

## **Race, Identity and Leadership in South African and English Schools.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports a pilot study. It adopts an international perspective in examining the perceptions and practice of leaders in a South African and an English primary school. Both schools have experienced a relatively swift and large scale diversification of learners away from the previous white profile to one where white learners are in the minority and there are various ethnic groups represented amongst the majority. In each case the educators, and particularly the senior management team, have not diversified to the same extent. Data from interviews with educators in South Africa and in England are explored to consider how diversity is conceived, and how ethnicity/race is placed within diversity. By considering instances of practice in two countries, similarities and differences are identified, in order to increase understanding of context, its relation to practice and the implications for managers and leaders.

### **Keywords**

Leadership, diversity, ethnicity, identity, primary schools

### **Opening a dialogue about diversity**

There is a large literature exploring the issues and practice related to meeting the needs of diverse learners. There has been far less research focused on the issues that arise for leaders in attempting to work both for and with diverse staff. Both South Africa and England have seen change in many schools which were previously populated by learners of only one ethnic group to much more diverse populations. In some cases the staff have also changed and are representative of the learner profile. In others, the staff have remained relatively

stable and consequently do not reflect the variousness of the students. This results in a context where diversity, and particularly ethnicity/race, are potent issues.

The purpose of the paper is to report a pilot study in which educator leaders in a primary school in South Africa and in England were asked to consider their beliefs and practice in relation to diversity and leadership. A close focus allows consideration of each of these elements to better understand the position of individual leaders and the leadership team. The paper is not primarily a travelogue, designed to inform readers about practice in South Africa and England. In focusing on just two primary schools such an aim would in any case be unachievable. Rather it seeks to stimulate and to challenge thinking about diversity and leadership, and to support deeper reflection on one's own practice wherever in the world the reader may be located.

### **Identity and diversity**

Diversity signals a range of socially constructed and understood 'differences' between people, which do not reflect immutable characteristics, but rather a mosaic of privilege and advantage. The term is often taken to be synonymous with 'race' in the US or ethnicity as the parallel term used in the UK. There is no genetic basis for the concept of race (Litvin, 1997). Nevertheless, because prejudice and disadvantage are differentially experienced by those deemed 'other' in any context, particularly those who are visibly different in terms of their physical characteristics, it may be necessary to focus on those with particular attributes or origins in order to resist injustice. The term ethnicity is therefore used to refer to groupings of people merely as a strategy to better understand their experience.

The final concept which underpins the paper is that of identity. While diversity and ethnicity are often researched and discussed in relation to groups, such as women or black Africans, our focus on leadership impels a consideration of individuals and the identity of particular leaders. The concept of identity is explored within a very large body of literature and is highly contested (Bauman, 2004; Goffman, 1959). We note Walker's definition of identity as 'an interlocking personal and social project under particular discursive conditions of possibility' (2005, p. 42), as this reflects her work in South Africa and emphasises the necessity to explore not only the internal understandings of identity, but also the influence of possibilities and limitations in the specific context. The paper explores ethnicity and

leadership but within a wider frame of diversity, as ethnicity is a central but insufficient dimension to understand the identity of leaders and how it shapes their practice.

Leaders are often very aware of the moral issues that arise in relation to their diverse learners. Far less attention has been given to the models inherent in the practice of leadership, and how the latter supports or resists the wider system of injustice. Lorbiecki and Jack (2000, p. 25) suggest an imperative to 'theorize more than one difference at once' (Lumby in press). The pilot reported by this paper trialled consideration of the multiple and diverse identities of leaders, how this relates to the practice of leadership as perceived from an international perspective.

### **Research methods**

The schools were purposively selected as in both cases the learner profile has changed dramatically in a relatively short period of time, and now comprises a majority of black or Asian origin children while a relatively stable white staff remain.

One school is located in the Western Cape Province. The population in this province is majority white, Afrikaans speaking, with the largest number of Afrikaans speaking 'coloured' people (as defined pre 1994 and still used as a defining term)<sup>1</sup> of any province in South Africa. There is a lower proportion of black people in this province than in any other province. The primary school is in a former white urban area, located near the former coloured township area. The community around the school can be classified as disadvantaged socio economically, with 33 per cent of families depending on welfare money and a large percentage of single parents.

The school learners and educators were exclusively white until 1995. In 2007, when the research was undertaken, the learner population had increased by 43 per cent and now comprises 73 per cent children coloured, 14 per cent black, 12 per cent white and 1 per cent Indian, using the classifications that would have been use in 1994 before majority rule was achieved. The main home languages of the children are Xhosa and Afrikaans. There are nine coloured educators within a staff of thirty four. The SMT consists of the principal, two deputy principals and four heads of department. Only one coloured member of staff has held a formal leadership role as head of department on a temporary basis.

