

# Teacher–student interactions in desegregated classrooms in South Africa

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## Abstract

This study explored the state of desegregation and integration in South African schools 11 years after the demise of Apartheid. Three classrooms in three desegregating schools with different histories and race profiles were visited. Overall, each classroom was visited on 10 occasions over a period of 2 weeks. Direct observation was the main data gathering technique. The main findings were that desegregation as assimilation is occurring in these schools, but institutionalized racism is still pervasive. Manifestations of this at the classroom level include negative stereotyping of Black students, selective empathy, discriminatory seating arrangements, devolution of authority to students on racial basis, and aversion to African languages. The study concludes that the Constitution of South Africa is being given the most minimalist interpretation where racial desegregation is concerned. It concludes further that for system change to occur at school level, a radical shift from thinking about desegregation to contemplating substantive integration must be undertaken. Only in this way is it possible to introduce anti-racism as a transformative device into schools.

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## 1. Introduction

The vision of equality, respect for human rights, and a world in which human dignity is affirmed is one that is shared the world over. During the past century, a wide range of international instruments have been promulgated, signed or ratified by many nations. For its part, technological advancements have witnessed the birth of the ‘global village’ where spaces that once separated nations seem to be getting smaller. As a result, many nations across the world have become more and more aware of both

the similarity and diversity of cultures and heritages. In societies in which cultural and racial hierarchization has been the norm rather than the exception, recognition of diversity posits an especially difficult task, demanding of systems introspection at very profound levels. At its core is the challenge of defining the nature of, and managing this diversity. At the operational level, there is the question of what change or transformation strategy is adequate for addressing a particular manifestation of segregation or intolerance?

The problematic of defining and effecting desegregation therefore poses a challenge that is as pertinent internationally as it is in South Africa. This is especially the case given the centrality of

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questions of race, racism, citizenship and diversity to school systems worldwide. Schools, as microcosms of the society at large, are constantly challenged to become the nuclei of the transformation of futures, while in themselves and through their practice, transcending overt and institutionalized racism in education.

“South Africa is unique in that its portrait is framed by a history of apartheid in which ‘difference’ was construed in hierarchical terms and colour coded within a “carefully crafted, politically legitimated pigmentocracy” (Moodley, 2004). In this regard, key differences between South African and some international (especially American) discourses are that the latter frames integration issues primarily within a desegregation and multicultural framework, whereas South Africans prefer to speak of desegregation (but which by law encompasses integration), inclusivity and integration in the formerly white, Indian and coloured schools (Nkomo et al., 2004).

Contexts in which the process of desegregation have emerged have differed internationally, so have national responses to this problem. Depending on the definition of the problem triggering the segregation, different nuances of desegregation have been implemented to address diverse learner populations. These nuances of desegregation cover a number of approaches ranging from desegregation, integration, assimilation, multicultural education, antiracist, to critical anti-racist education.

## 2. Some conceptual clarifications

Since terms are used casually, conceptual clarification, broader than this study, is important. *Desegregation* has been defined as a mechanical process that involves establishing the physical proximity of members of different groups in the same school, [but] without interrogating the quality of the contact (Rist, 1979; Zafar, 1998). A key presumption and goal in desegregation is assimilation. According to Banks (2004) and Carrim and Mkwanazi (1993) the process of *assimilation* occurs when one ethnic or cultural group acquires the behaviour, values, perspectives, ethos and characteristics of another ethnic group and sheds its own cultural characteristics. Closely allied to the perspective of assimilation in the context of race-based desegregation are claims of ‘*colour-blindness*’. Colour-blindness occurs when teachers suppress the negative images they hold of learners of other races

by professing not to see colour (McCarthy and Crichlow, 1993, p. 131). This stance serves to conceal institutionalized racism or discriminatory attitudes in desegregated schools.

In its truest form, *integration* is a process whereby one interrogates the quality of contact not only in the personal attitudes of teachers and learners but also in the institutional arrangements, policies and ethos of the school (Sayed, 2001, p. 254). For its part, *multicultural education* sets out to create equal educational opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-class and cultural groups. It attempts to help all students to acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate, and communicate with people from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good (Banks, 2001; Gay, 2000). Multiculturalism is based on the premise that racism is a result of prejudice and ignorance that can be eradicated by merely promoting personal contacts, cultural exchange, understanding and provision of information. Its critics see it as depoliticising culture, and ignoring the power and structural dimensions of racism.

Anti-racist educators have in particular, challenged “the apolitical and folksy orientation of multicultural education” (Bonnet and Carrington, 1996). They have instead proposed *anti-racist education*, which can be defined as “an action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression” (Dei, 1996, p. 25). The anti-racism perspective calls for not only confronting and opposing overt attitudes, practices and customs, but also insists on opposing subtle racism, stereotypes and patronizing attitudes.

