

**RESPONDING TO LEARNER DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM:  
EXPERIENCES OF FIVE TEACHERS IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN  
KWAZULU – NATAL.**



**by**

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## ABSTRACT

The principle of quality education for *all* learners is embedded in all policy documents and legislation and this emphasis on quality education for *all* suggests that schools have to meet the diverse needs of all learners. However, throughout South African schooling contexts, there are many learners who face barriers to learning and participation in view of the fact that schools are unable to respond to the diversity of needs in the learner population. The issue is not how the learners adjust to the learning environment but whether the learning environment is flexible enough to accommodate the diverse needs of all learners. The responsibility of achieving the goal of a non-discriminatory education system lies heavily on the shoulders of classroom teachers. The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers at a primary school experience diversity within the classroom. The research was undertaken in a historically Indian boys' only state primary school in KwaZulu-Natal, with a learner population of almost 95% African, 4% Indian and the other 1% comprising White/Coloured learners. The focus of the study was the teachers. I sought to investigate how teachers construct and respond to diversity in their classes. Within the context of the post apartheid South Africa, the classroom has become a microcosm of the 'rainbow nation', with teachers having to deal with many differences at varying levels within the classroom. How teachers interpret and respond to differences is likely to be subjective. In light of the fact that teachers' interpretations are subjective, for the purpose of this study, symbolic interactionism was used as a theoretical framework. Qualitative research methodology, which took the form of a case study was used. Teachers experiences were examined through semi-structured interviews, observations

and document analysis. Throughout the study, there emerged the “them” and “us” syndrome in teachers. The study shows that while the teachers did not treat African learners unfairly, there are numerous exclusionary practices at the school. Very little attempt is made by the teachers to change their teaching behaviours in ways that make the curriculum responsive to their learners. In fact, very little was done to change the ethos of the school, and African learners were expected to ‘fit in’ and become part of the existing culture of the school. There emerges from the study, a definite need to train teachers to think and work within a new frame of reference, that is, a human rights framework which constantly interrogates unequal power relations and inequalities that schools perpetuate.

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### **Declaration**

**I declare that this is my own work. It is been submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in Education (Psychology of Education) in the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.**

**Sunitha Singh**

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**DATE**

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Contextualising the study

#### 1.1. Introduction

From 1994, there has been a strong move towards a non-discriminatory South Africa, and much effort is being put into addressing inequalities of the previous apartheid regime at all levels, education being no exception. Various education policy documents and legislation have emerged, stressing the principles of redress of past injustices, equality of access and opportunity, human rights and social justice (cf. White Paper on Education and Training, March 1995; South African Schools Act of 1996; Report of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training and the National Committee on Education Support Services, 1997; Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, July 2001.). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 in its Bill of Rights stipulates the rights of all learners, regardless of race, gender, sex, colour, sexual orientation, disabilities, religion, conscience, belief, culture or language to basic education and equal access to educational institutions.

The principle of quality education for *all* learners is embedded in all policy documents and legislation. The provision in the South African Schools Act of 1996 regarding this principle is as follows:

Subject to this Act, the governing body of a public school must promote the best interests of the school and strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for *all* learners at the school. (South African



Act, 1996:14).

These clauses encapsulate a vision of an education system that gives recognition to the wide diversity in learner population, and which ensures a more flexible range of responses through the curriculum. The emphasis on quality education for *all* learners suggests that schools have to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

However, throughout South African schooling contexts, there are many learners who face barriers to learning and participation in view of the fact that schools are unable to respond to the diversity of the needs in the learner population (Department of Education, 1997). The Report of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and a National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS), identified key barriers in the South African context that render many children and adults vulnerable to learning breakdown and sustained exclusion: problems in the provision and organisation of education; socio-economic barriers; factors that place learners at risk, such as high levels of violence and crime; HIV/Aids epidemic; substance abuse; an inflexible curriculum; problems with language and communication; inaccessible and unsafe built environment; inappropriate and inadequate provision of support services to schools, parents, care givers, families and communities; disability; lack of enabling and protective legislation; lack of human resource development; and lack of parental recognition and involvement (Department of Education, 1997). The Report explained that it is only by focussing on the nature of these barriers, that problems of learning breakdown and exclusion can be addressed.

According to the Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, the ultimate challenge is to “create the conditions of learning and teaching in all our learning institutions so that all learners can be fully accommodated, can flourish and contribute to the regeneration of our society, our economy and our country” (Department of National Education, 1999:2). The Minister of Education in Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, July 2001) stresses that classroom educators will be the primary resource for achieving the goal of an inclusive education and training system.

However, a disturbing number of educators are confused and insecure because of a series of radical policy changes that have transformed their working environment since 1994. Some are still struggling to come to grips with a new national curriculum, Curriculum 2005, and outcomes based education. Educators have been given the map but there are a few roads on it (Parker, 1997). This means that the results of the conceptual work done on education by planners will depend heavily on the creativity of teachers and principals in the actual school.

## 1.2. Aim and Critical Questions

The aim of the study was to examine how teachers at a primary school experience diversity within the classroom. In other words, what barriers to learning and participation do their learners experience, and how are teachers trying to be responsive to learner diversity in their classrooms. Central to the study was be the process of mapping inclusionary and exclusionary practices and processes within the schooling context. With the implementation of Education White Paper 6: Building an Inclusive Education and

Training System (Department of Education, July 2001) that is underway, it was envisaged that the findings in the study could inform this process at school level.

The key critical questions explored in the study were:-

1. How do the teachers experience diversity in the learner population in their classrooms?
2. How are teachers attempting to make the curriculum responsive to the needs of all the learners in the classroom?
3. What challenges do teachers experience in trying to mediate the curriculum to all learners?
4. What knowledge and skills do teachers need to be responsive to the diversity in their classrooms or to ensure the inclusion of all learners?

The focus of the study was on the teachers. The study sought to investigate how teachers construct and respond to diversity in their classes with respect to language, socio-economic, gender, race and other differences. The fundamental issue is how teachers educate all children, irrespective of how similar or different they are. There is no question about it, helping all children to succeed in school is a complex task. As classrooms in South Africa become increasingly populated with diverse learners, this complexity is magnified.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Introduction:**

This chapter has three aims: firstly, to discuss key concepts of relevance to the study; secondly, to present the theoretical framework that informed this study, and finally, to review current literature in South Africa and internationally that engages with debates on diversity in education.

### **2.1 The Conceptual Framework**

The two key concepts of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' have relevance for this study. International and national debates on inclusion/exclusion focus on inclusion as a political and social struggle that has as its goal the valuing of difference and identity. In recent years, there have been numerous papers that have emerged interrogating these concepts (Sayed, 2003; Sayed & Soudien; Sparks, 1999; Slee, 2001; Porteus, 2003; Dyson, 1999). This body of literature reveals that debates around the issue of inclusion/exclusion are intensely political. They proceed from larger political questions about the nature of society, and the structures of social organizations. Inclusion is about the questions of access of all people. The issues are about who is in and who is out, about which learners are valued in mainstream, and who are relegated to the status of 'other' (Muthukrishna, 2003). There is also an emphasis on the need for more rigorous analysis in the application of the concepts of social inclusion and exclusion, and the different sources of inequity in society and their interrelationships.