The second school in England is in a city in one of the most socially deprived wards in the country. It has also experienced a considerable decrease in the proportion of white learners. The majority is now of Asian origin and there are also students who are of African origin and Europeans whose first language is not English. The children speak eleven home languages and only 15 per cent of students speak English as a home language. Specific percentages indicating the ethnic profile of learners are not available, but the population is similar to that of the South African school, in having a majority of Asian origin children, a range of other groups and languages represented and a small minority of white children. There are 42 staff. The staff in support as teaching assistants, language support, dinner supervisors and cleaners are primarily minority ethnic. However, only one teacher is minority ethnic. The rest are white. The SMT consists of the principal and four heads of year, that is, responsible for a particular age group. However, other staff hold leadership roles, such as responsibility for a particular curriculum area.

As the focus of interest was how identities are constructed and understood and how this relates to leadership, interviews were chosen as the means to probe people's self perceptions and the perceptions of others. All the members of the SA school management team (SMT) were interviewed. One additional staff member was also interviewed because she has been acting head of department for numerous periods. The English school suggested that all staff had a leadership role. Therefore those formally in the SMT and a purposive sample of further staff were interviewed. The range of respondents is indicated in table 1.

Table 1 about here

The interview schedule which guided the semi structured interview consisted of questions to explore the respondents' understanding of their own position as a leader in the school, how they conceived diversity and its impact on the staff members as well as the person's conception of her/his own identity. The two researchers come from South Africa and the UK; they therefore bring an insider and an outsider perspective. However, both will be positioned by a particular history and identity and it is acknowledged that this will inevitably influence how they see and how they interpret.

### **Conceptualising diversity**

There are numerous frameworks which might allow analysis of how leaders in the two schools conceptualised diversity. The most widely used distinctions are between observable (such as gender) and non observable (such as educational background) characteristics (Simons and Pelled, 1999). You-Ta *et al* (2004, p. 26) describe the same distinction as 'readily detectable or underlying'. The second binary is between broad and narrow conceptualisations (Wentling *et al*, 2000, 36). The former focus primarily on those characteristics seen as particularly likely to incur socially constructed disadvantage, that is race/ethnicity and gender (Kosseck & Lobel, 1996) Broad definitions have incorporated a much wider range characteristics which may distinguish individuals and groups, including age, disability, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, values, ethnic culture, education, lifestyle, beliefs, physical appearance, social class and economic status (Norton & Fox, 1997). One might anticipate that the South Africans might be particularly aware of the implications of narrow conceptualisations of diversity and of the effect of visibility.

### **Staff concepts of diversity**

When asked what diversity meant to them, staff in the South African and English schools had similar responses. Some listed characteristics that signified diversity and some presented position statements such as the necessity to 'celebrate differences'. The differences cited that indicated diversity included both non visible attributes such as function, experience, family background, and detectable characteristics such as ethnicity (sometimes using the terms race or skin colour), language and age. Of the fifteen respondents most offered lists of characteristics which mingled narrow and broad conceptualisations. The most frequently mentioned dimension of difference was ethnicity, cited 10 times, followed by language (7), culture (4), religion (4), socio-economic background (3), disabilities (3) and age (2). There were one or two references to aspects of difference such as education, leadership or teaching style, personality and values. Three provided position statements, 'one nation', 'celebrating difference' and 'equality', two provided narrow definitions focused on race and one said there was diversity in all children and staff but did not specify how.

While one might anticipate differences in how diversity was conceptualised given the very great differences in the context and history of South Africa and England, staff in both

countries appeared to have similar thinking. They generally perceived a mix of characteristics and attributes as leading to diversity and mingled visible characteristics historically associated with oppression with non visible characteristics which are likely to be more superficial in their impact on how people are perceived, such as function or educational background. In only one case, was there a sense of immutable biological differences being primary; a South Africa respondent who referred to diversity as reflecting differences as in 'kinds of insects'. For others, the positioning of an individual, how that diversity was perceived, reflected a complex intermingling of various characteristics or alternatively a determined orientation to difference such as celebrating it.

### **Valuing diversity in identity**

Staff were asked to describe their identity. Half of the staff chose to depict their identity in terms of their personal and professional qualities only. For example an English male leader described himself as:

I am fair and that is important for me. I like to think I prefer to listen more than I talk or do.

Another emphasised his capacity to make jokes as an important aspect of his professionalism. In South Africa, staff responded similarly in depicting their identity:

- I am a lover of mankind. I love people. It does not matter who it is.
- I am perfectly designed to teach. I never get mad. I never lose control. I love kids.

One might anticipate that South African staff would see their ethnicity as a critical aspect of their identity, given the history of racial segregation, but only one referred to himself as white. In England again a single respondent referred to himself as white; other staff, including an Asian origin leader, did not refer to ethnicity. Within the entire sample across both countries, even the two who included skin colour within their description of their identity, placed it as of less importance than other characteristics. The English leader stressed his Christian religion more. He explicitly rejected ethnicity as important: 'Race does not matter'.

