Identity and diversity: A case study of leaders in a South African primary school

Jan Heystek & Jacky Lumby

To cite this article: Jan Heystek & Jacky Lumby (2011) Identity and diversity: A case study of leaders in a South African primary school, Education as Change, 15:2, 331-343, DOI: 10.1080/16823206.2011.619995

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2011.619995

Published online: 21 Dec 2011.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 79

View related articles

Citing articles: 1
Identity and diversity: A case study of leaders in a South African primary school

Jan Heystek  
Stellenbosch University  
Jacky Lumby  
Southampton University

Abstract

The article explores school leaders' perspective of their identity and how this relates to their leadership in an ethnically diverse school. This case study indicates that, in general, the leaders are only partly aware of their own identity and of the complex issues related to diversity in the school. Diversity is still predominantly conceptualised as meaning the former racial groups. Significant efforts are made by leaders to unshackle themselves from discriminatory acts or attitudes; the result is 'colour blindness' and attitudes which tend to neglect the significance of one's own identity and that of other individuals and groups. This limited or narrow conceptualisation of diversity and one's own identity has implications for the leadership of schools. There is still a strong emphasis on the 'other' or 'anderskleuriges', identifying 'us' and 'them', which is indicative of the persistence of unequal power relations in the school.

Key words: diversity, identity, race, ethnicity, leadership, teachers, principals, social

Introduction and background

This article explores the perspective of school leaders in a South African primary school on diversity and identity as one element of a project about leadership and diversity in schools. The broader and longer-term purpose of the research is to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of leading with and for diversity in schools. The driving force behind the project is that the learner and, to a lesser extent, the teacher composition in former white schools has changed from monoracial (white) to multiracial in a time frame of a few years. The demand for such schools to provide equal opportunities for all learners and staff creates specific social spaces, especially for leaders in schools. They have to lead the school in this newly diverse context and assure sustainable quality education in the face of a heritage of political and social tension from racial issues. It is not the purpose of this article to provide answers to these complex interactions in similar schools or to criticise people caught in these circumstances. It is an attempt to provide another perspective on this complex situation and to support reflexivity, as educators come to terms in their daily personal working life with the demands of legislation enforcing equity and equality.

The article focuses on leaders (principal, deputy principal and heads of departments) and not on teachers, because leaders have a specific responsibility in schools in this process of change. Our contention in this article is that if educational leaders identify and acknowledge their own identity it may influence how they lead and impact at numerous levels. It may influence their relations with other staff and learners, and thus how staff and learners see themselves. The resulting power flows within schools and, as they graduate, the legacy of how a learner’s identity has been shaped will influence outcomes for individuals as
well as national and international society. Thus individual understanding of leaders’ identity is important and becomes increasingly so in schools or communities where diversity is a contentious issue, as in the former white schools.

This article uses a social identity theory (SIT) lens, as developed in Tajfel and Turner 1986. There are others which could have been adopted such as critical race theory or intergroup conflict theory. However, leadership identity is the prime focus and consequently, while the article refers to a number of relevant concepts, identity is at its heart. School leaders have many demands which they must balance, such as maintaining their personal identity within the Performitivity context and pressures for equal opportunity. They are also expected to offer the opportunity to attain good results with limited resources, while they must also provide equal opportunity for all. Leadership requires vision, and vision is closely associated with a leader’s identity and performance drive.

Leadership and organisational theories consider the individual in the context of the organisation. They do not generally take account of issues of oppression and emancipation (Lumby and Morrison 2010). Critical race theory (CRT) originated as a critical law perspective and emphasises the inequality between white and black. The point of departure is that racism is ingrained, inborn in white supremacy (Gillborn 2008). CRT asserts that whites do not have any incentives to eradicate racism and has as its broader goal the elimination of all forms of racial oppression (Ritzer 2008:641). It argues that minority groups are marginalised and different forms of legislated or psychological barriers have been created to bar them from equal opportunities. Hence, the benefits of the white majority need to be redressed as well as enhancing the rights and position of minorities (Ladson-Billings 1998; Dixson and Rousseau 2005). The leadership and organisational theoretical approach in this article incorporates the agenda of CRT. It does not ignore or underestimate the importance of the CRT approach and takes it as a necessary adjunct to leadership theory in the context of the political environment in South Africa.

