
TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: DECONSTRUCTING DISCOURSES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Communitas

ISSN 1023-0556

2012 17 (Special edition): 21-44

Rodelle Govender and Nithi Muthukrishna*

ABSTRACT

Internationally there have been calls for the creation of sustainable learning environments. Education is seen as a key tool for building a sustainable community and society. A key issue in these debates is that the school curriculum should involve learners in a critical engagement on issues of social justice, human rights and social change by transforming attitudes and behaviours. This article presents a study that explored how discourses of social justice are created and generated in a classroom, and how they influence a teacher's practices. The study involved one teacher at an urban secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal. Data generation tools used were interviews and lesson observation. Data analysis entailed the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Three discourses of social justice embedded in the teacher's assumptions and pedagogical practices emerged from the analysis: the discourse of academic excellence; the discourse of inclusivity and diversity; and the discourse of critical thinking. The study highlighted the need for further research into ways of supporting teachers in adopting a social justice approach to teaching and in creating empowering learning environments.

* Rodelle Govender is a postgraduate student and Professor Nithi Muthukrishna is a lecturer in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Edgewood Campus.

INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades or more, international research has challenged social messages embedded in the school curriculum and has raised questions about whose and what forms of knowledge are conveyed to learners (Apple 1982; 1986; Arnot 2002; Giroux 2001; Shor 1987). The focus of this research has been on understanding the curriculum as a political text, and the content and form of the curriculum as being ideological in nature. The main argument has been that the school curriculum is hegemonic and reproduces and sustains inequalities in society. However, scholars such as Henry Giroux have raised concerns that an overemphasis on the concept of reproduction perpetuates a “discourse of despair” (see Giroux 1988: 99; Pinar & Bowers 1992). Furthermore, such emphasis reinforces the belief that hegemony and reproduction cannot be contested or disrupted without drastic change to the economic system. Reproduction theory also neglected to give any prominence to the concept of human agency (Pinar & Bowers 1992).

In response to this critique, Paul Willis (1981) introduced the concept of resistance and argued that the process of reproduction was contestable. This led to considerable debate on the critique of reproduction theory and a critical shift in thinking from reproduction to resistance theory (Apple 1982). Scholars conceded that resistance was a positive step for radical educators in that it created a space for possibility and hope (Giroux 1983; Greene 1988). Giroux (1988) argued that resistance highlights the possibilities of a radical pedagogy that foregrounds human agency. From these debates emerged constructs such as empowerment; teachers as transformative intellectuals; democratisation of the curriculum; pedagogical agency; praxis; and reflective practices in the classroom. Further, the focus shifted to an interrogation of the curriculum values, philosophy and content, and the pedagogical practices and social structures in schools that support the curriculum (McCarthy & Apple 1988).

The arguments above align with debates internationally and in South Africa for the creation of sustainable learning environments (cf. Gardner 2007; Mahlomaholo, Francis & Nkoane 2010; Robinson & Shallcross 2006; Singh & Francis 2010; Steyn & Wolhuter 2010). James and Schmitz (2011) assert that organisations and institutions in society have been criticised for their impact on society – an issue that relates to sustainability and social responsibility. The crux of this argument is that education is a key tool for building sustainable communities and societies. According to Egan (2004), a sustainable community is health-promoting and inclusive, provides economic opportunity for all, addresses social challenges, and makes equitable use of resources. In the case of schools as institutions, the argument has been that a school’s curriculum, learning processes and pedagogies should empower learners to achieve more sustainable

behaviours in order to enable a sustainable community and society (Leslie 2009). Leslie (2009) contends that the curriculum should aim to address the priorities of the community and society so that learners do not become the burden of future generations. For learning to be meaningful, purposeful and relevant, it has to be a holistic process that integrates knowledge, values and action. Leslie (2009) argues that the values of understanding, tolerance, respect and peace provide an important base for communities to become sustainable. In order to inculcate sustainable behaviours, learning should be seen as a collaborative process of inquiry, action and reflection. Furthermore, in order to achieve sustainable behaviours in learners and develop learners as global citizens, the curriculum must target values, behaviours and skills.

In the same vein, Newell-Jones (2007) stresses that education should involve learners in critically engaging in issues of social justice, human rights and social change by transforming attitudes and behaviour. Newell-Jones (2007) explains that globalisation has led to an ever-growing awareness that education has to prepare learners for a changing society in which its members are interdependent. Leslie (2009) suggests that the violations of human rights and social injustices that may arise from class, race, gender and ethnic differences are central to explaining why certain communities are unsustainable. Leslie (2009) argues that schools and classrooms should be models of a sustainable community and should engage learners in an active and participatory way in democratic learning environments.

A key message in the perspectives above is that education is about identity formation. Singh and Francis (2010) go further to emphasise that in order for teachers to create sustainable, empowering learning environments, issues of social justice should be integral to the curriculum so that learners are able to develop a tolerant identity which includes reciprocity and mutual respect. A social justice imperative in the curriculum means engaging students in a critique of issues of oppression and marginalisation in society that impede the optimal development of citizens. Such an imperative is central to social reconstruction and social transformation. Classrooms cannot be divorced from the society in which they are situated and schools play a critical role in either enhancing or challenging social inequality.

There is no question that education transformation in South Africa from the early 1990s, and curriculum change in particular, was influenced by international debates on the curriculum as a political text. The principles of democracy, human rights, human dignity, social justice, non-racism, equality, nation-building, and reconciliation are among the fundamental values of the South African education system (South Africa 1995; South Africa 2001). A key outcome of education is the development of critical, creative and responsible citizens (Chisholm 2004).

