

6-2013

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Recommended Citation

Dreyer, L. M. and Singh, Sam (2013) "Closing the Gap? Persistent Underperformance of Black Minorities in Former Whites-Only SA Schools," *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62608/2164-1102.1083>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/ela/vol1/iss2/3>

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CLOSING THE GAP? PERSISTENT UNDERPERFORMANCE OF BLACK MINORITIES IN FORMER WHITES-ONLY SA SCHOOLS

by LM Dreyer, PhD & SAM Singh

Abstract

This paper is based on a study that explored the life experiences of Xhosa-speaking learners as a minority in a former whites-only school in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The focus was specifically on the factors that contribute to the continued poor academic performance of this minority group within the school. Identifying and understanding these factors as challenges to academic success can help teachers and schools provide appropriate support structures to maximize the potential of these learners. Research has shown that programs of support will only be effective if they appreciate and cater to the needs of the learners concerned (Michael, Andrade & Bartlett, 2007; Ogbu 2003; Rhamie & Hallam, 2002). The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role of peers and teachers in contributing to persistent underperformance of minority Xhosa speakers in a former whites-only school in the Western Cape province of South Africa.

1. Theoretical Framework

Listen to Lorna Dreyer, Lecturer at Department of Educational Psychology Stellenbosch University, South Africa discuss closing the gap.

The advent of the newly democratized government in South Africa brought about the opening of all school doors. The South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996) formalized this access to quality education for all by granting learners access to any school regardless of social, economic, race, or cultural background. Many black families in South Africa enrolled their children into former white-only schools, believing that these schools were better resourced and that their children would therefore receive a better education. Many of these children have to travel long distances from the townships to the suburbs to attend school. However, research has shown continued poor academic performance of racial and linguistic minorities in these schools. Although the generic racial term "Black" refers to all who were previously referred to as non-whites (indigenous Africans, colored people, and Indians) under the Apartheid government, this study focused

specifically on the life experiences of the Xhosa learners who belong to the group of people from indigenous Africans.

A wealth of research (Altinyelken, 2009; Nickerson & Kritsonis, 2006; Ogbu, 2003) highlights some of the challenges to learning and development that may affect effective learning. Language and cultural differences have been identified as barriers and are particularly relevant in our diverse South African society. Research has shown that children who attend schools where the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is in their second language experience tremendous conflict, especially if the parents and caregivers are not proficient in the second language (Altinyelken, 2008; Prinsloo, 2005; Yeh, Okubo, Ma, Shea, Ou & Pituc, 2008;). Landsberg, Kruger and Nel (2005) proposed that when such children enter school, these abilities and cultural differences are not understood, and this can lead to social awkwardness and discomfort in the school situation that, in turn, could affect academic success in school.

However, underperformance of minority groups is not an exclusive South African phenomenon. Altinyelken (2009) conducted a qualitative study into the educational challenges of migrant girls whose families moved from rural areas in the east to the western parts of Turkey. This study revealed that the girls, as a minority group with a language and culture different from the larger, general population within these schools, encountered a number of challenges that influenced their educational achievement. Themes which emerged from this study included adaptation, language, peer relations, discrimination, bullying, and self-esteem. These themes are all relevant to the scope of the study on which this paper is reporting.

Discovering not only what causes these disparities in academic performance among minority groups, but also what factors contribute to their academic success, has become increasingly important. These factors can serve to guide and inform future measures of support provided for learners, parents, and teachers within the context of fostering academic success (Ogbu, 2003). In a study that explored why Asian American students perform better than other minority groups, parental involvement, time spent on task, and study habits were identified as factors that contributed to academic success (Nickerson & Kritsonis, 2006). In addition, Ogbu (2003) suggested that the enhancement of the student's academic orientation through supplementary educational programs and the creation of a cultural context that increases the value of academic success are important factors to consider when examining academic achievement among minority communities. Furthermore, he suggests that visible academic role models, effective parental strategies, perseverance, and working hard are factors in achieving good grades.

The important role that teachers play with regard to creating an environment that fosters academic success cannot be ignored (Vandeyar, 2010). Teachers have to be aware of their own prejudices and engage in reflective practices where they critically assess the effect of their views and practices in the classroom. They must find ways to provide an inclusive, nurturing environment where learners from different backgrounds feel safe to express themselves freely (Ferrer, 2011; Sleeter & Grant, 1994). Teachers should use

the learners' cultural and linguistic assets as a basis for providing positive and socially meaningful classroom experiences. Learning from and with their students can help teachers to be more effective (Michael, Andrade & Bartlett, 2007; Vandeyar, 2010).