The context for this research is the political change from white minority government to black majority government. The 1994 elections based on universal suffrage introduced a new democratic system, followed in 1996 by a new Constitution. Racially divided schools no longer officially exist. Black learners have enrolled en masse at the former white and, to a lesser extent, at the former Indian and coloured schools. These schools have generally not appointed teachers proportionately from all ethnic groups to represent the new learner profile. The teachers and especially the leaders have not had the opportunity to prepare, especially their minds or attitudes, or to be trained for the transformation, so they stumbled into a new composition of culturally-diverse learners with their identity and understanding of diversity already formed by the previous regime.

The desegregation, integration or inclusion of non-white learners into the former white schools is fraught with problems (Vandeyar 2008; Sayed and Soudien 2005; Fataar 2009; Dolby 2001, 2002). These authors indicate that the black, Indian and coloured learners have problems of access to schools, and that the leadership and governance of the white schools may not fully support access or equal opportunity.

The perspectives of the leaders in this case study must therefore be considered against these political changes. The school leaders’ position changed from being within a powerful decisionmaking group, to being of minority status from 1994, with less legislative decisionmaking power in a democratic dispensation. Leaders’ personal and professional identities had developed during white supremacy in a society where their authority and status went unchallenged and, within a short time, they found themselves in a quite different position. In the national debate about school access and equity these school leaders are under legislative and moral pressure, because they are perceived not to provide sufficient equal opportunity for all in their schools (Sujee 2002:27–29; Vandeyar and Killen 2006:385; Bush and Moloi 2007; Fataar 2009). However, in the smaller world of their own school, their experience is that everything has changed radically, and that their ingroup and power status (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman and Rust 1993) are challenged, although they may believe that they are doing all that could be expected to support access and equal opportunity (Dolby 2001).
Legislation and policy were able to instigate structural change fast. For example, the learner and staff composition were legislated to change from monoracial to multiracial, but it is a more sophisticated, complex and time-consuming process to change an organisation's culture, as this comprises people's attitudes, identities and beliefs (Smith 2008). For this reason, the ability and willingness of the leaders to change or accept change comes under scrutiny in this article in the light of how it may impact on their identity in the school. In thinking about the leaders and their own sense of identity it must be recognised that resistance is normal and associated with change.

Diversity, identity and leadership

Diversity as a concept needs some clarification as well as its association with the influence of leaders in and on the diversity in the school as an organisation. Diversity relates to a range of individual or group identities. Conceptualising diversity varies considerably. Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn (2004:50) suggest that diversity indicates a range of different characteristics present in a population and includes gender, ethnicity, age, able-bodiedness, sexual orientation, parental status, religion and marital status. Lumby with Coleman (2007:57) agree that diversity is a multifaceted and complex concept with many interpretations and meanings. Although characteristics such as gender, language and religion are signalled as key issues by many commentators, the trend within public policy is for diversity to be used increasingly as synonymous with race. Schermerhorn et al. (2004:66) and Ashmore et al. (2001:71,76) reflect an international perspective and emphasise that in organisations the focus is generally on race and gender issues when diversity is dealt with. They make a distinct link between individual and group identity, and diversity, and contend that diversity is becoming a growing challenge for leaders in the USA, Canada and the European Union. This is also the case in South Africa, although the circumstances and challenges differ with respect to the power relationships between minority and majority groups. South Africa displays different complexities, because the former politically powerful minority is now a politically disempowered, numerical minority since the government has been dominated by a black majority since 1994.

The nomenclature and description of groups persist as politically and socially constructed, reflecting the context of power struggles amongst communities and the identity performance of individuals (Bauman 2004). There is widespread acknowledgement of the greater extent to which populations and consequently workforces are diversifying (Darden 2003; Lumby with Coleman 2007; Patrickson and Hartman 2001); hence the situation in South African schools is not unique and leaders with their own and group identities must be able to lead, both in and for the diversification of the teacher and learner population. For the purpose of this article, diversity will focus on ethnic, cultural and language diversity with the acknowledgement of the complexity of individuals' personal and group identities.