Many scholars within the area of curriculum reform have contended that the curriculum is a key structure through which a democratic society can meet its political goals (cf. Aitchison 2007).

Since 1994, when the democratic government came into power in South Africa, much has changed in respect of the South African school curriculum. The first defining moment of the South African curriculum was the inception of Curriculum 2005 (South Africa 1997). Subsequent to this, there have been various revisions to the national curriculum which include the Revised National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (South Africa 2003); the National Curriculum Statements Grades 10-12 (South Africa 2004), and the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 (South Africa 2012). Overall, curriculum policy represented a particular political and historical purpose (Le Roux 2008; Lelliott *et al.* 2009), the key tenets of which relate to promoting democracy and upholding the principles of equality, equity, human rights, human dignity, social justice, solidarity, and the rights of the South African citizen irrespective of difference.

In the context of the above-mentioned debates, the study presented in this article focused on the principle of social justice embedded in the national curriculum. More specifically, the study explored how social justice imperatives in the English Home Language Curriculum were understood and mediated by a secondary school teacher.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE CURRICULUM

Social justice is a contested construct and does not possess a single, essential meaning (Ness, George, Turner & Bolgatz 2010; Sandretto 2003). Rather, the meaning is derived from the *context* in which it is used. Lewis (2001: 189) contends that generally “social justice involves exploring the social construction of unequal hierarchies, which result in a social group’s differential access to power and privilege”. Thus, social justice relates to issues of oppression within society. Ness *et al.* (2010: 89) explain that “social justice is simultaneously a goal, a process, and a stance”. The goal is the pursuance of equal opportunity and equity for all. The process involves confronting and disrupting oppressive processes, cultures, structures and systems in institutions and developing inclusive values. A social justice stance is one of reflecting on, questioning of and critiquing everyday, commonsense assumptions embedded in particular contexts. Ness *et al.* (2010) explain that a stance is the lens through which one critiques and questions the world.

According to Davies (2006), social justice has been perceived as one of the key drivers of informing a curriculum for global citizenship. Kruss (1998: 99) states that “education remains one of the key spheres for the state to meet the social

and political demand for reconstruction, redistribution and equity in a way that is highly visible”. Reed (2009) states that the intrinsic or individual benefits of social justice education are that learners are encouraged to recognise their position in society and become more aware of their purpose in and responsibility to the community at large. Teaching for social justice requires that teachers become agents of change. The process is a complex one as it involves self-transformation and self-scrutiny (Reed 2009).

The most overarching evidence that South Africa takes a strong stance towards eradicating social injustice is found within its Constitution which foregrounds the rights and equality of all South Africans. According to its Preamble, the aims of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa 1996a: 1) are to “heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights”. Underlying South Africa’s education legislation and policies, including curriculum policy initiatives, are the principles of democracy, citizenship, multiculturalism, redress, equity and equality (cf. South Africa 1995; 1996b; 1997; 2001; 2003; 2005). These principles are also evident in South Africa’s language-in-education policy (South Africa 1995; 1997).

According to the National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 for Languages: English Home Language (South Africa 2003: 2), “social transformation in education is aimed at ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of our population”. Further to this statement, the amendments to the National Curriculum Statement for Home Languages (to be implemented in 2012 in Grade 10) echo similar views, as shown in the following extract:

The National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 is based on the following principles:

Social transformation: ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population.

Human rights, inclusivity, environmental and social justice: infusing the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 is sensitive to issues of diversity such as poverty, inequality, race, gender, language, age, disability and other factors (South Africa 2003: 6).

Thus, the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12 (South Africa 2003) highlights the principle of social justice in education.

In view of the above policy texts, we assert that a teacher's pedagogical practice is shaped by his or her particular position as a South African citizen, and the role that this position plays in the educational context. For example, the National Curriculum Statement (Grades 10-12) for English Home Language mentions that teachers are envisaged as key contributors to the transformation of education in South Africa (South Africa 2003). There is a clear indication in the curriculum document that the teacher's role has social responsibility attached to it. In addition, teachers are constructed as "political" agents of change which requires not only an understanding of oppression and social change on an academic level but also a highly personal sense of self and a genuine responsibility to community and society.

There is a body of research in South Africa and internationally that has examined teacher beliefs, classroom pedagogies, and educational practices of teaching for social justice (cf. Bolgatz 2005; Carlson 2007; Cornbleth 2008; Francis & Hemson 2007; Francis & Le Roux 2011; Moore 2008; Nel 2011; Ness *et al.* 2010; Vasquez 2001). Carlson (2007) delved into the complexities of adopting a social justice approach to teaching from the perspective of one teacher. Francis and Le Roux (2011) examined the emerging identities of pre-service teachers and how these identities are linked to a stance towards social justice and the construct of critical agency. Moore (2008) explored teachers' views on becoming agents of change in a science classroom and argued that teacher identity and transformatory actions in the classroom are closely connected. Vasquez (2001) offered a personal, reflective account by researching her own pedagogical practices as she engaged with a critical literacy curriculum. Vasquez (2001:2) noted that the self is constructed "within discourse communities that carry different forms of power, sometimes complementing one another, at other times conflicting with one another".

The study in this article investigated how one language teacher interpreted and understood the social justice imperatives in the English Home Language Curriculum Statement for Grades 10-12 (South Africa 2003), and to what extent this understanding influences her pedagogical practices. The key research questions were: What discourses of social justice are evident in the teacher's beliefs and pedagogical practices? Why do these discourses play out in particular ways?