Internationally, the inclusion/exclusion debate has been largely dominated by countries of the North, and numerous publications have emerged in the last decade (for example, Clark, Dyson & Millward, 1995; Armstrong, Armstrong & Barton, 2000; Ainscow, 1999; Ainscow & Booth, 1998). There is a small body of empirical research in South Africa that examines issues of inclusion and exclusion, and barriers to learning within the contexts of school and their communities (Thejane, 1999; Persad, 1996; D'Amant, 1996; Carrin and Soudien 1999; Hortop, 2002). These studies have explored barriers to learning and participation with respect to disability, gender, language, race, geographical location (urban/rural).

Booth (1995) explores the question of how do schools and other institutions respond to the diversity of their learners. He argues that debates on special education and the education of learners with disabilities and learning difficulties merges with other concerns about inequality and discrimination in education. Today, many researchers are using the terms inclusion or inclusive education to refer to the concept of educating all children irrespective of diversity within their local community and providing a quality education (Udvari-Solner & Thousand, 1995; Hemson, Moletsane, & Muthukrishna, 2001; Jansen, 1998; Harber, 1998; Soudien, 1998; Cross & Mkwanazi-Twala, 1998; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Booth, Nes & Stromstad, 2003; Singal & Rouse, 2003; Moletsane, Hemson & Muthukrishna, 2003).

Within the South African context, the inclusion/exclusion debate arises out of the political transformation that took place in the 1990s and the desegregation of schools.

Carrim and Soudien (1999) provides one with an indepth insight into the historical background of laws and practices prevalent in South Africa, pre-democracy, and out of which arose the desegregated or 'open' schools. They note that the 'opening' of schools in South Africa did not simply imply, and is not, a matter of Blacks going into White schools. It entails desegregation of schools within the broader black community as well. They also note that the assimilationist approach to school desegregation is prevalent in many schools in South Africa. The assimilationist approach involves previously excluded learners 'fitting in' a desegregated school. Carrim & Souden (1999) contend that once people are classified along racial lines, their identities become fixed within that particular group. They state that other intersecting factors such as class, gender, ability and socio-economic status, for example are ignored. A further critical point they raise is that experiences of reconstructed forms of racism mean different things in the different school contexts, and include those within intra-black settings. D'Amant (2001) in her study of a secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal found that context is important when interpreting emerging patterns in a desegregated school as a "contextual analysis gives insight into the complexities between school policy, emerging practices, and lived experiences within schools." (p.5).

The Report of the NCSNET & NCESS (Department of Education, 1997) stressed that the education system must prevent breakdown in learning and exclusion, and it must create equity in learning opportunities for all. According to Naidoo (1999) the Report argues further that it is when the education system fails to provide for and accommodate diversity that learning breakdown occurs, and learners are excluded. The report also

stresses the need to focus on the nature of barriers experienced by learners. Naidoo (1999) states that the barriers to learning and development can occur within all aspects of the system – the curriculum, the centre of learning, the educational system, and the broader social context. The Report states that all learners may either permanently or temporarily encounter or experience barriers to learning and development. In particular, this includes learners who have been historically neglected in the system; those learners with disabilities and needing specialised equipment or assistive devices to access the curriculum and participate in the learning process; those learners who experience some form of learning breakdown as a result of a particular barrier such as poverty, gender, ability/disability; and those learners who are at risk for personal and social reasons. This study seeks to examine how teachers experience diversity in their classrooms, and how are they able to address the needs of all learners in the classroom. Diversity in this study refers to the intersection of race, class, language, gender, ability and disability, and other differences in the learner population.. Moletsane, Hemson and Muthurishna (2003) argue that this kind of analysis will need to be context-specific in order to expose the processes through which inclusion and exclusion are experienced and perpetuated.

Inclusion is about new thinking and new practices. It does not, most definitely, mean taking those previously excluded and placing them in a different context and expecting them to change to or become part of, the new context. Increasing access to and being part of the transformation in education, is not about trying to make ‘others’ fit into an existing system. (Booth, T.; Nes, K. & Stomstad, M. 2003; Ainscow, M. & Booth, T. 1998; Bhana, D. 1994). It is about transforming the education system so as to allow a greater

and more diverse student population within the system. Inclusion is the celebration of differences - where you can be yourself and not struggle to fit in. Exclusion involves both the denial of opportunity to gain entry into existing institutions and more importantly, the denial of opportunity to be able to participate equally in the process of teaching and learning, and thus being afforded the opportunity to achieve equitable outcomes. Inclusion and exclusion relates to the nature of the curriculum and teaching methods, school ethos, and overall expectations for all learners. For example, if there is an emphasis on valuing individual differences rather than competition, this can help less academically inclined learners feel they can contribute. Education needs to be collaborative and co-operative and teachers need to foster a culture of inclusion in the language they use, the topics they select, and in interactions with learners. Education White Paper 6: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001), defines inclusion as the process of increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, cultures, curricula, communities of local centres of learning, and addressing barriers to learning and development experienced by all learners. Inclusion is seen as a never-ending process dependent on continuous pedagogical and organisational developments within all schools.

Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) and the Report of NCSNET and NCESS (Department of Education, 1997) introduce the concept 'barriers to learning'. Learners are likely to be faced with many barriers in their attempt to access the curriculum, and how the teachers respond to these learners can be very subjective as teachers have their own feelings and views.



The Report of the NCSNET & NCESS (1997) and Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) identify the following barriers to learning and development:

- Socio-economic barriers: Poverty and under development, factors that place learners at risk, and lack of access to basic services;
- Attitudes: Discriminatory attitudes resulting from prejudice against people on the basis of race, class, gender, culture, disability, religion, ability, sexual preference and other characteristics manifest themselves as barriers to learning when such attitudes are directed towards learners in the education system;
- Inflexible curriculum: When learners are unable to access the curriculum at all phases of education involves a number of components, which are critical to facilitating or undermining effective learning. Key components of the curriculum include the style and tempo of teaching and learning, what is taught, the way the classroom is managed and organised, as well as materials and equipment which are used in the learning and teaching processes. Assessment processes are often inflexible and designed to only assess particular kinds of knowledge and learning, such as the ability to memorise rather than understanding;
- Language and communication: Teaching and learning for many learners takes place through language, which is not their first language. This not only places the learners at a disadvantage, but it also leads to linguistic difficulties, contributing to learning breakdown;
- Inappropriate and inadequate provision of support services: In rural areas (as is the case with most schools) access to professional assistance is limited or non-existent.
- Lack of enabling and protective legislation and policy.

- **Lack of parental recognition and involvement:** The active involvement of parents and broader community in the teaching and learning process is central to effective learning development.
- **Disability:** For learners with disabilities, learning breakdown and exclusion occurs when their particular learning needs are not met as a result of barriers in the learning environment or the broader society. For example, a learner in a wheelchair will have problems moving around in a classroom which is overcrowded.
- **Lack of human resource development strategies:** The absence of on going in-service training of teachers, in particular, often leads to insecurity, uncertainty, low self esteem, and the lack of innovative practices in the classroom. (Naidoo, 1999)

In view of the recent trend of inclusive education, there is a shift away from focusing on the characteristics of the learners and onto how schools can help learners overcome barriers to education.