From this position, *overt racism* has been identified as taking the form of crude racist practice as in derogatory and racial name-calling and various forms of racial harassment, often resulting in physical altercations. These are taken to be expressions of a self-conscious and volitional practice. *Covert racism* on the other hand, takes on a much more subtle guise. It is ubiquitous and has the ability to mutate and adapt. *Institutionalized racism* is a form of covert racism that results from acts of indifference, omission and refusal to challenge the status quo. This mutation takes the form of ‘business as usual’ that has been systematized to maintain previously excluded groups and

other minorities in an oppressed state (Spears, 1978).

It is from taking the above into account that *critical anti-racism* has emerged to draw attention to the complex ways in which racism expresses itself in various settings, particularly in regard to ‘intra-Black’ dynamics. A dynamic that was not addressed in the bipolarity inherent in the ‘White’ versus ‘Black’ construction common to both racist and anti-racist arguments (Carrim and Soudien, 1999). “Critical anti-racism is a refinement of the anti-racist approach” (Carrim, 1998, p. 318). The principal concern in what follows will be desegregation/integration.

### 2.1. *The South African Constitution and Schools Act*

It is more than 11 years after the legal termination of apartheid in South Africa. Since 1994, various policies have been developed and legislation enacted to encourage the process of desegregation (intended to imply full integration in Sayed’s, 2001, p. 254, usage) in the schooling system of South Africa. The *South African Schools Act (SASA) (Act no. 37 of 1996)* catalysed by the Bill of Rights and the South African Constitution, formalized the desegregation [read: integration] of schools in South Africa, and created the opportunity for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to attend schools of their choice.

Several Constitutional provisions have a direct impact on education, key among which are fundamental human rights clauses; clauses concerning redress of the past apartheid inequalities; the right to education; and with some caveats, the right to choice of language in education. These constitutional provisions on fundamental human rights underline the fact that anti-racist measures are sanctioned by the state.

Besides the Constitution, the SASA adopted in 1996 has had a pivotal impact on the desegregation of schools. The preamble to the *SASA (1996)* links the achievement of democracy in South Africa with the consignment into history of the past system of education, which was based on racial inequality and segregation. It states that South Africa requires a new national system for schools which will redress the past injustices in educational provision, make progressively available education of high quality for all learners, and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people’s talents and capabilities. The national school system should

advance the democratic transformation of society and combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination.

### 3. **Research methodology and context of study**

This research is composed of three ethnographic case studies of Grade four teachers working in multicultural classrooms in South Africa. The data collection consisted of a mix of sustained classroom observations, in-depth interviews of teachers and focus group interviews with Grade 4 learners.

The research was conducted in mathematics lessons in Grade 4 classes in three urban Primary schools in a large South African city. For convenience the schools will be referred to as Broadwater, Silverstream and Riverwood. These schools were selected to represent the larger group of similar urban public schools where rapid desegregation had been implemented during the 8 years prior to this study. It is important not to overstate the growth of racial integration in South African education. While some White schools have become ‘Black’ due to White flight, Black schools have (understandably) not changed in terms of their racial distribution of learners and teachers. A large number of mainly middle class, white and Indian English medium urban public schools and low class Afrikaans-medium urban public schools have changed as a result of the growth of Black learners in such schools. The overall picture in South Africa is that children of colour have moved in large numbers towards the English-speaking sector of the former white and Indian school systems (Soudien, 2004).

The race profile of the teaching cadre at these schools however, had remained relatively unaltered. It was thus suspected that considerable mismatches would exist between the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the teachers and a significant proportion of the students at each school. What was not clear was how desegregation at the level of classroom practice was manifesting itself. Of particular interest was the teacher–learner interaction.

Observation was the main data gathering technique used in this study. Observations were conducted in 2003. One researcher observed each teacher on 10 occasions over a period of 2 weeks. The observer made notes that formed the basis of the analysis and that highlighted issues that were later raised with teachers and learners during interviews. Observed lessons were videotaped and interviews were audio taped and transcribed. However, it must be noted