FRAMING OF THE STUDY

The research was located within the critical social science paradigm. The study draws from critical theory which highlights the importance of examining issues of power, oppression, empowerment and emancipation through research (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg 2011). Further, research grounded in critical

theory was considered suitable for this study as such research aims to examine human agency, social inequalities, change and transformation (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba 2011). Popkewitz and Fendler (1999) explain that critical researchers concern themselves with the interrogation of existing social relations in an attempt to understand issues of power and institutional contradictions. A critical approach to research is highly political and ideological in nature, and the researcher is concerned with praxis. Research itself becomes transformative, according to Kincheloe *et al.* (2011). Critical research is based on the premise that knowledge is not neutral but is constructed and supported by societal interactions. The aim of critical theory is not only to identify who controls the construction of this knowledge but also how (in what way) and why (for what purpose).

McLaren and Giarelli (1995) and Giroux (1983; 1988) contend that critical researchers have used critical social theory to increase the understanding of schooling as an essentially political enterprise; a way of reproducing or privileging particular discourses. They further argue that the curriculum is a form of cultural politics and is deeply implicated in the production and organisation of student experiences of learning and social forms of knowledge such as language use. Giroux (1988) identified three issues that critical researchers would explore in an educational context which are captured in the questions: What are the inequalities and the injustices in an educational context or setting? What produces equalities and injustices and how are they maintained? How can we address inequalities and transform oppressive social structures? Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1995) have written extensively about the political nature of teaching and argue that teachers must be aware of their own positioning in terms of oppressive discourses in order to be effective change agents in the classroom and the school.

The authors are in agreement with Denzin and Lincoln (2011) when they argue that a critical framework in social justice research is important as its aim is to empower research participants and transform the institutions, policies, processes and practices that may be perpetuating oppression in a society.

THE STUDY

The study was a qualitative case study. Baxter and Jack (2008) explain that a case-study approach is the ideal choice if the researcher's objective is to explore contextual conditions as these conditions are relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The study acknowledged the "situatedness" of the beliefs and pedagogical practices of one English Home Language teacher which could not be considered without context. The unit of analysis was the teacher in her situated context. Scholars have argued that engaging in curriculum implementation is

very much a personal journey for teachers (Kilpatrick 2009; Noack 2011) – hence the decision to focus on a single teacher.

Participant and setting

An English teacher at an urban secondary girls' school was the participant in the study. Sam (a pseudonym) has been a teacher for ten years. The school has gained acclaim for offering quality education to its learners and is considered one of the leading institutions in its community. Learners' backgrounds reflect the diversity of the country in terms of race, social class, religion, ethnicity, etc. Learners range on the socio-economic scale from lower- to upper-middle class.

Sam is a female teacher who teaches English Home Language from grade 8 to grade 12. She was purposely selected as she displays enthusiasm for the profession and has engaged extensively with curriculum policy during her decade as a teacher. She is the Subject Head at the school and has involved herself in the compilation of textbooks for use in English Home Language teaching. Sam indicated that she was confident in the tenets of the curriculum as she began her university studies when South Africa had already embraced curriculum transformation. However, studies have shown that teachers struggle with the complexities inherent in the social process of making sense of curriculum change (Kilpatrick 2009). As insiders in the field of teaching, we as researchers are particularly aware of the tensions and dilemmas teachers face in attempting to teach for social justice.

Data generation

The process of data generation occurred in three phases. A preliminary semi-structured interview was conducted with Sam; a lesson was observed; and a second follow-up interview was conducted. The interview focused firstly on Sam's biography and her views on social justice education as a concept. Secondly, the interview explored Sam's understanding of social justice imperatives in the NCS for English Home Language Grade 10-12. Thirdly, the focus turned to her classroom practices, particularly on teaching for social justice.

The data generation also involved classroom observation. Sam was requested to teach a lesson in which she delved into issues of social justice and oppression. This provided insight into how her philosophy and beliefs influence her teaching. The lesson observation examined the nature of learner diversity, the content of the lesson and its links to the NCS imperatives related to social justice, the pedagogical enactments of the teacher and teacher-learner interactions.

After an initial analysis of the data, the follow-up interview was conducted to explore issues that emerged from the first interview and the lesson observation in more depth.

The data generation tools used in the study allowed for an “emic” perspective of how the teacher constructs knowledge and mediates the curriculum to her learners. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) explain that the teacher’s “emic” perspective provides a unique vantage point from which to generate knowledge as it emanates from lived, everyday practices.

Data analysis

Data analysis in the study involved the identification of the discourses of social justice embedded in the teacher’s pedagogical enactments. The authors considered Barbara Johnstone’s (2002) heuristic for analysing discourse to be an appropriate one for this study. In essence, there are common threads or understandings that permeate this heuristic. Firstly, discourse is interactional. It is a culmination of one’s understanding of the world – through language, history, culture and experiences – that shapes the way one behaves or responds to situations.

Secondly, discourse is shaped by language and has an impact on the way we speak. Johnstone (2002) argues that discourse constitutes ideologies or sets of interrelated ideas. These ideologies are linked to the manner in which power is distributed or maintained in society. This brings us to the third aspect identified in the heuristic: discourse is shaped by its medium and purpose. This aspect seems highly relevant to the role of a critical teacher as it seems to present the notion that a teacher has the ability to interpret and affect purposeful change in the way a lesson is delivered. It further shares a congruency with Giroux’s (1988) idea of the political role of a teacher.