Diversity cannot exist without identity. Individual identity is fluid, fragmented and ambiguous and is situationally determined by time, place and circumstance, and this creates multiple identities (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips 2007:312). Verkuyten (2005) therefore argues that individual identity only becomes meaningful as a social identity when the individual associates with a group or team. Because space, place and circumstance have such an important influence on individual identity, Verkuyten indicates that the question about identity is not really 'Who am I?' but rather 'Where am I?' which determines identity in the moment. Strong identification (bonding) with origination fosters ownership, which may be behind well-motivated and dedicated workers, according to Whetten and Godfrey (1998:6). They further agree with Tajfel and Turner (1986, in Ashforth and Mael 1989) that individuals will emphasise their most distinctive characteristics, and will use these to associate themselves with a group. This association provides them with strong group identity as they will share in the power associated with the group. Few individuals are powerful on the basis of their individual identity, but identifying with a group whose identity can be associated with a dominant (powerful) culture, religion, political base or language may lend them more power, hence the contextuality of individual identities. Individuals may actively decide to which group
they wish to belong, and this identification will not be a one-sided decision. The group, which has been established already, will also have a significant say on whether or not to accept an individual.

Identity is therefore a strong relational activity. It is this distinctiveness which creates ingroups – and if leaders do not lead in an acceptable manner for their local and also their national and global community, the situation may create conflict and performance problems. The ‘ingroup’ refers to the nucleus of the organisation; a small, closely-related group associated with its leader which, for most of the time, has considerable decisionmaking power (Verkuyten 2005). Becoming part of or being excluded from the ingroup in an ethnically diverse school may therefore be important. In this way the leader, with his/her own identity, secures the membership of the ingroup and has the power to make decisions. This power may be perpetuated structurally, hence the importance of understanding how leaders lead in an ethnically diverse school.

Although each educator-leader has a personal identity, they find their identity in the context of the school predominantly by association with the group to which they belong. The discussion in this article therefore draws on social identity theory (SIT) as developed by Tajfel (1978, 1981) and Tajfel and Turner (Ashforth and Mael 1989). While many aspects of a person’s identity (age, race, sex, or ethnicity) are immutable, social identity theory suggests that an individual’s social identity can be formed, influenced and shaped by a social space as well as by their experience of it. Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman and Rust (1993) found that manipulations of seemingly irrelevant variables created common group identity sufficient to diminish or provoke negative bias arising from diversity in other social category factors. This will become evident in the discussion of the data later in the article.

SIT refers to ingroups and outgroups and, particularly in South African schools, there are already groups and people who have strong associations caused by and structured in the country’s historical context. These groups have specific powers due to their position and association with other influential people in the organisation. In an organisational context, for example a school or a department of education, power is the ability to get somebody to do something they do not particularly want to do (Jackson and Carter 2000:76) or the capacity to influence decisions (Robbins 1980). Powerful leaders will play an important role in determining membership of the ingroup as well as its advantages. The ingroups and outgroups may change when new leaders at school or national governmental level are elected. The possibility of change is whether they belong to the ingroup and has significant implications for people’s identity. Belonging to the ingroup is associated with decisionmaking power and the allocation of resources, so individuals or groups usually will not readily step down from a position of power; hence the resistance associated with any change. More significant change normally results in greater resistance, especially when individuals may lose power as a result of the change.

The theory provides for the interaction between social context (agency) and structures as well as the individual’s identity within a group identity. People tend to group themselves in social categories which they find comfortable and give meaning to their existence, and also for the power associated with their group. These groups have distinct and positive identities for the individual. During significant change processes these may lead to an ingroup attempting to maintain its ‘superiority’ over the outgroup. Such power play may culminate in the exclusion of individuals or other groups who do not fit comfortably alongside the ingroup (Mor Barak 2005). This has implications for individual identity as well as group identity, since an individual possesses both and neither can be separated nor understood without the other. They are reciprocal; each depends upon and influences the other.

