

Towards Compassionate Care: A Critical Race Analysis of Teaching in Township Schools

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a critical race theory-informed qualitative study of three teachers in a township secondary school outside of Cape Town, South Africa. Based on a series of interviews conducted throughout the school day, this study demonstrates how teachers intentionally empower learners to navigate school infrastructures that reinforce racial disparities. Findings centre a commitment to empowering instructional strategies, including code-switching and an ethic of compassionate care for learners of colour navigating resource-poor schools. The article concludes by arguing for immediate attention to remedying historic racialised disparities, fostering code-switching as intentional instructional approaches, and considering an ethic of care that helps learners navigate the daily conditions of township life.

Keywords: teachers; township schools; racial inequalities; culturally responsive teaching

Introduction

More than two decades have passed since the end of apartheid in South Africa, yet systemic racial disparities are still the operating reality for the majority Black South African population. During apartheid rule, the white government legislated racial discrimination in social, political, economic and educational institutions that enforced an intentionally racially inferior society for all non-white populations (Mhlauli, Salini, and Mokotedi 2015). Despite the overthrow of apartheid in 1994, myriad forms of racial disparities continue to plague South Africa, including unequal schools, housing, and employment opportunities (Knaus and Brown 2016). While Nelson Mandela, the anti-

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apartheid leader and first Black democratically elected president of South Africa, argued that “education is the great engine of personal development” (Mandela 1994, 99), schools in South Africa remain embedded within previous systems of racial oppression. This racial apartheid is seen through state-enforced unequal resource distribution and school funding disparities that mirror and extend the conditions of poverty in Black townships, as well as a white-framed curriculum and white-dominated language of instruction (Brown, Dancy, and Lane 2017; De Kock, Sayed, and Badroodien 2018; Spaul 2013).

These racialised educational disparities are not exclusive to South Africa, as racially diverse nations across the globe mirror the dichotomy: wealthy populations attend more well-resourced schools than do those mired in poverty, and these conditions are exacerbated when racial background is considered (Darling-Hammond 2010). Despite these disparate conditions within schools and across school systems, however, classroom teachers do what they can to create caring spaces of compassion that empower learners (Vandeyar and Swart 2016). Regardless of insufficient resources and inadequate curricula, many teachers in South African schools still manage to engage learners (Knaus and Brown 2016, 36). Driven by passion, teachers in township schools aim to serve as positive role models for students, all while navigating daily struggles of overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and inaccessible curricula (Cappy 2016; Rampa 2014, 394; Spaul 2013).

In light of continued racial disparities in schools across the globe, this article examines the contexts in which township schools are used as a tool of racial oppression. Through sustained implementation of English-dominated curricula and the stubborn unequal distribution of resources and funding, teacher voice stands out as central to understanding educational inequities, offering teacher-informed solutions to larger societal inequities. This research thus demonstrates how teachers intentionally navigate school disparities that reinforce racial oppression specifically so they can in turn help learners navigate societal disparities. Critical race theory informed research was conducted at Ukholo,¹ a secondary school situated in a geographically isolated South African township referred to in this paper as Uthando. Primary data collection consisted of ethnographic interviews with three teachers, including formal and informal interviews during the school day, recorded via extensive field notes from the first author.

Literature Review

A review of literature on South African education suggests that racial disparities built by apartheid-era educational infrastructures remain. This section examines how educational systems exacerbate these disparities through the imposition of colonial

¹ Pseudonyms have been assigned to the school, community, and all participants to maintain confidentiality, as participants did not feel they could safely share their opinions without professional retribution.

languages of instruction, racially biased curricula, and unequal distribution of resources and funding. This literature review thus frames the foundation for teacher care within school systems that perpetuate dualistic racialised societies.

Context of Apartheid

South African schools were built and expanded during the apartheid era and have continued to reflect racial classification systems legislated by the ruling apartheid government (Knaus and Brown 2016). South Africa's colonial legacies, violent removal of indigenous and African people, and intentionally segregationist approaches prior to apartheid specifically intended to "place the interests of the country's African majority in the hands of the white minority" (Fiske and Ladd 2004, 20). Thus, as Fiske and Ladd (2004, 20) argue, "apartheid is deeply rooted in a colonial tradition of racial segregation." There were four racial classifications under apartheid policy: white, African, Coloured and Indian (Fiske and Ladd 2004, 24). The racial classification of African was assigned to the Black majority; individuals of European descent, mostly British and Afrikaner, made up the minority group which was classified as white; individuals classified as Coloured were those of "mixed-race," with parents of African and European descent; and the smallest group, Indians, was comprised of individuals brought to South Africa as "indentured servants" to work sugar plantations for the British (Fiske and Ladd 2004, 21).