The work of Fairclough (1989; 1995) informed the approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) used in the study. Van Dijk (2000: 353) explains that CDA focuses on “the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of power and dominance in society”. The strength of CDA lies in the importance of recognising the impact of institutional structures in shaping and influencing our subjectivities or ways we negotiate the world (Hanrahan 2005).

Fairclough (1995: 2) notes “that language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology and through being both a site of, and a stake in struggles for power”. From this argument, discourse is embedded not only in the linguistic codes provided by language but also in the social structures that shape them. A further important dimension of analysis is the role of the subject in

social settings (Balfour 2007). This relates to a “sense of being”, that is, the way in which people shape discourse/s relevant to their particular social demands and adapt them as necessary. In turn, discourse/s are impacted upon from the outside to “normalise” or shape particular situations (Grbich 2007).

The central approach to analysis in the study was the attempt to capture the data in the form of “texts”. The analysis examined specifically how the teacher interpreted social justice imperatives in the NCS and the discursive influences on how she implemented her understanding of these imperatives in her teaching practice. Drawing from Carlson (2007), the first level of analysis was text-based in that it focused on specific references (words, phrases, sentences) that lent insight into the way Sam understood social justice and concepts related to social justice. This linguistic analysis is modelled on the first analytical part of Fairclough’s (1995) three-part model and provided insight into the manner in which the participant constructed knowledge.

In the second level of analysis, topics were identified from the text provided by the interviews and classroom observation. Examples of these topics include: equality, diversity, discrimination, equity, political issues, social issues, class, and gender. The topics assisted in forming a broad understanding of the teacher’s pedagogy and in identifying “chunks” of data that were applicable to the key research aims.

At the third level of analysis, the topics were then grouped together to form “meta codes” (Carlson 2007). Similar themes or patterns in the data were identified across topics and were grouped together to form the discourses identified in the findings. The three main discourses that were identified were: the discourse of academic excellence; the discourse of inclusivity and diversity; and the discourse of critical thinking.

When undertaking qualitative research, one has to concede that the process is never truly objective. Rather, it seeks to explore a phenomenon through the subjective experiences of the individual (Ryan, Coughlan & Cronin 2000). Validation in discourse analysis is an important part of the process of analysis. The two authors subjected the data to much re-evaluation and reflection to ensure that the findings were derived from the data and that the most plausible interpretation was obtained. The research questions of the study were constantly kept in focus and the authors tried to represent the views of the participant as authentically as possible.

Ethical considerations

Permission to undertake the study at the school was obtained from the Department of Education. Ethical clearance was given by the University of

KwaZulu-Natal. Informed consent was obtained from the school principal and the teacher participant, who were fully briefed about the aims of the study and the research process.

FINDINGS

In this section, we examine three discourses of social justice that emerged from the data and offer insight into how these framed the teacher's pedagogical practice. As in the study conducted by Carlson (2007), the discourses in this study were not discrete boundaries in that there was evidence of overlap in the data.

The discourse of academic excellence

The school at which Sam teaches places a great emphasis on academic achievement. This ethos is reflected in Sam's teaching philosophy. When asked to describe the context of the school, Sam responded:

I would describe the school's context as one that fosters an appreciation for learning, for academics. There is quite a lot of pressure put on learners to achieve well – with the recognition of academic merits, and awards and colours, and what not. So these are role models to which they aspire ... Teachers themselves here are genuinely motivated, well-educated. Being driven individuals they place their own pressures on the children to do well ... So overall, I think academics is highly valued.

The discourse of academic excellence seems to be embedded in Sam's view of her pedagogical practice. The lesson observed was clearly focused on the content that needed to be covered for grade 12. During the interview, Sam stated explicitly that although she would be dealing with oppressive discourses, her key focus would be on the examinable text, which was *Othello* by William Shakespeare. She mentioned the difficulty of time constraints when explaining why in-depth, interactive classroom discussions about issues of social justice could not be held often. Her interview responses seemed to indicate that social justice issues are not central to the curriculum, and that dealing with them may disrupt the time frames of the academic curriculum.

Sam places great emphasis on remediation and scaffolded learning to assist what she describes as "weaker learners". She mentioned the school reading programme and other techniques that she felt assisted learners in improving their skills. Reading seemed to be an important part of the curriculum as she often made reference to the fact that the "weaker learners" had not been exposed to the love of reading at an early age.

In terms of social justice in the curriculum, placing a high value on academic success for all learners is a social justice issue to Sam. Hirsh and Hord (2010) asserted that the important link between social justice and academic learning cannot be negated. However, these scholars use the example of so-called remedial programmes in schools to point out that high academic achievement alone is not a clear indicator that inequities are addressed. A skilled teacher may believe that remediation in the form of decreasing the pace of learning for weaker learners may be beneficial; however, based on research the thinking is that acceleration may have a greater impact on learners' performance (Hirsh & Hord 2010). Hirsh and Hord (2010) conclude that, from a critical theory perspective, success should not be determined only by academic achievement but also by a greater sense of social issues.

The discourse of inclusivity and diversity

The discourse of inclusivity and diversity was the one that most informed Sam's conceptualisation of social justice. Her classroom consisted of 33 female learners from various race groups, cultural backgrounds and beliefs. The layout of the classroom was such that the girls were arranged in groups. The group activity that learners were given was structured by Sam so that each learner had a role in the activity. Sam explained that she made a concerted effort to integrate diverse learners within her groups. Her aim was to teach tolerance, empathy and sharing.

