



**Exploring the impediments to racial integration
at South African high schools in the post-apartheid era:
A case study of Bridge Town High School¹**

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Introduction

After the dismantling of apartheid, various formal policies were implemented by the South African government to permit racial desegregation in high schools. While the demographic profile of many high schools in South Africa has changed, there have been many impediments to meaningful racial integration in these schools in the daily lived experiences of the pupils. This research explores the various impediments to meaningful and substantive racial integration in South African high schools, with a particular focus on the institutional culture and structures of these schools.

I have explored these themes through the case study of Bridge Town High School in Bridge Town Athlone. The research was conducted over a three week period from July to August 2014, at request of the principal.

¹ This report is drawn from L Karassellos's 2014 UCT Honours dissertation of the same title. It was a collaborative study between Bridge Town High School and UCT, facilitated by the UCT Knowledge Co-op. The full thesis will be made available on <http://www.knowledgco-op.uct.ac.za/resources/>.

Research Methods:

The research design of this project is a descriptive, qualitative design which aims to explore and uncover the ways in which race and institutional culture are experienced by black pupils at Bridge Town High School. The study describes the lived, daily experiences of black pupils from their own point of view.

Data Collection Instruments:

Semi-structured Interviews: I conducted eight semi-structured interviews, five with pupils, and three with teachers. They were semi-structured in the sense that there was a basic interview guide but I allowed the conversations to progress naturally, following up with relevant themes which came up. I also had a number of informal conversations with teachers and the principal.

Observations: I observed seventeen classes on a range of subjects and also with a range of grades. I was also given access to the staff room and observed a number of staff meetings.

Study of the curriculum: I was given two textbooks on different subjects by the staff and analysed these.

Literature: I studied the current literature on the relevant themes.

Ethical Issues:

This research was requested by the school, but I also received an ethical clearance letter from the UCT Sociology Department. Each interview participant filled out a consent form allowing me to use the information they provided in the interview, and all names were changed to ensure anonymity.

The following are my four main findings along with the accompanying recommendations for the school:

1. Race and Culture in the classroom

Through my research I explored the ways in which race and culture are handled, spoken about and constructed within the classroom. I found that the Afrikaans language is a significant part of the institutional culture of the school, with some even describing Bridge Town as an Afrikaans school. The use of Afrikaans may feel exclusionary for those who do not understand it.

The staff of any institution plays a vital role in shaping its institutional culture. So the language, culture and values of the teachers can often become the language, culture and value of the school. One significant finding from my research is that the teachers have developed a very close bond of trust with many of their pupils. They often go beyond their normal duties and responsibilities to provide support for these pupils. Of the pupils I interviewed, most felt very comfortable talking to at least one teacher when they needed guidance or support, and these relationships are by no means determined by race. The black pupils I interviewed felt very comfortable confiding in coloured teachers, but they did feel that it would be beneficial for them to have more teachers at the school from their own

background, who spoke their language and who they could look up to and identify with as role models.

The relationship of trust some teachers have developed with their pupils has allowed these pupils to talk freely and openly about the contentious issues of race and culture in the classroom. This openness is important when picking apart the stereotypes which are often reinforced by the textbooks provided by the WCED.

In these situations, pupils' cultural capital cannot be taken for granted. All of these pupils have come from different backgrounds, have different language fluency and varying access to the aspects of cultural capital which allow them to succeed in this schooling environment.

Recommendations:

The strong heritage of Afrikaans at the school needs to be acknowledged and the staff need to ensure that certain pupils do not feel excluded by their difficulty in communicating in this language.

The hiring of new staff is something which is often determined by the WCED but, where possible, the school should ensure that their staff body is diverse and more representative of the demographics of the school.

When discussing contentious issues such as race and culture, teachers should ensure that these issues are discussed in an open and non-judgemental space where every pupil feels comfortable contributing their opinions.

2. Language

Proficiency in English and, to some extent, Afrikaans, is a tacit expectation to succeed at this English-medium school. Language, however, is part of a learner's cultural capital which is acquired from their homes, past schools or other influences and some struggle more than others. Many learners may also experience the feeling of being an outsider at the school due to their home languages not being part of the dominant language at the school. In this case I found that a learner's primary school education, rather than their race, had a major impact on their language proficiency. Those that studied Afrikaans in primary school generally felt quite comfortable with it in high school. One black learner even described it as her favourite subject. So a learner's past education and their cultural capital often have a major impact in determining how they perform in high school.

I observed a significant lack of integration and interaction between black and coloured learners at the school. In the classroom, learners were often visibly segregated into groups along racial lines. This separation is partly a result of language barriers. Many black pupils feel comfortable socialising with those who speak the same language so as to avoid the social risk of being teased or mocked for difficulty with English or Afrikaans. Language therefore acts as a unifier within the student body. Many black learners feel that they cannot fully participate in Afrikaans classes. I noticed a sharp contrast in the behaviour of black pupils in the Afrikaans and isiXhosa classes I observed. While in Afrikaans most struggled and did not participate, isiXhosa classes were very interactive with most students actively participating.

