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Black parents' experiences and perceptions of race(ism) in highfee-paying independent schools in Johannesburg

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2023
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/36904

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Abstract

South Africa has a long history of racial segregation and discrimination. Transformation and diversification have been central to the national agenda in all spheres of life post-1994, including schools which have been integrated for many years. However, the recent spate of public complaints against independent and Model C schools, as well as calls for the Human Rights Commission (HRC) to investigate state schools, suggests that many schools are still struggling with systemic racism. High-fee-paying independent schools have been slower to transform and remain predominantly white spaces and pockets of privilege in society. This hermeneutical phenomenological study explored black parents' experiences and perceptions around race, racism and discrimination within their children's high-fee-paying independent schools. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis to explore common threads in their lived experiences from an interpretive stance. The themes identified elucidate parents' subtle, and difficult-to-articulate, racialised experiences, as well as their psychological and behavioural responses. Parents' perceptions of their children's experiences are also discussed. Their perceptions of the school's management of race-related matters are explored and appeared to be strongly related to proactive communication from the school. The racial dynamics that emerged during the interviews are explored to understand parents' experiences at school. Finally, other social identities, such as gender, class, and nationality, which act as proxies for race or intersect with race, are discussed. The parents' experience of racism in these white liberal spaces was found to be extremely subtle and yet pervasive. Black parents were found to occupy a precarious position in white schools where they may be compelled to tolerate, assimilate, or reproduce racist narratives to maintain their privileged position. While race was difficult for them to confront on an individual or interpersonal level, parents were active in challenging racism at a structural and systemic level. These findings aim to contribute towards the goal of dismantling systemic racism within schools and in South Africa.

Keywords: Black Parents, Discrimination, Education, Independent Schools, Johannesburg, Race, Racism