Sam did demonstrate her awareness of inclusivity and diversity in her classroom. Not only did she affirm learners but she also made direct reference to learners bringing their own experiences to bear on literary texts. She included an example of a text choice that she made for grade 8, a book titled *Someone called Lindiwe* (Smith 2003). The book deals with the issue of identity as it tells the story of a young girl who was brought up as a member of the Zulu culture, only to discover later that she had been stolen by her "mother" from a Coloured family. Sam saw the relevance of the book in allowing learners to acknowledge who they were as she believed that "it is important for people to think of that question very closely and just in terms of their character trait, traditions, religions ...".

Learner participation was encouraged, as identified by the comments made during Sam's interview and the lesson observation. Learners appreciated this inclusive ethos and culture in the classroom and actively engaged in the discussion and in sharing their personal experiences. For example, the following interaction was observed during the classroom observation:

Learner: I watched a soccer game the other day and the referee was a woman. My dad said that it was completely wrong for a woman to referee a professional male soccer game.

Sam: And how did you feel about that?

Learner: Well I said there was nothing wrong. We still have the same qualifications as a male ref – there's nothing wrong with it. They say that something went wrong in the game because of the woman.

Sam: And you see that's quite an interesting example because it shows a generational difference. So even though, like what you guys were saying about those values being transmitted to children, in fact, you know each generation is responsible for themselves. Each individual is responsible for their own thoughts and beliefs as well. I think it shows strength that you were able to deal with that.

The above excerpt captures Sam's philosophy in that it was important for her to affirm learner perspectives regarding social issues. However, she seemed to hold back when the discussion required a more in-depth interrogation of the power dynamics in society. In the context of critical pedagogy, delving into oppressive discourses would require an interrogation of the discourse of gender, for example, by encouraging learners not only to identify the oppression but also interrogate its maintenance in society. Power and ideology are also key constructs when delving into oppressive discourses (Foucault & Gordon 1980). For example, the learner had the courage not only to challenge her father on the issue but also to mention it to her peers and teacher. However, while she felt comfortable to share the story with them, when asked how she dealt with her father's comments, she responded that "there was nothing wrong with it", implying that her father was entitled to his own views. Perhaps her construction of the discourse of gender needed to be interrogated and explored.

According to Trainor (2005: 158), "as with individualism, assertions about the unchanging nature of the social world (manifest in such statements as 'that's just the way people are,' or 'that's the way it's always been') rationalised an unequal status quo by implying that injustice is merely part of nature, and not amenable to critique, intervention, or change". In the above interaction, accepting the situation as a generational issue may be viewed as maintaining the status quo as explained by Trainor (2005). Further, Sam implies that individual behaviour is responsible for such gender oppression. Sam's intention may have been to affirm the learner for challenging her father's assumptions but she had not adequately addressed the construction of gender as an oppressive discourse. Once again, the danger of adopting a purely inclusive approach may be a barrier to empowering learners to challenge societal injustices related to oppression from a more critical perspective.

In the analysis of the data related to this discourse, the authors identified a tension and contradiction with regard to Sam's construction of "weaker learners". She presented the idea that "weaker learners" are in need of "remediation"

or “remediation programmes”, that they are “intellectually average or below possibly” and that there are “intelligent learners” and “weaker learners”. This view may be criticised by proponents of inclusive education (Barton 1994; Holt 2004; Sayed 2003; Slee 1996; 2006) who would argue that constructing learners in a deficit-oriented manner is problematic as it tends to pathologise certain groups of learners in a class or school. Internationally, studies have shown that such thinking has led to exclusionary school practices and the lowering of expectations for certain groups of learners (cf. Ngcobo & Muthukrishna 2011; Swanson 2006). In South Africa in particular, students’ schooling histories and systemic factors may be responsible for their learning difficulties so the focus should be on limitations in the system and not solely on deficits within learners. However, the paradox is that the above constructions do not seem to have an impact on Sam’s commitment to teaching all learners in her class. Further, Sam mentioned that most of the learners who are under-achieving come from the poorer white families. It is laudable that Sam provides additional curriculum support outside the formal teaching schedule for learners who have difficulties in learning. She explains, “...you know, you are wanting to keep the intelligent learner engaged, and yet not leave the weak learner behind”.

On another dimension of inclusivity, the study revealed that Sam’s pedagogical practice is highly influenced by the values of affirmation and validation. She recounted two important aspects of her biography that seem to affect the way she perceives herself and “behaves” in her practice. If discourse is shaped by and shapes the participant, as postulated by Johnstone (2002), then Sam’s experiences must influence her way of being. She changed her religious beliefs by her own choice about 12 years ago. She also mentioned that her youngest child had learning difficulties which made her recognise the need to be patient with academically weaker children. These two life experiences seemed closely related to Sam’s commitment to the values of affirmation and validation. Creating an inclusive culture and ethos in her classroom through affirming and validating all learners were priorities of her social justice agenda.

Sam mentioned that she did not particularly enjoy her own schooling experiences as a learner and battled with her self-esteem. The data analysed from the classroom interactions with learners and the interview transcripts made many references to validation in the form of acknowledging learners and affirming their responses. Sam explained:

I think that I explicitly validate learners’ experiences or their beliefs about things. Even if I think that is a ludicrous thing they would never know that I thought that because my intention is to validate them. And I think I am able to let them go away feeling good about their own understanding of things.

The values affirmation and validation shed light not only on how discourses are shaped by the social constructions of a person's realities but also on how they are influenced by the social interactions and engagements individuals have with others. This dialectical process by which discourse is formed is an intricate dance that teachers need to be highly aware of in order to inspire themselves and learners to become critical agents of change. McLeod and Yates (2006) stress that the construction of teacher identity is impacted both by understandings of the self as a teacher and new understandings influenced by social interactions and new situations. Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne (2002) draw attention to the constructed nature of a teacher's identity in the context of professional knowledge.