Table 1  
Summary of school profiles

School name	Broadwater	Silverstream	Riverwood
Type of school	Ex-Model C <sup>a</sup> , well-resourced school	Afrikaans pubic school	Indian public school
Situated	Middle- to upper-class predominantly white suburb	Low- to middle-class white suburb	Middle-class Indian suburb
Medium of instruction	English	Afrikaans, since 2001 changed to English	English
Established	Early 1900s	Early 1900s	1987
Pre-1994-Catered exclusively to:	White English-speaking learners	White Afrikaans-speaking learners.	Indian learners, the majority of whom spoke English
Post-1994-Student population	800 (60% White, 33% African, 4% Indian and 3% Coloured)	535 (52% African, 43% Indian, 3% White and 2% Coloured)	840 (85% African, 14% Indian and 1% Coloured).
Teachers	33 (all White)	19 teachers (17 White, 1 Indian and 1 Coloured) 17 White teachers were all Afrikaans-speaking, English was their second language	24 teachers (23 Indian and 1 White)
Learners in Grade 4 class	28 (20 White, 7 African, 1 Indian)	39 (24 African, 13 Indian, 1 White, 1 Coloured).	35 (26 African and 9 Indian)
Grade 4 teacher	White Afrikaans/English-speaking female	White Afrikaans-speaking female	Indian English-speaking female
Mode of transportation	Privately owned cars	Taxis	“Bussing-in” <sup>b</sup> phenomenon

<sup>a</sup>Model C school—a government attempt to cut state costs by shifting some of the financing and control of White schools to parents.

<sup>b</sup>“Bussing-in”—a phenomenon that has occurred post-1994, where large numbers of African learners are transported by bus from neighbouring Black suburbs to middle class Indian English medium schools.

that there are advantages and limitations of intensive observations at a small number of schools. The advantages of such a technique is that it provides a lens into the ‘lived experiences’ of classroom life over a period of time that allows for in-depth study and creates the opportunity for patterns (if any) to emerge. The limitation is that the small number of schools observations could be seen as instructive and illustrative, and not as representative of all schools.

Focus group interviews were conducted with Grade 4 learners to determine what their perspectives were about the way in which the process of desegregation was unfolding in the classroom. Two sets of focus group interviews were conducted with learners from each Grade four class. These focus group interviews were conducted after the 2-week period of observations. Criteria used in the selection of learners were based on racial background, level of participation in lessons and overall performance in mathematics.

To assist in formulating comparisons in the data, Fleet and Cambourne’s (cited in Wiseman, 1993, p. 172) process of ‘coding naturalistic data’ was implemented. Keywords and meanings were used to

identify significant issues from the observations and interview transcripts and these were then considered as being major categories for organizing the remaining data. Eventually all the data were reduced into seven major categories: *Seating arrangements in the class; Language; Teacher interactions with learners from other cultural backgrounds; Body language of teacher; Non-academic related interactions; Responsibility and leadership roles and Belittling the culture of some learners.*

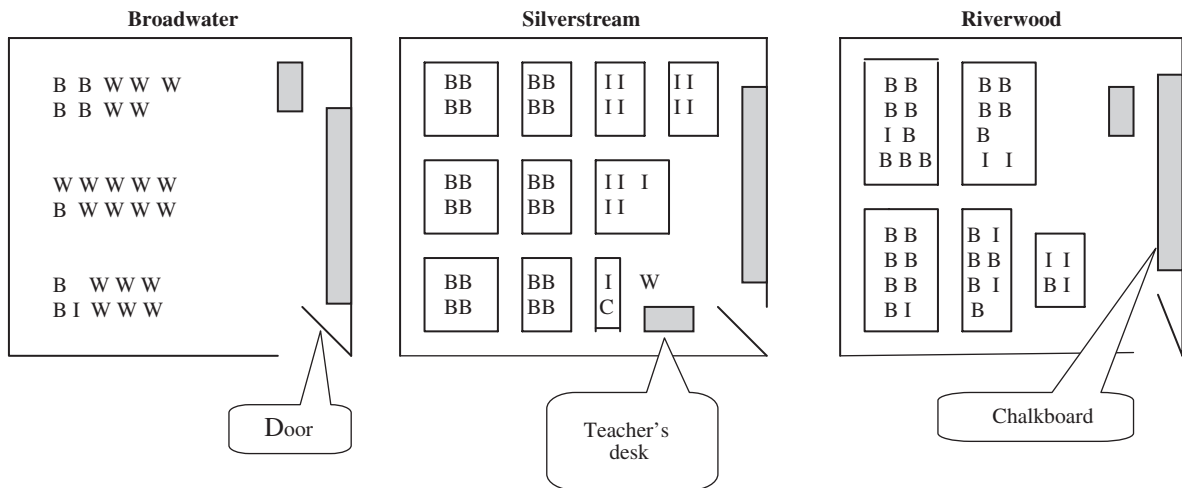
Table 1 presents a summary of the school profiles.

