"Narratives of Social Cohesion": Bridging the Link between School Culture, Linguistic Identity and the English Language

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Abstract

This paper argues that processes of self-creation are significantly influenced by experiences of schooling, of which language forms a critical aspect. The school is a central site in which identities are contested, negotiated and affirmed, but it is also imbibed with a particular identity that, in the South African context, often remains

expressly raced and classed. Existing research has pointed to the salience of language for questions of identity in education, and moreover the relationship between school cultures and the inculcation of particular norms and values. However, in the South African context research should also be focusing on the relationship between the major medium of instruction in schools, English, the values and behaviour encouraged at the school level, and how these influence learners' linguistic and social identities. This paper engages with research conducted in three Cape Town schools and develops the idea of "narratives of social cohesion" to articulate the ways in which different school cultures influence learner-identity formation. It posits that the assumed neutrality of the primary medium of instruction, and its historic association with whiteness, represents a continued undervaluation of black learners' linguistic and social experiences.

Keywords: identity; language; learners; race; school culture; social cohesion

Introduction

The relationship between language and education in South Africa is deeply political and historical in nature. British and Dutch colonisers were not initially invested in teaching their languages to the indigenous population until this became critical to boosting skilled labour and spreading their respective languages and cultures in order to bolster colonial expansion (Alexander 1989). The alignment of linguistic identities with social and cultural ones was further entrenched by the division of indigenous South Africans into ethnic "tribes" on the basis of language (Alexander 1989; 2013). Schools became important spaces in which linguistic and cultural norms were negotiated, affirmed or delegitimised.

Language was also the means through which economic and social mobility was mediated under apartheid, particularly as the education of black, coloured and Indian[1] learners was deliberately (and differentially) rendered inferior to education for whites. This was done through systematic deprivation, under-resourcing of schools, inadequately educated teachers, and the implementation of a mother-tongue instruction policy that was associated with inferior learning (Sayed et al. 2015), against the backdrop of the broader racist policies instituted by the apartheid state.

The apartheid state's attempt in 1976 to force black learners to receive their major subjects in Afrikaans, with minimal and often poor exposure to the language, represents one such intervention in stunting the opportunities and aspirations available to them. Following the

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[1] Black, coloured and Indian South Africans are hereafter collectively referred to as black South Africans. This term is also inclusive of learners from other African countries currently being educated in South African schools.

Soweto riots that began that year, black South African parents and learners began to view English as a pragmatic and symbolic alternative to Afrikaans, which was associated with the racist apartheid regime (Mesthrie 2004). As the language commonly used in the liberation movement, and offering access to a wider culture, information and global networks, English became an important form of social capital at a time of rapid globalisation and change in the political climate of the country and the world (Granville et al. 1997).

The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) (DoE 1997) was an intervention by the newly elected democratic government to deal with the challenge of linguistic identity in the school setting. It gave school governing bodies (SGBs) the power to decide the language policy of their schools with respect for efficiency, equity and diversity (DoE 1997). However, the continued importance of the English language to the South African context is reflected in statistics on the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) compiled by the Department of Basic Education (DBE).

The DBE found that seven per cent of learners were English (first language) speakers, while about 65 per cent of all learners were actually being taught in the language (DBE 2010). What this percentage does not indicate is that, in fact, on average about 80 per cent of learners are being taught in English after Grade 3 (DBE 2010), the end of the Foundation Phase where it is generally encouraged for learners to be taught in their home languages. This shows the ongoing salience of English for the education of black South African children, and reflects a critical area of intervention for scholars and educators interested in language. English is not only the language of a former colonial power; it is also one of the languages associated with the former white ruling class of the apartheid state, and thus continues to act as an important form of social and economic gatekeeping in a country where English remains a major language of business, government, media, and higher education (Brock-Utne 2003).

"Social cohesion" has become a national priority in government and policy-making in South Africa, and thus forms a useful yardstick against which to engage with education as one of its major inputs and outcomes (Sayed et al. 2015). Understandings of social cohesion vary from the behaviourist—modelled on good behaviour and positive interpersonal relations—to the structural, which focuses on the reduction of inequalities, fostering social justice and the building of an inclusive society (Sayed et al. 2015). Arguably behaviourist interpretations tend towards a conservative or liberal tradition while structural interpretations, though these do not

discount the importance of behavioural changes, have a more radical character due to their emphasis on the need for structural and material transformation to precede, or accompany, the building of good relations.

Sayed et al. (2015) argue that inequalities play a significant role in conflict, violence and crime, and thus a progressive notion of social cohesion must take seriously the role of inequality as a driver of social disintegration. Moreover, education plays an important role in developing social cohesion, through the promotion of peace and acceptance of all members of society and the equitable offering of access and opportunities for economic and social mobility (Sayed et al. 2015, 7).

This is how the link between school dynamics, language education, and linguistic and social identity becomes apparent. The historical linguistic identities of South African schools—evident in the primary languages of learning and teaching (LOLT)—are overlaid with the turn to English through the decisions made by school governing bodies to educate learners in the language despite their own existing linguistic repertoires. Fataar (2015) writes that the increase in enrolment of black learners in historically coloured, Indian and white schools was in large part due to the possibility of acquiring fluency in the English language at first-language level. The reality that apartheid (and colonialism) was as much a cultural as it was a political and economic system of domination means that education was a key point of entry for the socialisation of people into their roles in the racial hierarchy (Alexander 1989; 2013; Soudien 2012), with the result that both access to and the content of education needed to be addressed in the post-apartheid state. Following this, the existing teaching, learning, disciplinary and social cultures that comprise these schools may be antagonistic to the experiences of learners from outside the immediate community, indicating a need to interrogate the contexts in which black South African learners learn, learn the dominant language, and what this learning tells them about themselves and their belonging in the South African context. The following discussion engages with existing literature on these issues, before turning to a brief description of the methods used to conduct the research and a discussion of the meaning of the findings for the research problem.

Language, Identity and Schooling

Following from the introductory comments on language in the South African context, this section briefly reflects on some of the existing literature around issues of linguistic and social identities, schooling, and language education.