Though racial classifications are social constructions ill-equipped to define how real people live race realities (Haney López 2006; Reddy 2000; Smedley and Smedley 2005), "they were designed to advance racial separation in a way that promoted white control of space and land" (Fiske and Ladd 2004, 25). Thus, contemporary concerns with monoracial concepts abound, as the term "Coloured," for example, reflects contested cultural histories between very different geographic communities, all of which are subsumed under the catch-all phrase designed to isolate specific communities (Adhikari 2006; Alberts 2018; Dalmage 2018; Knaus 2005). We apply a more commonly used term, "so-called Coloured" to reflect a critical stance that the term is contested and inappropriately general (see also Holtzman 2018). Similarly, the term "Black" has been used historically to represent all communities of colour, as well as political solidarity with anti-apartheid struggles (Taylor 2016). For the purposes of this paper, we rely upon these outdated and ineffective terms because they are widely in use today, employing the term Black South African to refer specifically to geographically isolated, isiXhosa-speaking people in the Uthando township.

Racialised terms notwithstanding, apartheid-era school buildings, and certainly the location of township schools, have remained. Indeed, a recent study of 25 schools in the Western Cape clarified how the majority of schools still serve the same specific communities, enrolling almost entirely Black South African, so-called Coloured, or white learners (Knaus and Brown 2016). According to Goodlad (1996, 1630), "the infamous Group Areas Act of 1950 and 1966, set about designating every square inch of and for occupation by one of four 'racial groups.'" Permission to live in an

overcrowded township was granted by the apartheid government; these townships were intentionally located far from the resources and employment opportunities of city centres, thus forcing long commutes and geographic isolation (Goodlad 1996, 1630). Black South Africans were forcibly removed from newly designated “white” areas and relocated to what had been labelled homelands “intended to provide political rights to Africans, while denying them the full economic and social rights of participation in the South African economy” (Goodlad 1996, 1631).

Apartheid Schools

Schools are framed as the way out of poverty but are themselves used as a tool of oppression (Mandela 1994, 99). One of the major ways in which schools remain unequal in South Africa is through disparate allocation of resources and funding (Knaus and Brown 2016). Knaus and Brown (2016, 20) explain, “under apartheid, South African education was fairly clear: Statistics reflected intentional state-sponsored inequalities built into the education system.” The South African education system was designed to place non-whites at an economic disadvantage in comparison to white counterparts. Whites were given opportunities to obtain an education that would prepare them to be economically successful, whereas non-white South Africans were forced to attend schools “designed to maintain a permanent undereducated workforce” (15). This design intended “to communicate to Black learners that they are less intelligent and of less worth than the minority white population for whom this model of education is designed” (16).

Black South Africans were drastically affected by this racialised educational system; however, those classified as “Coloured” and “Indian” under apartheid laws were also dramatically affected. As Chick (2002, 466) argued, “Indian and Coloured schools, while better funded than those of the Black townships, still did not match those of the white community.” Classroom sizes reflected this hierarchy, as Black schools enrolled “more learners than Coloured schools, which enrolled more learners than White schools” (Knaus and Brown 2016, 78). Such hegemony was evident in the curriculum designed for each of the four racial groups as well (Knaus and Brown 2016, 19). Zungu (1977, 208) argued the education system in apartheid schools was designed specifically to make all non-whites “particularly the Africans ... fit their subordinate role in the society.”

Knaus and Brown (2016, 78) state “while the official end of apartheid led the external world to celebrate reconciliation of the races, within South Africa not much has changed for the citizens in the majority Black schools or townships.” Black South African township schools often lack basic necessities, and are impacted by weather, limited electricity, and only occasional access to running water. Learners that attend these schools are still subjected to overcrowded classrooms with too few desks, while their white counterparts enjoy the privileges of having a much lower learner to teacher ratio (Knaus and Brown 2016, 79). Learners that attend township schools also tend to lack basic educational and technological resources, with at best sparsely stocked libraries

and woefully outdated computer labs (Knaus and Brown 2016, 78). Meanwhile classrooms in white schools tend to reflect privilege, with desks for each learner, computers, WiFi, state-of-the-art bathrooms, and the latest pedagogical technology, including laptops, tablets, and smart phones (62). Ukholo Senior Secondary School, the site of this research, reflects these racialised disparities. The current condition of schools across South Africa challenges the notion that education is a way out of poverty, and indeed, demonstrates a continuity with the systematic racial oppression fostered by the previous apartheid government (De Kock, Sayed, and Badroodien 2018; Spaull 2013).