#### 4. Classroom interaction data

##### 4.1. Seating arrangements in the class

Seating arrangement is important because it structures the interaction both with the teacher and among students. At Broadwater Primary School (see Table 2), the desks were joined to accommodate two learners. Aside from the one Black learner (Karabo) who partnered a White learner at the back of the class, all the non-White learners were paired with other non-White learners, and were placed at the back of the classroom. White

Table 2  
Seating arrangements of classrooms in researched schools



Code: B = Black; W = White; I = Indian; C = Coloured

learners, in all three rows of five desks deep, occupied all the front seats.

At Silverstream (Afrikaans public school), the groups were also segregated according to race. The learners sat in groups of five or six. Annatjie the single White female learner, sat next to the teacher's desk, right in front of the classroom facing the chalkboard. The Indian learners sat in groups towards the front of the class and the African learners were grouped at the back of the class.

At Riverwood (formerly Indian public school now with a large contingent of Black learners), the groups were unequally distributed and had no set formation. A number of learners had their backs facing the chalkboard. Each group however had an Indian learner who automatically became the group leader. Because there were five groups and there were 9 Indian learners, some of the groups had more than one Indian learner per group, hence the following interaction between Reena (the teacher) and Shaneel (an Indian learner): "Madam?" "Yes Shaneel?" "I'm group leader...you said the other day".

#### 4.2. Language

At Broadwater, the home languages of the 27 Grade 4 learners were as follows: 16 English, 5 Sotho, 3 Afrikaans and 2 Zulu. English was a second or even a third home language to some of the learners. In this school, Black learners were not

allowed to speak through their mother tongue when inside classrooms and were discouraged from speaking in their mother tongue on the school property as a whole. This policy was adopted because the school deemed it necessary to develop proficiency in the language of learning and teaching, which at this school was English.

At Silverstream, the languages of instruction were English and Afrikaans. The home languages of the 39 learners were: 14 English, 11 Tswana, 2 Afrikaans, 8 Sotho, 2 Zulu and 2 Sepedi. The teacher explained her special provision for Afrikaans speakers as follows:

We speak Afrikaans to the Afrikaans-speaking child and they are in their own groups. So we speak both languages in this class. My working tasks are in both languages and the Afrikaans child gets the same work as the English children, it is in Afrikaans and naturally we regard language as important...and they are now Afrikaans first language and English second language...and this is part of how we must do it.

Class assessment tasks were also provided in English and Afrikaans, but no provision was made for African learners who, by Constitutional right may have preferred the test in their mother tongue. Here, they were expected to write the test either through the medium of English or Afrikaans. In some cases, English was the third or even fourth language of the learner. The belief held by the

teacher (Marieta) that the learners must either adapt or leave was clearly expressed in her interview when she said: “...the African learners must practice in English and speak in English, but it’s not always that easy, because when they talk to one another then they talk in another tongue. When we hear that then we say ‘no you not allowed to’...the parents placed them here not us...it was their choice...”

At Riverwood, the home languages of the 39 learners were as follows: 8 English, 11 Sotho, 9 Tswana, 4 Zulu 2 Sepedi and 1 Urdu). The teacher (Reena), is clearly aware of the multilingual composition of her learners, hence her statement: “There are easily about five different language backgrounds”. The majority of learners were therefore linguistically disadvantaged in this class as the medium of instruction was English. Some of the learners in this class demonstrated limited English proficiency and a few of these learners could barely speak English. Reena affirmed this when she said: “Now you know that some of us can’t read and understand, so did I go and help now quickly to make my friend understand what is happening?” At this school however, learners and teachers are allowed to code switch to any of the official languages in an attempt to clarify subject matter. Similarly, during school breaks learners are allowed, but not encouraged, to communicate through their mother tongue.

There are two overlapping and intersecting but distinct issues here. One has to do with the immediate and longer-term consequences of devaluing children’s home languages and the knowledge and cultures associated with those languages. The other has to do with the pedagogy of language instruction. Throughout the world, it is not uncommon to teach, say French through immersion—both teachers and learners are required to use French and only French, with no translation or coaching in other languages. That is generally considered effective pedagogy and not cultural discrimination or racism. In the South African context, that pedagogical strategy—learners must speak the languages specified by the SGB as the school languages in order to learn them—becomes part of the process that reinforces racial hierarchies and disadvantages darker skinned learners.

In the South African context the dynamics are very different. There is an underlying political play of power. The medium of instruction is directly linked to issues of access and power. The official languages of instruction in public schools during the

pre-1994 period were that of English and Afrikaans. The language policy of the post-1994 period, although beautifully crafted as legislation in the Constitution “Everyone has the right to use the language...of their choice...Persons belonging to a cultural...linguistic community may not be denied the...to enjoy...and use their language” ([The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Act 30 & 31](#)) has yet to materialize. Why is this?