Multilingual classrooms are spaces in which learners have to negotiate their cultural capital in order to acquire the LOLT as a medium of communication. McKinney and Norton (2008) suggest that for black South African learners (including speakers of indigenous languages, black Afrikaans, other former colonial languages such as French, and other African languages such as Swahili and Lingala) this negotiation is particularly complicated by the subordinate (and racialised) status of their first languages compared to English in the South African context (McKinney and Norton 2008). In English-medium, and particularly historically white schools, they find that linguistic and cultural diversity is tokenised and superficially incorporated into the existing school culture, while the dominance of English as the LOLT and MOC is not sufficiently interrogated or disrupted. In fact, as Soudien (2012) argues, the association of the language with the colonial project has shifted to an association with a globalising world that neutralises its associations with racism and economic deprivation. For historically white schools, this has allowed for a continuing attachment to a global-as-European identity without, until recently, being subjected to scrutiny for how this maintains racial and linguistic inequalities (Soudien 2012).

The significance of school cultures in upholding or contesting particular linguistic dynamics cannot be understated. Maxwell and Thomas (1991) argue that schools produce, reproduce and contest particular compositions of knowledge, values, behaviour and beliefs within their spatially contextualised settings. Moreover, the relationships schools hold with their surrounding and institutional communities, and the manner in which they locate their relationship to the wider society, is indicative of an institutional identity and culture that is fostered, promoted and legitimised by management and the school community (Maxwell and Thomas 1991). When strategic choices are made that favour particular activities, subjects, cultural mores and traditions, it can be said that schools are developing their own culture, one that shapes how they are perceived externally and by their own members. As Gaziel (1997) suggests, strong institutional culture is often indicative of high productivity due to a shared understanding of common goals, beliefs and values. Weak institutional culture, or perceptions

5

thereof, may have a converse effect on the performance of learners and teachers, and the support afforded to the school by members of the institutional, immediate and wider community (Gaziel 1997).

Schools in the South African context are themselves imbibed with social-as-cultural capital stemming from the twin legacies of apartheid and colonialism, which intersect with the complexity of the post-1994 situation. Bourdieu (1986) finds that the passing on of cultural capital—those dispositions, knowledges, values and positions that confer prestige and social mobility—is an important part of the schooling process, inculcating and legitimising the particular behaviours, values and attitudes that offer learners social mobility. While they have been, and continue to be, categorised on racial and economic terms, the local circumstances, histories and practices of South African schools also influence how they are perceived, even where these are inextricably linked to the differential resourcing, support and development offered in the past (Fataar 2015; Soudien 2012). It is the attachment of particular identities to schools, and the correspondence of these with historic racial divisions, that confers or disrupts the cultural capital that learners can expect to derive from the schooling experience.

This impacts on all South African schools, though also in varying ways. Banda (2000) argues that the quality of English as a medium of instruction has declined in historically black schools often as a direct result of apartheid-era legislation, which saw a drain of good teachers from rural areas and township schools. The overproduction of English's prestige took place alongside this decline as quality English language teaching was thus seen to be available only in a minority of schools (Granville et al. 1997). Granville et al. (1997) argue that the asymmetry between English and other official languages also produces a context in which command of the language is associated with being "educated," as compared to indigenous languages which are assumed to only have salience in the private sphere.

Soudien (2012) and Fataar (2015) thus both contend that language is a key factor in the ongoing failure of schools to transform. Philips (2004), in her work on language in education in the United States, found similar dynamics prevailing in the refusal of mostly white teachers and administrators to engage with and utilise the linguistic and cultural diversity present in schools. The "underperformance" of black learners was directly linked to the hostility their schools showed towards their cultural experiences and modes of expression, evidenced in schools' often deliberate distancing from marginalised dialects and the silencing of particular topics and

narratives associated with these dialects in the classroom (Philips 2004). Philips thus suggests that "economically disadvantaged persons have less prestige, and so do the codes they use" (2004, 483). The underside of this is that more economically advantaged persons have the ability to dictate the terms of the codes that are legitimated and expanded in the economic and social spheres, a reality that the literature discussed in this section has alluded to.

Identity thus plays a critical role in how historical and existing dynamics play out in different schooling contexts. Schools, teachers, and learners come with variegated, multiple, intersecting and contradicting identities and positionalities that are worked through daily. Identities are externally and internally imposed constellations of meaning that are also manifestations of particular dynamics and patterns of power (Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Sook Lee and Anderson 2009). A learner can internally categorise herself as a black queer womxn (a term that is intended to be inclusive of non-binary and trans persons) and take pride in this identity; it is the interpretation of this identity by a society that is patriarchal, misogynoirist and/or classist that renders her positive self-identification negative, immoral or even criminal in her everyday life. Important in this example is the issue of *power*: for some individuals, externally imposed identities carry more material weight over their lives than those they ascribe to themselves (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Sook Lee and Anderson 2009). For black South African learners, the legacies of apartheid's particular brand of structural racism remain evident in the homes, schools and communities that have not been systematically transformed since 1994, and the ongoing salience of racial categorisations in the public sphere that tethers them, as raced beings, to these material circumstances (Soudien 2012). In this sense, while democracy has attempted to do away with the social and structural legacies of apartheid, any reading of linguistic and social dynamics in the classroom must take these legacies into account in order to understand the strategic, pragmatic and symbolic moves that learners and teachers make in the process of language education. The discussion turns briefly to a description of the methodology, before expanding on how the research contributed new insights to understandings of social cohesion and language identity in schools.

Methodology

This paper is the result of dissertation research into linguistic identity and social cohesion in three schools in Cape Town, one of South Africa's capital cities, in 2015 and 2016. The research took the form of a critical realist case-study approach using a qualitative methodology

that hinged on triangulation as its verifying mechanism. The three-pronged data collection approach used to complement this mechanism comprised of class observations, learner focus groups and teacher interviews, all conducted by the author. The teacher was the primary unit of analysis in the original dissertation research, but the quality of data gained from the three-pronged method allowed for secondary findings to be sufficiently verified and substantiated for the purposes of this paper.