The discourse of critical thinking

The study indicated that the discourse of critical thinking is embedded within Sam's professional beliefs and pedagogical practices, as illustrated in the interview excerpt below.

Critical thinking involves learners deciding for themselves the rights and wrongs, the pros and cons, the relative validity of an argument and stance. Being aware that they are making a conscious choice about their own view on the issue is how I would define "critical consciousness". Critical thinking is something I emphasise, telling learners they must not automatically believe what they are told – whether it be something I tell them, something on the news report, or even something that has been culturally determined as the "right" way of understanding something.

Sam clearly understood critical thinking and incorporated this understanding in her teaching methodology. The classroom observation indicated that she encouraged learners to isolate key themes from the text and apply them to their own lives. For example, in the lesson observed, learners were given selected extracts from *Othello*. Each group was required to present a summary of the plot, role-play the extract and then relate the extract to an issue in South African society. It is clear that Sam had thought through the objectives of the lesson, its social justice imperatives and the dynamics of the student interactions. Sam's view of critical thinking was that learners should use information to make conscious choices about the world. In some ways, this view would fit in with a social justice agenda. However, by Sam's own admission her focus is on the personal rather than the "broader social context". Evidence of this view can be seen from the following classroom interaction:

Learner: On that topic. Like in the Zulu culture as soon as you get married to your husband, he thinks he owns you just because he paid lobola for you.

Sam: That's such a good point. Can you see how it relates to the play?

Learner: Ya. It does.

Sam: Can you see how it relates to the play because of the way in which Brabantio, Desdemona's father, like he believes he owns her? He even talks about her being stolen as if she is some kind of possession. That's a good point! Somebody else had their hand up.

Sam drew on the learner's existing knowledge to guide an understanding of the text. She mentioned during her interview that validating learners' cultural experiences is important to her classroom pedagogy. However, there is a need to draw a distinction between critical thinking and critical consciousness – a key construct within a social justice agenda (Freire 1970). Although the two are related in terms of encouraging people to engage with discourse and texts at an in-depth level, the development of critical thinking does not necessarily lead to critical consciousness. Freire's (1970) view of critical consciousness is that it is the ability to recognise oppression within social, political and economic contexts and to take action against such oppression. Hence, critical consciousness must lead to a sense of responsibility pertaining to broader society and the will to act against oppressive issues.

The study suggests that the teacher did not make the shift from critical thinking to critical consciousness which has its roots in critical pedagogy. Kumagai and Lypson (2009) explain that critical consciousness is in contrast to critical thinking but also complements it. Critical consciousness implies that the learner does not exist in isolation but engages with others in the world. Therefore, developing a critical consciousness, according to Kumagai and Lypson (2009: 783) "involves a reflective awareness of the differences in power and privilege and the inequities that are embedded in social relationships – an act that Freire calls *reading the world*."

CONCLUSION

The study raises awareness of the complexities of teaching for social justice, particularly in mediating curriculum policy imperatives in classroom contexts. The importance of interrogating the embedded assumptions that underlie the pedagogical practices of teachers cannot be over-emphasised. The teacher's conceptualisation of a social justice agenda was framed by what she had learnt as a student teacher, her own beliefs about teaching and learning, and what she perceived as the government's way of addressing past inequities that had impacted South African society. We argue that the teacher's beliefs and pedagogical practices reflect a rather traditional, multicultural approach with a

focus on what would be considered as “surface culture” (Grant & Sleeter 1997; 2007). She prioritises learner-centredness, high academic achievement, affirming and valuing learners’ cultural and social backgrounds to take forward the vision of a “rainbow nation”, and creating an inclusive classroom culture and ethos. Her discourses of affirmation and validation, and inclusivity and diversity suggest that Sam is aware of her role in building learners’ trust, self-confidence and self-esteem. Her classroom is a safe place for learners to express their feelings about various issues in society.

However, the findings suggest that the teacher does not make the shift to a critical perspective as described in debates emanating from anti-racism and critical multiculturalism (Gillborn 1995; 2004; May 1999). Such a perspective would emphasise, for example, the unequal distribution of power within and between different groups and the key political imperative of social justice education which is to interrogate inequities within institutional and social practices. A passive stance with respect to addressing oppressive issues may develop learners’ identification of these issues but may not provide them with the necessary linguistic skills to examine and engage with oppression in society. This argument aligns with the agenda of creating sustainable, empowering learning environments in schools. Robinson and Shallcross (2006) contend that sustainable learning environments would work to develop informed, critical and active citizens. Such environments would critically engage learners in interrogating society’s structures, norms, values and actions; for example, the implications of limiting perspectives on issues of social inequality, and the silence around inequities that impact the lives of marginalised groups in society.

The study has implications for teacher-education programmes that aim to develop the skills and knowledge required for teaching social justice to student-teachers. Critical questions to engage with are: What are students’ understandings of the construct “social justice”? What does teaching practice for social justice mean? How do student biographies influence their conceptions of teaching for social justice? What are the power dynamics in the diverse schooling contexts in South Africa?

The study was limited in scope in that it examined how one teacher in a particular schooling context understood the social justice imperatives in curriculum policy and the implications of teaching for social justice. However, it suggests the need for further research on the teacher’s role in mediating the social justice imperatives embedded in the South African curriculum, given the tensions and complexities highlighted by the study.

