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# Asymmetrical relations of knowing: pedagogy, discourse and identity in a de(re)segregated girls' school

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## Abstract

Drawing on post-structuralist theorising of discourse, identity and power, this paper examines the relations of knowing in one Grade 10 English class in a de(re)segregated suburban girls' school in Johannesburg where the teacher and the learners come from divergent social backgrounds. I present an analysis of the teacher's dominant discourses, constructed in dialogue with the learners, and focus on the ways in which these position the girls. I argue that while on the one hand positioning learners as valuable contributors to and agents in classroom discourse, the teacher simultaneously constructs an ideal learner/subject that excludes most of the learners in her class. The latter is informed by the teacher's constitution of her own partial everyday knowledge as 'knowledge of the world' which shapes the dominant classroom script. Selected learners construct and insert counter-discourses, resisting the teacher's positioning and her knowledge construction. However, such discourses are not fully taken up by the teacher whom I argue reproduces racialised asymmetrical relations of knowing in the classroom.

## Introduction

In continuity with the apartheid past, ex model-C, or previously white schools, at present continue to be perceived as representing the aspirational standard in South African schooling. This perception is enabled by the current context of crisis in quality provision of schooling to the majority of South Africans (Chisholm, 2008; Fleisch, 2008). To the extent that previously white schools produce successful matriculants with highly valued university exemptions, such schools remain largely uninterrogated spaces – the 'shining lights' in an otherwise failing system. Thus, despite the history of apartheid racism, and the profound continuing impact of this history on constructions of identity and lived experiences, engaging with issues of difference and democratic values is not seen as a priority in redressing inequality in the South African schooling system. While addressing the politics of difference may seem justifiably backgrounded in the context of widespread educational

failure, I would argue that the consequences of neglecting difference for the experiences of black learners who continue to be ‘othered’ in the post-apartheid schooling system (Makoe, 2009; McKinney, 2010; Soudien, 2007), cannot be ignored.

In 2005, I conducted fieldwork at a desegregated suburban girls’ school in Johannesburg where black working class learners have replaced the previously white middle class learner body, i.e. a resegregated school (Orfield, 2004). While dismayed at the powerful assimilationist discourses operating in the school which frequently positioned the girls as ‘outsiders’ who were expected to ‘fit in or leave’ (McKinney, 2010), I was simultaneously intrigued by the respectful positioning of the top streamed Grade 10 class whom I observed over many hours in their English classes. Apart from classroom observations, I conducted group interviews with volunteer learners from this class ranging across a number of topics from their experiences at the school to their linguistic repertoires. A profoundly disturbing moment in these interviews was the (re)production of a troubling narrative of racial knowing by one of the learners:

Maria: But guys think about it, think about it. Us as black people, what do we really have to say that we are proud of? (*Dissenting overlapping speech*) White people have the Renaissance. No, no, no, of being black. White people have the Renaissance, have buildings, they have all these other (*Dissenting overlapping speech*) For us it's like (*All talk at once*) No, I'm just saying that (*Dissenting overlapping speech*) It's sad because I can't say I have something that's mine. (16 May 2005, Group interview 3).

This moment and the ensuing discussion provoked me to conduct a close analysis of the discursively constructed relations of ‘knowing’ in the Grade 10 English class. Drawing on post-structuralist theorising of discourse, identity and power, in this paper I examine the kind of learner/subject constructed in classroom discourse, highlighting the constitution of an idealised subject in relation to social positions such as race, class and gender, who is quite different from the learners in this class. In doing so, I analyse the ways in which the girls are positioned by the dominant classroom script drawing attention to the multiplicity of power relations as some learners struggle to insert their voices into this script while others ascribe legitimacy to the teacher’s ‘local knowledge’ (Canagarajah, 2005). The paper concludes with a consideration of missed pedagogical opportunities for disrupting asymmetrical relations of knowing, and the consequences for the learners of the teacher’s dominant discourses.

## Race and relations of knowing in schooling: culture, identity and pedagogy

In a recent analysis of the history of school desegregation in South Africa, Soudien (2007, p.439) argues that “contact in the South African school is structured around fundamentally asymmetrical relations of ‘knowing’ between groups”, where knowing is defined as “the exercise of power of those who determine the conditions of knowledge and its production and reproduction in a particular context” (Soudien, 2007, p.443, drawing on Miles, 1989). Soudien delineates three phases in this history: firstly the desegregation of private religious schools in 1976–1990, secondly the Clase years ending apartheid schooling 1990–1993, and finally the post-1994 democratic era. The analysis reveals that it was only during the early phase of desegregation involving the opening of private church schools to black learners that there was a brief moment of self reflection and critical introspection within white schools. This was represented in the self-critical voices of Brother McGurk and Sister Michael who called for a consideration of processes of enculturation thus acknowledging the partial cultural scripts operating in white schools. Theirs not being the dominant voice, this moment was neither fully realised nor sustained (Soudien, 2007). In contrast to this, the desegregation process of state schools under Minister of Education Clase was expressly assimilationist with its rule of maintaining the white numerical majority in desegregated schools and its injunction that “the cultural ethos of such schools should remain intact” (Carrim and Soudien, 1999, p.157). However, the lack of a tradition of school ethnographies in South African educational research means that we have limited research evidence on the cultural ethos of (previously) white schools in South Africa,<sup>1</sup> and a lack of research on classroom practices which show how the cultural ethos is being constructed.