### **2.3 Symbolic Interactionism as a Theoretical Framework**

Within the context of the post apartheid South Africa, the classroom has become the microcosm of the 'rainbow nation', with teachers having to deal with many differences at varying levels within the classroom. How teachers interpret, and respond to differences is likely to be subjective. In light of the fact that teachers' interpretations are subjective, for the purpose of this study, I have chosen to adopt symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework.

Symbolic interactionism, or interactionism for short, is one of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology. This perspective has a long history, beginning with the German sociologist and economist, Max Weber (1864-1920) and the American philosopher, George H. Mead (1863-1931), both of whom emphasised the *subjective meaning* of human behaviour, the social process and pragmatism. Herbert Blumer, who studied with Mead ... is responsible for coining the term, “symbolic interactionism”, as well as for formulating the most prominent version of the theory (Blumer, 1969).

Interactionists focus on the subjective aspects of social life, rather than on objective, macro-structural aspects of social systems. One reason for this focus is that interactionists base their theoretical perspective on their image of humans, rather than on their image of society (as the functionalists do). For interactionists, humans are pragmatic actors who continually must adjust their behaviour to the actions of other actors. According to McClelland (2000), we can adjust to see these actions only because we are able to interpret them, that is, to denote them symbolically, and to treat the actions and those who perform them as objects. This process of adjustment is aided by our ability to imaginatively rehearse alternate lines of action before we act. This process is further aided by our ability to think about and to react to our own actions and even our selves as symbolic objects. Thus the interactionist theorists see humans as active, creative participants who construct their social world, not as passive, conforming objects of socialisation (McClelland, 2000).

Blumer (1969) suggests that there are three premises which underlie a theory of symbolic interactionism:

- Humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Symbolic interactionism holds the principle of **meaning** as central to human behaviour.
- The meanings of such things arise out of social interaction that one has with others, that is, the self is constructed through communication; and hence, **language**. Language gives humans a means by which to negotiate meaning through symbols.
- A third core principle is that of **thought**. Thought modifies each individual's interpretation of symbols. Thought is based-on language, or dialogues that require role-taking. Social activity becomes possible through the role-taking process.

According to Nelson (1998), the theory of symbolic interactionism is strong in that it provides a way to understand the establishment of meaning. It has creative meaning as interaction gives humans meaning. It also has free will in that every person has meanings which can change at any time. It has emancipation, that is, individuals are free to find their own meaning. It has room for interpretation of meaning, language and thought.

Symbolic interactionism views the socialized individual as capable of thought, intervention, and self-determination. In the context of the present study, teachers have to adapt to and negotiate change, engage in joint action, respond to others, and encounter and resolve problems that arise in their attempts to handle diversity in the classroom.

## **2.4 Responding to Diversity in Schools: Key debates**

Much of the international literature on schools responses to diversity seems to focus on a critique of the assimilationist model of dealing with diversity. According to the assimilationist view, learners are expected to fit in or adapt to the existing culture that prevails in the school even though this might be the culture of the minority. The trend in most schools is simply of 'towing the line'. According to Booth (2000) if the curriculum, teaching strategies and requirements for success are seen as fixed then many learners will fail. Following this view, the assimilationist model fails to embrace the diversity of the learners within a school and is found to be inadequate if there is to be a genuine transformation of the curriculum and to foster an education system that validates its diverse learner population.

Researchers have found that the reported ease in which 'immigrants' and 'minorities' would adjust to the dominant culture is, in fact, a myth perpetuated by policy makers in many countries. Kalantzis & Cope (1999) found that in Australia, the cultural aspect of assimilation was founded on an expectation that all children would end up with singularly 'Anglo' affinities, identifying themselves with the British monarch as head of state, the Westminster system of parliament, the English Common Law, and speaking English without a trace of accent of another language. This, they state, have striking parallels in many other countries. But assimilation is not as simply as the policy makers are making it out to be. There is mounting evidence of this as 'minority' students are left more and more educationally disadvantaged. Carrim & Soudien (1999) point to a trend in South Africa where learners were simply expected to fit in with the dominant culture. This is in

keeping with the assimilationist approach which seeks to make minority learners fit into the existing ethos of the school. There exists within schools a sense of 'racelessness', - learners are expected to lose their ethnicity and cultural affiliations. In keeping with assimilationism, the issue of race is robbed of any status and the recognition of differences and cultural diversity is completely obscured. According to D'Amant (2001), such schools may consider themselves equal opportunity schools, while continuing 'business as usual', making no special attempts to cater for the needs of a diverse learner population. There exist what is referred to as a 'colourblind' approach, in which according to Moletsanne (1999) teachers claim not to see race or colour and refuse to consider it in their dealings with diverse learners. It seems that by adopting this strategy, teachers are trying to ignore the negative feelings they have for learners from diverse racial groups.

A major criticism of the assimilationist approach is that the curriculum and teaching methods of the school is so far removed from the lived experiences of the learners that it is difficult for learners to understand and learn in such a context. The assimilationist approach is deemed to ignore any diversity within learners. The mere assimilation of 'other' learners into the dominant culture of a school, 'will continue to legitimise, sanction and privilege some learners, while simultaneously serving to silence, disempower and marginalise others' (D'Amant, 2001:3).

Furthermore, in many countries there seems to be an absence on the issue of diversity in education and the current educational agendas seem to continually exclude the voice of

the minority. Ballard (2003) looks at events in New Zealand since 1984 and how the policies adopted in this country are not supportive of inclusion. Booth and Ainscow (1998) cited by Ballard (2003) suggest that inclusion involves working against all forms of exclusion within schools and the wider social context. Engen (2003) looks at inclusion in Norway and states that although it was introduced very late into the educational arena, it was introduced to a very strong and traditional mindset on issues of inclusion.

In Norway, the existing school system perpetuated class division in society, and made social mobility by means of education almost impossible (Engen, 2003). However, from the latter part of the twentieth century, all previously excluded children were placed in the local schools. As a result of adopting an inclusive school concept, or the 'school for all' philosophy, schools in Norway moved away from ignoring its minorities to including them in all aspects of the education system.

From the assimilationist approach, there emerged a shift in debates to multiculturalism and multicultural education. Multicultural education has emerged and grown out of various imperatives in the different countries over the last five decades. A need to acknowledge the diverse cultures of learners, led to the adoption of the multicultural approach to education. This approach acknowledges the life experiences of the learners and attempts to make the learning experiences as realistic as possible. Multicultural education in the United States received its major impetus from the struggle and rejection by racial minority groups of racial oppression. In the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, the pressure was brought about by the changing social and demographic profile of the countries, and the need to address the increasing diversification of the population.

However, multicultural education in these countries in essence adopted the assimilationist approach, as this approach allows for the dominant culture to be maintained. According to Sleeter & Montecinos (1999) multicultural education seems primarily to entail recognition of cultural differences to the education enterprise. They say further, that multicultural education is merely making cosmetic changes to the curriculum. These changes are often not part of the formal curriculum, but simplistic attempts on the part of the school to show inclusion of other cultures. This token representation is one of the major criticism of multicultural education. Multicultural education, then has been criticised for its disemphasis of the impact of racism on learners lives. It has failed to recognise the wider patterns of racial discrimination and disadvantages faced by minority learners. While multicultural education moves away from colour/cultural differences, discriminatory attitudes still abound. There is a potential for misunderstandings and misconceptions in the multicultural classrooms. According to D'Amant (2001:2) there has been a rising concern among educators about the sense of meaningless, alienation and eventual marginalisation of these learners. Multicultural education is seen to be lacking in its attempts at inclusion as it ignores issues of power, social class, socio-economic status and politics and it assumes that all cultures as being equal.