The research focused on three Grade 11 English (Home Language) classes at three Cape Town schools. While there are township schools where English is used as LOLT, only one township school in Cape Town could be found teaching English at home-language level as a subject. Fataar (2015, 66) further adds that 66 per cent of learners attend schools outside of their immediate vicinity, justifying an approach that looked at the schools learners were leaving their neighbourhoods to attend, rather than a simplistic model that looked at black, white and coloured schools as distinctive phenomena.

The process of data collection followed a particular logic. An initial context had to be established through a preliminary document analysis. The main documents assessed were the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) English Home Language Grade 12* (DBE 2011), the *Language in Education Policy* (DoE 1997), the South African Constitution and selected education policies such as the South African Schools' Act (Republic of South Africa 1996). These provided the policy context in which teachers' practices were cast. Rather than using analytical tools developed by other scholars, it was decided to use the stipulations of the CAPS document in terms of learning outcomes and skills to determine the expectations influencing teachers' work in language education. This allowed for the research to be embedded in the policy intentions governing language education rather than standards external to the schooling context of South Africa.

The research period at each school amounted to two weeks of English (HL) lessons, beginning with an introductory interview with teachers where they briefed the researcher on their teaching styles, challenges in the classroom, and learners' progression with the content. Observations were then conducted and learner focus groups and teacher interviews scheduled for close to the end of the observation period or just after. Each class had between 30 and 35 learners, and focus groups comprised 10 learners per class. Questions posed to teachers included what they considered important skills and attitudes for learners to take from the language class, how they managed linguistic difference in their practice, and their perspective on the language and

literature curriculum. They also reflected on their relationships with colleagues in curriculum delivery and support. Learners were asked about their experiences of language teaching and their own linguistic backgrounds, challenges they faced in the classroom and the ways in which their teachers sought to inculcate particular values, attitudes and skills through their practice. Teachers' practice and their social relationship to the learners they taught could not be isolated from each other: as it will be shown, it is the relational dynamic created in the classroom that enabled or constrained learning and development.

The researcher did not participate in lessons observed and was positioned out of learners' view in the classroom. Inasmuch as teachers and learners were aware of an outsider in the classroom, for the most part their interactions continued as normal and allowed for findings from focus groups and interviews to be verified or contested through this method. It would have been insufficient to the study for learners and teachers to share their perspectives on the classroom experience without the researcher witnessing this dynamic in context.

Participant teachers, learners and schools were guaranteed confidentiality and were also given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. These pseudonyms are also used in this discussion. Ethical permission was granted by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and then subsequently by the school principals and class teachers. Learners were requested to participate in focus groups in advance, but were made aware that they could withdraw from these at any time without fear of reprisal or identification.

The salience of this research for the issue of school teaching and learning cultures is discussed in the next section. Attention is given to the notion of "narrative" and the use of narrative in shaping particular attitudes towards school and social belonging. The English (HL) classroom becomes a lens through which this analysis is cast in broader terms.

Narratives of Social Cohesion

Social cohesion in South Africa is tied to the broader nation-building project that has characterised one of the major symbolic interventions of the post-1994 government (Sayed et al. 2015). This project developed from the need to reconcile deeply unequal and antagonistic groups under a cohesive and inclusive national identity. Government construction of the discourse of nation-building, and more recently social cohesion, has focused on developing a

positive sense of South African citizenship that transcends difference and values the non-racism, non-discrimination, respect and equality highlighted in the Constitution (Sayed et al. 2015; Soudien 2012; Staeheli and Hammett 2013).

One respondent in Sayed et al.'s (2015) study on teachers and social cohesion suggested that the discourse of nation-building collapses the experiences and traumas of the individual body with those of the body politic, and in so doing neutralises the national conversation around the traumas of segregation, racism and deprivation (Barolsky 2013; Staeheli and Hammett 2013). Driven by a premature logic of unity, this approach in fact misses the step of engaging with and resolving the inequalities created by a legacy of structural discrimination fixed primarily on the presentation of the body itself. Consensus is established through the silencing or sanitising of particular issues in national discourse, including in the formal public education system (Barolsky 2013).

This sentiment is echoed by Bock and Hunt (2015), who in their research on the attitudes of university students to race and identity found that a lack of social-level engagement with the tensions and awkwardness of race-thought resulted in these debates being located largely in private spaces. The outcome of this was that some of their participants were exposed to prejudiced opinions that were rarely subject to critique, and so had taken these on in their own worldviews alongside the Constitutional values they were taught in their schooling (Bock and Hunt 2015). The tensions between these contradicting perspectives were evident in their responses, which also highlighted a form of "race fatigue": fatigue with engaging on racial terms and casting their experiences within a raced lens. Despite this, participants continued to deploy racial stereotypes and speak in opposition to other "race" groups, suggesting, like Barolsky, that the lack of deep engagement with race as a social fact resulted in a superficial interpretation of the Constitution superimposed on existing dynamics and prejudices (Bock and Hunt 2015).

It was further significant that Bock and Hunt's (2015) work pointed to the influence of schooling on learners' processes of self-creation and conscientisation as citizens. The discussion has so far suggested that the school cultures and environments that learners are inducted into are also critically shaped by particular racial, spatial, class, and other contingent dynamics, much like learners themselves—thus typifying the agent that, Soudien (2012) argues, lives in creative tension with space and time. It is thus important to ask how the schools

in which young people find themselves contribute to the ways they conceive of their belonging, particularly as South Africans.

This brings in the issue of narrative and its importance for enabling the construction of individual and collective meaning. Several theorists suggest definitions of "narrative" as the accounts of agents located within processes of change or development (Bruner 1991; Sewell Jr. 1992; Steinmetz 1992). Narratives are located within relationships to time and space that invest them with particular meanings—meanings that are constantly negotiated, affirmed or challenged by the agents who encounter them in the process of change. Further, the reality that meanings are contextually produced and negotiated means that narratives are invested with normative conceptions of the world (Bruner 1991; Steinmetz 1992). The participants in this research developed narratives of social cohesion through ongoing engagement with their own experiences, the school culture and context, and its location within broader social dynamics— echoing Bruner's (1991) assertion that the accrual of individual narratives and experiences contributes to the development of collective discourses, histories and cultures. Further, strong identities, particularly for groups, organisations, and institutions, are often thickly constructed through coherent and consistent narrative-building that is verified by members or through ongoing support (Steinmetz 1992).