Language of Instruction

Language policies in South Africa have shaped curricula over the last century, paralleling the aforementioned policies of racial disparity. Chick (2002, 464) explained, “In the period 1910–1994 language policy in South Africa was one of a formidable range of strategies both coercive and ideological through which the state maintained the hegemony of whites over blacks.” Greenfield (2010, 519) stated, “Majority-group students whose first language was English or Afrikaans experienced their education without linguistic interruption; conversely, the vast majority of schoolchildren in the nation were seriously disadvantaged by these policies.” The Afrikaner-led government solidified “its dominance in the minds of Black students” with the enforced use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction (Ladson-Billings 1998a, 251). English and Afrikaans were required as the only languages of instruction in white schools up until 1948, when the government decided to segregate white schools into those who spoke English and those who spoke Afrikaans “so as to reinforce and preserve Afrikaner culture and identity” (Fiske and Ladd 2004, 44). In line with the government’s goal of perpetuating the separation of cultures, mother-tongue instruction was similarly required in African schools through Grade 4 (Fiske and Ladd 2004, 44). In 1953, the introduction of the Bantu Education Act extended the period of mother-tongue instruction through Grade 8, after which learners would be expected to take half of their classes in English and the other half in Afrikaans (Fiske and Ladd 2004, 44).

Moloi, Ndlovu, and Nieftagodien (2006, 325) clarified how African schools were positioned “as strategic sites where Afrikaner hegemony could be implanted by using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction.” With the increased enforcement of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in the 1970s, African students increased protest efforts (Moloi, Ndlovu, and Nieftagodien 2006, 362). Moloi, Ndlovu, and Nieftagodien (2006, 320) argue that “township schools across the country were awakening politically and developing well-articulated demands on educational issues.” In 1976, two years after a new language mandate enforced Afrikaans-only instruction, students in Soweto rebelled in what is now known as the Soweto Uprising (Fiske and Ladd 2004; Ladson-Billings 1998a). The ANC united in response to the imposed language policy, ultimately reinforcing the foundation of apartheid resistance in South Africa.

According to Ncoko, Osman and Cockcroft (2000, 226), after the fall of the apartheid regime, the Department of Education established the “Language in Education Policy

(Department of Education, 1997)” that “allows schools to determine their own language policy in consultation with parents and the school community. The Language in Education Policy states that all children have a right to learn in their mother tongue and that the school must fulfil this right where practical and reasonable.” This policy ultimately gives schools responsibility to define what is “practical and reasonable,” without having linguistically relevant curricular resources to decentre English and Afrikaans as already privileged languages (Ncoko, Osman, and Cockcroft 2000, 226). While there are 11 official languages in South Africa (Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, English, Northern Sotho, Tswana, Sotho, Tsonga, Swazi, Venda, and Ndebele), the two historically white languages sanctioned under apartheid (Afrikaans and English) remain the only languages tested for required matric exams (Knaus and Brown 2016, 71). These continuing practices devalue language diversity and multilingualism, while associating school success directly with the ability to write and speak dominant languages (De Kock, Sayed, and Badroodien 2018; Rudwick 2018).

Critical Race Theory

This study applied critical race theory (CRT) to make sense of the lingering educational infrastructures of apartheid, including the stubborn roots of school inequities and the reliance upon dominant languages as pedagogical and assessment-driven processes. Indeed, central to CRT is a commitment to understanding oppression, and in particular, racism, as a societal-wide mechanism for structuring society. CRT stems from critical legal studies, a legal movement that challenged the legal structures that justified the norms and standards within the United States (Ladson-Billings 1998b, 11). Legal scholars developed CRT in response to critical legal studies’ failure to include racism as a critical aspect of US society (Ladson-Billings 1998, 12). Amongst its many applications in a diverse range of disciplines, CRT has been applied globally to examine racial oppression in educational systems (Gillborn 2008, 26). Many scholars have noted that the primary tenet of CRT is the notion that racism is normalised and embedded across every aspect of society (Gillborn 2008; Knaus 2014; Ladson-Billings 1998b). Ladson-Billings (1998b, 13) argued “racism requires sweeping changes but liberalism has no mechanism for such changes. Rather, liberal legal practices support the painstakingly slow process of arguing legal precedence to gain citizen rights for people of color.” This critique of liberalism is derived from “the inability of traditional legal discourse to address anything except the most obvious and crude versions of racism” (Gillborn 2008, 29).

CRT posits that in order to address structural racism, there needs to be “aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are” (Gillborn 2008, 22). CRT views schools as colonial institutions that reinforce the white supremacist master narrative through the implementation of white-framed, English-only curricula (Ladson-Billings 1998b, 22). Delgado and Stefancic (2012, 22) ultimately challenge an oft-named South African value of nonracialism, arguing that “color blindness will allow us to redress only extremely egregious racial harms, ones that everyone would notice or condemn.”