The knowledge and insights gained through these and other studies can prove to be valuable in overcoming the challenges minority groups' experience. In order to truly achieve equality for all, the life experiences of all individuals have to be appreciated and catered to, to better inform future measures of support aimed at improving their academic performance (Nickerson & Kritsonis, 2006; Ogbu, 2003).

A bio-systemic theoretical framework guided this qualitative research project (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This framework enabled the researchers to contextualize the study within the interacting systems that indirectly and directly influence the life experiences of the participants. The study was conducted within an interpretive qualitative research paradigm as the researchers needed to understand the life experiences of the participants that could possibly contribute to continued poor academic performance (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Qualitative research is a scientific research design and is fundamentally interested in how the participants give meaning to their own situations (Merriam & Associates, 2002). This was particularly valuable as the aim of this research was to explore the meaning of phenomena as experienced by the learners themselves (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Working within this framework provided the researchers the opportunity to understand the learners' unique experiences within the particular context of the school.

2. Methodology and Data Collection

This research was conducted at a previously whites-only school in South Africa. The school is well resourced in terms of facilities and experienced, qualified staff. At the time of the study there were 53 staff members, of whom 48 were white and five were colored educators. There were no black, Xhosa-speaking educators on the staff. The school is situated in an urban area and serves a learner population of approximately one thousand and four learners. Sixty-five of these learners are the black second-language learners who formed a minority of less than 7% at the time of the research.

The participants were purposely selected as information rich sources at the specific school. They were Xhosa-speaking learners in grades 9 to 11 (two learners per grade). They had all attended the particular school from grade 8 (SA high schools provide for grades 8-12). Only one of the six participants lived within walking distance of the school. The other five had to travel about five kilometers from the nearby township (black residential area from the previous dispensation). These learners commuted to school using public transportation, i.e. bus or taxi.

Data for this study was collected through individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview. These interviews were audiotaped with permission of the participants.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by an interview schedule that served as a basic checklist to ensure that key topics were covered (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The interviews were flexible and respected the way the participants structured their responses. This allowed the participants' views to unfold as they perceived them (the emic perspective) and not as the researcher views them (the etic perspective) (Patten, 2009).

The themes that guided the interviews, such as educational experience, school environment, work ethic, and motivation were identified through an extensive literature review and an evaluation of the various programs of academic support instituted by the school. These academic support programs are discussed in more detail under document analysis below. These interviews allowed the researcher to understand the meanings of everyday experiences in relation to their influence on the academic performance of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The focus group interview allowed the researcher to further explore the identified themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The group discussed these particular themes while the researcher acted as a facilitator to ensure that the discussion remained on the themes of interest (Barbour, 2010). One benefit of a focus group interview is that it can be used as a means of revealing the development of perceptions in a social context. As more than one person participates in this interview, it allowed for a greater variety of information than can be obtained through the individual interview (Barbour, 2010). The focus group interview further allowed for immediate follow up and clarification of views and misconceptions (Patten, 2009; Merriam & Associates, 2002). This safe and supportive environment created in the focus group discussion enabled the researcher to explore themes that needed further clarification and to obtain consensus on the themes as identified by the researcher. The themes identified were: Learning in a second language, Ethos of the school, and Home environment. Participants were also given the opportunity to raise any other matters that might not have been mentioned during the individual semi-structured interviews.

For this study, it was important to look at policy documents at national and school level as it related to inclusion and providing access to quality education for all learners. These documents included Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001), the academic support program, the schools' language policy, and the South Africans Schools Act (DoE, 1996) which provided guidelines to school governing bodies in determining the language policy of a school.

Although the school can decide on the language used for teaching and learning (LoLT), language may not be used as a barrier to admission. Governing bodies must stipulate how their schools will promote multilingualism, as failing a language will result in failing

a grade (DoE, 1997). Since the school had predominantly English first language learners, the LoLT of the school was English.

The academic support program included extra lessons offered in various subjects and various reading support initiatives. The learners could access these on a voluntary basis. The value these policies and programs held for the participants were explored through the interview methods discussed previously.

3. Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed through the qualitative process of content analysis. Themes were identified that explained the patterns noted in the responses of the participants (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). A process of coding was then undertaken to highlight and group information according to identified themes. This was done through examining the verbatim transcripts of the interviews to identify distinct categories that were then coded with individual names (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Themes identified were Ethos of the school, Learning in a second language, and Home environment.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings indicated that the respondents and their parents link the major reasons for continued poor academic performance of this minority group to discriminative attitudes of teachers and peers and feelings of inadequacy. Although the findings from this study indicated various factors affecting learner achievement, this came as an unexpected surprise since the country is almost two decades into the new democratic post-apartheid era. The focus of this paper will therefore be on the theme that emerged as:

Ethos of the school with specific focus on the categories identified as:

1. Peer relationships
2. Teacher attitudes and support

However, the theme Learning in a second language with categories 1) schooling, 2) loss of first language and 3) reasons for attending the school provided significant context for the discussion. The study revealed that the participants indicated that they did not have a problem learning in a second language as they had been attending an English school from grade one. However, they did indicate that this led to loss of development of their mother tongue.

