

Troubling Diversity in South African Education

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To understand how issues of diversity have been handled in South African education, it is necessary to explore the prevailing educational approaches in recent years and the ways they have been contested. In my lecture, I will explore limitations of a multiculturalist approach in what is seen, in over-simplified terms, as the ‘Rainbow Nation’¹, and will argue for an approach to diversity that is designed to meet the challenges of continuing inequalities. My contention is that South African education has always recognised diversity, but the ways in which it has done so have mainly reflected oppressive attitudes and structures.

I write from within a tradition of critical pedagogy, a tradition that in particular brings into scrutiny forms of exclusion and the relationship amongst such forms of exclusion. This requires that I give particular attention to the ways in which specific forms of inequality emerge or are intensified.

South Africa is a society diverse in terms of racial and ethnic divisions, with many languages. It has a history of violent conflict between groups since colonisation, both in the suppression of black groups by white colonisers, in the war between Britain and the Boers, in the continued suppression of black people in the 20th Century, and in armed opposition to apartheid. It is also a very unequal society in economic terms,

¹ By ‘Rainbow Nation’ we refer to the term coined by the then Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, to describe post 1994 South Africa when apartheid rule officially ended after South Africa’s first fully democratic election

with a Gini coefficient that rose from .68 to .77 from 1996 to 2001 (Schwabe, 2004).

While diversity has not always been foregrounded as a central educational problem, understandings about how it should be handled have always informed policy.

Christian National Education

The apartheid system had its own approach to education, Christian National Education. Within this framework the dominant educational philosophy was known as Fundamental Pedagogics. This emphasised the role of 'cultural groups' in terms that were closely aligned with the distinctions of apartheid: 'A nation ... is a group of people bound together by certain essential, common ties, interests and sentiments to form a self-aware, spiritual unity' (Du Plooy, 1982, p.152). The 'South African' nation '... is historically connected with Western civilization' but includes both Afrikaans and English South Africans in 'national co-existence'. The implication was that all black groups (in the South African formulation, African, Coloured and Indian) were simply outside the nation.

This formulation was completely consistent with the political structures of apartheid, by which all White people were brought into one political entity, while African groups were split between nominally independent 'homelands', in the language of 'pluralism'. The approach essentialised culture; though all Whites were accommodated within one entity, all black groups were split both conceptually and administratively into separate education departments. Unlike approaches that fail to acknowledge diversity, Fundamental Pedagogics strongly emphasised diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, within an unquestioned Christian commitment, while ignoring such issues as class, sexual orientation and gender.

A second element was an emphasis on the authority of the educator over the child. This authority was presented as inherently good, with little acknowledgement of its limits (for example, see Du Plooy, 1982). In turn, that authority came from God. The teacher is described consistently as 'he' and is endowed with masculine values: 'He reveals a certain firmness of character and constancy in his life. His ties to a community as a cultural and religious community give him a reserved power and tranquillity' (Du Plooy, p.144). Thus, there is a hierarchy that reached from God down to the learner, with the educator as the key transmitter of norms.

This relationship of authority was reflected also in the relationship between races, in the Afrikaner Nationalist belief that the 'White man' in Africa had the role of leading unenlightened black people to a better life. An educator, researcher and (key note speaker at our colloquium Prof Alleta Delpont) raised with these beliefs expressed it thus: 'Our pious mission was to save Africa from destroying itself. The only way to accomplish this God-given task was to civilise Africa for the Africans. They needed us. We were therefore the superior and they the inferior - we, the masters and they the slaves, we the assertive and they the subservient' (Delpont, 2005, p.211).

With the exception of the more liberal, English-speaking white universities of the time, which were more in contact with international trends, Fundamental Pedagogics permeated all teacher education in South Africa. White Afrikaner graduates who were taught in this philosophy staffed education faculties and teaching training colleges for black students. The sense of hierarchy and authority was pervasive, even extreme. In teacher training colleges for African students, corporal punishment was still practised in the 1980s (Morrow, Maaba and Pulumani 2002).

