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A case study of the English language practices of six learners in a desegregated urban South African school.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

1.1 General Introduction

The 'new' South Africa is working to forge new identities that transcend its deeply divided past from the colonial era, through apartheid into the post-apartheid era. Construction of these identities is open-ended, fluid and constantly being shifted (Zegeye, 2001). Under apartheid, however, essentialist racial and ethnic identities were imposed on people, what scholars have termed 'ethnicity from above' (Zegeye, 2001), premised on some imaginary cultural boundedness (Snyman, 2005) and designed to keep people separate from each other.

Education has been recognised as one of the spheres that bore the marks of this divided society. One of the most outstanding features of the education system in South Africa during the apartheid (and colonial) era was a fragmentation and inequality in educational provision along racial and ethnic lines. The passing of legislation such as the Bantu Education Act of 1953, the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, the Coloured Persons Act of 1963, the Indian Education Act of 1965 and the National Education Act of 1967 during the apartheid era effectively segregated the education of different 'race'[1] groups to privilege the minority white population at the expense of other 'race' groups (Vally and Dalamba, 1999: 9).

The demise of apartheid led to the establishment of a single 'integrated' education system that aims at redressing injustices of the past and eliminating all forms of discrimination (Department of Education, 1996). A number of issues have emerged in the schools that have become 'integrated' (hereafter desegregated)[2] such as those relating to racism, sexism, quality, staffing and language among others. The issue of language[3], especially the position of English, is one of the highly contested issues in

[1] Following Hall, (1992b) and Distiller and Steyn, (2004), I see the notion of 'race' as a socially and politically constructed category that is never fixed but is continually constructed and reconstructed. Therefore I will use quotation marks whenever the notion of 'race' is mentioned in this Research Report.
[2] Although all schools in South Africa in policy terms are desegregated, only a small number of schools have undergone desegregation, as I will show later.
[3] This includes among others: the question of the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT); the position of English; the position of Afrikaans; and the position of African Languages.

these desegregated schools. The position of English, its status, its hegemony, its different identities, its changing ownerships, and its overwhelming spread are some of the issues that a number of scholars have continued to grapple with.

1.2 Research Aims

This research report aims at exploring the English language practices of six high school learners attending a desegregated school in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. For the purposes of this study 'English language practices' include accents and varieties of English used, mimicry and parody, proficiency or ability in English, how much English is used in relation to other languages and the impact of the learners' use of English on classroom learning and perceived success. While emphasis is placed on the English language, it would have been naïve to explore the various issues concerning English to the exclusion of other languages in an environment where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. In addition, this study also aims at exploring how the learners position themselves and others as users of the English language and other South African official languages.

It is hoped that a study of learners' English language practices and positioning towards language in a desegregated school space will give a better understanding of the learners' language practices, of how learners imagine themselves and others as speakers of English and other languages, show the role of language in the processes of 'integration' and also reveal the identities that are being constructed in the process.

1.3 Rationale

My research stems from my involvement as a research assistant in a project (hereafter SANPAD project 04/06) in the department of Applied English Language Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand entitled "Language, Identity and Learning: exploring language practices of children/youth attending desegregated schools in urban South Africa". Although my research is one of the outputs of this larger research project, the choice of the focus of my study is entirely my own arising from my interest in issues of post-apartheid youth identity.

South Africans have been described as struggling to find an identity for themselves individually and collectively in the face of the country's brutal history (McKinney, 2003). According to Crain Soudien, that '[h]ow young people are thinking their way through these identity conundrums and the role of the school in these processes are of crucial importance for the new South Africa' (2001: 311). The 'new' South Africa is a product of a deeply divided past marked by racial discrimination and other doctrines of the colonial and apartheid era. The democratic elections of 1994 were a momentous occasion for they marked the end of apartheid and its legacy of racialism and systematic exclusion of black[4] people from civil, political and economic rights among other injustices (Zegeye, 2001: 4). Literature is replete with images of systematic discrimination, fragmentation of systems and distortion of identities by a tyrannical system whose effects and legacies society continues to grapple with today (Vally and Dalamba, 1999; Zegeye, 2001).