Learners and teachers constructed particular "stories" about the worlds they inhabited, particularly in the school's relationship to other schools, and their own relationships to the wider society. In the following discussion I identify three main narratives of social cohesion found within the three participant classrooms and schools, arguing that these could also be applied in other schooling contexts in order to identify the manner in which social relationships interact with and are produced in relation to the institutional identity of the school. These narratives drew on the expressions of learners and teachers and the ways in which the stories they told about life and learning cast them, their schools and communities within particular relationships to the "new" South Africa.

Conceptualising "Narratives of Social Cohesion"

Progressive interpretations of social cohesion, which this paper subscribes to, suggest that it can only be achieved through both structural and symbolic mechanisms with social justice at

their core (Barolsky 2013; Sayed et al. 2015). A socially cohesive classroom, in the South African context, could be developed by:

- Creating a positive and productive learning environment through building trust and respect between learners, and dealing with prejudices even when these are uncomfortable to acknowledge;
- Dealing with inequalities (whether material, learning or other) practically and sensitively to preserve the dignity and inclusion of all learners, and maximise learning;
- Engaging with learning materials critically, particularly in how these represent or silence particular issues or identities;
- Facilitating learning that is relevant and context-driven, sensitive to learners' needs, aspirations and challenges.

It is evident that this approach is inclusive of sensitivities to language and linguistic difference, as it requires teachers to use learning materials and teaching strategies that are responsive to learners' needs and proficiencies in the classroom. Moreover, sensitivity, inclusivity and critical thought are important elements of a language class in a historically unequal and linguistically disparate country. The above are distilled from a range of literature on social cohesion and learning, including the official curriculum policy (Barolsky 2013; Bourdieu 1991; Bucholtz and Hall 2004; DBE 2011; Philips 2004; Portes and Vickstrom 2011; Sayed et al. 2015). While not an exhaustive list, it points to broad approaches teachers could take to create inclusive and productive learning environments. It does not, however, advocate for a romanticised notion of teaching or learning, but instead suggests that in order for positive, lasting and substantial social cohesion to take root, the role of schooling in inculcating particular values, attitudes and identities needs to be more seriously addressed. Moreover, the discussion presented here locates each participant school within a *dominant* narrative of social cohesion, but does not suggest that these are prescriptive or totalising interpretations of their schooling identities. The table below (Table 1) presents the "narratives of social cohesion" discussed in this section and describes their relationship to the social expression of the school culture and its effect on teaching and learning.

Table 1: Explaining narratives of SC

NARRATIVE	SOCIAL LEVEL	LEARNING
Dissonant Tension between expression of Constitutional values and lived experience	Casual expressions of racism and prejudice in interactions Cognitive dissonance Negative constructions of the Other Unwillingness or hesitancy to engage difference	Disrupted by fragile internal dynamics including: The relationship between weak leadership and ill-discipline Lack of interpersonal respect in the classroom Prejudicial or biased teaching practices
Deep Where behavioural and structural manifestations of social cohesion intersect	Commitment to social justice, development of critical attitudes in respect of inequality and diversity Intolerance to prejudice and engagement with its root causes	A professional community that supports teachers Teaching strategies mindful of and responsive to learner needs, positionalities and aspirations Mutual cooperation, responsibility and respect for peers
Alternative Where a broader social identity is rendered secondary to a specific collective identity informed by the school ethos (e.g. academic, religious)	Might inculcate positive social values, but at a superficial level relative to the ethos of the target community of the school Exists within and in service of a specific cultural/academic/religious/other normativity that supersedes responsibility to wider societal needs	Learners expected to conform/subscribe to dominant normativity to succeed Because the normativity of the school is how it is identified and perpetuated, the extent to which teaching and learning can subvert this normativity is constrained

Dissonant Narratives of Social Cohesion

Dissonant narratives of social cohesion arise when the values embedded in the Constitution and the curriculum rub up against the everyday realities of life in often still racially, spatially and economically segregated communities. At the social level these are highlighted in casual expressions of racism and prejudice, negative constructions of other social groups or an unwillingness or hesitancy to engage in new interpretations of difference. For learning, this also points to how learning is disrupted through fragile internal dynamics in the school, weak leadership, or prejudicial teaching practices that unfairly favour some learners over others.

13

Juniper High School was located in a mixed-income, historically coloured neighbourhood, but had experienced the post-1994 drain of wealthier learners to white schools described by Soudien (2012) and Fataar (2015). As they argue, this movement renders vulnerable schools and learners more vulnerable through the loss of critical resources, parental support and strong learners to wealthier schools (Fataar 2015; Soudien 2012). Learners were confronted with challenges such as pregnancy, substance abuse and violence in the school and local community (Bray et al. 2010). While this was not "rife" in any sense, it was widespread enough to constitute a disruption to ordinary schooling activities in the community. As a result, a negative impression of the school's status circulated among participant learners and seemed to be shared by their peers in the school, though these were also tempered by positive celebrations of learner achievements and attempts by the staff to encourage order and participation.

It was in this context that Ms Bezuidenhout, a young teacher who would be classified "coloured," operated. Her awareness of the local dynamics that present challenges to learners' success at school made her work towards instilling particular life lessons about resilience, discipline and hard work. She encouraged an open relationship with learners and often addressed them more as a friend than as a teacher. Daily interruptions (on one occasion by a drunken learner) showed that she took a pragmatic view on the realities she faced in the schooling context, and felt that learners needed personal support from her that they may have lacked elsewhere in their lives (Bray et al. 2010).

