

# POWER STRUCTURES IN EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF POST-COLONIAL AND POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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## ABSTRACT

The incidents of claims of racism against the Visual Art department during the last two years has motivated the author to research the differences in perceptions and expectations that could exist within such a multicultural and multifaceted learning-teaching situation. This type of difference of opinion can often be very complex and emotionally loaded, when taking into consideration a racially divided past. A curriculum is planned and performed from a particular viewpoint that is affected by the educational culture of the university, which is still, despite the post-apartheid present, predominantly male, white and Afrikaans (a language developed from Dutch). Course content is offered in either English or Afrikaans, with the political baggage attendant upon those languages. Because perceptions regarding power structures are often subtle and subconsciously ingrained, examining the colonial and apartheid past and how that inform our perceptions and reactions towards others is of the utmost importance. The critical theory approach is used as a theoretical framework for this study.

*Keywords: Power relations, education, colonialism, apartheid, South Africa*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a PhD study which investigates perceptions and expectations of lecturers and students at previously Afrikaans universities in South Africa. Power relations are one of the aspects investigated in the PhD study and discussed in this paper.

Foucault (1998:93) remarks that “power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere”. We cannot escape power relations. “[P]ower is not an institution, not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (Foucault, 1978:93). Power often comes in a subtle form; one that is mobile and transitory and that forms a dense web with the potential to shift society, fracturing unities physically and mentally.

The agenda for critical theory is to change and empower. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:27) critical theory in education seeks to establish how educational institutions maintain or reduce inequality that is again reproduced in society; how power is produced and reproduced through education; who benefits from this power; and how legitimate these preferences are. These actions, which might be suppressed or taking place unconsciously or subliminally, could perpetuate a system to sustain the status quo of empowered and disempowered.

A group of twenty black, coloured and white students at the Arts Department were interviewed individually as well as in focal group discussions. The complex nature and the relatively unexplored area of multicultural teaching and learning in South Africa require an inductive approach where theories could emerge in the process of re-examining and repeated data collection (Seale, 2004:241). Comments from students are included in this paper.

## 2 COLONIAL AND APARTHEID POWER STRUCTURES

Giroux (1985:xxiv) comments on Freire’s work, stating that “a critical sensibility is an extension of a historical sensibility”. He emphasises the importance of the historical by saying that “to understand the present, in both institutional and social terms, educators must place all pedagogical context in a historical

context in order to see clearly their genesis and development”.

The domination of one group over the other predated the colonial and apartheid era. Cole (2004:582), in examining the master/slave dialectic, notes Hegel’s reference to ancient forms of domination: from ancient Oriental cultures to Roman societies up to the German Middle Ages. The colonial expansion was not only geographical, but what Said (1994) calls “positioned superiority”, where knowledge and culture were also influenced by colonialism. The identity construction of the colonised were adjusted and manipulated by the colonisers. Both the colonised and the coloniser’s identities were formed in the process. Hierarchy and typologies of more and less worthy citizens in society were formed between the coloniser and the colonised, and thus the concept of *them* and *us* developed.

Smith (1999:23) emphasises that because of the disruptions in cultures, colonisation brought fragmentation and often disorder to the colonised. He also argues that the fragmented postmodern world has its roots in colonisation (Smith, 1999:28). The remains of fragmented and fractured identity are also visible in class situations. A student remarked in an interview, “I am losing it [my culture] and in a way losing myself and forgetting a lot about myself.” Another student mentioned, “I have lost much of my Xhosa culture because I went to a ‘coloured’ [brown] school. All the culture was lost to me; I created a new township identity.” Categorising and stereotyping is also visible in the classroom. A student remarked, “Being black is too much in my face; I am first seen as a black Zulu woman then as an individual. My fellow students already have an expectation of what I am.” Identity transformation always involves processes of power. The individual has the power to define him/herself, form identity stereotypes of others, to contest or resist stereotypes and to accept social conceptions (Ratele & Duncan, 2007). However, despite the power of the individual, it is in the interest of a dominant group to keep social hierarchies in place.

Fanon (2006) stresses that the colonial experience was internalised and implanted in the subsoil of both mind and body. During apartheid, colonial supremacy continued, but with an additional focus on ethnicity and colour. Public institutions were separated on the basis of colour. A child from white and black parents would have been classified as coloured, which means the child had to attend a coloured school and not a white or black school. Ratele and Duncan (2007:101) emphasise the embodiment of racism in South Africa, especially with the main focus on skin colour. They refer to Foucault who suggested that even when a system is unjust, people can construct themselves to fit in the mould, therefore hand over the body to access power (Ratele & Duncan, 2007:98). An example in South Africa was where people apply to be reclassified from black to ‘coloured’ (brown) or ‘coloured’ to white. The colour differentiation white, coloured (brown) and black gave access to different levels of power. The white body became associated with the highest hierarchy in power and black the lowest.