More recently, there seems to be away from looking at 'race' as a divider amongst people and emphasis is more focussed on cultural diversity. As Kalantzis & Cope (1999:249) so aptly writes: "The 'problem' of cultural and linguistic diversity, in other words, is a much bigger one than the dominant culture would like us to believe. Cultural diversity is becoming increasingly pertinent for every member of society, including those



comfortable at home in the dominant culture, untroubled because they imagine themselves to be the cultural majority. Diversity is one of the fundamental issues of our times, for all people.”

May (1999) looks at how a critical multicultural approach may be more suited to the educational arena, and states that a critical multiculturalism needs to recognise and incorporate the differing cultural knowledge that children bring with them to school and that culture must be understood as part of the discourse of power and inequality. He concludes by stating that a critical multiculturalism must foster learners who can engage critically with all ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, including their own.

Carrim and Soudien (1999) argue that people who are construed as being culturally different are seen only within these identities but it has to be remembered that Indians or Africans, or any other black group, are not homogenous groups. There are intersecting dimensions of class, gender and status, for example, and schools tend to ignore these differences which exist amongst the learners. They introduce an important dimension when considering desegregation in the South African context which refer to as anti-racist education. They argue that it is not a ‘black versus white’ issue. It is a matter of *intra-black* desegregation as well. They content that of critical importance is the cultural diversity within groups and this is being ignored. Looking at diversity along racial lines will not equip us with the tools to investigate the intra-black dynamics that are currently unfolding. This also means that one cannot work with the assumptions that all Whites are

necessarily and only proto-racists or that all Blacks are necessarily and always victims (Moodley, 1999) cited in Carrim and Soudien (1999). This is clearly not the case.

Moletsane, Hemson & Muthukrishna (2003), argue that true integration that promotes equality of access as well as of educational opportunity for all is still elusive in most school contexts in South Africa. Instead, school and classroom policies and practices that are informed by such understandings of integration as simply accepting learners from other racial groups continue to flourish. Beyond access, schools continue to respond to their changing demographics by adopting approaches that allow them to maintain the status quo. As reviewed by Moletsane (1999), these include the assimilationist approach in which learners are expected to fit into the existing ethos and culture of the school and for the school to continue to do business as usual. A second approach to maintaining the status quo is the colour-blind approach, in which teachers claim not to see colour/race and refuse to engage with issues around it in their dealings with learners. A third and the most common is the contributionist approach, in which learners are asked to acknowledge and know about the contributions (mostly food and dress) of other racial groups. In uniracial schools, the denialist approach dominates, in which teachers claim that issues of diversity do not concern them, as their learners all come from the same background.

Moletsane, Hemson & Muthukrishna (2003) state that while antiracist goes a step further and locates itself in opposition to more forms of inequalities (race, class, gender) it still falls short of acknowledging all sources of unequal power relations and forms of

discrimination they perpetuate. They state that conceptualizations of diversity, and interventions that isolate and deal with one and exclude the others, may not work. Rather, a framework that encompasses all forms of oppression, resulting from unequal power relations needs to inform teacher education and professional development interventions. They propose a human rights framework which looks at other forms of difference and inequity in schools.. They also state that for the South African context, multiculturalism, is limited in its capacity to address issues of diversity and that, while antiracist education goes one step further and locates itself in opposition to more institutional forms of inequalities based race, class and gender, amongst others, it still falls short of acknowledging all sources of unequal power relations and all forms of discrimination they perpetuate. For example, HIV/AIDS stigma, child abuse, and other forms of gender violence, ability/disability, and the different ways all these factors may interact to exclude certain individuals and groups from social institutions, including schools, are not automatically addressed in an antiracist framework. They suggest a human rights framework, which examines the relationships/intersections between race, class, gender, HIV/AIDs status and other forms of differences and inequity in schools, their communities and society in the context of shifting power relations. In the same vein, Jansen (1998) points out that when engaging with issues of diversity in schools, deafening silences remain on issues of curriculum, staffing policy, assessment or language policy.

Since 1994, almost 10 years ago, schools in South Africa are still struggling to successfully accomplish equal schooling. According to Moletsane, Hemson and

Muthukrishna (2003), many teachers and schools are either unwilling or unable to implement requisite changes to qualitatively respond to the mandate that all public schools are to provide equal educational opportunities for all learners.

Taking into consideration the learner composition of the school under study, I will be drawing heavily from the discussions taken in the Moletsane, Hemson and Muthukrishna (2003) paper. I would also be using the human rights framework to examine relationships/intersections of issues of race, class, and other forms of diversity as they emerge in this study.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN**

### **3.1 Introduction**

A need exists to conduct research on education in such a way that teachers recognise its relevance, affirm its validity, and facilitate a process of engaging with its outcomes. This study engaged the active participation of teachers in exploring the question:

“How do teachers respond to diversity in the classroom?”

### **3.2 Context of Study**

The school under study is situated to the south of Durban in Clairwood, which is relatively close to the historically White area of Montclair and the historically African area of Umlazi. The school was originally intended to cater for Indian boys from the Clairwood and Merebank areas. Presently, the racial composition of the learner population of the school is largely African, approximately 95%, with the Indian population totaling about 30 learners (4%), and the other 1% comprising of White/Coloured learners. The reasons for the high African population in the formerly “Indian” school are two fold. Firstly, the intention of the City Council to re-zone Clairwood into an industrial area. The result of this was that a number of Indian families moved away to new suburbs. In many instances, families were forced to move away or live under appalling conditions. These conditions came about because of the uncertainty which surrounded the future of the area and as a result very little, if anything was done to maintain the homes, and uplift the surrounding environment by property owners or the municipality. The few Indian families who chose to remain did so out of defiance, and a

deep rooted attachment to an area that was once an oasis of Indian culture. While the intention of making Clairwood an industrialized area is yet to occur, the Indian population of Clairwood dwindled as did the Indian learner population of the school. However, the area is slowly being re-populated, mainly by Africans and Coloureds. Many informal settlements have also mushroomed around the area. Learners from these communities now constitute a significant part of the school population.

Secondly, the high African population can be attributed to the desegregation of schools after 1994. African learners come from the townships of Umlazi, Kwa Mashu, and Folweni. Many also come from Umbilo, Montclair, Bluff and central Durban to seek 'a better quality' of education in a historically Indian school. These learners travel to school by bus, taxi or train, and are often late for school, owing to the distances they have to travel. During times of strike action by drivers and political unrest in the townships, a large number of these learners are absent from school.

The staff of the school is made up of 20 teachers, including the principal. Of these 17 are Indian, two African, and one is Coloured. There are four males and sixteen females on staff. There are three heads of departments, two of whom are female. Both the principal and the deputy principal are male.

### **3.3. Participants in the study**

I met with the staff and briefly outlined the study. I explained that I needed five educators to participate in the study. The data gathering process of interviews, observations and document analysis was explained. I asked for volunteers, as I did not want to run the risk of imposing on any teacher. Five teachers volunteered – all five were females and taught in the senior phase. These teachers agreed to have their interviews taped, on condition that they remain anonymous.