Understanding the relationship between individual and group identity is important to understand the relationship between the individual and larger sociocultural systems. Tajfel (Ashmore et al. 2001:4,6) refers to this interrelation between self and group identity as social identity and does not try to separate the two concepts. Individual and group identities are therefore integrated. It is the social identities which can raise power complications for an individual: Where do I belong? With which group do I try to belong?
A phenomenological interpretive research design was used for this project. Phenomenology refers to a method, but also a philosophy of research. A phenomenological approach studies the actual, lived experience or people in a specific context. It is also associated with a specific direction where the philosopher or phenomenologist moves away from the metaphysical to come into contact with the matter of philosophy. The metaphysical and physical meet (Lichtman 2010:79). The interviews used a phenomenological approach (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2001:23), exploring the experience of the interviewees. Interpretivism is associated with the search for the truth through the eyes of the actors involved, hence the close correlation with phenomenology (Briggs and Coleman 2007:24). The school leaders in the case study are in the process of constructing meaning for themselves in this process of change, and the research looked at how they are making sense (meaning) of their personal circumstances (Henning 2004:20). The opinions and perceptions of the interviewees were taken at face value – it is reality, for them – and what is studied is the phenomenon of their identity as they experience it in a particular situation. This approach also influenced the data analysis and interpretation.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to ensure that both researchers focused on the same questions, because the aim was to obtain the respondents’ perspective about their importance as leaders with regard to identity and diversity. Individual interviews were chosen over other methods, for example narratives or life stories, to ensure some consistency of approach across the group of leaders prior to interpretive and phenomenological analyses of the data. The last two are favoured by critical race theorists. However, the limitations of critical race theory methods are that analysis tends to be less specific in its contextualisation and therefore not strongly conducive to logical argumentation and data-specific arguments, although it allows the voice of the people to be strong (Ritzer 2008; Ladson-Billings 1998, Dixson and Rousseau 2005). Semi-structured interviews were therefore selected because they provide a better structure to understand the change process. All the interviewees were members of the management team, so it was important to obtain the perspective of the whole group on the issues under investigation, not only their narratives of how they were experienced.

A qualitative design was utilised, intentionally selecting data-rich informants to interview about leadership in the school and their role in diversity leadership. The school was chosen as a case because it has a diverse learner profile and a staff composition which has diversified somewhat, but not considerably, since the all-white staff composition prior to 1994.

The school is a primary school in the Western Cape province. The majority of the population in this province is white, Afrikaans-speaking, with the largest number of coloured, Afrikaans-speaking people of any province in the country. There are fewer black people in both absolute and proportionate terms in this province than in any other. The official racial classification of white, black, Indian and coloured no longer exists, but the concepts are still used by state departments to monitor progress with regard to equal opportunity. These classifications are problematic since the concepts refer to specific groups of people with specific group identities, but do not provide sufficient space for individual identity or the opportunity to associate with one’s group identity of choice.

According to the principal, 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 socioeconomically disadvantaged, with 33 per cent of families depending on welfare money and a large percentage of single parents. The school was exclusively white until 1995. In 2007 there were 777 coloured learners, 151 black learners and 125 white learners. There were nine learners who were Indian or of another ethnic group. There were nine coloured teachers amongst a total of 34 staff members, including the principal, two deputies and five heads of department.
Individual interviews were conducted with all eight senior management team (SMT) members. Each researcher interviewed four staff members. The data were analysed to identify themes (e.g. leaders and diversified learner composition) within the main focus of diversity and leadership in schools, which were refined into codes (e.g. leader attitude) and then categorised (e.g. others and anderskleurig) (Henning 2004:105). A data check was done with interviewees by means of sending them the written data and also by a discussion in a focus group following up some of the issues in the data, conducted to determine if the interviews and the process so far had had any impact on the individuals or the management team and to make sure that the research process did not create any difficulties between them and the school. The interview schedule which guided the semi-structured interview consisted of questions to explore the respondents’ understanding of their own position as leaders in the school, how each conceived diversity and its impact on the staff members, and their conception of their own identity.

Because the theme of identity and diversity in the South African context is a sensitive issue, it was important to give sufficient attention to ethical issues. Each interviewee was assured that they would not be identified in feedback to the school or in any publication (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2001:62). This was important because diversity is a sensitive theme in South Africa and teachers may be victimised if they have different views from their colleagues. The leadership team, to which all who were involved in the interviews belonged, gave their consent and confirmed that they understood what might be the implications for them both as individuals and as a team (Cohen et al. 2001:292).