However, this socially-driven approach undermined her success as a teacher in the way it contributed to learners being disruptive, derailing her lessons and refusing to cooperate on the basis of their level of familiarity with her. The dynamics in this classroom were underpinned by the schooling context, articulated especially through Ms Bezuidenhout's experiences. She relied to a large extent on the Teacher's Guides for her set textbooks to get through her lessons, and though she reported positive collegial relationships she did not have consistent interaction with her colleagues regarding the syllabus. In the main, Ms Bezuidenhout's full lessons sometimes amounted to between 10 and 20 minutes at most, with the rest of teaching time spent quieting learners or out of the classroom. She relied on a call-and-response style of teaching that collapsed into interactions between her and a few learners while others listened or did other work. Learners were seen to become agitated when these interactions occurred, and hostilities seemed to develop around what was viewed as her favouritism towards a few outspoken learners such as Tara and Sumaya. Her struggles to manage the disruptions (which often

resulted in angry outbursts) showed that she could not rely on a strong disciplinary culture in the school to hold learners to a code of conduct, which in turn made them less likely to obey instructions (Bray et al. 2010). In this way, her personal approach to teaching undermined her authority and made it difficult for her to assert it where necessary.

It is important not to pathologise these circumstances and ignore the ways in which teachers and learners were attempting to work past them. The school management team was working on building a culture of achievement and pride in the school, but learners expressed disillusionment with the slow pace at which things improved. "I thought the school would improve, and I would be part of the improvement … that's why I do everything at school," said one learner. Despite the stigma attached to the school by some learners and, they felt, outsiders, there were still extracurricular activities available at the school and academic prestige to strive for, and a cohort of learners who took pride in these.

Negative impressions of the schooling context did influence learners' descriptions of alienation and marginality more generally. Ms Bezuidenhout held the view that her class, the top set of the year, could not handle being taught at a particularly "high" level and thus pitched the content to be accessible to them. The result of this, following Granville et al. (1997), was that learners developed a false sense of their competency and were under the impression that they were learning at a more sophisticated level than their peers. This became apparent when learners were asked what they enjoyed about their particular English class. Sumaya commented:

> We enjoy that we get to speak our minds, not just speak our minds but we analyse things and because … not just because we are 11A, that just sounds very cocky … but because we are able to like go in depth with certain things.

Afrikaans-speaking learners were particularly conscious of their command of English, and described being the only English speakers in their families and struggling to pick up the standard form of the language at school. They associated school with the "high" and home with the "low" varieties (Mesthrie 2004), using these terms distinctly and suggesting a need to learn the "high" variety in order to be successful in the workplace. Perhaps due to the erratic nature of Ms Bezuidenhout's teaching, learners were particularly focused on their ability to speak to others, rather than on skills such as writing, which would be critical for further study but required more attention from the teacher (Bray et al. 2010). Learners reflected on this when

asked what important outcomes were for them from the class. Craig and Kaylah, respectively, responded:

> I think the most important is communication skills. That's what will get you far in life, in interviews, in one-on-ones with ordinary people … it says a lot about you, how you represent yourself, and that will get you far.

> I think the way you speak gives you a certain level of professionalism; one day when you start your job, if you can't communicate with a certain person they will see you as unprofessional and they won't regard you the same.

The dissonance in learners' shared desires for careers and social mobility became apparent in their underlying sense of competition with, and disdain for, black people. While discussing careers and the working world, a comment about having communication skills became racially loaded. Terry observed,

> Miss, if you look at our country, the population … is black, so we're going to have to have a language that we can also communicate in because there out there in the workplace, you will see things changing, you will see *dark of complexion* [own emphasis] people and you need to communicate and know what they're saying about you behind your back.

Learners were wary to use the world "black" and often resorted to signifiers such as the one highlighted above when making pejorative statements. However, in one instance, Sumaya used the derogatory "k-word" without being corrected by her teacher or peers. This incident took place during a broader class conversation around race that started with a discussion of the contestations over LOLT at Stellenbosch University in 2015. Learners were antagonistic to the idea that languages other than English or Afrikaans could be used for teaching and learning. Terry expressed frustration with the continued resort to race before, in agreement with Kyle, making a derogatory comment about the quota system in place for national sports teams. Learners generally challenged the persistent use of race categories and questioned why "everything is about race" in the South African context—echoing Bock and Hunt's findings (2015). Lameez, talking about the language debate at Stellenbosch University, stated:

> If people could just leave it at English because everybody speaks English.

Also regarding the language debate, Tara advanced:

> Let's not see races. Because … *You black!—Oh I'm black? I'm going to go to court and make a case now because you said I'm black.*

The potential dominance of one of the nine indigenous official languages over their own repertoires of English and Afrikaans threatened learners' already fragile sense of belonging in the new South Africa.

Moreover, while learners were enthusiastic about the idea of democracy and human rights, they exhibited evident prejudices, suggesting that they struggled to reconcile the Constitutional values embedded in their learning[2] with their daily experiences (Bock and Hunt 2015). Their antagonism towards black people stemmed from a sense of alienation and competition with a group that they viewed as having unfairly and collectively benefited under the new dispensation, however inaccurate this was in material terms (Adhikari 2005; Kometsi 2007). Learners were acutely aware of their historic "middling position" in the apartheid racial hierarchy and so were sensitive to the precarious terms of their belonging in the new South Africa. This was captured in their use of the phrase "[w]e were not white enough then, and we are not black enough now" (Adhikari 2005). Other authors have written extensively on coloured identity in South Africa (see Adhikari 2005; Erasmus 2001; 2013; Stone 2004), but it suffices to say that the marginality learners expressed was caught within their relationship to other groups in South Africa and their sense of distance from a broad South African identity.

This was also captured in their expressions around language. While learners located their insecurities around social mobility in relation to what they viewed as the dominance of black people in government and society, they still associated their linguistic identities in relation to English as a marker of whiteness (Stone 2004). Tara suggested that their immediate comparison in respect of their linguistic competency was the English spoken at "white schools," while in several incidents learners spoke in exaggerations of white South African accents when reading in class and were met with silence and seriousness by their peers. In comparison, when a learner demonstrated a caricature of a black accent while reading the Mandela speech, the class dissolved into laughter. However, learners expressed frustration with the depictions of coloured people as "violent," "stupid," and low-class, suggesting that black and white South Africans were equally complicit in their exclusion.