The ending of apartheid has led to a number of radical correctives of a discriminatory regime in various sectors of society. The education system is one of the sectors that have seen a wide range of transformative actions such as the desegregation of schools, new curricula (e.g. Curriculum 2005, Revised National Curriculum Statement), new textbooks, teacher training and changes in the system of values (Harley and Wedekind, 2004). Education, as a number of scholars have recognized, was one of the ideological tools which the apartheid regime used to sustain itself through a systematic distortion of values and attitudes, institution of crude acts of separation based on 'race', and disproportionate allocation of resources aimed at privileging the white[5] population at the expense of other 'racial' groups (Christie, 1988; Christie, 1990; Nkomo, 1990). While white schools were very well resourced, African schools and those of other 'racial' groups were forced to bare the brunt of the apartheid system with meagre resources, untrained or poorly trained teachers, poor curricula and inadequate teaching and learning materials (Vally and Dalamba, 1999). Among the consequences of this apartheid education on African schooling was a destruction of a culture of learning leading to general conditions of anarchy (ANC, 1994). While the capacity of education departments such as the Department of Education and

[4] Includes those classified as 'African', 'coloured' and 'Indian' by the apartheid classification system.
[5] While recognizing the problematic nature of racial categories, this study will use categories 'African', 'coloured', 'Indian' and 'white' for the purposes of identification, clarification and analysis.

Training (DET)[6] was outstripped by the demand for school spaces, a number of white schools controlled by the Department of Education and Culture, and House of Assembly (HOA) were faced with closure as a result of declining pupil enrolment as represented by a total of 287 387 vacant places in white schools in 1991 (Metcalfe, 1991: 13).

It is against such a background that upon the dismantling of apartheid, changes in the education sector became even more compelling. The Constitution of South Africa (Republic of South Africa 1996), which repealed divisive and discriminatory laws of the apartheid era, is founded on the advancement of a human rights culture and provides a foundational basis for societal transformation (Bray, 2004). Following the new Constitution, desegregation of schools was one of the correctives the new post-apartheid government embarked on in fostering equity, equality and redress. My definition of the concept of desegregation is informed by Fine, Weis and Powell (1997) who citing Thomas Pettigrew (1986) see desegregation as the existence of learners from different racial and ethnic groupings within the same institution. While apartheid ensured that children from different 'racial' groups attended separate institutions, the new constitution and the South African Schools Act are unequivocal about the need for desegregation of schools (Vally and Dalamba, 1999).

Desegregation of schools, however, has not come free of challenges. Meaningful desegregation cannot come about without a concomitant process of integration. Nkomo, McKinney and Chisholm argue that:

> integration is not merely about changing the racially exclusive demographics of learner and educator bodies-what we might refer to as desegregation-although it is too. By integration we mean schools changing to meet the needs of all children enrolled, fostering meaningful interaction among learners in the classroom, on the play ground and in extramural activities, as well as instilling a human rights culture (2004: 1-2).

[6] Education departments during apartheid were separated by race-DET former Department of Education and Training (African); HOA former House of Assembly/TED former Transvaal Education and Training Department (white); HOD former House of Delegates (Indian) and HOR former House of Representatives (coloured).

However, a number of studies on school desegregation in South Africa reveal that real integration is not taking place in schools as shown by cases of racism, alienation and linguicism (Gordon and Barkhuizen, 1994; Dolby, 1999; Vally and Dalamba, 1999; Soudien, 2001; Soudien and Sayed, 2003; Soudien, 2004).