The interviewers were aware that leading questions or too many prompts could jeopardise the trustworthiness of the data. This was discussed between the two interviewers in detail before the interviews to confirm what would be used as prompts if necessary (Cohen et al. 2001:280).

In the article the different interviewees will be referred to as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Principal</td>
<td>DP1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Head</td>
<td>DP2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Dept</td>
<td>HOD1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41–50</td>
<td>senior phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Dept</td>
<td>HOD3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>intermediate phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Dept</td>
<td>HOD4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>foundation phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of Dept</td>
<td>HOD5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–40</td>
<td>intermediate phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting HOD</td>
<td>HOD2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the interviewees were white, with Afrikaans as their first language, apart from HOD2 who has English as first language. She indicated her identity as ‘coloured’. Her Afrikaans is as fluent as her English, while the Afrikaans teachers found it hard to express themselves in English. This school’s teachers and especially the leadership team are still typical of the former white schools, as indicated by Sujee (2002:27–29), Vandeyar and Killen (2006:385), and Bush and Moloi (2007).

The ‘other’: implications for identity and ingroup protection

References from most of the interviewees to an ‘other’ group or groups reflect a belief in being part of an ingroup, as identified by Tajfel using social identity theory (Terry and O’ Brien 2001:272). The use of
the ‘other’ indicates a strong feeling of belonging to and identifying with a specific group in the school. It was also identified through the interviews that the white teachers, belonging to the majority teacher group and therefore also the powerful decision-making group in the school, view the ‘other’ group or groups as of lower status, indicating a feeling of superiority in the powerful group.

DP1, as an older staff member, has specific views about his identity and status which is related to language:

No, I consider myself as a South African Suid-Afrikaner, which talk Afrikaans and love the language. I will stand up for it. I do not want it to be suppressed in this school, as this is also been some of the talks. Sometimes I feel threatened. I was afraid, not afraid, but uncomfortable at one stage. It was when I turned 50, that I thought, how would I introduce myself to 38 English children after teaching for many years Afrikaans children. Moreover, English children have a multi-culture, black children, brown children, and …. There is a different culture in the English class.

The change made him feel vulnerable. He felt threatened with the substantial numbers of ‘others’, and the protection of his identity and group is understandable from this perspective.

The same feelings of vulnerability and threat were experienced by HOD3, but she also experienced it as positive and willingly embraces it:

I cannot convey to the child what I really want to because it is not my own language. There are times that it goes wonderful and the next moment I get stuck. My vocabulary is lacking, I feel uncomfortable.

In the South African context, belonging to the ingroup in the school is important for the identity of the educators because it gives them an enduring feeling of importance and identity. The change in the country in 1996 created the feeling of searching for identity by the white educators, as expressed by DP1: “Who am I, if I am not a white Afrikaner man?” In the school they can still identify with an ingroup and feel secure because of ingroup dominance. The feelings of superiority may be sensitive in schools in the case study, because the white ingroup is not part of the larger socially dominant group in the country, the black population, and may create tensions if these feelings of dominance are unpalatable to educators from the other school groups. This possible tension was indicated by HOD2, who mentioned: “I am only there (in the leadership group) temporarily, the top structure of the school is still white, to put it that way, even though 80 per cent of the school is coloured.” She realised she belongs to the ‘other’ group, but feels that she should have a more important role and function in decisions as she belongs to the majority group – for the learners in the school and also to the majority group in the country.

During the follow-up focus group discussion of the data with the interviewees, they realised that the label ‘other’ they use to categorise respondents or a group might offend people. This sensitivity was discussed between a few staff members. During the focus group they indicated that the teachers want to work and live in harmony, but they do not really know how to achieve this. HOD5 mentioned:

We talk about others, which are not whites, as ‘anderskleurig’ [other colours – directly translated -- or non-white]. Who said that we are not the right colour? Particularly in this new political environment and the situation, it is for me the reason why people wonder nowadays which word to use. We are not really the right colour. Why do we call people ‘anderskleurig’?
This references to ‘*anderskleuriges*’ establishes ‘otherness’, or the inside and the outside group. In this school the staff majority, white, determines who the ‘others’ are. Although Gillborn (2005) ascribes the identification of the other from the perspective of white supremacy, it is possible that any dominant group with sufficient power will be able to label those not belonging to their ‘own’ group as the ‘other’. In this school’s context, the ‘other’ can be linked to the historical past of white supremacy, but in the rest of the country the ‘other’ in the eyes of the black majority is also the white minority. As social identity theory suggests, the ingroup wants to keep its exclusiveness (Ashmore, Jussim and Wilder 2001:72), and this is visible in the school.