Freire and People's Education

In radical opposition, leaders of the anti-apartheid struggle reached for an educational philosophy that was consistent with its liberatory commitment. Freire provided both the philosophy and the means. The sharp divide in his early work between ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ echoed the division in society between white and black. One area of its influence was the Black Consciousness Movement, led by Steve Bantu Biko. The Movement asserted Black identity, in the sense of all groups racially oppressed, within a broadly socialist approach. In his trial in 1976 on charges of terrorism, Biko spoke about his involvement in Freirean literacy work and the relevance of conscientisation to the Movement (Biko, 1988). Black Consciousness did not emphasise cultural differences amongst African, Coloured, or Indian people in South Africa but asserted common features of the culture and consciousness of the oppressed, and defined as a key problem to be overcome not cultural difference, but the common internalised consciousness of submission. Diversity was taken for granted; the problem being addressed was not difference, but oppression. White people who committed themselves to the struggle were welcome.

Freirean influence also extended into the educational movement known as People’s Education. This approach was adopted by the United Democratic Front, the ANC-aligned popular movement in late apartheid years. In this movement, the ‘People’ were seen as ‘all sections of the oppressed community and all who detest apartheid’ (Zwelakhe Sisulu, in Mashamba, 1990, p.4). This formulation recognised that there were various groups divided by race and class, all of whom could be brought together in the movement against apartheid, under the leadership of the black working class.

The focus of People’s Education was oppositional and emphasised national liberation and process (Soobrayan, 1990), at the expense of issues of content, pedagogy and management of education (Wolpe, 1991). There was little exploration

of such issues as developing skills for a more open economy, and People's Education can be criticised for over-simplifying complex educational issues and setting in place a polarisation that has continued in the approach to the school curriculum after apartheid (Young, 2006). Despite the polarisation, the one common feature with Christian National Education was that both were uniquely South African formulations.

Birth of the Rainbow Nation

The overarching legacy of the anti-apartheid struggle is the South African Constitution. It is highly progressive and forbids discrimination against people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, language and physical ability, as well as other identifiers. Amongst the guiding principles of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2004) are Social Justice, a Healthy Environment, Human Rights and Inclusivity. These principles have obvious implications for the ways in which diversity is handled, though in themselves they do not commit the education system to a particular formulation.

At the same time, the rapidly shifting context also involved the opening of South African society in the 1990s to international influences. Formulations such as Multiculturalism entered educational discourse with a strong emphasis on the ways of bringing together different people into one common democratic political entity (Cross, Mkwanazi-Twala & Klein, 1998). There was contestation from the outset at the ways in which culture would be understood and different traditions accommodated (Soudien & Nekhwevha, 2002). At issue was whether the 'rainbow' is made up of the essentialised identities imposed by apartheid, or is simply an unlimited expression of openness to diversity.

However, this was not the only international influence. The prevailing neoliberal

emphasis on cost-effectiveness and accountability had strong effects on the ways that schools in fact addressed issues of diversity, with constraints such as school fees intensifying economic inequalities. In higher education, Ntshoe (2004, pp.111-112) refers to the ‘contradictory imperatives of social justice... and the requirements of neoliberalism’. Chisholm (2001, p.65) similarly describes the ‘linkage of redistributive strategies with policies designed for a context of financial stringency; of an association of desegregation with deregulation.’ The inheritors of the anti-apartheid struggle now faced economic challenges that established the terrain on which issues of cultural diversity were negotiated.

Research into current approaches to diversity in South Africa

A study conducted for the Human Sciences Research Council (Hemson, 2006) assessed the prevailing frameworks for addressing diversity in operation at three very different campuses of teacher education. The two most commonly identified by staff were *multiculturalism* and *inclusivity*, though the study found that a third, *critical multiculturalism*, also informs teaching and research in this area. We turn now to an exploration of these three approaches.