Critical race theory, as applied to education, typically reflects five tenets, explored extensively elsewhere (Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). For the purposes of this study of teacher care in under-resourced schools, however, we applied two tenets. These include the normalcy of racism, which ultimately helps describe the seeming permanence of apartheid-era structures, and counter-storytelling, in which the voices and experiences of those navigating racism are best positioned to clarify the impacts of such racism.

The first tenet argues that racism is a permanent aspect of US society (Bell 1987; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Numerous global scholars, however, have applied critical race theory analyses to the way racism and colonial legacies shape legal, educational, health, housing, economic, and all other aspects of everyday societies (Andrews 2017; Gillborn 2006; Hylton et al. 2011; Modiri 2012; Wing 1996). The normalcy of racism tenet highlights that structural racism is built into the systems that create and sustain societies, and while individual racism is often derided, the more covert nature of structural racism encourages avoidance of recognising the concrete ways in which everyday policies and practices privilege white people over people of colour (Gillborn 2008).

The second tenet applied to this study centres counter-storytelling and the voices of those systematically oppressed by structural racism. The voice tenet argues that the very stories and experiences of people of colour in oppressed spaces are silenced by legal procedures, which, in linking to the first tenet, further normalises the experiences of the majority white population in the US (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Within South African schools and universities, the normalisation of whiteness as voice is reflected not only by the predominant use of English and Afrikaans but also in the foundational curricula and pedagogical approaches being rooted in such dominant languages (Green, Sonn, and Matsebula 2007; Heleta 2016; Hlatshwayo 2015; Soudien 2010). Counter-storytelling is particularly relevant when considering that many South African teachers do not speak English or Afrikaans as their first language (Nieman and Hugo 2010). Teacher voices within this linguistic context, particularly those which highlight the lingering apartheid-era conditions, are central.

There have been a number of related conversations and protest efforts centred on decolonising schools across South Africa. While much of these efforts have specifically focused on higher education, we situate decolonial analyses within a critical race lens. This is in part to recognise that CRT has been aligned directly with indigenous contexts in the US and across the globe (Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith 2008; McKinley and Brayboy 2005; Writer 2008). Over the past several years, students have protested to remove colonial monuments, dominant languages of instruction, racist school policies, and tuition fees (Christie and McKinney 2017; Makhubela 2018; Vorster and Quinn 2017). These efforts, often disruptive of normalised educational operations, have reignited national conversation about the decolonisation of higher education. Vorster and Quinn (2017, 39) state that “for black students, curricula and pedagogic processes

are often not aligned with who they are as people and it is not possible to divorce themselves—their being—from what is taught and how it is taught.” Conventional school culture in South Africa, and globally, has been historically aligned with the identities of white learners, while simultaneously excluding Black learner identities (Makhubela 2018; Vorster and Quinn 2017). This is precisely the normalisation of whiteness within the school context that CRT illustrates.

In township schools, Black learners continue to be devalued through English-language curricula (De Kock, Sayed, and Badroodien 2018). Christie and McKinney (2017, 7) argue “most children in the world grow up multilingually,” and this is especially true for Black township-based learners. Yet, education processes continue to remove the “most valuable resource a child brings to formal schooling”: their language skills (7). This is done through devaluations of African languages and identities in the production of knowledge, curricula, and as languages of instruction (Musitha and Mafukata 2018; Vorster and Quinn 2017). Musitha and Mafukata (2018, 2) argue that the exclusion of Black South African identities from the production of knowledge stems from Black South Africans being historically “defined as sub- or non-human.” Applying a CRT lens here, linguistic domination through schooling enables a systemic silencing, ultimately linking definitions and measurements of success to learners who are afforded access to—and submit to—learning English or Afrikaans over mother-tongue languages. When learners must submit to the linguistic dominance of a colonial language, their voice and capacity to develop counter-stories that can be heard by the masses are intentionally and systemically diminished (Knaus 2011). Thus, while the national conversation should remain on the decolonisation of educational structures, we recognise that this is a long-term struggle. In the immediate, we apply CRT to refocus on the present-day conditions in which South African Black teachers teach, and to consider how this teaching attempts to thwart the reality that township schools are designed to fail Black learners.