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[2] Of the several activities Ms Bezuidenhout worked through in the observation period, three featured speeches (Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela) or a column (Jonathan Jansen) by pastoral figures advocating hard work, respect, equality and/or forgiveness. In one instance the takeaway from the Mandela speech was that "the apartheid president (FW De Klerk) was a good man."

Interrogating the dissonant narrative of social cohesion is important to understanding how South Africans grapple with the tension between the lofty values of the nation-building project and the ongoing visibility of racial insularity and inequality across social spaces. It also reveals the deep and persisting struggles for belonging and recognition (Soudien 2012; Staeheli and Hammett 2013) that have characterised much of the country's history, struggles that are not appropriately accommodated by current discourse on social cohesion. Juniper High School is not the only one of its kind, and dissonant narratives of social cohesion may also be present, for example, in historically white schools with strong racial identities and a desire to preserve this. What this example illustrates is how learners struggle to reconcile their own experiences with those captured in their schooling space, and how this intersects with what they encounter in their learning. Moreover, it shows how the insularity of schools, located as they are in historically raced settings, contribute particular kinds of knowledge to learners' understandings of their place as citizens. This is addressed further in the following section.

Deep Narratives of Social Cohesion

Deep narratives of social cohesion can be viewed as those most congruent with the four elements identified in the discussion prior. They develop when both behavioural and structural manifestations of social cohesion intersect. A commitment to social justice and the development of critical attitudes to inequality and diversity is accompanied by the fostering of positive attitudes and behaviours among learners and with teachers. This is further supported by a strong ethic of discipline within the school context, and moreover by a community of teachers who encourage each other's development and improvement. Particular to this narrative is the school's awareness of and interest and participation in debates and struggles around social justice, especially those that affect the quality of learners' experiences.

The school that illustrated this narrative was Lodge High School, located in the city proper. Following the end of apartheid the school attracted a significant number of black learners, and in fact the majority of all learners commuted from areas far from the city. Some travelled up to four hours a day in total just to attend school, which served as an alternative to historically white schools based on perceptions of quality and university throughput. The fact that learners did not share a common local identity meant that their commonalities were tied to the school, which emphasised its political tradition as an anti-racist, activist institution (often with radical

humanist or leftist politics) alongside a strong academic record (Soudien 2012). Lodge High set common goals for school performance each year, and consistently reached its targets, suggesting that learners were also invested in maintaining, and thus being associated with, the school's academic tradition.

Lodge High had teachers from a variety of former race groups and religious communities, and the participant teacher was Ms Fisher, a young woman who would be classified white. The principal encouraged the observation of what he considered to be a revival of critical language teaching in her classroom. Ms Fisher openly flagged her "whiteness" and her symbolic and structural privilege as a white South African as a challenge to her teaching, saying that it required her to be particularly "mindful and sensitive" when negotiating her classroom. Her Grade 11 class contained a mixture of black South African learners, including some who had been born in South Africa to parents from other African countries, or who had moved with their families as a result of political unrest. The linguistic dynamics present in this classroom were reflective of broader South African realities; most learners could speak three or more languages, with one, Mamadou, being able to speak English, Afrikaans, Swahili, Lingala and French. Ms Fisher thus had to deal with language diversity in a very tangible sense, and showed deep commitment in her attempts to create a productive learning environment that suited everyone.

Her own attitude to her teaching was supplemented by the amount of support she received from colleagues and seniors on the staff, and the strong emphasis the school management placed on consistent, uninterrupted and quality teaching. Learners were also held to high standards of discipline and respect for teachers and peers, and the school enforced the code of conduct through punishments for rule-breaking and disrespectful conduct.

This is the context in which her classroom practices took place. Ms Fisher's teaching strategy was to supplement her own teaching with peer learning. She encouraged learners to support each other by identifying their individual strengths in everyday activities and using these as models of good behaviour. For example, Ms Fisher observed,

> From personal experience, I never did well in subjects where the teacher wasn't kind or nice. It is important to model that kind of behaviour to be a positive influence.

19

Mamadou, when asked about the teacher's approach, responded:

> Sometimes, like even—we did orals recently, right? Now not everyone is the best at orals, right? Now, last year we had a teacher that constantly … criticised us to do our best. But Ms Fisher [will] always give you positive [feedback] even in the most dullest work [*others laugh in agreement*]. So she's very motivational in that way.

In this way, learners saw each other as peers, came to treat each other with respect and were able to participate confidently in class. They also assisted each other during activities and in this way freed up the teacher's time to focus on especially struggling classmates. During the observation period learners were presenting orals that cast the lessons of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* within an imagined, authoritarian school setting. Learners were quiet while their peers presented, except to offer encouragement, and applauded and complimented each other upon finishing their speeches. One learner received a standing ovation. In the midst of this, a learner who had not prepared his oral approached the teacher to discuss a way forward that would avoid him receiving a nil mark. She asked him to remain behind in the afternoon where he then presented his oral and received a good mark. After discussing the arrangement with him, they explained to the class why he would not be presenting, with the teacher reconciling the learner to the rest of the class for taking responsibility for his actions. She also used the opportunity as a gentle reminder to those learners who had not prepared yet.

It was evident that it was the school's stated commitment to academic and extracurricular excellence—evidenced in articles, statistics and diaries pinned in the main foyer—that created an environment in which learners were encouraged to achieve, and that this heavily influenced the success of the teacher in implementing her own approach. Ms Fisher asserted:

> I try to be as consistent as possible without taking away from creativity. They know what I expect of them and this rarely changes … [Within the school] there are strong expectations of learners to perform well and be disciplined.

This culture of performance was linked to the school's history. The ex-learners who had gone on to study further held prominent place in the school's narrative of its involvement in the liberation struggle. Doctors, lawyers and teachers featured in the stories learners heard about their alumni, and this was an influence on their own career aspirations and future plans.

