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An exploration into educators' perceptions and attitudes towards immigrant learners

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

There has been numerous developments in the schooling sector over the first decade of South African democracy, for example, *opening all schools to all racial groups, making previously white schools model 'c', the introduction of Outcome Based- Curriculum 2005 (1998), Education for All (2000), Education White Paper 6 (2001) and modifications to the Revised – National Curriculum Statement (R-NCS: 2002).* In addition the country has seen migratory patterns as South Africans leave the country and as 'foreigners' come into it, some to seek refuge and others for greener pastures. These developments have had implications for educators in the country. Educators have had to be accommodating towards learners from different backgrounds in the classroom situation, and that includes immigrant learners.

South Africa, since the new dispensation, experienced an influx of foreigners particularly from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana and Angola. An official from the Home Affairs Office in Johannesburg gave the following figures as estimates of registered immigrants in Gauteng province: DRC – 5378, Angola – 3793 and Zimbabwe – 2321. The official stated that there are more immigrants who are not registered with the Home Affairs Office. South Africans have reacted with mixed feelings towards this influx. This reaction could be due to different languages spoken in the countries from which the foreigners came. People from the Democratic Republic of Congo speak mainly French

and some speak Lingala. Angolans speak mainly Portuguese. People from Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Botswana speak English and other African languages that are dialects of South African languages like Zulu, SeSotho and SeTswana. Educators find it easier to teach immigrant learners from countries that speak English and dialects of South African languages. Educators find it difficult to teach immigrant learners from countries that do not speak English, like French and Portuguese speaking learners from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola.

Immigrant learners who cannot speak or understand English find it difficult to cope with lessons in the classroom. Thus ‘special classes’ were introduced for such immigrant learners. In some schools the ‘English only Policy’ has been introduced, this policy is meant to force all learners to speak only English at school. Educators see having ‘special classes’ in the school a helpful tool in dealing with immigrant learners who speak French and/or Portuguese.

In the past, pre-South Africa’s democracy, in Black townships special schools, were very limited and in mainstream schools there were no special classes. Special schools were mainly for learners with physical and/or mental challenges. The unavailability of special classes led educators to accommodating learners with barriers to learning in their classrooms. This could have been made easier by the fact that educators could understand the languages most learners spoke. With immigrant learners speaking French or Portuguese, educators find it difficult to accommodate them because of the language barrier.

Research on *The lives and times of African immigrants in South Africa* has been conducted (McDonald, Mashike, & Golden: 1999). It focussed on issues such as stereotypes pertaining to crime; employment seeking; and other issues affecting foreigners in South Africa. Such research has in the main excluded children and the education of immigrant children.

1.2 The Aim of the Study

This study is intended to look at the prevalence of xenophobia in a school environment with a view to understanding educators' attitudes and perceptions towards immigrant learners. According to the *Education White Paper 6* inclusive education and training can be defined as "changing attitudes, behaviour, teaching methods, curricula and environment to meet the needs of all learners" (2001:7). This statement implies that a change of attitudes is fundamental to meeting the needs of all learners regardless of their origins or citizenship status.

The study will further look at educators' perceptions and attitudes towards immigrant learners at a school in Gauteng. It is envisaged that this could engender further research in this neglected yet important field of study.

1.3 Research Questions

The research question is two fold:

- Identify the attitudes and perceptions of educators towards immigrant learners (specifically French and Portuguese speaking).
- Reflect on the attitudes and perceptions of educators with regards to the fact that attitudes and perceptions could be seen as a barrier to learning in South African schools for immigrant learners.

1.4 Rationale

Having been an educator, in the South African education system, for just over a decade, the researcher was intrigued regarding how educators reacted towards immigrant learners within a democratic South Africa. This study was further influenced by personal observations and experiences of ways in which different educators reacted to and commented on teaching immigrant learners, specifically those from the DRC and Angola. Reading around this area of interest it was discovered that the researcher's observations were not limited to the school in which she worked, but had also been reflected in her readings around the topic. For example, Nhlapo's study (2001: 198) indicated a pervasive negative attitude towards immigrant learners in schools shown in the quote made by one educator below:

> "I didn't want to teach foreign children and in my school we did not have an option because we had so many foreign children especially from

> Angola. And these kids they don't speak English, they don't know anything about our country, and when a child is in your class you always ask yourself how am I going to teach this child".

This rationale is founded in the need to search for answers to the issues in a scientific manner. Further, as the researcher herself had lived in a foreign country for a year, as an adult had, she identified negative attitudes and feelings towards her 'foreign' status. This led the researcher to retrospectively think about the immigrant learners she had taught and ways in which her attitudes and perceptions might have negatively impacted on them. Hence, it has been the researcher's aspiration to try and understand educators' perceptions about immigrant learners in schools.

Finally, the researcher felt that it would be interesting to determine whether the race or gender of an educator influenced the perceptions and attitudes held by different educators within a multicultural and multiracial schooling situation.

1.5 Overview

Chapter 1 focused on the aim and the rationale of the study.

Chapter 2 encompasses the literature review, which centres around similar studies. It is limited to issues such as 'xenophobia', 'inclusion', 'the role of language', and other issues around 'migration'.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and the design used for this study.

Chapter 4 provides the research results and findings, interpretation and discussion of the findings.

Chapter 5 provides information pertaining to limitations and shortcomings of the study and recommendations for further research.

1.6 Ethical Considerations

- Permission from the Department of Education was obtained.
- Permission from the school was also obtained.
- A letter of consent was forwarded to the school.
- The purpose of the study and the aim thereof was explained to the participants.
- Letters of consent were sent to all the participants of the study.
- Confidentiality was guaranteed.
- Information gathered was only used for the purpose of the study.
- Tapes made during the interviews were destroyed after the study was completed.
- Participation was purely voluntary and participants were informed of this and that they could withdraw at any stage of the research.