When asked why they chose to attend this school and not the school in their township that is within walking distance and which has a majority of Xhosa learners, the responses of the participants revealed a perception that one has access to better opportunities if one attends a white school:

Respondent 5: "My mother doesn't think the education is high and she thinks the standard there is lower. . . . She thinks being here is a like a privilege because she did not get to go to a school like this."

Respondent 3: "Things are better here. The facilities are better. There are good teachers."

These responses corroborate research findings (Makhalemele, 2005; Vandyar, 2010) that the choice of many parents to place their children in former white schools is based on the fact that these schools are better resourced. According to Makhalemele, despite the many efforts to redress the inequalities in education, the contrast between former white and former black schools seems to be largely unchanged. Even in instances where the gap between resources was not that large between schools, the perception and stereotyping of what better education comprises may still inform parents' decisions to send their children to these former white schools.

With regard to the theme Ethos of the school, peer relationships and teacher attitudes seemed to play a significant role in the academic success of the participants. Four of the participants indicated that they were not able to ask for help in certain classrooms, as there was constant teasing and ridicule of black students by certain white students. This prevented them from asking questions if they did not understand the work or discussion. These experiences were voiced in the following responses:

Respondent 4: "Because, like, sometimes people always make funny comments, race jokes. They react different and weird towards you."

Respondent 1: "Sometimes, if someone says something in class about black people, then I'm like, ok, now he's pointing out that I'm black and it's kinda irritating, so, like, I'll end up being upset the whole lesson, ... affects my concentration."

Respondent 5: "Last year I did not ask questions. They laugh for everything. I would keep quiet or try and figure it out for myself."

Respondent 6: "Sometimes if you say you don't understand they might end up laughing."

However, respondents 2 and 3 indicated that they did not let the comments bother them as they had realized that if they keep quiet it may affect their learning. This view was confirmed in the focus group interview.

Respondent 3: "I don't care. I will ask no matter who says what."

Respondent 2: "I ask when I need help. I can stand up for myself. Does not bother me. I am able to work and carry on."

Furthermore, when given the choice, participants generally preferred to sit next to other Xhosa learners in class and to work with other Xhosa learners on classroom projects and assignments. This tendency flowed over into break time when they generally spent their breaks with other Xhosa learners.

In as much as an accepting and welcoming relationship with peers had an influence on the ethos of the school and consequently the learners' academic success, so too did the relationship with teachers. It was evident from the interviews that the participants perceived certain teachers as having favorites that did not include them as black learners. Some expressed that certain teachers made comments that made them feel inadequate. They therefore did not always experience the classroom as a safe environment to ask questions. The Xhosa-speaking learners sometimes met this with retaliation. This retaliation could, in turn, be experienced by teachers as lack of discipline on the part of the learners and could therefore add to discipline problems experienced within the classroom.

Respondent 1: "I hate the way some teachers sometimes ask if you need help. Sometimes it feels like, 'Why are you asking me?'"

Respondent 4: "You do think, 'Is it because I'm black that they think I can't do it?'"

Respondent 2: "If I ask a question and you don't take note of me and if someone else does ask and you respond, that means you don't respect me and I will then not listen to you as well."

Respondent 6: "Others will just say, 'I've just explained, what don't you understand?' Then you put your hand down or sit down."

On the other hand, some teachers were more approachable and supportive than others. Some teachers were able to create an environment in which the participants felt safe to ask questions if they did not understand. This was clearly illustrated in the following comments:

Respondent 3: "The teachers I have this year are approachable, especially Mr ... He has this whole system going. He has a good heart. He believes in everybody. That is what I like about him."

Respondent 4: "But it's like I can ask questions in Mr ...'s class."

Research (Goduka, 1999; Makhalemele, 2005; Vandeyar & Killen, 2006) clearly showed the important influence that teachers' attitudes and support can have on the academic success of learners. The creation of an accepting and welcoming environment, with an ethos of respect for diversity, is essential for learners to feel that they can be

themselves. There is a clear need to create an environment in which learners can concentrate and feel safe and confident that they can achieve their potential.