School Governing Bodies yield considerable power in determining the language policy of the school. Most urban public schools have retained the former language policy of the school and a few of the Afrikaans medium schools have changed to English medium or dual medium (English and Afrikaans) to prevent closure. Instead of becoming models of societal integration ([Jansen, 2004](#)), schools have continued to reflect the hegemonic dominance of whiteness that characterized pre-apartheid schooling. Assimilation into the predominantly hegemonic culture of the school and a reluctance to embrace Black indigenous languages seems to be the general approach. By retaining English and Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in schools, the signal is given to learners that Black indigenous languages are inconsequential to obtaining quality education. White [ness] is fabricated and presented as morally, intellectually and biologically superior contrasted to Black [ness] as subaltern.

A substantial number of learners are consequently being taught in a language in which they are not yet proficient. What often tends to be the case is that the intelligence of these learners is judged by their ability to express themselves in English. The result is what Robert Merton referred to as “the self-fulfilling prophecy”, whereby students perform according to the expectations of their teacher ([Nieto, 2000, p. 43](#)). In accordance with this term, learners view their own ability as lesser than their peers who are fluent in English, and as a result under perform. Language thus becomes an effective gatekeeper to academic progress and by extension, access to power and socio-economic status.

#### *4.3. Teacher interactions with learners from other cultural backgrounds*

Teachers in this study tended to be attracted towards learners from cultural backgrounds that were similar to their own. At Broadwater, the teacher (Sharon) displayed an overt ease of

familiarity with White learners. These learners were made to feel a sense of belonging. She constantly reinforced their attempts and encouraged their participation. With the other learners she was curt and almost always gave negative feedback. The following examples are typical of her interactions with students. “Lauren, (White Afrikaans-speaking female learner) you cannot work like this, you added wrong...you write down the two and carry the one, do you understand now?” as opposed to her response to Sibongile (African female learner) “You can’t take seven away from one...look what you’ve done there...where did you get the one ten?” Sibongile did not respond. Sharon did not probe any further, but closed the student’s book and returned it to Sibongile. Sharon’s bias is also revealed in Table 3.

Sharon did not respond to Karabo’s attempt in any way, but rather shifted her attention once again to Storm. Storm was not reprimanded at all for interjecting. Karabo was not given a chance to express his opinion on this question.

During the observed lessons as Silverstream, the teacher (Marieta) explicitly instructed learners not to speak to each other in their mother tongue. “Now I don’t want to hear you speaking in your mother-tongue, you must solve the problem and talk to each other in English, did you hear...” She readily admonished African learners if they attempted to converse with each other through the medium of one of the African languages. However, she constantly invited the Afrikaans-speaking learners to engage in the lesson through the medium of

Afrikaans, by switching instruction between English and Afrikaans throughout the lesson. She also reaffirmed their conceptual understanding of mathematics by posing questions such as “Verstand julle?” (Do you understand?).

At Riverwood, Reena (the teacher) conducted her assessment task in the following manner. She issued a group assessment sheet to each group. She then gave each of the learners a worksheet based on mathematics word problems and instructed them to work in their groups to solve the problem. At the end of the assessment task she collected the word problem worksheet from each learner and assigned an individual mark. She seemed to have conflated two assessment tasks into one since learners were confused as to whether they were being assessed on their participation in the group or on the mathematics problems.

Her interactions with the Indian learners centred primarily on solving word problems and the mathematical conceptual understanding of these learners. Her interactions with African learners centred on the group assessment sheet that assessed group dynamics and not the conceptual understanding of mathematics. Reena went to the Indian group leader (Imraan) and checked his word problem worksheet, she picked up a slight error and highlighted it for him and got him to correct it. She then crossed over to an Indian learner in another group and enquired: “Did you read Shaneel (Indian male learner)? Write your number sentence. What does that *more* tell you? What does he need? How much more...we’ll have to minus it. Why must

Table 3

Teacher learner interactions at broadwater primary

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*Sharon [to Storm, an English-speaking white student]:* “Storm will you read the first question please.”

*Storm:* “Grandpa collected 51 eggs. Unfortunately he dropped the basket and 27 broke. How many eggs did not break?”

*Sharon:* “If Grandpa had 51 eggs and 27 broke, I want to know how many are left?”

*Storm:* (in an enquiring tone): “So Ma’am it will be a minus sum?”

*Sharon:* “Yes.”

*She then calls upon Marlize, a White Afrikaans-speaking female learner, you read the second question.”*

*Marlize:* “Sam weighed 37 kg and John weighed 52 kg. How much more did John weigh?”