### **3.4. Research approach**

A qualitative research method was chosen, because this study constitutes an interpretative effort. It is based on the notion of context sensitivity, that is, the belief that the particular physical, historical, material and social environment in which people find themselves have a great bearing on what they think and how they act. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to undertake the study with an open mind, and as such the researcher is free from any preformed ideas or hypotheses. As the study progresses the researcher becomes more familiar with issues of the study, and concepts start to emerge. These concepts arise from the information that is obtained during the study.

According to Vulliamy & Webb (1992) the features of qualitative research are:-

- Firstly, it provides descriptions and accounts of the processes of social interaction in a ‘natural setting’ – this means that it engages with events as they occur in everyday life. Via observation and interviews, the researcher is allowed into the daily life situations of the people under study, and thus enabling one to gain insights and understanding from a personal perspective.

- Secondly, from the qualitative research method, culture, meaning and processes are emphasized, rather than variables, outcomes and products which are the focal points of quantitative methods.
- Thirdly, while quantitative research revolves around the testing of predetermined hypotheses, qualitative research aims to create hypotheses and theories from the data that emerge. By not having a pre-conceived hypotheses, the researcher is allowed far greater flexibility concerning research design, data collection and analysis.

Qualitative research is particularly suited to a number of topics in education. These include investigation into students', parents', and teachers' perspectives and experiences of the plethora of legislation and policies of the education ministry. The question of how teachers experience diversity within the classroom is under investigation in this study, and therefore, a qualitative research method was preferred. At first, I experienced the entire natural setting and as the investigation progressed, concepts became more clearly defined.

### **3.5. Methods of data collection**

The qualitative research methods employed in the study were semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study as it is less formal, hence allowing for open-ended questions. According to, Cohen & Manion (1994), the interviewer in a



semi- structured interview is allowed to use prompts to clarify topics and questions, whilst probes enable the interviewer to ask respondents to extend, elaborate, add to, provide detail for clarify or qualify their response, thereby addressing richness, depth of response, comprehensiveness and honesty that are so often the hallmarks of successful interviewing. Subjects of the interview are not restricted within any time frame, and can talk at length of their experiences and feelings of the issues at hand. This kind of interview is needed when in depth information is required as in a qualitative study.

Although I went into the interview with a set of questions, this was not fixed and I was able to vary questions from interviewee to interviewee because each respondent is expected to have had unique experiences and special stories to tell. Five teachers were interviewed about how they experienced diversity within the classroom. Interviews conducted with the teachers were tape recorded and later transcribed.

According to Cohen & Manion (1994), observational data are attractive as they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations.

There are two types of observation, namely, participant and non-participant. The participant observer is a regular participant in the activities being observed. This type of observation involves a dual role – that of participant and that of observer.

Non-participant observation ensures that the researcher would not participate or pretend to be a member of the group. Both participant and non participant observations methods were used in this study. According to Bhana (1994), participant observation refers to the manner in the researcher seeks access to gain insider's knowledge about such a social

interaction. As I am a member of the staff of the school in which the study is located, I was able to engage in various discussions with other members of staff without any threats. Rapport between teachers and myself was quickly established as teachers felt comfortable and uninhibited to talk as we are also colleagues.

Before studying documents, I first determine exactly how useful a document would be.

In this study the following documents were examined:- preparation books, test records, school policy and supervision reports. These documents allowed me determine the extent to which teachers were accommodating for diversity in the classroom.

### **3.6. Data Analysis**

Once the information had been obtained, it required a process of coding. I looked for trends or patterns of occurrences and phenomena among the concepts pertaining to the study. As there was no fixed hypotheses, new concepts could be formulated, evaluated against the data, discarded if necessary, and more concepts formed and more relevant data gathered. While engaging in this data collection process, I had to ensure that the relevancy of the data and this depended on whether or not the data could be verified.

The technique of triangulation was used to verify the data. With the qualitative method, triangulation allows for data from different sources to be examined, compared and cross checked. The different points of view on the same issue serve as a cross referencing device in the data analysis process.

### **3.7. Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

As a member of staff of the school under study, I had unrestricted access to the school.

Teachers were very co operative during the interviews, observation and documents analysis procedures. They did, however, request that they remain anonymous in the write up of the data. I agreed to this hoping that this would encourage the teachers to respond honesty and freely to the questions posed to them. Some apprehension was experienced during lesson observations but I assured the teachers that it was not my intention to judge them. Once the teachers were reassured, the observations proceeded smoothly.

Throughout the period of the research, I enjoyed, and in fact, improved my relationship with my colleagues, something that would not have been possible had I been an outsider.

The most important result of the study was the awareness of diversity that was instilled in these teachers.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### 4.1 Introduction

The study provides insight into how teachers interpret their experiences and make meanings of their day to day experiences as they deal with learner diversity in their classrooms. The theoretical framework for the study was symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). The theory of symbolic interactionism explores meanings in individual interpretations of events and experiences. In this study it provides a framework for understanding how teachers respond to diversity in the classroom.

I shall be using a human rights framework to examine relationships/intersections of factors relating to diversity in schools as they emerge in this study. The South African Constitution advocates a just and free democracy with a society based on equity, justice and freedom of all its people. The central principles of the Constitution are: democracy; social justice and equity; equality; non racialism and non-sexism, *Ubuntu* (human dignity); an open society; accountability; the rule of the law; respect and reconciliation. According to the Constitution, there must be no discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, religious conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. When analyzing the raw data, I was able to establish recurring themes emerging. These will be discussed in the sections that follow. In analyzing the data, I was curious to find out what the experiences of these teachers are telling us, and what are the lessons we can learn from this study.

## **4.2 Teacher experience of learner diversity**

There are a myriad of issues that confront teachers in all classroom contexts. The unequal power relations and oppressive behaviours that result from them mean that, at any one time, different factors related to individual and group identity (for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, etc) interconnect to negatively impact on teaching and learning. These factors, according to Moletsane, Hemson & Muthukrishna, (2003) range from racial/cultural discrimination, gender based violence (including sexual abuse, harassment and rape), ability/disability, social class, language, and others, which act to exclude or alienate certain learners from schooling and learning. The study examined how teachers experience diversity.

### ***4.2.1 Teacher perceptions of differences amongst learners***

Gauging from the responses of at least 3 of the 5 teachers interviewed, I would say that some of the teachers could not see the diversity that exists amongst learners.

*Well all the learners in my class are boys... (Teacher A)*

*I have all males,... (Teacher C)*

*... they come from the same racial group and in many instances the same kind of home environment. (Teacher D)*

*With regards to ability/disability, I don't think there are any differences... (Teacher C)*

However, Teacher E is aware that there are cultural differences between herself and the learners in her class:

*Being of a different cultural group than the majority of the learners in my class was one of the biggest problems I experienced. I had to learn to understand their ways and mannerisms-like for instance, their need to talk very loudly, not making direct eye contact with me when I spoke to them challenging my authority because I am female – they come from very patriarchal homes ..... (Teacher E)*

She also acknowledges that there is diversity amongst the learners even though 40 of the 43 learners in the class are African:

*I also found that the knowledge that the learners brought into the classroom situation varied – some come from more affluent homes and have access to computers, and other resources while others are living in homes that do not have electricity and water. Some learners are taken on outings and exposed to things around them while others haven't even been to the beach..... (Teacher E)*

A study of this teacher's lesson preparation books, confirmed that Teacher E makes allowances for differences within her class. Work is set according learners' capability and assessment is in keeping with this. For example, during an English lesson, learners had to write about 'A Picnic'. The teacher realised that some of the learners in the class may have not gone on a picnic, and to give these learners an idea of what a picnic is all about,

she planned an outing to the Mitchell Park. There was also evidence of different levels of works being set for the learners. Learners who were able to work by themselves received a different level of work from those needing assistance. Peer assisted learning and group work also features quite often in the planning of lessons.