Methods

This study examined teaching approaches at one specific school site to potentially suggest a broader understanding of a larger phenomenon (Gerring 2004; Lipson 2005; Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2009). Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe (2009, 6) argued that case studies provide descriptive information and suggest theoretical relevance. Descriptive information allows the researcher to gain in-depth understanding of the case, while theoretical relevance helps the researcher explain concepts that shape theory (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2009, 6). In conducting a case study of teaching at Ukholo Senior Secondary School, interviews with the teachers of three classrooms were conducted. Two sets of interviews were conducted over the course of three weeks in 2017, with additional follow-up interviews conducted in 2018. The first set of informal interviews with teacher participants was conducted in offices, during lessons, and in the school staffroom. The second set of more formal interviews took place in each teacher’s classroom, often at the end of the day or during an extended break. The lead author

conducted all interviews, and spent most of each day over the three weeks in each of the three teachers' classrooms; thus, in addition to interview data, additional opportunities to triangulate the data were provided in the form of informal observations of classroom instruction, staff meetings, and discussions with school leaders. Extensive field notes were taken to capture these additional details.

Participants agreed to participate using a verbal assent process and agreed to use pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The three participants included Mr MC, a teacher who taught both Grade 8 and Grade 10 mathematics. Mrs Nkuta, a Grade 9 English teacher who also served as deputy principal, maintained a half course load. Mr Mana, the third participant, was a Grade 9 mathematics teacher. The research conducted at Ukholo was guided by two research questions:

RQ1: What are the school and classroom conditions in which Ukholo teachers teach?

RQ2: How do Ukholo teachers challenge the oppressive conditions at Ukholo?

Data analysis took place through initial examination of field notes and summaries of interviews. After identifying initial themes, the first author analysed all materials using grounded theory methodology, assessing for alignment, support for themes, and any missing or confounding quotations or data points (Glaser 1992; Strauss and Corbin 1994). The core themes, and the related detailed descriptions that follow, were generated by the first author, and reviewed again by the second. In what follows, we present three teachers' experiences to highlight tensions and possibilities for improving classroom instruction, and ultimately, South African education.

Ukholo Senior Secondary School

Ukholo Senior Secondary School sits in a geographically isolated township of Uthando, approximately 20 kilometres from Cape Town. The maze-like streets that lead to Ukholo are lined with shack houses. Electrical wires stretch intricately from house to house, resembling spider webs. Rows and rows of houses culminate in a line of concrete toilets, not nearly enough to accommodate the estimated population of roughly 200,000. Water taps serve as the primary source of residential water, though a few homes on the outskirts have recently been piped; for most residents, however, township schools are often the only reliable source of water. Ukholo sits at the end of the road, and its brick school building is surrounded by barbed wire fencing topped with razor wire. A large open field at the back of the school lays desolate, serving as a toilet for the many who cut across the field. As of 2019, Ukholo Senior Secondary School enrolled over 1600 students and employed just over 40 teachers, all of whom are Black South Africans.

Findings

Perhaps the most obvious of the initial findings was that the school was not equipped to educate the number of learners. Thus, the initial findings reflect the first research question: the conditions were inadequate, at best, to educate learners. Two additional

themes emerged that provide context for the second research question, suggesting that teachers use code-switching as an instructional tool and maintain a commitment to being radically compassionate teachers in drastically unequal schools. The continuation of apartheid conditions, such as inadequate school funding and resource distribution and an oft-delayed dissemination of school curricula, reflected CRT's notion of the normalisation of racism. Teachers challenged these conditions by utilising within-lesson code-switching to resist the whiteness reinforced by the English-only curriculum, and through being radically compassionate towards both their fellow teachers and their learners (Ladson-Billings 1998).

Continued Apartheid Conditions

Ukholo was housed in an uninsulated brick building, making classroom temperatures freezing during the winter and sweltering hot in the summer. Many classrooms had broken windows as well, resulting in a continual influx of additional cold air during winter months. Learners wore thick coats inside classrooms, restricting their movement and adding to the overcrowded conditions. Three to four mothers, whose children attended Ukholo, prepared meals out of a small storage room converted into a makeshift kitchen, where they hustled to provide learners with breakfast and lunch every day, using some of the vegetables grown in school's garden. Most days, the mothers ran out of food, carefully distributing meals to ensure all had something to eat. Mrs Nkuta, responsible for keeping the kitchen stocked, was frustrated: "How can we be expected to teach these children when we do not have enough food to feed them? I wonder how one is supposed to be engaged with the lesson with their bellies empty?" This question lingered throughout the day, as learners did not have their own snacks or anything to augment the sometimes meagre daily rations the school provided.