*Sharon:* “Remember Marlize, here the word *more* means difference, what is the difference? So you should...?”

*Some learners shout out “Minus”.*

*Sharon:* “Yes, you should minus.”

*Sharon proceeds by asking Karabo (an African male learner) to read question three.*

*Karabo (reads in a hesitant manner):* “Dad picked...picked three baskets of oranges of twenty-four oranges in each basket. When we cut them...when we cut them...we found fifteen oranges...oranges has worms in them. How many good oranges did we have?”

*Storm:* (immediately shouting out): “Ma’am, there’s two parts to this problem.”

*Sharon:* “There are two parts to this problem. Well done, Storm! So you are going to have a A and a B. Right you are going to have two parts, but you only going to have one answer, one thank you note at the bottom. But you’ll have to do two sums to get to the answer. Just remember that when you write your open number sentence, you write neatly...underneath each other”.

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we minus it? ...Because we will have to find the difference. You got it?" She crossed over to another group and engaged with an African learner (Jessy). She did not even glance at his word problem worksheet, but merely queried about the group assessment form and asked general questions, ending with an admonition: "Did you fill it in Jessy? Did you waste time? What should we do? What else must we do? We must listen."

#### 4.4. *Body language of teacher*

In Broadwater, Yun-ling, a Taiwanese male learner, was at the teacher's desk having his attempts at word problems assessed. It seemed that some of his work was incorrect because Sharon said to him "how much *more* does he weigh? What's the difference?" Sibongile, an African female learner, was with the teacher having her work marked. Sharon reacted in the following way "I've just explained. If I weigh *more* than you do...there's a difference." Her tone indicated frustration and exasperation at the fact that learners were getting the sum incorrect. Her interactions with Afrikaans-speaking learners were markedly different. For example, "Lauren I didn't see your book again after I sent you back". She then went over to Lauren's desk sat on her haunches and explained in an empathetic, conversational and relatively quiet tone: "Lauren, you cannot work like this, you added wrong...you write down the two and carry the one, do you understand now?"

At Silverstream, there was very little interaction during the administration of the assessment task. Marieta (the teacher) set the scene and the learners were expected to attempt the assessment task in complete silence. Now and again Marieta would interject with a phrase such as "Komotso (African male learner) I'm watching you" and "Lerato (African female learner) stop fidgeting, sit still if you finished". She responded to Annatjie a White Afrikaans speaking female learner, who raised her hand for clarification of a problem in the following manner: she went across to the learner, bent her head over the learner and quietly explained through the medium of Afrikaans, the procedure that needed to be followed in the solution of the word problem. Annatjie smiled because she had been reassured. However, her response to the African learner who sought assistance was totally different. She said aloud: "Makola, you did not study, I told you to study".

At Riverwood the body language of Reena (the teacher) was also overtly empathetic and caring about her Indian learners. She proceeded to the group that had three Indian learners and noticed that one of the Indian girls had a problem with a sum. The teacher went down on her haunches, with her arms resting on the learner's table and in a reassuring and comforting way explained, "Will it be more or less? *More*, so what must I do? So now you see why? ...Because you did not underline the word *more*. So the answer is going to be... Good".

#### 4.5. *Non-academic related interactions*

Power relations also played out at the skills and social levels in the classroom. In Sharon's class in Broadwater, Sandiso, an African male learner who had injured his arm was made to feel a sense of disempowerment when she said: "Sandiso, you'll have to bring me your things so that I can paste it in for you...you not going to do it with that arm". The statement "I can paste it in for you", indicates Sharon's attempt at what is commonly referred to as dysfunctional rescuing. She believed that she was helping Sandiso, when in fact she was depriving him of the opportunity to learn to do things on his own, and in this way she disempowered him. He seemed to be coping on his own. Her interaction with Sandiso was in the form of an instruction that required him to comply and to succumb to authority. Whereas her interaction with Michael, a white male learner, who had injured his finger, indicated one of concern, "How's your finger? Such a brave boy. Does the pin have to stick out like that?" She built the positive self-esteem of this learner in the words "such a brave boy". She also invited engagement and discourse from this learner by posing questions to him.

#### 4.6. *Responsibilities and leadership roles*

At Broadwater, a White learner, who seemed to have been appointed as monitor, was instructed by Sharon to collect the math books of all learners. Almost 6 months into the school academic year, the focus group participants reported that the appointed monitors in this class had so far all been White learners.

At Silverstream, Marieta seemed to switch leadership and responsibility roles between two learners in her class—Annatjie (the White Afrikaans-speaking female) and Marishka (an Indian female learner).