Other issues highlighted by teachers were social risk factors such as poverty and home environment. The teachers appeared to be aware of conditions under which learners live, and that these can adversely affect performance in the classroom.

*The townships are rife with violence, crime and these children witness this on a daily basis, in fact, it is almost part of their daily life and I think the presence of shebeens in the townships adds to the violence which is seen, if not experienced, by these learners. Who knows so of them might be living in homes that operate as shebeens. And what about the taxi violence? –we must remember that many of the boys travel to school by taxi and that they are being exposed to all this violence.*

*(Teacher A)*

*Well, lets see, the lesson could be too boring or he has had a long day and he is tired or there might be more pressing things on his mind.*

*(Teacher B).*

*I also think that the teacher in the class does not have a true reflection of what is going on in the home of the learners – in many instances, the child is making his own lunch and is having to cook his own food, these*

***children are also left alone in the home for long periods of time and there is no supervision especially after school... (Teacher C)***

It is evident from these responses that the under achievement of the African learners seems to be the responsibility of the learner and the kind of home/social environment that he comes from. The school nor the teacher is seen to be at fault.

#### **4.2.2. How do teachers construct learners?**

According to Moletsane, Hemson & Muthukrishna, (2003) understanding and working with learner characteristics is essential if issues of diversity are to be effectively dealt with in schools. They find that it is important for teachers to engage with their learners as they really are, and not as we would like them to be or expect them to be. The question to ask is: Do teachers know who their learners really are? and if they do not, can we expect them to provide them with equal opportunities for learning? This then leads me to the next issue and that is how do teachers construct learners?

Some negativity was evident amongst the teachers with regards to the school under study being an all boys' school.

***Basically I think girls are more eager to learn ...(Teacher A)***

***Can I be honest? I really didn't like it at first – and I am still having a hard time handling the boys in my class. Discipline is one of the major problems - you know in African culture, males are dominant...***



***(Teacher B)***

***Really stressful, with discipline being a major problem. I find that the learners just don't listen and they wait for any excuse to make a noise.***

***(Teacher C)***

It is evident that the teachers do have serious issues when it comes to teaching in an all boys' school. However, it must be noted that there have been no incidents at the school where the learners were confrontational or aggressive towards teachers.

Teaching in an all boys' school also seems to offer some challenges to the largely female staff of the school, according to the teachers interviewed. There have been reports from the younger female teachers that a few of the Grade 7 boys had made sexual comments to them, and/or that the boys tend to look for reason to stand in very close proximity to them.

As one teacher said:

***It is as if he is always looking for a reason to touch me***

Teachers seem to be aware of the fact that learners come from varying backgrounds. There are those who come from middle class backgrounds whose parents are professionals or occupying well paying positions, and on the other side of the equation, are learners who come from informal settlements and children's home. However, besides placing learners in groups so as to encourage peer learning, in most instances, very little else is done to accommodate for diversity.

Violence was also highlighted as a major social risk factor amongst the learners.

Children's exposure to violence, combined with heightened levels of frustration and increased aggression, have given rise to problems within the classroom, compromising the culture of learning. It has been said that there is a thin line between being a victim of violence and beginning to commit violence oneself and that the real tragedy is that South African children, like other children, throughout the world are not born violent, but are socialised into violence in their day to day experiences. According to the teachers, children are faced with violence on a daily basis: in their homes, the streets of the township and in public transport. As stated earlier, children become the victims of the violence – many miss school because of taxi violence, some children have lost parents or caregivers- their home lives are disrupted and this impacts on their ability to learn. It is impossible to expect children to concentrate when their lives are surrounded by discomfort, tension and anxiety, according to the teachers interviewed.

#### ***4.2.3. How do teachers construct parents and community?***

Teachers are aware that there are those parents who show interest in their children. The manner in which learners are dressed, the interest shown by parents in helping learners with homework and projects and parental presence at school meetings, are a clear indication of the interest and concern parents have for their child's education. However, teachers also raise concern at the lack of parental interest, in a number of learners at the school. As one teacher stated:

***We see some parents just once, that is, when they enrol their child into the school (in Grade 0). The child spends the next seven years at the school but the parent is not seen again. (Teacher C)***

Poor parental attendance at parents' evenings and the Annual General Meeting, also seems to point the fact that parents/caregivers just do not seem to care about the child's education. However, it seems that many African parents/ caregivers do not show up at meetings because they consider the classroom to be the domain of the teachers and they do not want to intrude. Some parents/caregivers may feel embarrassed, as meetings and conversations are invariably in English and these parents/ caregivers are not fluent in the language. In the school under study, a number of learners are taken care off by grandmothers who are too old to make the journey to school.

#### **4.3. Teaching in a diverse context: Challenges and tensions**

According to Jansen (1998) research and experience in countries such as the United States of America suggest that children from disadvantaged economic or linguistic groups learn best when the persons teaching them share their background, culture and experiences; understand their values; expectations and beliefs; model success and achievement in contexts where this is seldom observed. It is not surprising that teachers in the school under study are experiencing stress and tension. The school has a staff of twenty of which eighteen Indian and two African. It has a learner population of almost 95% African learners.

#### **4.3.1. Dealing with diversity**

From the responses of the teachers in the interviews and from my observations at the school, it is clearly evident that teachers are experiencing stress and strain due to the changing nature of the learner population. In response to a question as to how this teacher coped, the response was:

*Really it is not easy, I sometimes get the feeling that some of the learners just don't seem to understand what I am talking about. You know, it is so stressful because after teaching the lesson and doing as much explaining as I possibly could, most of them would still fail in the exams and then I have to explain to the office why they failed, as if I didn't do any teaching. (Teacher A)*

*You know I became a teacher because I thought would be teaching learners who were like the learners when I was at school-but I was surprised at the reality of learners today and I don't think it has anything to do with being African, Indian or Coloured because even the Indian and Coloured boys in school just don't show the enthusiasm that prevailed amongst learners when I was in school. (Teacher C)*

These comments reveal that the challenge of teaching in a desegregated context does not relate just to race. The challenge is how to deal with the complexities related to the intersection of race with other forms of diversity such as language, class, learner

motivation, ability and others. This challenge can only be met, if education is seen from a human rights perspective. Diversity involves the interrelationships of numerous factors including race, ability/disability, HIV status, amongst other things.

During an Economic and Management Science lesson, I observed Teacher C. The lesson was conducted in the transmission mode with teacher talk dominating the lesson. The whole lesson revolved around a handout which the teacher read to the class. From the response of the learners, it was clear that they did not understand what was going on. Much of this I attribute to the fact that the content of the lesson was so far removed from their lives. The teacher did nothing to ensure relevancy of the content of the lesson.