In addition to inadequate kitchen facilities and food for the learner population (the school was built to serve 800, not the current enrolment of 1600), no modern technology (such as projectors or computers) were visible in any classrooms. Teachers relied on worn, stained, hardly readable chalkboards, probably the same ones from the time the school was built. Learners and teachers alike relied on natural lighting, as most light bulbs had long ago burnt out. Wooden desks with attached chairs were the only seating options, complicating efforts to perform group work or otherwise engage in hands-on lessons. The desks, covered in decades-old graffiti, were insufficient in number, causing teachers to send learners to fetch extras from other classrooms, leading to the constant moving of desks throughout the day.

Teacher absenteeism was frequent, and while teachers rarely missed work from being sick, they were often not in their classrooms. With classrooms serving upwards of 45 children per class, and a lack of administrative support (there was just one principal and acting vice principal, who also taught half a day of classes) for the 40 teachers, teachers were often in line at the one and only copier or assisting another teacher to sort and staple the hundreds of instructional materials by hand. As Mrs Nkuta clarified, "the shortage of technology is also a concern, because we have to purchase a personal laptop

if one wants to have work done at home.” This lack of support for teachers often resulted in what Mrs Nkuta called “enforced absenteeism” for when teachers needed to go to the hospital to see a learner, to arrange family matters, or when they needed to catch up on marking papers.

Along with limited classroom resources and stretched teacher capacity came a lack of instructional materials. Textbooks were provided to Ukholo Senior Secondary by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). However, the school only received textbooks every five years when they were supposed to be receiving them every year, and even then, they never received enough for each learner. The delay in textbook allocation meant learners were sharing outdated and tattered textbooks; several class sets were from the early 2000s. One set, for one class, was new, but this set arrived in April, four months after the start of the school year. These conditions were regular discussions in morning staff meetings, and during a meeting where teachers expressed their frustrations, Mr MC, himself buried under a chest-high pile of workbooks needing to be marked, calmly reminded the rest of the teachers that “we are here for the learners, so let’s remind ourselves of this. The rest we cannot fix today.”

Code-Switching as an Instructional Tool

Teachers at Ukholo, as Mr MC reminded during the staff meeting, were well aware that schools were designed to foster inferiority in Black learners. Within this context of limited resources, however, teachers were adamant about learning. Every teacher at Ukholo is bilingual and switching back and forth between isiXhosa and English is common practice. Often referred to as code-switching, Wheeler (2005, 110) clarifies that “to code-switch is to choose the language appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose.” The way teachers at Ukholo practised code-switching allowed for cultural nuances to be present in their everyday classroom talk. Teachers would often joke with learners in isiXhosa, making culturally responsive references about the struggles living within poverty. In Mr MC’s eighth grade mathematics class, for example, learners were asked to take out their homework. Upon noticing that several of the learners either did not have their homework or the homework was incomplete, Mr MC light-heartedly joked “*hay shame ndiyanivela abakuni abangayenzanga ihomework, Inoba abazali benu bathe Cima eso sibane, nigqiba umbane wethu*” (oh shame, I feel pity for some of you who couldn’t do the homework, probably your parents told you to switch off the lights). The learners erupted into laughter at the obvious reference to a lack of infrastructure. This type of code-switching demonstrated cultural and linguistic affinity with learners as people and helped learners recognise that their teachers navigate the same township conditions.

Teachers also utilised code-switching to strengthen language skills, often through encouraging learners to use isiXhosa when struggling to find the English words. Mr MC had a knack for reading the climate of his classroom. When asking questions, if there was no response, he would give isiXhosa hints. When asked how language played a role in the acquisition of mathematics-based content knowledge, Mr MC clarified “it is like

learning and using three languages at the same time: English, isiXhosa, and Math” (MC 2017). He further explained that some things in maths cannot be expressed in isiXhosa, and since not all learners possess the same English skills, he must provide examples and explanations in isiXhosa so all learners have an opportunity to learn.

Mr MC’s use of code-switching fostered a comfortable classroom environment through validating English and mathematics ability. Code-switching as a teaching strategy offers more than just benefits for those teaching—it also benefits the learners by being a “natural . . . phenomena which facilitates communication and learning” (Ncoko, Osman, and Cockcroft 2000, 229). This approach to teaching was effectual in “language and content acquisition,” through “translation, clarification, checking comprehension, [and] giving instructions and procedures” (Ncoko, Osman, and Cockcroft 2000, 239). King and Chetty (2014, 46) further argued that the ability to think is linked to the ability to talk and that restricting learners’ mother-tongue usage in the classroom limits participation in classroom discussions. King and Chetty (2014) echoed Ncoko, Osman, and Cockcroft (2000, 229), who argued that code-switching in the classroom allows for a “natural short-cut to content and knowledge acquisition.” Mr MC, reflective of all three participants, reinforced the importance of code-switching in the classroom as an instructional tool to assist learners in language and subject matter acquisition while honouring the learners’ cultural context.