There is some contradiction in how the interviewees refer to the ‘other’ groups and how they say they react towards them. The white teachers still refer to ‘*anderskleuriges*’ and ‘other’, but equally they say they do not see colour anymore. The discrimination between groups as explained by Tajfel (Sachdev and Bourhis 1985:415) is evident in the school and has implications for the relationships and leadership in the school. The leaders would benefit from being aware of the implicit or explicit intergroup feelings and possible discrimination to be enabled to lead and manage the situation positively. This is explained by DP1:

She (HOD2) is also the only ‘*anderskleurige*’ teacher in the school at this stage. We however never think of these things. It is here for a long time. [It is ingrained in us – author.] I doubt strongly if there are any teachers in the school, when they teach, see brown, black or white in front of them. You only see a child. The same with the teachers in the teachers’ room. I only see a new colleague for me.

This perspective of ‘colour blindness’ was also echoed by DP2 and two other HODs. DP1 refers to a female teacher as ‘*anderskleurig*’, but also said they do not see brown, black or white. This may be an indication that they say one thing, but do something else. Alternatively, to distinguish by referring to the ‘other’ is still ingrained in them, although they know this is no longer acceptable. They consciously aspire to be ‘colour blind’. Unconsciously, people are still divided into the ingroup and the outgroup or ‘other’. They say they do not see ‘other’, but they still label them as ‘other’. Walker (2005:134), using critical race theory, suggests that ‘colour blindness’ is particularly problematic in cases where racism was practised in the past. You must first see the diversity before you can react with ‘colour blindness’, so it is an indication of differentiating on the basis of ethnicity. Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick (2004) identify the ‘colour blind’ approach as another form of racism. They indicate that it is white people who tell stories to indicate that they do not see colour anymore but remain involved with activities or have attitudes which can be regarded as racist. This seems to be the case in this school, where teachers indicated they do not see colour in their learners or colleagues, but in discussion still use the concept of ‘*anderskleurig*’, which may be experienced as a form of racism by the members of the ‘*anderskleurige*’ group.

During their discussion as part of the interview feedback, interviewees used the concept of ‘*anderskleurig*’ in front of the ‘coloured’ lady, a member of the group. It was noticeable that some of the SMT members were uneasy with the use of the term during the discussion, but it seems that not even the hyper-awareness created during a discussion with a researcher about identity and diversity altered the language they used for people working together, or not, as a school team.

**Understanding of diversity**

Respondents had neither clear understanding, conceptualisation, nor definition of diversity. Two of the teachers asked, “What is diversity?” when they heard the researchers wanted to talk to them about it. As researchers, we did not give them any leads on what to expect: we wanted to hear what they understand and think about when they hear the term. There was also limited similarity between the eight respondents in their understanding and use of concepts to describe diversity. This was a strong indication for us as researchers that, although working in this diverse environment, as leaders in the school they are not attentive; nor do they pay much attention to understanding or doing something
about it. As far as we could detect, there were no problems or conflict in evidence in the school relating to racial or ethnical issues.

There were different contentions about the concept -- on a continuum from having no idea what diversity is, to having very specific opinions. For example, the DPI’s comment on the direct question “What is diversity?” is typical of the initial response from most respondents:

Look, we work all day with this without recognising we are busy with it. Yes, this is again a thing that happen subconscious. Without using the word or that we have give thought to it. We just trust that, because they are part and parcel of the school, that we should have the necessary representation on the management team. As long as this management team takes the lead, this will be the case. I mean to say, we do not even negotiate about this.