Research, in the USA has come to similar conclusions: that students frequently report being bored at school and see little relevance for their lives or their futures in what is being taught. (Farell; Peguero; Lindsey & White 1988; Hidalgo, 1991; Poplin & Weeres, 1992 cited in Nieto, 1999). Nieto (1999) goes on to say that there is often a mismatch between students' cultures and the content of the curriculum, and that there is a glaring contrast between the belief that learning starts with what students bring into the classroom and what is actually taught. She argues that in many schools, lessons starts not with what students bring, but with what is considered high status knowledge. This points once again to the fact that the lived experiences of the learners, their background, homes, cultural diversities are ignored within the classroom context. There is a constant preoccupation to get on with the curriculum, irrespective of how far removed the curriculum is from the experiences of the learners.

The most effective teachers were those who made a conservative effort to connect learning to the learners' backgrounds. One way to use the experiences of students is to focus on the kinds of issues they live with every day such as poverty, racism, violence and so on. However, teachers tend to veer away from such topics. Considering the fact that many teachers are themselves products of the apartheid era, it is not surprising that they seem to have it ingrained in them not to openly discuss contentious issues like race or poverty.

Another reason why learners might appear not to show enthusiasm during lesson time, and hence do badly in tests and examinations, can be found in the teaching methods in most classrooms. Often teachers lean heavily on the 'chalk and talk' methods; textbooks (and as in the case of the school in the study, worksheets and handouts) are the dominant teaching materials used, routine and rote learning is used over creativity and critical thinking; and that teacher-centered transmission prevails (Nieto, 1999).

While one or two of the teachers interviewed do experience problems with diversity, others have made concerted efforts to equip themselves for their present situation:

*I've made an attempt to learn about their culture. To help understand their language, I did a course in IsiZulu at college.... I also had to quickly lose my middle class upbringing and know the realities of the lives of the learners. I had to become patient and understanding – and*

*I also learnt how to comprise. I had to learn not to take things for granted. (Teacher A)*

*What do you mean? (Interviewer)*

*At the beginning of year – you know, the first day of school, I know when I was at school, all the children would be excited about returning to school. They go shopping for stuff and are excited to start school. But now, things are so different, many of the children (especially the African children) don't turn for almost first week of school – and when they do return - it is like their absence was no big deal – they were still at the farm. (Teacher A).*

It also became apparent during the interviews that some teachers where not aware of the varying degree to which diversity exists in the classroom. The language issue is seen as the only challenge.

*What are some of the difficulties you experience in trying to teach children from these diverse background? (Interviewer)*

*Well the main problem is getting through to them (Teacher B)*

*What do you mean? (Interviewer)*

*You know getting them to comprehend whatever it is I am saying. I*

***believe that language is the main barrier to them learning and understanding. (Teacher B).***

When I asked another teacher in the same question, her response was:

***Getting them to understand..... language appears to be the greatest barrier. (Teacher C)***

She does, however, admit that social risk factors, home background and socio economic factors as also very relevant.

***Firstly, there is a language problem...I find it difficult to get across to them, especially when teaching English ...These learners have problem when it come to reading and learning. (Teacher D).***

Clearly, language is proving a barrier to learning and many teachers are experiencing problems overcoming this barrier.

According to Van Tonder (1999), world wide, a great deal of research has been done on language-related issues in education. He goes on to say that many research initiatives in other multi-lingual countries focused on the link between learning, cognitive development and language. Without exception these research initiatives proved that learners learn and develop best when using their main (first) languages for learning, or should another language be used for learning, their main languages are sustained.



It seems clear that the current trend in the majority of South African schools is that learners (and their parents) favour English as language of teaching and learning. It is assumed that the reason for this is that people regard English as a language of empowerment. The extent to which parents value English is reflected in the following critical incident I encountered.

*During my observation of the registration process at the school, I heard the admission's officer tell a parent that there were no more places in the grade two class for 2004, and as such her son could not be accommodated for in the following year. The parent's response was that she did not mind if her son was retained in grade 1 (in 2004), just so long as he gained admission into a school where he could 'learn in English'.*

English is the main language at the school and all learning areas are taught via the medium of English. Government policy with regards to official languages until 1997, deemed that only English and Afrikaans be offered at first and second language level and Zulu at third language level. While Afrikaans is being offered at second language level at the school, there is no third language level, hence Zulu is not part of the curriculum at this school.

Learners, at the school are encouraged to talk in English at all times – in their communication with fellow learners and even at home. In fact, it was observed that that some teachers react very negatively when they overhear learners communicating in Zulu and say things like:

***Why don't you go to a school in Umlazi? There you can speak***

***Zulu all the time...***

This kind of response is indicative of the fact that the learners are expected to adapt to the school and that the teachers see little else beyond the physical learner in the class. The fact that South Africa has eleven official languages has very little bearing on the language policy of the school.

It seems clear that the current trend in most of the South African schools is that learners and parents are in favour of English as the language of learning and teaching. It seems English is considered as the language of empowerment. Van Tonder (1999) states that what parents need to realise is that own languages are very important, and that they play an important role in the child's development.

Throughout the research, I observed that the African learners are seen as "them" by the Indian teachers and Indian learners are part of "us". In most cases the problems seem to be located in the African learners. It seems as if the teachers are sitting on their racist platform and looking down on learners. Issues like poverty and violence only seem to happen African learners. Indian learners who come from very poor socio economic conditions, are not seen in the same light as their African counterparts. The teachers appear to focus on the "deficiencies and inadequacies" of the African learners with no consideration given to their own approaches or the curriculum, showing a lack of understanding and ignorance of the complexities of the issue of integration.

*I think many of them need to be assessed as they might need special help. (Teacher A)*

*When I think of some of their home conditions, I really feel sorry for them. They are not like us you, you know ...(Teacher C)*

*You can't blame them, you know the children are the innocent ones... (Teacher C)*

*They just don't seem to understand the language... (Teacher E)*

Much of the language of the teachers entrenches a deficit orientation, that is, it tends to construct "them" as having defects and as victims. Words such as 'them' exclude and 'us' include. According to Bhana, (1994) this use of 'us' and 'them' became important grammatical tools that teachers employed. She states further that is kind of talk is an oppressive tool in it that emphasises differences, and that rather than working with differences, teachers place differences under surveillance and attempt to close them off.

By adopting the assimilationist approach, it is expected that the African learner would fit in and become part of the dominant culture. While learners are made to fit in, they are not given any power or privilege. It is evident from the interviews that the teachers always tend to distance themselves from the learners. These teachers come from an era when racial divisions were so well entrenched. The view that Africans are an 'inferior' group is ingrained in the minds of teachers, and they are continually work to maintain this

power status. Teachers in the study, verbalise an acceptance of African learners, yet very little is done to accommodate for these learners within the classroom context, especially with curriculum access. Learners are being constantly excluded by what is being taught, the language used by the teacher, and the teaching methods used to mediate the curriculum. According to Booth & Ainscow (1998) inclusion involves the process of increasing participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, mainstream curricula, cultures and communities.

#### **4.4. Responding to Diversity: Strategies used by teachers**

Some of the strategies employed by the teachers include peer learning and group work. Teachers say that they would like to engage with learners on a one to one basis but find that the large class numbers make this very difficult.