Multiculturalism

How multiculturalism has been interpreted within South African teacher education can be judged from this comment by a lecturer in a Faculty of Education at a university originally set up specifically for African students:

Encouraging them to have pride in their own different cultures, and to participate actively in their culture. When they integrate cultural values in their lessons, and during September Heritage day they used to wear the traditional attire in class (Hemson, 2006, p.18).

Typically, multiculturalism is being used in terms mainly of an essentialised understanding. Such events never acknowledge the cultural roots of white English-speakers, suggesting that ‘heritage’ is understood to mean the occasional genuflection to those traditional cultures that are now marginalised. A popular article by Madlala-Leclerc (2004) satirises the way that schools use ‘multiculturalism’ as the opportunity for a rehearsal of racially-based cultural stereotypes that have little resonance with the lived reality of young South Africans. Quin (2002) also indicates how students in teaching practice fail to address ‘diversity’ in just ways, this failure drawing on the lack of critical engagement with the term.

Research on issues of diversity has focused in particular on the rapid desegregation of schools that were previously white, Coloured, or Indian (Vally & Dalamba, 1999; Zafar, 1999; Moletsane, 1999; Dolby, 2001). Such research has largely demonstrated that in the name of multiculturalism, incoming African learners are subject to various forms of exclusion.

This evidence led to criticism of the multiculturalist approach, which was seen as drawing on the idea of racial and cultural essentialism of apartheid, instead of the liberatory commitments of its opponents. Within educational circles outside South Africa, the term ‘critical multiculturalism’ was coined as a way of signifying a concern with power relations and the dynamic complexity of difference. As McLaren (1995, p.43) puts it, critical multiculturalism, among other things,

...does not see diversity itself as a goal but rather argues that diversity must be affirmed within a politics of cultural criticism and a commitment social justice... Critical multiculturalism interrogates the construction of difference and identity in relation to a radical politics.

Similarly, in South Africa a paper by Carrim and Soudien (1999) argued for a framework of *critical antiracism*, an approach that would capture the strong focus on

race in South Africa, while interrogating its links to issues of gender, class and other social identities. Their criticism echoed that of theorists elsewhere who have argued for *critical multiculturalism* as a corrective to the essentialised reading of culture:

...a 'critical antiracism' may be described as a form of antiracism that is explicitly alert and sensitive to the multiple expressions of 'difference' in identity (Carrim and Soudien, 1999, p.153).

Crucially, what is missing in this approach is an exploration of power and conflict in society. In this context, the rhetoric of the Rainbow Nation has fostered 'multiculturalism' in the sense of celebrating the differences outside an assumed norm. It does not connect with the history of struggle, and fails to challenge the idea of culture as static tradition. Thus Gqola attacks what she perceives as 'rainbowism' (Gqola, 2001) as an approach that affirms difference without scrutinising differences in power relations, and that avoids dealing with conflicts around the differences in power.

A particular limitation of the assumptions underlying such a multicultural approach has been the strong emphasis on race and ethnicity, and on researching schools that have been through a process of desegregation. The great majority of schools nationally were and remain entirely African in learner and staff composition, and are frequently referred to as 'not diverse'. One implication is that the ways in which racism affects all-African schools have not been explored (Hemson, 2006, p.56). Further, other social differences, such as gender, disability, class and sexual orientation have been under-researched, distorting the understanding of ways in which diversity is caught up in issues of power relations, and limiting the potential for research to contribute to addressing the many problems in such schools (Francis & Muthukrishna, 2004).

Inclusive education

In contrast, the language of Inclusive Education has been extended in the South African scene from an initial focus on disability to a broader focus on the barriers to full inclusion, including racism and poverty. This is reflected in official policy (Department of Education, 2001) that located disability within a broader focus on possible exclusionary factors. Within teacher education, however, the term is still being used primarily in terms of the ways in which children with disabilities are ‘mainstreamed’ and with a strongly individual emphasis that does not address the broader issues of social relations, as a lecturer on one campus commented:

We do use ‘inclusive education’. This is about differences especially in terms of abilities, accommodating each and every learner in spite of their abilities. The whole range of abilities (Hemson, 2006, p.17).