Studies by scholars such as Christie (1990), Metcalfe (1991), Carrim (1992), Vally and Dalamba (1999), Soudien (2001), Sujee (2004), Soudien and Sayed (2003), and Soudien (2004) have documented the process of school desegregation in South Africa. Sujee's (2004) quantitative study of government schools in Gauteng province reveals some of the patterns of the desegregation process. Sujee's study shows a considerable movement of African learners from former DET schools into white former TED schools, Indian former HOD schools and coloured former HOR schools. The shifts in school population that Sujee reports support 'the existence of a perceived hierarchy of privilege and quality' with the former DET schools as the least resourced, compared to the former HOR and former HOD schools, and ending with the former TED schools as the most privileged (Sujee, 2004:45)

In terms of the extent to which the desegregation process has taken place, Sujee's study reveals that though there has been a considerable movement of African learners from former DET schools into schools of other departments and into independent schools, the 'greatest movement has been among Indian and coloured learners…who have moved from their respective departments into the former TED and into independent schools' (Sujee, 2004:49-51). Sujee's study also reveals that the significant movement of Indian learners into former TED schools has led to a dramatic movement of African learners into former HOD schools where they constitute the majority of learners in these schools (Sujee, 2004:49; 51). Soudien, however, states that though there has been a considerable movement of African learners from formerly African schools, 'there has been no parallel movement of children classified coloured, white and Indian into former black schools' (2004,101) (*cf*. Chick and McKay, 2001). Studies of school desegregation in South Africa thus reveal that schools previously designated as Indian, coloured and white are the sites of desegregation in South Africa.

School desegregation has in many ways altered the face of schooling in South Africa. Not only has it brought learners from different racial groups together after years of separate schooling, it has also made schools a site of the coming together of cultures and languages; a site of potential 'integration' and negotiation of identities. While limited forms of desegregation had begun through the opening of private schools to black learners in the 1970s and 1980s (Christie, 1990), it was the changing political climate in the early 1990s that made the imperative of desegregation in schools even more compelling (Naidoo, 1996; Vally and Dalamba, 1999; Dolby, 2001). In 1990 the Minister of Education Piet Clase announced a new admission policy for white schools that gave white parent communities the option of retaining the status quo in their schools or opting for one of three new models (designated A, B and C) that came to be known as the Clase models (Metcalfe, 1991). Though unrestricted forms of desegregation only came into being in 1993, the introduction of the Clase models marked a significant shift in constitutionally based school racism (Naidoo, 1996; Vally and Dalamba, 1999).

However, in spite of the Clase models being hailed for representing a significant step in dismantling apartheid education, they encountered a frosty reception from critics of the government who accused Clase of 'fidgeting on the periphery of apartheid' (Metcalfe, 1991:21). Metcalfe further saw a major weakness in the Clase models being in the inherent 'reluctant reformism' of the models that failed to address the real crisis in education and also for their perceived commitment to the racism of apartheid and to Christian National Education (1991:19).

School desegregation, however, as I have stated earlier is not enough in itself in ending inequalities if it is not accompanied by meaningful integration. Orfield (2004:107) is categorical that 'desegregation is not integration' (*cf.* Vally and Dalamba, 1999) for while desegregation is concerned with ending exclusion, it does not in itself lead to 'positive interaction' (Soudien, 2004) and may lead to inequalities embedded in the social structure going unchallenged and therefore work to perpetuate them. The Department of Education's *Manifesto of Values, Education and Democracy* also highlights the limited nature of the desegregation process in schools in its statement that desegregation is essentially a 'suburban experience' (2001: 58). The movement of a few African learners from rural and township schools into formerly

white, Indian and coloured schools in the suburbs does not affect the majority who still go to under-resourced rural and township schools. This fact constrains the results of my study of English language practices of learners in a desegregated urban school from being unproblematically extrapolated to non-suburban and rural contexts. It must be emphasised that most South African schools will never be desegregated in the sense of becoming racially mixed because of the racial demographics in South Africa which is characterised by a small minority of 'white', 'coloured' and 'Indian' people as compared to the 'African majority'. Further, the close affinity between 'race' and class in South Africa suggests that the relatively wealthy 'white' and 'Indian' populations will not seek admission in the relatively poor former 'African' schools.