Teacher B acknowledges that she had to

*“learn very quickly that I had to be open and flexible and that I could not impose my values and attitudes onto them. I also realized that it was not my job to change them or their culture...”*

Teacher C states that showing patience and the fact that you are interested in the learners helps in winning learners over. She says that learners need to know that you have their best interests at heart.

Strategies used by the teachers seem to be the mere scratching of the surface – as there appears to be no depth in understanding the real problem, that is, the diversity among the

learners. As a result of this lack of understanding, teachers are unable to employ strategies which will be successful in responding to diversity in the classroom.

According to Booth (2002) the details of inclusive teaching strategies differ depending on available resources but principles are constant: learning and teaching are varied, collaborative, active, and draw on all available resources within teachers and other staff, learners, parent/carers and communities. This kind of collaboration appears to be lacking at the school and teachers who were teaching the same grades appear to be working in isolation from each other.

Teachers need to pay special attention to the language they use in the class so that learners are not disadvantaged because the language these learners use at home is different to the language of instruction. Booth (2002) states that teachers have to ensure that any technical vocabulary is understood by learners or are explained to them.

#### **4.5. Teacher professional development**

Many of the teachers employed at the school, endured schooling during the apartheid era and as such were socialised to avoid or blatantly accept certain issues. Many teachers fail to realise their own racial identities, and this becomes a barrier to understanding and connecting with the diverse needs of the learners in their classroom. According to Engen (2003) the inclusionary practices have changed over the years and vary in different educational contexts. It is for these reasons that teachers are confused and one of the reasons for this confusion can be found in the special nature of teachers' professional knowledge, which are shaped by things of the past. Attitudes, points of view, values and interests which inform teachers' professional identities do not disappear when new and

competing ideologies are introduced and receive support. These move to the back of teachers minds and in many cases cause conflict when teachers attempt to receive and implement new ideologies. In the study, two teachers reflected positively on the teacher training they received. Others stated:

*I had OBE in service training which was helpful in a limited sort of way. However, my university studies did not prepare me for the realities of the classroom especially not the emotional aspect of it. (Teacher B)*

*I qualified at U D W – with a B.A. degree and then I did the H.D.E. through UNISA. How effective is the qualification?- I think what we learn at university is very different to what actually happens in the class. (Teacher C)*

*Mmm, I graduated with a B. Paed. Degree from UDW. Of course, as all university degrees, it was more theoretical or academic in nature- not much of what happens in the classroom... I also went on OBE training- where I was supposed to learn and adopt this whole new way of teaching after a few superficial workshops. Needless to say, I was more confused then enlightened. I sometimes think the Department is playing games with the teachers. (Teacher E).*

The challenge facing many South African teachers is that they were not trained to cope with the diversity that is now present in schools. According to Gordon (1997) cited by

Bothma, Gravett & Swart (2000) all teachers have the skills to teach all learners –*if they wanted to*. He went on to say that the difference between an effective and a non-effective inclusive school, is whether teachers in a school have been assisted to achieve positive changes in attitude towards new teaching methods and circumstances. Bothma, *et.al* (2000) argue that teachers not only need the skills and knowledge to cope with diversity in the class but they also need to have a positive attitude.

The statement by Teacher E:

***Sometimes I think the Department is playing games with teachers.***

portrays the sense of helplessness that resounds through the teaching fraternity. Teachers complain that they are forced to implement policies in which they have no voice.

Further, they are expected to implement these policies without a clear understanding of what these policies are or without enough time to prepare themselves for the implementation process. Teachers might also lack confidence in their abilities to teach learners of diverse needs considering the fact that they had no professional training to undertake such a challenge.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this study was to examine how teachers in a primary school respond to diversity within the classroom. The use of semi structured interviews, observations and analysis of documents served as the research tools in the study. The five teachers who participated, did so voluntarily. A human rights framework was used to examine relationships/intersections of factors relating to diversity in schools as they emerged in this study. The analysing of the raw data, saw recurring themes emerge. I was also interested in what the teachers were not talking about, that is what were their silences?

With regards to teacher experience of learner diversity it must be acknowledged that the teacher is faced with a number of issues in the day to day interactions in the class. From the responses of some of the teachers, it is apparent that teachers see learners as ‘males’, or ‘African/Indian’, and beyond these superficial differences, no other diversity is envisaged. Therefore, teachers tend to treat all the learners alike and no particular attention is given to the diversity that exists within the class.

In analysing how teachers construct learners, it is evident that the teachers do not really know who their learners are and it follows that if teachers do not know who their learners are, they cannot provide the learners with equitable opportunities for learning. In this study, it was found that there was some negativity amongst the teachers with regards to teaching in an all boys’ school.



The manner in which teachers construct parents/caregivers and the community is determined by the teacher's understanding of diverse nature of the learner population. Teachers have stated that parents/caregivers non attendance of school meetings and so on points to blatant disinterest in the learners education! This might however, not be the case.

The analysis of the challenges and tensions experienced by teachers teaching in a diverse context show that the teachers are experiencing stress and strain. The major challenges highlighted by the teachers were getting the learners to understand what is being taught in the class. There appears to be a language barrier. Learners did not seem to fully comprehend the language of instruction. This acted as a barrier to learning. Strategies used by teachers to help them in the classroom were limited to peer teaching and group work. While these methods are effective, they are by no means exhaustive. Teachers' professional development appears to be largely lacking at the school. In fact it was observed that teachers tend to work in isolation from each other.

No teacher is expected to become knowledgeable in every facet of every learner in her class. It would therefore be impossible for a teacher to design lessons to suit every learner in the class. Teachers should make use of the most important resource available within the class, and that is the learners. Teachers need to design the curriculum to meet the needs of the learners. In other words, the curriculum has to have relevance. Teachers, in the study, talk about learners being disruptive in class, or of the difficulty of getting through to learners. This can be avoided, if teachers incorporate and

acknowledge learners' experiences of life into the curriculum so that they can begin to reflect upon the circumstances and formulate solutions to problems. According to Jarvis & Edley (1996) if they cannot see themselves in the literature, history or geography that they learn, they will never be able to identify with the subject matter and make it their own. Effective teaching can take place, if teachers move away from the transmission mode of teaching and make use of the cultural diversity amongst learners as a learning resource.

In the target school, teachers own educational experiences have typically been mono cultural rather than multicultural. There is a need for professional development efforts to help educators expand their perspectives and deepen their understanding of the ways in which race and racism has affected their own education as well as that of their learners. It is important that schools have a well thought out policy for staff development. This appeared to be lacking in the school under study. There appears to be a dire need for in-service training for teachers and this should be designed in such a way so as to take into account the needs of the school.

This study has highlighted some of the experiences of teachers in responding to diversity in their classrooms – the tensions and the challenges. It is possible that teachers in many other schools are experiencing similar problems. Further, research into how teachers already in the school situation could work to removing barriers to learning and participation would be very useful. Professional development workshops would be of

great help to teachers. It is also recommended that teacher training institutions implement courses that would enlighten future teachers on how to handle diversity effectively.

Monocultural schools are a thing of the past. Desegregation of schools is here to stay.

Teachers have to make concerted efforts to cater for all learners in their classes. After all the principle of quality education for *all* learners is embedded in all policy documents and legislation. This emphasis on “quality education for *all*” suggests that schools have to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

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