Similarly, Francis and Muthukrishna (2004) identify how the term is used in ways that limit its applicability to areas of power imbalances.

There is also, though, work that raises broader questions of social inclusion, and that brings to the term a critical perspective similar to the next approach (Porteous, 2003; Soudien, Carrim & Sayed, 2004).

Critical multiculturalism

While the term *critical anti-racism* has not in fact entered South African educational discourse, approaches consistent with it are influencing teacher education, in particular in giving the whole curriculum, rather than a specific section, a critical edge. Thus, lecturers in technology education at a campus that was a leading site in the past for Fundamental Pedagogics, spoke of ways in which they confront their students, most of whom are white and middle class, with some of the technological problems facing poor people in African townships (Hemson, 2006). At another campus, the curriculum in such areas as language, history and mathematics, opens up fundamental questions that challenge the assumption of white middle class norms

(Hemson, 2006)). This approach often works with an understanding of ‘oppression’, though not in the sense of one single form, rather through various forms that connect with each other in complex ways (Young, 2000).

It is helpful to clarify the distinctive assumptions of such an approach:

- 1) Like Multiculturalism, it recognises the significance of social identities. It differs in seeing the significance of such social identities as sexual orientation, class and physical ability, in which the term ‘culture’ is seen as less central.
- 2) It differs from Multiculturalism by its particular emphasis on social identities as social constructions, rather than as the expression of some essential form.
- 3) It understands ‘culture’ as dynamic and shifting, in which meaning may shift across time and place, rather than as a taken-for-granted stable building block.
- 4) Unlike Inclusivity, it situates the individual within the context of social identities and related power relations, while sharing with Inclusivity a commitment to the inclusion of all children from whatever background.
- 5) It recognises that a focus on one particular identity may come at the cost of awareness of other social identities (Kumashiro, 2002).

Emerging South African developments

Two issues of major social significance indicate the need to reframe the debates in terms that rely less on ‘culture’. These are first, the stigma related to HIV/AIDS, and secondly, xenophobia directed against black people from elsewhere in Africa.

The physical consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic are fairly well known. In mid 2004, an estimated five million out of a total of 46 million South Africans were living with HIV (Dorrington, Bradshaw, Johnson, & Budlender 2004). According to Statistics South Africa (Health Systems Trust, 2006), in 1996 the life expectancy for

South African Whites was 10 years higher than for Africans. Mid-year estimates for 2004 were that the gap had widened to 14.4 years, over a period of only eight years. What is less well known is the extent of stigma (Francis & Francis 2006; Francis & Hemson 2006; Francis 2005) and the way that such stigma draws on themes of race, class, religion and sexual orientation.

With regard to xenophobia, the media are increasingly reporting attacks on foreigners from other African countries. Black foreigners experience high levels of hostility, violence, and economic hardship (Warner and Finchilescu 2003; Harris 2002). The experience of African foreigners is one of considerable difficulty as they are accused of taking jobs, bringing crime and HIV/AIDS into the country, and so on. Ironically, one complaint is that they fail to speak the local African language (even if they are newly in the country), a complaint that is seldom made against White people who have lived their lives in South Africa. That this xenophobia is closely related to racism is indicated by the fact that no public hostility is expressed towards foreigners seen as White. It is thus a form of subordination that privileges Whites, whether it is enacted by Black or White South Africans.

Both these issues demonstrate the interconnectedness of issues of power imbalances and the need to frame issues of inclusion or exclusion in terms other than culture. These are two areas where an emphasis on 'culture' serves to entrench the marginalisation of groups who are subordinated on other grounds. Thus, stigma around HIV, xenophobia, heterosexism and such oppressive forces thrives once HIV, nationality and sexual orientation fall out of the frame of 'culture'.