It is noticeable that many staff chose to foreground aspects of themselves which related to their professional role rather than their ethnicity. One might understand this in numerous ways. Gurin and Nagda (2006) present two strategies by which people attempt to minimise the stigma of low status identities, such as minority ethnicity or gender. The first is *decategorisation* where members of a stigmatised group personalise relations with the majority or dominant group, so that they are perceived as just that individual, rather than as a member of a group. The teacher is perceived as 'Mary' rather than as an African American. In contrast, *recategorisation* draws out-group members into the in-group, through common tasks and symbols. Difference is set aside in order to create one single group rather than an in-group and out-groups. The teacher is viewed as a member of the senior management team, rather than as an African American.

The first two strategies were evident in the leaders' descriptions of their identity. Through foregrounding their personal qualities and skills they stressed their membership of a professional group. Their membership of a minority ethnic group within the school or the wider community was airbrushed out. They were recategorising into a more prestigious group, that of educational leader. Decategorisation was also evident in the insistence that colour did not matter. The single ethnic minority member of the SMT in SA believes that 'I do not recognise colour any more'. Speaking of her, another leader believes that staff do not 'think there is a non-white person'. Yet, in the South African responses, the Afrikaans word '*anderskleurig*' meaning 'other colour' was used more than once.

There is of course the irony of the assertion that people do not see colour when the interviews text is shot through with acute awareness of it. The insistence on colour blindness in both countries is striking: on the one hand whiteness is presented as salient by only one member of staff and yet whiteness 'has been a historically privileged category' (Simpson, 2008, p. 141).

It is, of course, complex. Some white people are extremely disadvantaged or disadvantaged in particular ways and their ethnicity may intersect with other characteristics such as gender or disability which can also lead to dis/advantage. Nevertheless, despite the changes that followed majority rule in South Africa in 1994 and the increasing diversity of British society, whiteness has continued to confer privilege for many. As Simpson (2008) argues, whites

think of themselves as neutral, normative. Awareness of their ethnicity is an optional extra. Consequently the disavowal of colour consciousness of all but two of the respondents may be rooted in differing imperatives. For the white respondents, they may be genuinely unconscious of their ethnicity as a salient feature of their identity. It is the norm. For the two minority ethnic respondents, the impetus may be de- or recategorisation. One group has no need to escape and the other has a persisting impetus to do so.

Such blindness may underpin racism (Cochrane-Smith, 1995; Mabokela & Madsen, 2003). It is a collusion of those who see themselves as the norm with those who know that the experience of difference matters, to feign that difference is irrelevant. How can discussion about difference take place if there is a denial of difference? Simpson, (2008) constructs a range of criteria for assessing if dialogue is genuine, that is allowing people to 'think together' (p. 140). Colour blindness is suggested to prevent such dialogue. The key issue is awareness or lack of awareness of the implications for staff and learners of their minoritiness within their school.

### **Learning from the cases**

Two cases cannot reflect the experience of educators and learners in English and South African Schools. The intention of the paper was not to attempt anything of the kind, but to stimulate reflection, by a close focus on two cases. McMahon (2007, p. 685) suggests that racism is 'emphatically conceptualized as a phenomenon that happens in other times and places'. The majority of staff in both schools felt that racism was not an issue in their school. We find that it appears to be so in both locations despite their very different history and context, and despite the apparent determination of leaders to be inclusive. So much is not new (Lumby with Coleman, 2007). Racism has been suggested to be a universal phenomenon. What is perhaps more noteworthy is the very great similarities in the thinking which underpin exclusionary practice. The way diversity is conceptualised and the way each person's identity is conceived sustains the invisibility of whiteness and the failure to address the unwarranted privilege it confers, even in contexts where white people are minority within the school, the local community and in South Africa, within the nation. The



cataclysmic shifts within South Africa appear to have had limited impact to date on the way people *think* about themselves and 'other'. A profound compulsion to remain dominant or to challenge dominance are decipherable in strategies of re or de categorisation.

Much activity to address exclusion from leadership has focused on recruitment and appointment practices. The analysis presented here suggests that inclusion in leadership requires leaders to engage more deeply with how diversity itself is conceptualised and how leaders conceive their identity. Internationally, leadership preparation programmes tend to focus on outward looking competence and not on identity and self-reflection (Lumby & English, 2008). They stress creating solidarity in a leadership team based on shared values. Our evidence suggests that the vision of cohesion is but one manifestation of the exclusion of 'other'. Leadership preparation and practice has not begun to address how it will enact rather than just speak about inclusion in relation to staff.

#### **Notes**

1. As Walker (2005) points out, use of the racial terminology of the Apartheid period is highly sensitive. Nevertheless the terminology is used by the respondents in South Africa.

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Table 1: Role of Respondents

South Africa respondents	UK respondents
Principal, Male	Principal, Male
Deputy Principal, Male	Deputy Principal, Male
Deputy Principal, Female	Deputy Principal, Male
HOD1, Male	Language support leader, Female
HOD2, Female	Age group leader, Female
HOD3, Female	Curriculum leader, Female
HOD4, Female	Teacher, Male
HOD5, Female	