These aspirations were tempered by the everyday realities learners faced in their local communities. Learners at Lodge High faced similar community challenges to their peers at

Juniper, and expressed frustration with the pressure that the high cost of their schooling and transportation placed on their families. This material investment in their education, coupled with a perception of the school as a space that encouraged and elevated learner excellence in all facets of life, did give learners significant reason to invest themselves. Moreover, following Soudien (2012), the humanism embedded in the school's anti-racist tradition created a coherent narrative of exemplary, brave and dynamic coloured youth at odds with the discourses of inferiority that black South Africans were cast in under apartheid. The school's foyer and halls were adorned with academic and sporting accolades as well as evidence of its political history and pedigree. In the post-1994 context this humanism was tested in its ability to expand and accommodate black learners on a concrete level as members of the school community (Soudien 2012), as well as in representations of this community and its values. That the principal took seriously Ms Fisher's contribution to learners' confidence and competence in her time at the school suggests that the school was aware of the need to find relevant, inclusive and transformative teaching for its diverse new learner base and its needs, creating a space in which all learners were believed capable of doing well and becoming critical members of society.

This does not deny that tensions existed between learners. Ms Fisher and her colleagues worked to diffuse and transform expressions of prejudice, both between black and coloured learners and between local learners and those whose families came from outside the country. Learners in her class, who could choose where to sit, often sat in racially mixed groups with their friends. Further, learners from other African countries described a sense of kinship with their peers at the school, and noted how this had developed over time, organically, and through a period of deep personal growth. Mamadou explained,

> the reason why we're so open is we started from an early, like from Grade 9 we first started together; obviously [then] we weren't so open as expressing our individual opinions with the other students but I think we've grown as some sort of a family bond with each other.

Given the existing dynamics within the school, it would have been reasonable to assume that black and foreign learners entering a historically, and still largely coloured high school may have been ostracised and treated as outsiders (Soudien 2012). It is thus significant that these learners described a sense of belonging that transcended friendship into a more complex, intimate and stable familial connection. English served as a bridging language in this space, and learners described a contextual relationship to the language that challenged its centrality in society. Rafael, for example, claimed,

21

you can value … how rich a man is due to how many languages he can speak. Because it means you can relate to different people, different cultures.

This was a view shared by Rafael's peers, who expressed desires to learn more languages in order to build relationships with others. There was an explicit racial divide in their impressions of which languages they wanted to learn; coloured and Indian learners wanted to learn European languages, while black learners (whether "local" or not) emphasised the need for more indigenous languages to be taught. In the classroom, Ms Fisher largely allowed learners to speak to each other in languages they were comfortable in while they were working, or when needing help with translations from a peer. While she taught in English, she recognised that learners would need to use their existing linguistic repertoires to scaffold their learning in the classroom.

While a positive role model, Ms Fisher herself had to grapple with her own paternalism and inherited prejudices as a white person, including her perceptions of learners' and their parents' apathy towards their schooling, and her encouragement for them to "rise up" and transcend their circumstances. This contradicted the real limitations and obstacles to learners' goals that they encountered at home and in society. By not engaging with the structural realities learners faced and helping them develop tangible ways to overcome these, Ms Fisher was setting a precedent that suggested that learners were solely responsible for the course their lives would take, even when she privately stressed the need for transformation and criticised the need for learners to learn a Eurocentric curriculum in a European language in order to be seen as intelligent. As she observed,

> There are certain things I get to choose and make it relevant. Literature is still Shakespeare, which totally demotivates learners … They could learn the same themes from African literature [and] could do so much better if they were taught literature that is about them and serves their development.

Deep narratives are thus not only contingent on internal cohesion, but intersect with broader elements of social cohesion and challenges to the development of positive and critical social relations. The institutional character of Lodge High has remained largely intact even as it has shifted to accommodate new learner subjectivities and transform teaching and learning practices. However, Ms Fisher's response indicated that this did not deny the school's own

Eurocentrism in its prescribed language syllabus, or the tensions between some learners that exhibited ongoing racial antagonisms. Ms Fisher explained:

> There is still massive segregation between the races at Lodge, and I find that snarky comments are directed at others. I confront these when they arise.

The institutional context does proscribe discriminatory behaviour explicitly and confirms the dignity of learners, with teachers attempting to mitigate possible tensions and cultivate a sense of critical, shared humanity (Sayed et al. 2015). It is arguable that the school environment also enables them to grapple with these tensions inherent in their interactions with difference in a productive way. Learners are actively exposed to a nuanced, historical and deep interpretation of Constitutional values, located as these are in the liberation struggle, which in turn provides examples for them to follow and engage with as they build relationships with peers and teachers.

Alternative Narratives of Social Cohesion

The final narrative of social cohesion hones in on schooling contexts where a broader social or even political identity is rendered secondary to a specific collective identity that informs and is informed by the ethos of the school. The function of this collective identity, intended or not, creates distance between learners and society as a whole, situating them in particular relationships to the world outside the school community and its familiars. Faith-based schools could also incorporate an alternative narrative of social cohesion through encouraging, despite positive values and respect for others, an insular connection to religious communities that may also have race and class elements attached. In the case of Lillie High School, this narrative was constructed as *social cohesion through excellence*, discussed further below.

Lillie High was located in an economically advantaged, historically white suburb. The school had a proud academic record, expansive amenities and an illustrious list of alumni. A large number of matriculants each year went on to tertiary study at historically white and elite universities in the Western Cape and elsewhere. The school received hundreds of applications every year, and used this reality to inculcate a sense in learners that they were hand-picked and thus had to live up to their initial prestige. The majority of learners were white, but there were a substantial number of black South African learners enrolled at the school.

Mr Haxton, the participant teacher, taught in an unusually silent classroom setting where much of the dialogue in the classroom went through him as a conduit. He had a firm but supportive manner in the classroom and expected learners to take their learning seriously, but deplored the academic culture of the school that encouraged some to focus obsessively on their performance.

While Mr Haxton recognised the importance of multilingualism he did not see it as a necessary concern because, as he explained,

> [m]any of the Xhosa speakers who come to Lillie can already speak English quite fluently anyway. We just are that kind of … I suppose "elite" school that we can … you know, kids that are getting 35% for English are just not going to end up here.