The rapidity of the emergence of these new forms of exclusion and their severity indicate a need for those concerned with the just accommodating of difference in society to be open to the dynamic forces at work, as well as the ways in which those

who are themselves subordinated may become implicated in excluding others.

Typically, such forms draw on existing oppressions. Thus, programmes directed against racism, for example, need to be developed around a critical understanding of these relationships and move beyond a single perspective in which White perpetrators exclude Black victims.

These examples validate the point made by Carrim and Soudien (1999) about the centrality of race and the complexity of race. We cannot account for the destructive impact of these issues without seeing the ways in which race interconnects with other identities, and also the ways in which negative self-images are internalised by the 'oppressed' as much as rigidly positive self-images are internalised by the 'oppressor' (Fanon, 1967). The 'oppressor' and the 'oppressed' often reside in the same person, as subjects privilege within themselves certain social identities and subordinate others.

While both HIV-related stigma and xenophobia exhibit the severity of exclusion, they also point to another element that I believe a critical multiculturalist approach must address: agency. In South Africa, the Treatment Action Campaign has enabled people who are HIV positive to assert clearly and publicly their right to treatment and challenge their exclusion in ways that are hopeful and powerful. Similarly, the my work with children of African migrants (Francis and Hemson, 2007b) provides ample evidence of xenophobia but, more significantly in my view, attests to the remarkable spirit, resilience and academic achievement of people who face poverty, linguistic challenge and societal hostility.

Pedagogically, the opportunity opened through a framework that is sensitive to such dynamics is one that recognises the potential for those excluded to reframe the situation. This may consist in part of renaming; proudly proclaiming that you are HIV positive is one way of jolting the stereotypes and the message that those infected

should hide themselves in shame. Similarly, the comment made by migrant children, that they can see things in two ways, attests to the ability to rework challenging experience into a source of strength.

Elements of a critical framework

Thus I see the need for a framework for approaching issues of diversity in South African education that focuses on how various social identities are caught up in imbalances of power, that is, open to the intersections of race, class, gender and other forms of oppression, and that connects individual and group agency to the traditions of democratic struggle.

Some principles for a critical approach

What then would a critical multiculturalist approach attend to? In the section that follows, I call attention to some general principles of practice. Many of these are drawn from my experience and work on diversity and social justice education with undergraduate and graduate students. Some address specifically the way issues of diversity are handled from a critical perspective. Others seek to bring that perspective to the whole curriculum.

Classrooms vary, of course, hugely in terms of societal context, the subject being pursued, skill requirements, the level of study, and so on. My own practice is within the context of university teacher education, in classes in which social justice is the focus, usually classes that are fairly diverse in terms of race and class. One of the ways in which I seek to use these principles is to notice who speaks most and who speaks least, and to draw students' attention to that which often shifts the patterns of communication. Another way is to avoid responding in a judgemental way to the prejudiced things that students may say; rather, to encourage the speaker to identify

where that idea came from, or alternatively, to ask other students how they feel about the statement. My aim is, in part, to develop in students a questioning attitude towards the ways in which people communicate, or fail to communicate, and also to model ways of enabling communication across social divisions. Another approach I use is through a wide variety of pedagogical techniques, as I do not assume that all students manage with ease the particular interactions of university debate (Ellsworth, 1992).

A teacher of mathematics in an impoverished rural school will face very different conditions; both content and aims will be very different. However, the principles may be very similar. One emphasis may be necessary: finding ways of validating the intellectual potential of the learners in a context where this is often not recognised (hooks, 1994). Such validation is itself a powerful challenge to oppressive relationships. Others are to recognise how mathematics may be encumbered with feelings of powerlessness and to find ways of working with the emotions of learners that enable them to see past the emotional blocks (Weissglass). A further intervention may concern ways of involving learners by discussing how to resolve conflicts amongst themselves equitably.