The speaker believes that a representative SMT will come about without taking any specific action, since in the school there are black, Indian and coloured staff. This is a strong indication that the management group, representing the ingroup with the decisionmaking power, seemingly subconsciously attempts to protect the ingroup. It does not ‘negotiate’ on a conscious and planned level its avoidance of decisionmaking to achieve greater equality. It may not want to allow the ‘other’ to become members of the ingroup.

His further explanation of diversity was the following:

One nation and everybody is together; diversity is in nature, for example, insects. It is in the leadership style and personalities of people, each person is unique. It is representative of the country and everybody must have a say. The variety of the different races.

A range of different concepts is implied. The first concept, referring to insects, is exactly the kind of scientific taxonomy which Litvin (1997) excoriates. The respondent links diversity in nature to race, and during the interview extrapolates to the nation’s history when, under apartheid, spurious scientific justification was provided for the classification of different races. This might be a limited or restricted understanding of diversity, but it is reality for the respondent and may influence his leadership in the school. This specific notion of diversity is at one end of the continuum, and recalls social identity theory’s suggestion that members of a socially heterogeneous team may find this idea difficult to integrate their diverse backgrounds, values and norms, and to work together (Jehn, Northcraft and Neale 1999).

HOD2 introduced a link between difference and inequality. She believed it is obvious that there are differences between people which result in inequality and that, according to legislation, all schools and companies must diversify their personnel. Her conclusion was that the following:

The main aim of our country is nation building and bringing the groups together, and the only way we are going to get over this legacy of Apartheid is if people interact with each other and that basically to me is what diversity should entail, that people of different groups, religions, whatever interacting.

HOD3 initially associated diversity with race only, but later added culture and religion. A distinction was drawn between diversity and variety. Variety was suggested to be the different age phases in the school but also included culture. This response is typical of the variation and some confusion in defining diversity in the interviews.

HOD5 gave a wide definition of diversity:

Differences in people with regard to colour, but not necessarily colour. Language, abilities. There are different levels of diversity; this is not necessarily only their colour. It could also refer to their levels of ability, anything. It is colour and language, abilities. I cannot think so quickly about more diversity. Talents, which people have.
This is a more complex conceptualisation and identifies multiple levels of differences between people.

The range of answers illustrates the multiplicity of thinking in the new context. Previous conceptions of diversity based on racial classification sit alongside conceptions which view diversity as related to a much wider range of dimensions of difference, and locate it within systems of equality and inequality. This diversity is evident in the identities of individuals, but also of ingroups and outgroups. They influence social and other interactions between groups which play out between ingroups and others in the school (Jehn et al. 1999).

DP2 stated that it is good that a non-white teacher is serving on the SMT, because she can speak on behalf of the ‘other’ and bring their perspectives. This raises the issue of why it is necessary that representatives of ‘other’ groups, mostly minorities, should speak on their behalf. Does this assume that no person not belonging to an ‘other’ group can understand well enough to be able to speak for them? If so, does this mean that individuals and groups cannot know and understand each other sufficiently to be able to speak on their behalf, to defend or promote understanding of ‘others’ situation? Those who have experienced life as lived by a particular group, of course, have particular legitimacy in communicating that experience. However, if the responsibility for understanding and building on such perspectives is left to group members, this may imply a kind of separateness and mono-perspective reflecting only one’s own ethnic or cultural group, gender or religion. Thus intergroup bias may arise, with ingroup members viewing themselves in a more positive light than outgroup members (Turner 1982).

The interviews (especially HOD2) indicate that ‘fear’ of the other is a reality, despite the respondents expressing a desire to change:

You are forced in a direction. You had no option whether you agree with this [new setup]. We had no real choice. This makes it difficult. But, this has the result that you become fully grown. You became a richer person.

Then you think a little bit wider. Take off the eye-caps and think a bit wider. Not only what will work for me. Let us look after each other. We have to look after the students. Forget about yourself. We are afraid we lose ourselves. I do not know. Protect, but ….

An oscillation between fear and self-protection and a willingness to change is evident.