Studies on school desegregation reveal that assimilation as a practice of integration is overwhelmingly hegemonic in schools (Soudien, 1998; Zafar, 1998, Vally and Dalamba, 1999; Sekete, Shilubane and Moila, 2001; Soudien, 2004; McKinney, 2005). In order to integrate, learners coming into desegregated schools are expected to give up some of their cultural resources and take up the dominant ones (McKinney, 2005). This process of assimilation, as Soudien has argued, is based on some imagined threat to the standards of the dominant group and also on assumptions of the dominant group being superior (Soudien, 2004: 95). Further, Soudien states that the consequences of the assimilation project on the subordinate group are dire as they:

> …are expected both to give up their own identities and cultures and critically, to acknowledge the superiority of the culture, and by implication, the identities of the groups into whose social contexts they are moving. (Soudien, 2004: 96).

One of the areas in desegregated schools where the assimilationist project is openly seen in operation is in the choice of the language of learning and teaching (McKay and Chick, 2001; Mda 2004; McKinney, 2005). As McKinney (2005) points out, despite the language-in-education policy that aims to promote all official languages as languages of learning and teaching (Department of Education, 1997), there is little evidence currently suggesting that languages other than English and Afrikaans are being used as languages of learning and teaching in desegregated schools.

Nonetheless, the powerful assimilation project in process in desegregated schools does not mean that learners do not have the human agency to resist, subvert and refashion ways of doing things. McKinney (2005) has argued that alongside the assimilation project, gaps and moments are available through which learners can resist, remake certain cultural resources and create new identities. Also significant here is Pennycook's notions of appropriation and refashioning of the self (Pennycook 1994; 2004). Following Walcott (1997) and Canagarajah (2000), Pennycook argues that in the face of extraordinary oppression people have used a number of strategies in refashioning the self that include parody and appropriation. One of the most prominent cultural resources of the dominant group, English, has constantly been appropriated for different ends (Pennycook, 1994). As cited in Pennycook (2004), Walcott in his discussion of Black diasporic language and culture asserts that "(Black folks) do not only perform language, but their language is made to perform, to work in the service of revisiting and altering the wor(l)d" (Pennycook, 2004: 17).

The *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* (2001) is unequivocal in its recognition of the centrality of the question of language in desegregated schools. It argues that real transformation will not take place if the linguistic, cultural and social inequalities which obtain in schools are not addressed. African learners coming into desegregated schools that have English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT), which is a second or third language to most of them, are often at a disadvantage compared to their white or Indian colleagues (most of whom are first language speakers of English) in the absence of mechanisms to aid their integration.

Soudien (2004) has stated that in the desegregation process, 'black' children have not moved in significant numbers into Afrikaans medium former white schools as they have into English medium former white schools. Sujee's (2004:53) study discussed earlier also shows a high correlation between schools that have Afrikaans as the Language of Learning and Teaching and a low number of African learners. This suggests to me a conscious decision by black parents to choose English medium schools as opposed to Afrikaans medium schools. This phenomenon of black parents choosing English medium schools could be as a result of the stigmatized status of Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor and also recognition of power of English

as the language of education and social mobility in post-apartheid South Africa (*cf.* Vivian de Klerk, 2001).

Nonetheless, the *Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy* shows that there are Afrikaans medium schools which, though 'desegregated', refuse to teach African learners in English. This denial of the right to be taught in English, the language of power (*cf.* Granville *et al*, 1998), is a denial of the learners' language rights which are provided for in Chapter 2, Section 29(2) of the Constitution which states that:

> Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of, this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single-medium institutions, taking into account (a) equity; (b) practicability; and (c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory law and practices. (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

The question of the 'right to access to the language of power' (Granville *et al*, 1998), which is currently English, is an important one for my study, though contentious at the same time. As Granville *et al* (1998: 259) postulate, access to English in South Africa creates a 'problematic contradiction' in that the provision of more people with the dominant language (English) contributes to its dominance over other languages. After all, the South African Constitution, as scholars such as Kamwangamalu (2002) and Mda (2004) recognize, does not confer English with any special rights or advantages over other languages.