Fanon (2006:63) explains his experience of colonial education as identifying with white in a very superficial manner. He argues that because books available in schools projected white as the colour of the hero, the black child associated with the hero in the story, even though the hero was white. He saw himself as white and only later when he grew up he would realise that the bad (black) character was referring to him as a black person. Fanon (2006:89) refers to this situation as “cultural imposition” where, because of domination, another culture is adopted as one’s own (e.g. as a “white mask”). A psychological battle developed in the minds of the colonised because the meaning of white was attached to what is good (Ratele & Duncan, 2007:127). Traces of these types of psychological scars are still visible today. For example, in a class situation a black student mentioned that she first wanted to “win the war” to show that she can do what white students can do before going back to her own culture for inspiration. Another student who was trying to cope with his black identity in a white-dominated environment stated, “I took many pictures of myself to express ‘African anger’.”

During apartheid, language was used as a tool of oppression. At present indigenous African languages still have to bow to the domination of English as the leading global language, and to Afrikaans as a

remnant of the previous regime's language policies (Maake, 1992). Afrikaans was and still is associated with domination because black African learners were previously forced to learn through the medium of Afrikaans at school. Their grievance about this state of affairs gave rise to the major student uprising in Soweto in 1976. In her study conducted at the writing centre of the University of Cape Town,, Hutchings (2006:254) refers to three difficulties students experience, namely (1) not being aware of the expectations of an academic environment because of a lack of previous exposure to academic discourses in school; (2) being aware of expectations but with the fear of not meeting those expectations becoming overpowering; and (3) experiencing language difficulties that result in gaps in understanding. Hutchings's study also suggests that perceptions are gender specific, with female students experiencing a feeling of inferiority especially when the lecturer is a white male (2006:257).

When the history of the colonised was recorded it excluded the voice of the colonised. African indigenous knowledge (AIK) was ignored and could not, claim academic value. Universities in South Africa were established with the notion of the European as the knowledgeable and supreme power. A universal and fixed concept of what legitimate knowledge entails was formed. The University of Stellenbosch currently endorses critical thinking and deconstruction of ideas, but often within the Western framework of knowledge production. The legitimacy of the Western knowledge system as the norm is not often examined. The reality is that a knowledge system does not come into being through the efforts of one group – it is a conglomeration of many ideas that form a system over many years. Tarc (2005) calls the western knowledge system an illusion of stability.

Currently in the Visual Arts course community interaction programmes are introduced with the aim of also applying knowledge to communities in need. It is, moreover, a way to integrate different cultural groups in a class situation. Biko (2004:23) warns against artificial integration, where the hierarchy of white as knowledgeable and black as needy is perpetuated. This type of integration can be an illusion and often provides a “vague satisfaction for the guilt-stricken whites” (Biko, 2004:23). Biko (2004:25) urges whites to refrain from solving black people's problems and to concentrate on the evils of white racism in their own personal life and community. This statement highlights the complexities of cross-cultural research such as this study.

The discourse around post-colonial theory is a reaction to the past. Bhabha (1994:66) highlights how the discourse continues to stereotype the colonised as separate, as the ‘Other’. Spivak (1993) urges an awareness of the limits of expression in language and in culture when it comes to colonial discourse. Writers like Said (1994), Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1993) opened up dialogue that led to an alternative to post-colonial discourse, highlighting the view from the colonised subject's perspective, thus creating space for the colonised voice. Currently, post-colonial theory has a strong focus in the Arts faculty of the university. A Muslim student remarked that the post-colonial theory has put the focus on her as the outsider more than it has built bridges between her and her classmates. Teaching post-colonial theory could easily perpetuate the notion of the Other, especially in a class where most students are white and the Others are brown, black, or Indian. The way it is presented and by whom could make a huge difference. One could then ask: Who benefits from post-colonial theory as presented from a Western viewpoint? Tarc refers to Derrida and Spivak (2005:846) who advocate “rethinking education in response to the Other and in encountering the Other in ‘Others’ ”. Haddour (2006:xxiv) refers to Bhabha who also criticises post-colonial studies that have failed to acknowledge the threat of the power of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism for post-colonial nations.

Because of the strong influence of Western capitalism, the dominant group are still those who are economically well off. Politicians often use the example of the black elite class that has developed in South Africa over the last few years as an example for the poor – something they can strive for. The small percentage of elite black and white people is still living in a first world environment next to a struggling third world majority. The divide is not based on colour, but on economic factors. MacDonald (2006:160) describes the current domination of global capitalism as global colonialism (neo-colonialism) with new

rules. Apartheid had no legitimacy, but ironically, global apartheid in a different form is regarded as legitimate (MacDonald, 2006).