**Theorising diversity, identity and leadership**

The leadership of the school’s SMT may be described as a protectionist, emancipatory, leadership approach. Leaders are trying to protect their own identity and their ingroup superiority, and to maintain their powerful decisionmaking position. Simultaneously, however, they realise they are the leaders for a new generation of children and that they are responsible for emancipating them, to lead towards equality and quality education in a fast-changing, diverse society. This is a difficult balancing act. They are leaders with their own identity, but a challenged identity in the broader South African context.

The leadership team members in the case study are aware of ‘political and policy speak’. They know the policies demand there be no discrimination, and equality and equal opportunity. Their emphasis on the ‘colour-blind’ approach sounds sincere and they strive to obey the Constitutional principles, but a ‘colour-blind’ approach in itself has the potential be discriminatory. As one of the HODs mentioned, some learners are less equal than others as there are Xhosa-speaking learners in the school who can hardly understand Afrikaans or English but, because of the emphasis on the democratic principles of freedom of choice, their parents want them to attend this school. Thus ‘colour-blindness’ and equal opportunity is politically correct and exemplary of an emancipatory and empowerment approach; it is less clear if the teachers really think it is the right thing to do, as they continue to convey messages of ‘we and them’ or ‘us and the other’.
The slow change – a form of resistance and protectionism – towards including ‘other’ groups in this small but important management team in the South African context is more sensitive than in many other social contexts because of the history of apartheid. In other social contexts, especially in an informal environment such as a sports club or a church congregation, there will always be an ingroup and an outgroup, but they will probably be from the same ethnic group and so less significant. As soon as the social context becomes formal, and especially in a public organisation with policies regulating the situation, the ingroup and outgroup become politicised and the protection of the ingroup becomes a potentially racial issue.

The South African history of enforced separation may have had the consequence that separation is inborn in everybody’s consciousness; it may take much longer to change this inherent attitude than a few years of politically enforced policies. An important perspective for South Africa is that social identity theory is not only a local phenomenon, but also a human global phenomenon (Hofstede 1997; Mor Barak 2005). The ‘us’ and the ‘other’ persists, from the individual’s or the group’s perspective of power in a school or a country, and will probably do so in the future.

The human phenomenon of social identity is also captured in the Constitution which recognises the principle of freedom of association (Section 18, Bill of Rights), so individuals and groups may associate (a form of protectionism) with their ingroup. However, this must not be to the detriment of other individuals or groups but instead include an emancipatory and empowerment approach, ensuring equality and quality for all.

Acknowledging or recognising diversity involves acknowledging similarities as well as differences amongst both individuals and groups. As soon as diversity is accepted, especially from a political and social constructivist perspective, it may be linked to power for a group or individual and their consequent potential dominance. Dominance leads to the conception of ‘us’ and the ‘other’, which again has negative implications for harmonious living in a diverse society. It is therefore a complex sequence of relatedness and implication which may be difficult for school leaders to understand, manage or accept; but with deeper understanding and openness by leaders, it may result in more effective leadership in diversity.

Endnotes

1. This article will still use the racially determined concepts of black, white, Indian and coloured as used before 1994 in South Africa in order to understand and explain the situation of the leaders in the case study. All concepts associated with race and racism, including non-white, have specific historical and especially negative stereotypes attached to them. Non-white in this case refers to all people that were not previously classified as white. A range of objections may be raised in relation to all racial categorisations of groups; hence it is nearly impossible to use any term associated with race which will satisfy all. The categorisations in play before 1994 are used here as a heuristic to enable understanding of their negative legacy.

2. We prefer to use the concept of ethnicity rather than race, since the latter is predominantly a socially structured concept with many negative connotations. It suggests a basis in biology which is misleading. The concept of ethnicity, linked to the diversity of languages and living cultures of the people in South Africa, is an attempt to navigate away from the past of racially based diversity. Although ethnicity and race refer to the same diversity and are often used synonymously, ethnicity, with its association with culture including language, is used in this article to emphasise the sensitive nuances in the diversity of people’s inherited and culturally acquired identities which cannot be captured in a simple way by the former racial divisions.
References


Corresponding author
Jan Heystek
Department of Education Policy Studies
Stellenbosch University -
021 808 2877
Heystek@sun.ac.za
E-mail: heystek@sun.ac.za

Corresponding author
Jacky Lumby
Southampton School of Education
University of Southampton