Radically Compassionate Teachers

Ukholo teachers were unapologetically Black and made repeated statements to ensure learners understood this political stance. Steve Biko’s notion of Black Consciousness helps describe this unwavering confidence in who the participants are, and how they approach their identities as teachers. Biko (1996, 53) stated,

Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation—the blackness of their skin—and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude.

Biko continued to argue that Black Consciousness allows Black communities to foster a sense of pride in being Black. Teachers at Ukholo embodied Black Consciousness through building a community of teachers compassionate to learners and to each other. Every morning at Ukholo, the teachers and the principal meet in the staff lounge for a school-wide staff check in, before heading to their classrooms. During these morning briefings, teachers were laughing and hugging one another as they arrived, offering support for family struggles and willingness to help others during marking periods. Mrs Nkuta often provided a nurturing presence in these meetings, asking aloud if anyone needed additional support, instructional coaching, or just checking in on health and wellness. The compassion witnessed between teachers went beyond the staffroom as these teachers demonstrably cared about each other’s lives and families, with continual recognition that everyone lived in township communities rife with violence and poverty.

While many township teachers do not live within the geographic boundaries of the schools in which they teach, two of the three participants lived within a five-minute taxi ride, while the third (Mrs Nkuta) lived 10 minutes away. Their proximity was clear in the way they expressed knowledge of the local geography and their familiarity with local community organisations. In short, this was their community, and the children were theirs as well.

This ethic of care permeated from teacher to learner. While all teachers seemed to embrace this care, several teachers in the pre-morning meetings indicated that Mrs Nkuta was particularly attuned to learners' family contexts. Mrs Nkuta talked about how some of her learners recently migrated with aunts and uncles, newly separated from their parents who had to remain in the Eastern Cape for economic reasons. Mrs Nkuta additionally stated that if learners missed more than a day of school, teachers would check on them; evenings were long for many teachers who often went to learners' homes before their own. Mr Mana, the third participant, then chimed in, clarifying that teachers directly faced "poverty and the housing problem" (Mana 2017). Mr Mana continued that they witnessed learners living "in tin houses with shebeen next door. Noise and everything."

Despite regular late nights, teachers came together each morning, translating what they learned through home visits the night before into strategies to uplift learners. One morning, Mrs Nkuta clarified that "it is tiring, but we must not complain [because] we need our learners to be educated because to them education is economic emancipation" (Nkuta 2017). Biko (1996, 53) echoed this point decades before when arguing that "the interrelationship between the consciousness of the self and the emancipatory programme is of paramount importance." Through implementing an ethic of care, both within the classroom, and through home visits, Ukholo teachers expressed love for learners, openly and without hesitation. Teachers could be seen giving welcoming hugs upon arrival, and giving high-fives and smiles to end each day, just as they consoled each other when a former learner was killed the previous weekend. While these three teachers knew they could not directly fix the racial and economic violence that shape the local township realities around them, they did know that their warm, engaging approaches could help spread compassion. Their collective approaches helped to foster a context of support that, in turn, enabled learners to develop a positive sense of self and pride in Black Consciousness.

Discussion

This engagement with the three teachers suggests two immediate outcomes that have been argued repeatedly since the initial imposition of colonial schooling in South Africa. The first is that current school funding formulas do not adequately support township schools and must be changed to address inadequate opportunities to learn. The second is the importance of code-switching as an instructional tool that recognises the cultural strengths of Black learners across classrooms. Code-switching, we argue here, is a

tangible teaching strategy that can help bridge some of the current demands for decolonisation through a commitment to centring multilingual pedagogical approaches.

Perhaps the most pressing outcome of this analysis is simply that apartheid-era conditions have remained, largely unabated, in Ukholo Senior Secondary School. These conditions directly reflect CRT's tenet of the permanence of racism and suggest a lack of transformation of apartheid-era disparities. The obvious racial disparities between this all-Black school and the many former Model C and other independent schools that educate more affluent Cape Town children cannot be understated. While some might claim that funding alone does not equate to school achievement, Baker (2016, i) argues positive outcomes are associated with resources that cost money such as "smaller class sizes, additional supports, early childhood programs, and more competitive teacher compensation." Funding is an issue when teachers are spending precious teaching time preparing materials for learners on a single copier, when teachers are not provided the newest WCED required curriculum, and when class sizes are more than double that of other nearby schools that teach white students (Knaus and Brown 2016). The dilapidated school conditions, the limited technological access, and the lack of sufficient nutrition are cause for immediate concern and must be addressed. These claims have been made before, and in much greater detail (Knaus and Brown 2016; Spaul and Jansen 2019), yet it is important to continually highlight disparities that dramatically shape educational opportunity. Globally, the need to find more equitable and adequate ways to fund public schools cannot be greater. However, funding alone will not create equitable spaces for learners of colour, as institutionalised racial disparities remain.