She called on these two learners to assist in the managerial activities of the classroom. During the focus group interviews with the learners it became apparent that most of the learners perceived Marishka as the best mathematics learner. The reasons for their choice however, differed from the responses elicited from Sharon's learners. These learners gave reasons such as "She gets the best marks in the class"; "She always does her homework"; "She works very hard"; "She gives all the correct answers in class". Their choice seemed to be linked to academic excellence. It would seem that Marishka earned the leadership role in the class because of her performance. By assigning leadership roles to Marishka, the teacher may have been attempting to motivate other learners to emulate her performance. But this does not hold as the teacher's own records indicated that Annatjie was not a good maths student. It seemed that there was some other dynamic at play in the choice of Annatjie as a monitor of this class.

At Riverwood, Reena, the Indian teacher commenced her assessment task by immediately transferring authority to the group leaders, who were all Indian learners. "Firstly, the group leader is going to check whether everybody answered all the questions because you have a worksheet that you have to fill in. Then the group leader is going to fill in which question was the easiest, now he won't say which question was the easiest for him, but for the group."

The teacher made the choice of group leaders. There were five groups. Four of the five groups had an Indian group leader. In the fifth group the Indian learner was absent on the day that this assessment was conducted. The teacher moved one of the other Indian learners to this group and appointed her as the group leader. Hence her comment towards the end of the assessment task: "Ateeya (Indian female learner), you want to go back to your group then it's more comfortable for you?"

#### 4.7. *Belittling the culture of some learners*

Sibongile, an African female learner in Sharon's class was having her previous work assessed by the teacher. Sharon said: "Ag no sis man, this is not nice. We have water at this school you mustn't carry it to school". (Sibongile's book seemed to have been messed by water and the teacher assumed that her juice/water bottle which she carried in her bag had messed her book, hence her comment.) By openly

admonishing this learner in front of the other learners she showed a lack of appreciation of the reasons why such a child needed to carry drinking water. Instead she foisted on to the learners the racist stereotypical view of Africans as being "dirty people". It is interesting to note Sharon's use of the term "we" have water. By implication the African girl "they" don't have water. It seemed like an indictment of the cultural background of this learner.

At Riverwood, Reena believed that African parents were non-committal and both African parents and learners lacked a culture of learning and teaching. Her comment clearly indicates her prejudice against African learners: "...its like a one-sided thing, you are trying as much as you can but the parent has no time for their child, they not prepared to help at all ...not even a handful will pitch up for a meeting. They do not have a culture of learning ...nothing". Reena's views seem to fit with Allport (1954, p. 7) who defines prejudice as "an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group".

At Silversands, the assessment task was administered according to the transmission model. Marieta stood at the front of the class and began reading through every question in the test paper and spent some time clarifying what was expected of learners from this assessment task. Now and again she interrupted her reading with the following instructions. "Abi (an African learner) follow on your paper...on the black line...Teleki (an African learner) look at the paper please." Marieta began reading the question: it's John's birthday... "Are you following Onkgopotse? Where's your file?" She continued reading the question: it's John's birthday, his taking his friend IshMael out for a meal. "First, what must you do first? Complete the...? Their order". "Thato look at the paper". Marieta constantly interrupted the reading of the question paper by calling upon the African learners to look at the paper, to follow the reading of the questions. These learners were silent and seemed to be following the reading on the paper.

## 5. Analysis, findings and interpretation

The findings reveal a number of interesting insights into the life experiences of learners in a desegregating classroom environment in a transforming South

Africa. In the conceptual section of this paper, integration was distinguished from desegregation in that integration implied going beyond creating physical proximity and headcounts, to interrogating the quality of contact, personal attitudes and institutional arrangements. It was also noted that desegregation invites assimilative tendencies. This study confirms that the model being applied in South African schools is basically desegregation, which is the mechanical process of bringing together members of different groups. It is still a far cry from integration.

This study also found that race hierarchization is still a prevalent phenomenon in all the schools visited. For instance, in delivering her lessons, Marieta (Silverstream), engaged more often with the learners seated in the front of the class and only related to the African learners seated at the back of the class in terms of discipline problems and the administering of homework. The Indian learners seemed to be awarded a somewhat higher status in this classroom, an observation reinforced by teacher comments such as: “The Indian child can read instructions, but the African child has difficulty there...with most of them it is a problem. When we assess them in English then they must be able to cope...this is an English school and they know about it”. Like the African learners in Sharon’s class, these learners had to accede to the process of assimilation by adopting and “blending into” the predominant culture of the school. Consequently, many learners began to undervalue and relinquish their own cultural heritage in an attempt to “play white” to fit into the school.