REFERENCES

- Aitchison, J. 2007. *Lifelong education and global citizenship: Units 1 and 2*. School of Adult and Higher Education: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Apple, M. 1982. *Education and power*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Apple, M. 1986. *Teachers and texts: A political economy of class and gender relations in education*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Arnot, M. 2002. *Reproducing gender: Essays on educational theory and feminist politics*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Balfour, R. 2007. *Forms of discourse analysis*. Paper presented at a research workshop of the School of Education and Development. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Barton, L. 1994. Disability, difference and the politics of definition. *Australian Disability Review* 3(94): 8-22.
- Baxter, P. & Jack, S. 2008. Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report* 13(4): 544-559.
- Bolgatz, J. 2005. Revolutionary talk: Elementary teacher and students discuss race in a social studies class. *The Social Studies* 96(6): 259-264.
- Carlson, D.L. 2007. Examining the embedded assumptions of teaching for social justice in a secondary urban school: A case study. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education* 5(1): 1-23.
- Chisholm, L. 2004. *The quality of primary education in South Africa*. Background paper prepared for UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report. [Online]. Available at: http://www.hsrc.ac.za/research/output/outputDocuments/2872_Chisholm_Thequalityofprimary.pdf [Accessed on 8 February 2012].
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S.L. 1999. Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. In Iran-Nejad, A. & Pearson, P.D. (eds). *Review of research in education*. Vol. 24. pp. 249-305. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association (AERA).
- Cornbleth, C. 2008. *Diversity and the new teacher: Learning from experience in urban schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Davies, L. 2006. Global citizenship: Abstraction or framework for action? *Educational Review* 58(1): 5-25.

- Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. 2011. Preface. In Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. (Fourth edition). pp. ix-xvi. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Egan, J. 2004. *The Egan review: skills for sustainable communities*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/152086.pdf> [Accessed on 5 January 2010].
- Fairclough, N. 1989. *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. 1995. *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. New York: Longman.
- Foucault, M. & Gordon, C. 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. London: Harvester Press.
- Francis, D. & Hemson, C. 2007. Rainbow's end: Consciousness and enactment in social justice education. *Perspectives in Education* 25: 99-112.
- Francis, D. & Le Roux, A. 2011. Teaching for social justice education: The intersection between identity, critical agency, and social justice education. *South African Journal of Education* 31: 299-311.
- Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gardner, M. 2007. Engaging democracy and social justice in creating educational alternatives: An account of voice and agency for marginalized youth and the community. *The Public Sector Innovation Journal* 11(3): 1-14.
- Gillborn, D. 1995. *Racism and antiracism in real schools: theory, policy, practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gillborn, D. 2004. Anti-racism: From policy to praxis. In Ladson-Billings, G. & Gillborn, D. (eds). *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in multicultural education*, pp. 35-48. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Giroux, H.A. 1983. Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis. *Harvard Educational Review* 53: 261-293.
- Giroux, H. 1988. *Teachers as intellectuals*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Giroux, H.A. 2001. *Theory and resistance in education*. London: Bergin & Garvey.

- Grant, C.A. & Sleeter, C.E. 1997. Race, class, gender and disability in the classroom. In Banks, J.A. & McGee Banks, C.A. (eds). *Multicultural education: issues and perspectives*. (Third edition). pp. 39-45. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Grant, C. & Sleeter, C. 2007. *Doing multicultural education for achievement and equity*. New York: Routledge.
- Grbich, C. 2007. *An introduction: Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage International.
- Greene, M. 1988. *The dialectic of freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hanrahan, M.U. 2005. *Highlighting hybridity: A critical discourse analysis of teacher talk in science classrooms*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.interscience.wiley.com> [Accessed on 1 June 2009].
- Hirsh, S. & Hord, S.M. 2010. Building hope: giving affirmation. *Journal of Staff Development*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.learningforward.org/news/getDocument.cfm?articleID=2105> [Accessed on February 1, 2012].
- Holt, L. 2004. Childhood disability and ability: (dis)ableist geographies of mainstream primary schools. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 24(3). [Online]. Available at: <http://www.dsquds.org/article/view/506/683> [Accessed on 3 July 2009].
- James, C.D. & Schmitz, C.L. 2011. Sustainability education: ethics, leadership, community engagement, and social entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 2(5): 1-7.
- Johnstone, B. 2002. *Discourse analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Kilpatrick, J. 2009. The mathematics teacher and curriculum change. *PNA* 3(3): 107-121.
- Kincheloe, J.L., McLaren, P. & Steinberg, S.R. 2011. Critical pedagogy, and qualitative research: moving to the bricolage. In Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, pp. 163-178. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Kruss, G. 1998. Teachers, curriculum 2005 and the education policy-making process. In Morrow, W. & King, K. (eds). *Vision and reality: changing education and training in South Africa*, pp. 96-111. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.