The following principles are thus stated in general terms, and teachers will need to reflect on how these may inform their own practices, each with its many unique demands:

1. Be open to what 'diversity' might mean in the particular context and how diversity relates to either inclusion or exclusion. Kumashiro refers to the possibility of being unaware of perpetuating oppression through assuming that one knows (2002, pp.78-79). Instead, such an approach requires that educators listen carefully, learn from the context, and take care not to let even well-founded understandings from

elsewhere serve as an adequate description of the relationships present in this context. As I indicate above, an approach that promotes the inclusion of all must be based on an understanding of how exclusion operates in ways that may have typical patterns of oppression, but differ in the specific ways that exclusion is expressed and becomes normalised in that context. The good teacher thus seeks to understand how these forms of exclusion may develop in the school's context and respond through taking thoughtful action to challenge them. It may require creating a climate that enables the silent to speak and recognising that not all groups communicate in exactly the same ways.

2. Affirm the experiential base of learners and students. The assumption is made that students will be more effective practitioners if their own experience is validated and explored. It is crucial that the students' own history is treated as valuable and is a critical part of the data that are reflected. Equally important is that such stories and similar activities are intentionally processed to enable students to make the connections between personal experience and relevant theory. Yosso (2005) identifies forms of cultural capital that the marginalised bring to education. A teacher can thus seek to explore and work with that capital.

3. Challenge the ways in which knowledge has been framed through oppression. Schools are often characterised by messages that draw on one or another form of oppression. Thus, expectations are subtly or in some cases unsubtly communicated, that girls are not good at physics, that while White learners are strong in abstract thought, African learners have untapped creativity, and so on. These attitudes are often expressed through both the 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson, 1968) and the silent or seldom espoused views of educators, parents and learners.

4. For someone to integrate into their role as educator a commitment against oppression means confronting obstacles that one may previously have shied away from, such as challenging authority, naming privilege, emphasising the power relations that exist between social groups, listening to people one has previously ignored, and risking being seen as deviant, troublesome or unpopular. Concepts such as internalisation, domination, subordination, collusion, and stereotypes can be used to inform practice, since they have proved useful in naming and understanding complex interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions (Adams and Marchesani 1992). To avoid leaving anti-oppressive attitudes at the level of opinions, we need tools that enable us to draw attention to how diversity is caught up in relations of power (Francis & Hemson 2007a).

5. Dealing with diversity in education is always affectively loaded for both students and teachers. In South Africa, one injunction from educators is to be 'sensitive' (Hemson, 2006, p.35). The cost of this is to avoid risking engagement with the contentious issues around imbalances of power. Most students do not want to believe that they can harbour unfair prejudices about groups of people and, for many students, confronting such prejudices is difficult (Griffin 1997). Teachers also grapple with their own social identities, biases, fears, and prejudices, and need to be willing to deal honestly with their values, assumptions and emotional reactions to oppressive issues (Bell, Washington, Weinstein and Love 1997; also Francis et al., 2004). If both students and teachers are to confront issues of oppression and power in any meaningful way, we need to design more purposely for the difficulties they will encounter. For example, creating a classroom environment that promotes safety and trust so that all students are able to confront and deal with prejudice and

discrimination. Classroom environments will need to balance the affective and cognitive in addressing issues of diversity and social justice.

6. Recognise the need to complement changing attitudes with attempts to change the structural aspects of oppressions. Translating raised awareness into social action must be seen as a critical and necessary aspect of a critical approach. To prevent superficial commitments to change, it is important for students to explore barriers that prevent them from confronting oppressive attitudes and behaviours. In this way students are able to learn and see the structural aspects of oppression. Equally important, however, is to get students to examine the benefits associated with challenging oppression. A fair amount of time, therefore, must be spent on developing strategies with students which they will be able to use practically in challenging oppression.

7. Affirm the capacity of staff and learners to act and learn in ways that do not replicate patterns of oppression. Many South African schools have survived both the harsh repression of apartheid and the continuing legacy of oppression of various kinds. Despite that, we are often as educators made aware of the ways in which young people in particular affirm themselves and each other in creative and confident ways.

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