A number of studies of desegregated schools have looked at issues of race and class in school integration and have identified language as key in the processes of inclusion and exclusion (Dolby, 1999; Vally and Dalamba, 1999; Soudien and Sayed, 2003; Soudien, 2004). However, none that I have come across has been focussed on the language practices of learners and how learners position themselves in relation to language. Though Nadine Dolby (1999), for example, recognizes that African learners going into desegregated white schools 'were largely unprepared for instruction exclusively in English' (p. 294), she does not engage with the language issue in her discussion of youths creating and re-creating identities in desegregated schools

through the mediation of global popular culture. Studies focussing on learners' English language practices and attitudes (Kapp, 2000) and learners' attitudes to language in general (Rudwick, 2004) have been conducted in former DET schools which as I have stated earlier are not sites of school desegregation.

Studies which do address language issues in desegregated schools such as McKay and Chick (2001) and Vivian de Klerk (2001; 2002a; 2002b) are notable for the absence of learners' voices. McKay and Chick's research in six desegregated schools of the metropolitan area of KwaZulu Natal Province was aimed at investigating the extent to which schools were promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism advocated by the language-in-education policy and focused on questionnaire and interview responses from school principals and teachers (McKay and Chick, 2001:396). Vivian de Klerk's studies (2001, 2002a) on parents' choices in sending their children to (desegregated) English-medium schools in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape Province focus on questionnaire and interview responses by parents of Afrikaans-speaking children and Xhosa-speaking children respectively who had sent their children to English-medium schools. These studies aimed at investigating 'personal linguistic histories and attitudes, changes in language practices and parents' subjective experiences of the process of language shift in their children and their homes' (Vivian de Klerk, 2001: 110; Vivian de Klerk, 2002a: 4). Vivian de Klerk also interviewed teachers with the aim of ascertaining the language policy and practice at the schools, and the 'ethos' and philosophy underlying language education issues in the schools (Vivian de Klerk, 2002a, 2002b).

Recognising the absence of studies in desegregated schools that have learners as the focal point in dealing with language practices and positioning towards language, I am interested in this study in finding out the English language practices of learners and how these learners position themselves in relation to the English language and other South African official languages in the context of an increasing local and global hegemony of English (Kamwangamalu, 2003) and also in relation to the expectation by authorities in desegregated English medium schools that learners must be proficient in English (McKay and Chick, 2001). This exploration of language practices and positioning towards language is significant in seeing how learners imagine themselves and others as users of language within the context of a

desegregated school space that the 'new' South Africa affords. It is also important in revealing what identities emerge in these desegregated spaces and what they reveal of the 'new' South Africa. Further, as scholars such as Kapp (2000) have argued, studies of language practices and attitudes are crucial in language planning and policy making for a number of weaknesses of the current language-in-education policy relate to the 'mismatch' between existing policy, and practices as well as attitudes (*cf*. Kapp, 2000; Rudwick, 2004)

1.4 Research Questions

This study is framed by the following research questions:

- What are the English language practices of learners in formal learning and school contexts (e.g. classroom, assembly) and informal spaces (e.g. break times, during extra-mural activities) of a desegregated school?
- How do learners position themselves in relation to the English language and other South African official languages?

1.5 Chapter Outline

My Research Report is organised into four chapters.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

In this chapter I present my theoretical framework and review literature pertinent to the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

I present the methodological frame of my study, introduce my research context and the research participants, as well as the research process, transcription and methods of data analysis.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

In this chapter, I first present detailed case studies of three research participants. I then go on to further explore some important themes that emerged in the data which include: the salience of English; English varieties and accents; the position of Zulu; subversion of institutional discourses and the construction of 'race'.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the conclusion I outline the main findings of the study. I point out that the learners in the desegregated school space on which my study is based experience English as a major part of their identities. I state that the learners' identities are continually fashioned and refashioned by their language practices and they way they position themselves and others as language users. Further, I also state that the learners' language practices and the way they imagine themselves and others as language users is context dependent. Furthermore, I contend that assimilation taking place in this desegregated school context cannot be understood too simply, for it takes place under complex processes of contestation, appropriation and authorizing of hybridities.