- Kumagai, A.K. & Lyson, M.L. 2009. Beyond cultural competence: critical consciousness, social justice, and multicultural education. *Academic Medicine* 84(6): 782-787.
- Le Roux, K. 2008. A critical discourse analysis of a real-world problem in mathematics: Looking for signs of change. *Language and Education* 22(5): 307-326.
- Lelliott, A., Mwakapenda, W., Doidge, M., Du Plessis, J., Mhlolo, M., Msimanga, A. *et al.* 2009. Issues of teaching and learning in South Africa: A disjunction between curriculum policy and implementation. *African Journal for Research in MST Education* 13(1): 47-63.
- Leslie, A. 2009. Sustainable communities: The role of global citizenship education. *POLIS Journal* 2: 1-44.
- Lewis, J.B. 2001. Social justice, social studies, and social foundations. *The Social Studies* 92: 189-195.
- Lincoln, Y.S., Lynham, S.A. & Guba, E.G. 2011. Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. (Fourth edition). pp. 97-128. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Mahlomaholo, S.M.G., Francis, D. & Nkoane, M.M. 2010. Creating sustainable empowering learning environments through scholarship of engagement. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(3): 281-286.
- May, S. 1999. *Critical multiculturalism: Rethinking multicultural and antiracist education*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press.
- McCarthy, C.R. & Apple, M.W. 1988. Race, class, and gender in American education. In Weis, L. (ed.). *Class, race, and gender in American education*, pp. 3-39. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- McLaren, P. 1995. White terror and oppositional agency: Towards a critical multiculturalism. In Sleeter, C. & McLaren, P. (eds). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference*, pp. 33-70. New York: State University of New York Press.
- McLaren, P. & Giarelli, J.M. 1995. *Critical theory and educational research*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- McLeod, J. & Yates, L. 2006. *Making modern lives: Subjectivity, schooling and social change*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Moore, F.M. 2008. Agency, identity, and social justice: Pre-service teachers' thoughts on becoming agents of change in urban elementary science classrooms. *Research in Science Education* 38(5): 589-610.
- Nel, W. 2011. Teaching about social justice: black lecturer, white students. *Acta Academica* 43(2): 194-213.
- Ness, M.K., George, M.A., Turner, K.H. & Bolgatz, J. 2010. The growth of higher educators for social justice: Collaborative professional development in higher education. *Insight* 5: 88-105.
- Newell-Jones, K. 2007. *Global skills and lifelong learning*. London: DEA.
- Ngcobo, J. & Muthukrishna, N. 2011. The geographies of inclusion of students with disabilities in an ordinary school. *South African Journal of Education* 31(3): 357-368.
- Noack, M. 2011. *Teachers in transition: A journey of educational reform*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Australian Catholic University.
- Pinar, W.F. & Bowers, C.A. 1992. Politics of curriculum: Origins, controversies, and significance of critical perspectives. *Review of Research in Education* 18: 163-190.
- Popkewitz, T.S. & Fendler, L. (eds). 1999. *Critical theories in education: Changing terrains of knowledge and politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Reed, J. 2009. Drawing on social justice education: Creating metaphorical images to foster and assess individual transformation in pre-service teacher education. *Multicultural Education* 16(3): 51-54.
- Robinson, J. & Shallcross, T. 2006. Education for sustainable development. In Kassem, D., Mufti, E. & Robinson, J. (eds). *Education studies: Issues and critical perspectives*, pp. 221-232. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Ryan, F., Coughlan, M. & Cronin, P. 2000. Step-by-step guide to critiquing research. Part 2: qualitative research. *British Journal of Nursing* 16(12): 738-744.
- Sandretto, S. 2003. *A voyage of critical discovery: Examining our conceptions of social justice*. Paper presented at the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) and Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) joint conference. New Zealand: University of Otago.
- Sayed, Y. 2003. Educational exclusion/inclusion: Some debates and issues. *Perspectives in Education* 21(3): 1-12.

- Shor, I. 1987. *Critical teaching and everyday life*. (Third edition). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Singh, L. & Francis, D. 2010. Exploring responses to xenophobia: Using workshopping as critical pedagogy. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(3): 302-316.
- Slee, R. 1996. Inclusive schooling in Australia? Not yet! *Cambridge Journal of Education* 26(1): 19-32.
- Slee, R. 2006. Limits to and possibilities for educational reform. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 10(2/3): 109-119.
- Smith, G. 2003. *Someone called Lindiwe*. Johannesburg: Macmillan Education.
- South Africa. 1995. Department of Education. White paper on education and training. Cape Town: Government Printers.
- South Africa. 1996a. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996.
- South Africa. 1996b. South African Schools Act of 1996.
- South Africa. 1997. Department of Education. Curriculum 2005: Lifelong learning for the 21st century. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa. 2001. Department of Education White Paper 6: Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa. 2003. Department of Education. National curriculum statement Grades 10-12: Policy. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa. 2004. Department of Education. National curriculum statement Grades R-12. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa. 2005. Department of Education. National curriculum statement Grades 10-12 (General). Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa. 2012. Department of Education. The national curriculum and assessment policy statement Grade 10-12 English Home Language. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Steyn, H. & Wolhuter, C. 2010. Creating sustainable learning environments in schools by means of strategic planning: The experience of engagement by a comparative education team at a university. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 24(3): 456-470.
- Stronach, I., Corbin, B., McNamara, O., Stark, S. & Warne, T. 2002. Towards an uncertain politics of professionalism: Teacher and nurse identities in flux. *Journal of Education Policy* 17(1): 109-138.

- Swanson, D.M. 2006. *Power and poverty – whose, where, and why? School mathematics, context and the social construction of “disadvantage”*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.emis.de/proceedings/PME30/5/217.pdf> [Accessed on 14 August 2011].
- Trainor, J.S. 2005. My ancestors didn't own slaves: Understanding white talk about race. *Research in the Teaching of English* 40(2): 140-167.
- Van Dijk, T.A. 2000. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.discourses.org/OldArticles/Critical%20discourse%20analysis.pdf> [Accessed on 9 January 2012].
- Vasquez, V. 2001. *Negotiating a critical literacy curriculum with young children*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.pdkintl.org/edres/resbul29.htm> [Accessed on 3 December 2011].
- Willis, P. 1981. *Learning to labour*. Hampshire: Gower.