### 3 EDUCATION AND POWER STRUCTURES

Giroux (1985:xv) argues that the new sociology of education challenges the claim that knowledge is objective. He states that knowledge is a “particular representation of the dominant culture, one that was constructed through a selective process of emphasis and exclusions”. Scott refers to Apple (2008:69), who argues that texts for educational purposes are shaped to be politically acceptable, for instance in terms of meeting the demands of the economy. He states that texts have multiple interpretations, but some are more preferred or have greater influence. According to Weedon (1987) education is geared towards the requirements of a specific educational institution, informed by the values, modes and preferences of the dominant group. He remarks that “at the heart of the mechanism of power lies the education system”.

Newman’s discussion (1994: 176) of theories of cultural pluralism, referred to by Sleeter and Grant, includes explanations of, amongst others, assimilation and amalgamation models as well as classical and modified cultural pluralism. Newman (1994:177) uses the formula “ $A + B + C = A$ ” to represent the assimilation model, where the minority is dominated by the majority, and ‘A’ represents the majority. Amalgamation, where all the groups are synthesized into a new group (Newman, 1994: 178), is represented by “ $A + B + C = D$ ”. All the groups should be of equal status, and be willing to amalgamate, if this theory is to be successful in practice. Classical cultural pluralism theory states that cultural groups maintain their identities (“ $A + B + C = A + B + C$ ”); and modified cultural pluralism expands on this by stating that cultural diversity will continue to exist in spite of attempts to assimilate or amalgamate (1994: 178 – 179). The current situation in the Art department, where black students are in a minority, reflects Newman’s theory of assimilation, where a minority is dominated by the majority. Any attempts to change this to an amalgamation model of plurality will be problematic, because of status complexities caused by political and historical systems in the past. A milieu that could be conducive to creativity, and where the various culture groups would maintain their uniqueness while integrating on an equal basis, seems to be possible only when the classical theory of cultural pluralism is followed.

The curriculum in education is a device used as a framework for the purpose of shaping student development. According to Barnett (2008) there is a curriculum within a curriculum. What is on paper and how that plays out in everyday actions could be different. A curriculum that is planned and structured from a particular perspective, or that uses languages such as Afrikaans or English, could be experienced as racist. Even though the policies and laws of apartheid in South Africa have been demolished on paper, people’s perceptions do not automatically change with that. An ingrained perception is often not consciously visible because it is taken as the norm. Perceptions therefore influence in subtle and complex ways the writing of a curriculum. Barnett (2004: 249, 2000: 264) suggests that recognising complexity in the “dimensions of human being[s]” within a multicultural and global world could be the way forward.

Informing the curriculum could include looking at student-centred learning where the background of the student is taken into consideration and used as themes in projects or as examples. Freire (1983:59) remarks that to enable student-centred teaching and learning, the poles of lecturer-student need to be reconciled so that “both are simultaneously teachers and students”. Apart from the knowledge and skills that are developed in education, one should also look at the person studying or lecturing (Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001). There is a relationship between knowing and being (Barnett, Parry & Coate, 2001:445).

Leonardo (2004) advocates neo-abolitionist pedagogy, which suggests that lecturers and students work together to name, as well as to reflect on historical and current context, and to dismantle supremacy discourses of whiteness. Neo-abolitionism does not entail denying whiteness (Leonardo, 2004:132), but white lecturers and students, and lecturers and students of colour have to work together actively to unpack multiculturalism. Leonardo (2004:132) emphasises that global pedagogy and neo-abolitionism “are not only acts of free speech but of praxis”. Freire (1975:144) suggests a problem-posing educational

approach, in which students become active participants in creating and negotiating knowledge, and are not relegated to a position of only receiving knowledge. Freire (1975:143) refers to the negative effects of “banking education” where the student becomes the container and therefore “adapt[s] to the world of oppression”.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

The power relations and structures created by the colonial and apartheid past have left traces in South Africa in general. Tertiary educational institutions have not escaped this challenge. In an Afrikaans university such as the University of Stellenbosch the legacy of apartheid lies more heavily on its shoulders because of associations with domination in the recent past. An understanding is needed of the consequences of the colonial and apartheid eras in order to grasp the complexity of contrasting perceptions and expectations that can spiral into bigger issues if they are not opened up and discussed. Lecturers and students have to reflect actively on misunderstandings that could have been influenced by power relations of the past. The charges of racism against the Art department highlighted the distance between people’s misconceptions and misunderstandings, because each of the parties involved, both students and lecturers, believed that they had a valid point. One believed it was racist and the other not. An important insight in the study was that there was no agreement on what the word racism means to the parties involved, which emphasises the complexity and diversity of the issue. Opening up the matter for discussion in the department could expose subtle power relations still prominent in the everyday interactions between people of different race or colour. In view of the fact that colour and race have played such a big role in the past, it is not surprising that people prefer to hide their fear and uneasiness in this situation. In the South African history it also proved to be in the interest of the dominant group to keep sensitive issues unexposed.

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The author would like to express her thanks to the NRF Critical Professionalism initiative who has sponsored the research presented in this paper.