According to Vandeyar and Killen (2006) multiculturalists believe that racism is the result of prejudice and ignorance and that it can therefore simply be eradicated by fostering personal contact between individuals of different cultural backgrounds, promoting understanding and exchange of information. However, critics of this perspective of multiculturalism view it as ignoring the power and structural dimensions of racism. An anti-racism perspective which not only calls for confronting overt attitudes and practices, but also insists on opposing subtle racism and stereotypical and patronizing views, is therefore proposed instead (Makhalemele, 2005; Vandeyar & Killen, 2006). Vandeyar and Killen (2006) distinguished between overt racism and covert racism as follows: Overt racism is identified as any obscene racist practice that can result in physical violence, while covert racism is a more subtle, permeating form of racism. Furthermore, institutionalized racism can take the form of covert racism and result from indifference or a refusal to challenge the way things are done within the institution (Vandeyar & Killen, 2006). Research (Goduka, 1999; Makhalemele, 2005; Vandeyar & Killen, 2006) showed that even many years after the end of Apartheid, some African learners are still given the message that they do not quite belong. According to Goduka (1999) the experiences and expectations of the minority learners, which may be influenced by power and status relationships, were consistent with those outside of school. Furthermore, Ogbu's (1986) view, as quoted in Goduka (1999), that years of discrimination and oppression have taught minority learners that working hard is an exercise in futility, seems to be supported by research into desegregated classrooms. These studies found that teachers not only tended to impose the predominant culture of the school onto their learners, but also undermined the culture of some learners by openly making derogatory statements about those cultures (Makhalemele, 2005; Vandeyar & Killen, 2006). Minority learners are therefore pressured to adapt to the culture of the school at the risk of negating their own culture (Kajee, 2011; Makhalemele, 2005; Mncube, 2009). This highlights the central concept of access in promoting a positive environment.

From an eco-systemic perspective, Vandeyar (2010) suggested that teachers could foster different micro and meso-systemic interventions. The micro-system refers to the close daily interactions between children and other significant and familiar people, such as the family, peers, and teachers (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Within this system, learners could be supported and motivated through enabling the skills and attitudes, such as the unconditional acceptance, focused observations, adaptability, and flexibility of their teachers (Ferrer, 2011; Vandeyar, 2010). Kajee (2011) highlighted the importance of teaching occurring within a context that is compatible with the culture of the learners. In doing so, continuity and congruence between the home and the school were fostered. To maximize the potential of learners it is important to understand not only the challenges they experience, but also their perceptions of how these can be overcome to achieve academic success (Ferrer, 2011; Sleeter & Grant, 1994).

5. Scholarly Significance of the Study

This paper highlighted the fact that teachers and learners do not construct the social context of schooling in a vacuum. There are certain experiences and expectations that may be influenced by power and status relationships that are consistent with those in society beyond school. Classroom expectations that are limited to the predominant "white" culture seems to impede the cultural orientation and free expression of minority groups, which in turn seems to sustain incidences of covert racism (Vandayar & Killen, 2006). It is important therefore to realize that the more learners feel that their culture and language are validated and reinforced; the more likely it is that they will want to learn. The idea that the learners' voice is fundamental in working towards cultural democracy in an inclusive classroom needs to be fostered. When minority learners are continually silenced by their teachers, they are prevented from finding their voices. These learners may therefore be conditioned into being dependent on a system that they do not understand and are unable to influence, because they have not been given the opportunity to develop the critical skills needed to make their interests and concerns heard. This in turn may serve to re-enforce the feeling of not really belonging (Darder, 1991 in Goduka, 1999).

Recommendations on a micro-systems level in response to these findings are:

1. Teachers can support the growth and development of learners from different backgrounds through a willingness to learn more about the different languages and cultures of the learners in their classrooms. Efforts should be made to relate the curriculum to the experiences and interests of the learners.
2. Providing accurate information about racial and cultural diversity can be achieved through opportunities of direct contact with members of other groups during carefully structured situations. The aim is for learners to gain accurate information that can challenge stereotyping of groups. Another method that can challenge stereotyping of groups is cooperative learning. Learners are given opportunities to share the leadership responsibilities as well as to share the responsibility for each other's achievements. These cooperative opportunities are provided as a means to help learners develop group process skills such as conflict management and listening (Sleeter & Grant, 1994).
3. The implications for creating a safe and stimulating environment are that teachers and learners need to establish ground rules that espouse mutual respect. These rules should be enforced consistently without favoritism and prejudice so that everyone feels part of the classroom and wants to belong. Learners should be included and considered as co-constructors of an accepting environment.

These recommendations are limited to what teachers in their individual classes can do at a micro-systems level. However, if the trend of continued poor academic performance of minority groups in former whites-only schools is to be reversed, progressively narrowing and eventually closing the achievement gap, schools have to take cognizance of the covert racism that exist in schools and take appropriate systemic action.

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