He did agree that as a teacher, being able to speak an African language would serve as a good social tool to "say more" in the hallways and on the sports field, but suggested that the school culture privileged English as part of its historically British identity. The attachment of historically white schools to elements of their European identities is flagged by Soudien (2012), who suggests that this attachment allows these schools to "recalibrate" their insular white identities into an association with a globalising world that avoids an interrogation of the underlying inequalities sustaining globalisation. The school offered one indigenous language besides English, Afrikaans, and at least two European languages, suggesting to learners that their cultural fields beyond the school and country existed in spaces such as these and that these languages would be most useful for their aspirations.

Learners across racial identifications were aware of the inequalities that existed in South Africa and problematised the school's "liberal" approach to managing diversity. For example, Michael stated:

> Everything is [about] this victory over apartheid back then in 1994; nothing seems to centre around the way apartheid is still very much ingrained in South Africa today… and it makes the people setting work seem kind of ignorant when they set work that isn't relevant to today's struggles. And like, going over to History … they sort of, they take race words out of the dialect that we use, it sort of delegitimises the issues of real South Africans in a country where race and financial privilege is still so interconnected.

White learners in the class shared a desire to grapple with their privilege and learn about the realities that they did not experience first-hand. Michael's comment suggested, following

24

Soudien (2012), that it was insufficient to discard racial terminology in a highly raced environment without engaging with the weight carried in racial language and the inequalities and micro-aggressions that persist in the present because of it. For them, their school's culture and traditions placed limitations on what they were able to learn outside of largely insular and affluent home environments. Even where progressive teachers and learners opened up spaces for debate in the school, Mr Haxton himself acknowledged that these interventions were vulnerable to being sacrificed for the greater academic project, which itself was characterised by deeply unrepresentative, mostly Western literature and resources. Two learners, Maryam and Beth respectively, elaborated on this:

> It doesn't necessarily reflect on [my identity] as a South African. [T]here are certain aspects of literature that influence who I am as a person, but not as a South African.
>
> I think especially because we don't really do books written by South African authors, we do a very Western type of literature, so it isn't as relatable.

A common thread that runs between the dissonant and alternative narratives of social cohesion is what I call *colourblind cosmopolitanism*, though this manifests differently. As Possnock suggests, cosmopolitan identities are usually a result of a refusal to identify primarily with a local or national subjectivity and instead to pursue and embody multiple forms of belonging (Possnock 2000, 802). Hook (2011) disputes the benevolence of cosmopolitanism in South African identity formation, arguing that in the context of fractured, contested and dissonant identities, appeals to a cosmopolitan identity leave "wounds" resulting from appeals to difference and Otherness open. Rather than reconciling one's multiple and often contradictory positions in the world, and accepting an identity that is a fractured and fluid unity of self, Hook argues that the cosmopolitan subject attempts to avoid grappling with the complexities of the identities they invoke or are inscribed with by appealing to a facile universalism that enables ignorance and alienation from their lived reality (Hook 2011). In short, cosmopolitanism is a premature form of identification in circumstances where individuals have not sufficiently dealt with the meaning of the identities they have been socialised into, and have forged for themselves.

In the case of the dissonant narrative, this cosmopolitanism formed part of learners' strategies to resolve feelings of alienation and marginality. As premature as this could be viewed, it must be stressed that learners were attempting to relieve themselves of the baggage that accrued to

a racial identity they had not chosen for themselves, and yet felt responsible for daily. The ways in which they attempted this were often contradictory and indicative of unresolved anti-blackness stemming from a lack of space created for learners to engage on the issue in depth. For learners at Lillie High, the school's cosmopolitan identity was an attempt to distance itself from its past as an exclusively white school while not structurally changing the way in which education was delivered in the classroom. This was recognised and problematised by many of them, and frustrations were expressed about the limitations on their ability to engage with these challenges effectively in the learning space.

Within the alternative narrative of social cohesion through excellence, the school's culture of academic and extramural excellence was seen as a proxy for belonging that sanitised the social and structural differences between white learners, who remained in the majority, and black learners at the school. It was assumed that difference would be transcended by high achievement because of the relationship this had to economic and social mobility. While the school respected equality and human dignity, its language policy, choices of texts and even test questions reflected a racially and culturally normative view of what constituted excellence that invisibilised those learners for whom assimilation was a strategic alternative. This invisibility further contributed to the school's silences around its role in sustaining white values and culture, and failed to provide learners and teachers with a learning space that enabled them to grapple with their identities and locate themselves as South Africans.

Conclusion

These narratives should not be seen as attempts to place each school in silos, and in fact elements of each narrative could be seen in different schools. For example, the alternative narrative of social cohesion at Lillie High, in its behavioural-attitudinal orientation, could also be seen as dissonant when one considers the reality that learners did not enter the school from the same backgrounds and yet were still expected to display particular, raced qualities in order to gain access—this while the school considered itself to have a respect for diversity. What is important to take from the above examples is that schools legitimise and delegitimise particular individual and collective identities through their processes of constructing, negotiating and imposing meaning. Schools "say" things in the way they enforce linguistic and social identities through the school culture, and teachers either affirm or challenge these normativities. Learners are also required to make strategic choices in how they interpret and inculcate these values.

What the narratives of social cohesion revealed was that the learner participants were deeply influenced by the school context, and indicated their agency was often enabled or constrained by these contexts. Crucially, the school ethos played a central role in offering, or not offering, alternative ways of conceiving of and developing positive social identities. Furthermore, the articulations of difference embedded within the school context give recognition to particular identities at the expense of others, with the result that particular differences are reified and legitimated, normalised through values and behaviours, and used to pursue particular orientations toward social cohesion and social justice. It is critical to recognise that an ongoing refusal to engage with the difficult, dirty and often painful substance of people's historically contextualised identities has the potential to reproduce inequalities through the normalisation of standards associated with particular racial and class identities. Re-imagining the human in the South African school must crucially interrogate how school contexts produce particular subjects for whom the past remains contested and the future hopeful and uncertain.

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