Unfair attribution of authority and claims to power by powerful groups was also observed. The authority was devolved to learners along racial lines, further silencing the disadvantaged students. In Reena’s class in Riverwood, it seemed that the learners were aware of the power attached to being a group leader and Shaneel was claiming his “right” to power. None of the African learners questioned or requested the role of the group leader. They accepted in silence the new power relations being played out in the classroom. It seemed that Indian learners could voice their dissatisfaction, but this did not apply to African learners.

Aversion to African languages was observed in all the schools visited witnessed in repeated admonitions to those who attempted to speak indigenous languages. This aversion takes away basic rights of the learners. Depriving learners of the right to speak

through their mother tongue, not only contravenes learners’ constitutional rights, but disempowers learners and denies them access to prior knowledge (Nieto, 2000) and a means of cultural expression (Sonn, 1994). Language is also the gateway to cognition as language contains knowledge codes that are crucial to learning. The denial of access to the learner’s foundational knowledge impedes their opportunity for further learning. This language dispossession also reinforces a message to the students that their mother tongue is of a lower status, serving to negate their culture and consequently diminish their self-esteem (Nieto, 2000).

Collins (1993, p. 121) argues that instead of perceiving these seemingly ‘natural’ practices as a function of language deficiency, it should be seen as systemic through which the dominant classes are able to maintain control “pedagogies that tacitly select the privileged and exclude the under-prepared are not regrettable lapses; they are systemic aspects of schooling systems serving class-divided societies”.

Negation of learner’s self-esteem was observed during this study. Sharon’s disregard for (the Black learner) Karabo’s attempt at answering and her favouring of Storm (the white child) appears to constitute a subliminal act of negation of Karabo. This action is very likely to diminish Karabo’s self-esteem, by ignoring his efforts to participate in the learning process. Sharon’s action is indicative of structural or institutionalized racism. This feature of racism serves to restrict the access of non-whites to “power and privilege” (Sleeter, 1993). During the 2-week observation period conducted by the researcher in this class, it became evident that there were some African learners who were “bright”. An analysis of their workbooks indicated that their performance in mathematics was of a very high standard. Yet, during classroom interaction they were almost totally ignored by the teacher.

During the focus group interview sessions with learners, one of the questions posed was: Who is the best math learner? Almost all learners responded that it was Storm and Marlize. On probing further with the African learners who were performing well in mathematics, responses given were “because the teacher says Storm and Marlize are the best math learners” and “because Storm acts like he is the teacher whenever Ma’am is not in class”. It would seem that Storm has been given some form of authority in this class. He has a more eminent status compared to the other learners in this class. Like

Sharon, Marieta's interactions with the African learners was primarily in terms of instructing them on what to do and then admonishing and reprimanding them for things they were getting wrong.

Cultural prejudices reflected in the manner in which teachers draw negative generalizations was also observed. Reena's insinuation that African students are unruly is indicative of such generalization that results in reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Problems that African learners are faced with at school, such as being thrust into linguistically and culturally intolerant environments are, in such situations, conceptualized by teachers as being a result of cultural-deficiencies located within the learners' homes or communities (Sleeter, 1993; Nieto, 2000).

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, Black learners were not treated as full citizens with cultural capital that they bring to school. Rather, they were expected to assimilate into the predominantly white culture of the school (Soudien et al., 2004). Essentially, borrowing Berger's (1980) term of "the male gaze", previously disadvantaged groups were expected to view themselves through the eyes of the hegemonic order; "the race gaze". A resulting factor of the "race gaze" is that Black learners are torn between two seemingly contradictory identities. On the one hand, they are children of a free and democratic South Africa, full of hope, promise, backed up by a Constitution that is held to be one of the best in the world. On the other hand, they are stuck in a time warp generated by the non-movement at the level of educational institutions to tackle the problem of diversity and the race base upon which it was founded; a situation that seems to have sedimented into a comfortable but pervasive form of institutionalized racism.

Eleven years after the demise of apartheid, some African learners in schools are still given the message that they do not quite belong as yet. According to Jones and Fennimore (1990, p. 16) although it is acknowledged in literature that "every culture brings habits of thought, resources, and contexts which have built into them vehicles that promote learning and inquiry, and accordingly, that children of any culture can and should have curriculum and instructional practices that draw from that culture," yet, in this research study, teachers not only tended to impose the predominantly hegemonic culture of the school onto their

learners, but also tended to undermine the culture of some learners by openly making derogatory statements about those cultures.

The key conclusion and recommendation from this study is that the focus for effective desegregation should be in deepening the conceptualisation of the mission from desegregation to substantive integration. This would enable the evolving of strategies for addressing institutionalized racism, and school-based anti-racism programmes.

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