The second outcome requires funding to be first addressed, but offers validation for teachers dedicated to working within township schools. Recognising the benefits that code-switching has to offer as an instructional tool that validates learner identities and languages needs to be done regionally, within specific township communities. Teachers employ code-switching across the globe, in classrooms and other social settings (Emdin 2016), yet despite its global use, code-switching has yet to be validated inside South African classrooms, in part due to the prioritisation of English language learning. Teachers should be armed with skills that validate mother language, cultural nuance and history, and local geographical contexts, in ways that support children to tap into their cultural heritage as academic strengths (Emdin 2016; Gay 2000; Yosso 2005). Incorporating code-switching as an instructional tool validates multiple language forms that learners use and counters the devaluation inherent in Standardised English (Emdin 2016; Ncoko, Osman, and Cockcroft 2000). Ncoko, Osman and Cockcroft (2000, 227) state "it is vital that an appreciation of the importance of students' own languages for education be developed and that these students' multilingual competencies be acknowledged." Training teachers to use code-switching would acknowledge the multilingual competencies learners already possess while simultaneously exhibiting the value and importance of learners' own languages. In short, recognition and validation of the ways in which learners think and express themselves must be incorporated into teacher preparation and support programmes.

While code-switching is an important aspect that needs to be recognised and incorporated across the field of education, more needs to be done to combat the racial disparities that exist in curricular contexts. These participants represent a commitment to caring that goes beyond pedagogy, though a caring teaching approach should be fostered given the context of violence many township youth grow up in (Gay 2000). Perhaps most important is that these teachers represent care as an act of resistance to the conditions in which they teach, and the conditions in which the majority of township learners live. It is because these teachers have lived familiarity with the conditions under which their learners live that they are able to so effectively code-switch, and this familiarity reflects CRT's notion of voice and counter-storytelling. Indeed, these teachers can evoke humour and warmth in the midst of a lesson on maths or language because they live the same racial disparities, and grew up under similar township conditions.

Because of these teachers' cultural proximity to Ukholo's learners, they are able to code-switch, and integrate the immediate world in which learners live into the classroom. This approach, spread more widely across schools, can encourage more honesty about the conditions of township life. Centring care through encouraging learners to speak in their mother tongue just as they are learning to speak in English and/or Afrikaans can also help provide space to talk about the complexities and complications of forced learning of dominant languages. This ethic of care, taught through a tangible lens of teaching through code-switching, can help foster what Love (2019) calls abolitionist teaching, where the realities, cultural strengths, and struggles of the immediate community in which children live become part of the language of learning within the classroom. These participating teachers ultimately illuminate a goal of making care a tangible teaching strategy.

Conclusion

While racial disparities continue to shape schools across the globe, teachers continue to create spaces of resistance, empowering learners to succeed in school systems designed for them to fail. Mrs Nkuta, Mr MC, and Mr Mana collaboratively strive to reduce the hostility created by a racialised school system through code-switching in classrooms and through practising radical compassion with fellow teachers and learners. To conclude, we share the story of Sinosidanga, a learner at Ukholo who grew up in Uthando, living in poverty where food was often scarce. His mother would send him and his three siblings to stay with aunts and uncles to ensure that they were fed. Although Sinosidanga is a member of what is commonly known as the "born free" generation, he and the majority of Black South Africans continue to experience the effects of the apartheid regime (Mpongo 2016, 95).

The continued apartheid conditions that plague Ukholo Senior Secondary School were all too common for Sinosidanga. However, he found refuge in the warm and compassionate classrooms that the teachers at Ukholo created. When asked about the impact his teachers had, Sinosidanga replied, "They have been so good to me.

Spiritually, physically, and emotionally.” He continued to explain how Ukholo teachers always extended help but “money was always a problem.” With the encouragement of his teachers to persevere in a system that was designed to hold him back, Sinosidanga passed his matric exams in October 2017 and started university that January. As of this writing, Sinosidanga is still studying at university, two years on. Sinosidanga’s story is not unique, he represents many Black learners across the globe who rely on teachers to help them navigate the racialised school systems. Yet one learner’s admission into university is not enough. As Mrs Nkuta, Mr MC, and Mr Mana demonstrate, all children should be provided access to well-resourced schools capable of caring, challenging, and preparing learners to create an inclusive nation.

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