As isiXhosa was only introduced this year, the subject is still very new to the school and there is no history and foundation for its teaching. The school lacks textbooks for the subject and its introduction has not been sufficiently supported by the WCED, which only sent an isiXhosa subject advisor to the

school once this year. The appropriate support is vital for this subject to be a success at the school, especially since it is a difficult subject for many learners. Even some of the isiXhosa learners I spoke to said they would prefer to do Afrikaans as isiXhosa is taught at such an advanced level in high school which makes it difficult even for those who are first-language speakers.

Recommendations:

Sufficient support (in the form of resources and subject advisors) is necessary for the newly introduced isiXhosa subject to succeed at the school. Unfortunately BTHS is reliant on the WCED for this support, which is often insufficient. The addition of more isiXhosa-speaking teachers to the staff, however, will contribute to incorporating isiXhosa as a core part of the school's institutional culture.

3. Extra-mural activities as a unifier

From the interviews I conducted I found that racial tension and lack of integration is less prevalent in the higher grades. The reason for this is that pupils need that personal interaction with their classmates over a prolonged period so that they can view each other as classmates and friends. They need to build these relationships over time. Racist attitudes and stereotypes are often acquired from families and communities, but are often broken down once children interact and see that there is no truth to these stereotypes.

When asked what changes they would like to see at the school, the majority of pupils and teachers felt that extra-mural activities would be beneficial and would assist in racial integration. Pupils are obviously aware of the visual markers of difference between them, such as the colour of their skin. Participating in extra-mural activities facilitates interaction among pupils and gives them a common interest over which to bond. Because there are currently not a wide range of extra-mural activities at the school, pupils have very few things in common to bond over other than race and language.

Another observation I have made at the school is the inconsistency in pupils' uniforms. A set uniform code is not followed by most learners. One learner pointed out how this is another visible marker of difference between learners as clothing can often communicate a great deal about a learner's socio-economic background. Again, pupils need fewer visible markers of difference and more things in common which unify them.

Recommendations:

I suggest the school adopts more extra-mural activities to facilitate interaction, team work and unity among learners. As the school is currently under-resourced and under-staffed, there are a few alternative channels which can be followed to implement these changes.

SHAWCO, the UCT student volunteer organisation, provides support and activities to various underprivileged schools. I have chatted to Cyril Pelseon at SHAWCO who is willing to set up a meeting with the school to discuss how SHAWCO may be able to assist the school in 2015 with extra-mural activities. Cyril Pelseon: 0733994425 / Cyril.pelseon@uct.ac.za

Sporting Chance, an organisation which provides sport activities and coaching to a number of schools, may also be willing to assist. Bradley (021 683 7299) asked the school to contact him in January as they do a few sporting events in the Athlone area and may be able to add BTHS to some of their events.

The mass participation; opportunity and access; development and growth (MOD) Programme, facilitated by the Western Cape government, provide sport and cultural activities for various schools in the Western Cape. The contact here is Graeme Groenewald (0733245885). He may be able to assist in making BTHS one of the beneficiaries of these activities.

Amandla Edu-Football is an organisation which also provides sporting activities for underprivileged learners. They have a Life Skills programme in which life skills are taught through sport, which may be beneficial for the learners at BTHS. The contact here is Beste: beste@edufootball.org

Other organisations the school may want to look into include: The School Reading Association and Ubunye's Township Debating League.

In order to unify the student body BTHS could create school 'houses' or 'teams', to which each pupil would belong - a blue, green or red house, for example. This is another way to unify pupils around a common identity and interest other than race or language.

BTHS should also look to implementing a stricter uniform policy.

4. The Outsider Within

Through my interviews I found that BTHS as well as the surrounding Bridge Town area is still viewed by teachers and pupils, of all races, as a coloured space. Black people often enter the space as outsiders who can often be marginalised and powerless within it. In my interviews I heard about incidents in which coloured bullies at the school use this unequal power dynamic to bully younger black learners with race as a justification. Both the coloured and black learners know these fights are carried out on an unequal playing field as these bullies can call on their friends in the area for support, whereas black learners are outsiders in the space.

From my interviews I have also discovered how black pupils often have to juggle between two identities – the one they have at home and the one they have when they come to the school. Often they feel that their traditions, culture and values are not respected within the institution and therefore have to play a different character so as to adapt and assimilate.

Recommendations:

I think that transforming the institutional culture of a school will always be a difficult and lengthy process. The first step is to identify some of the ways in which the institutional culture of the school manifests itself in the day-to-day, which I have attempted to explore above. Once this has been made visible, the school can start working on changing it. The aim is to find a way to meaningfully incorporate aspects of every learner's culture into the institution, so that no learner experiences BTHS as an outsider.