A growing body of educational research in the USA argues for acknowledging the centrality of cultural practices and identities in learning, particularly in the context of the under-achievement of learners from non-dominant groups (e.g. cultural modelling Lee, 2000, 2008; funds of knowledge, Moll, Amanti, Neffe, and González, 1992; Moll, 2000, culturally responsive pedagogy, Ladson-Billings, 1995 and cultural repertoires, Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003). While the researchers have different emphases,

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<sup>1</sup> See Dolby (2001) for a significant exception.

all of the approaches attempt to do two things: firstly to broaden what counts as legitimate knowledge in the classroom (e.g. in the recognition of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) as a rule governed and established linguistic variety and of the value of bidialectalism for students); and secondly to acknowledge and use the diverse resources learners bring with them (including their linguistic and semiotic repertoires as well as other kinds of knowledge) in their acquisition of new knowledge in school. Moll *et al.* (1992) outline an approach which enables teachers who come from different social backgrounds from their learners to learn about the social and cultural backgrounds of their learners so that this knowledge might be used to bridge the gap between ways of knowing at home and in schools. They use the term 'funds of knowledge' to capture the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (1992, p.133). Irizarry (2007) sounds an important cautionary note that some culturally responsive approaches do not go far enough in avoiding cultural essentialism and in acknowledging the hybridity of learners' identities, social and cultural practices. However, this work has produced evidence of the benefits of taking seriously teacher and learner identities, if we are to disrupt both under-achievement patterns and asymmetrical ways of knowing in schools (see also McKinney and Norton, 2008).

Focusing specifically on the English classroom, (and drawing on a critical literacy perspective), Freebody, Luke and Gilbert, (1991, p.436) argue that "the selective representation of culture is overt in literacy and literature lessons in school." It is the acknowledgment of this heavy cultural load in English curriculum content that has informed debates on what the purpose of school English should be and on efforts to broaden the canonical texts selected for study. In some cases language and literature lessons have provided a productive space for the development of new pedagogical approaches which draw explicitly on the learners' cultural worlds as tools for the mastery of disciplinary techniques (e.g. Carol Lee's (2000) 'cultural modelling' mentioned above). More often than not however, as Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson (1995, p.455) observe, the teacher presents his/her own "internalised cultural discourse" or "cultural habitus" as the norm or as knowledge of the world. That the partiality of this knowledge remains unacknowledged leads to the kind of asymmetries of knowing which Soudien writes about.

## Theoretical framework

I conceptualise the classroom as a complex discursively and semiotically constructed social space where the teacher and learners engage in a range of interactions. Following Bakhtin's (1981) notion of social heteroglossia, Gutierrez and Stone (2000) argue that classrooms are inherently multi-voiced dialogical spaces, "regardless of the dominance of the official script" (2000, p.157). Thus classrooms are sites of multiple and competing discourses. My analysis of discourses within the classroom is informed by post-structuralist theory (Davies, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991; Davies and Harré, 1990, Foucault, 1981, 1990, Weedon, 1997). Drawing on Foucault, discourse is defined as

. . .ways of organising meaning that are often, though not exclusively, realised through language. Discourses are about the creation and limitation of possibilities, they are systems of power/knowledge (*pouvoir/savoir*) within which we take up subject positions. (Pennycook, 1994, p.28).

Weedon argues that "to speak is to assume a subject position within discourse and to become *subjected* to the power and regulation of the discourse" (1987, p.119). My analysis probes the discourses (power/knowledge) which the teacher draws on in constructing the classroom script. I further analyse how the teacher takes up her subject positions and examine how the learners take up subject positions within the teacher's dominant discourses as well as in other, alternative discourses.

Identity or subjectivity (the preferred term) is conceptualised as discursively constituted, multiple and in process, fluid, and often contradictory, rather than as fixed and unitary. Weedon presents subjectivity as a conscious site of struggle between competing discourses in which the individual plays an active role. This struggle, she argues, enables individuals to resist being positioned in particular ways and to produce new meanings from conflicting discourses. Agency thus conceptualised relies on Foucauldian notions of power as productive, relational and distributed, "exercised from innumerable points" (Foucault, 1990, p.94) and dependent on a "multiplicity of points of resistance" (Foucault, 1990, p.96). Paechter (2001, p.46) reminds us that this "distributed nature of power also makes it clear that institutions and practices may be simultaneously repressive and liberating in their operation". Viewing identity as multiple and shifting across time and space, and performed using different semiotic resources, enables me to deconstruct the uneven processes of assimilation in a desegregated school where girls both participate in and disrupt dominant discourses at different times. Like the classroom, the school

itself is a site of multiple and often competing discourses with dominant discourses (and thus cultural practices) shifting in different spaces.

## The research site: girls' school

The school is situated to the North East of central Johannesburg and accommodates about 750 learners. While previously a white English medium of instruction school catering for a predominantly Jewish intake, the school now accommodates black learners who live mainly in townships and the inner-city, and most of whom are from working class backgrounds, with less than half paying the annual school fees of R5 500.<sup>2</sup> Learners are predominantly African with about 25 Indian and 'coloured' learners and about two or three white learners in the school. My focus was on two classes of Grade 10 learners (15–16-year-olds). Most of these learners (57/69) reported linguistic repertoires of between three and seven languages. Learners typically had either a Sotho or Nguni<sup>3</sup> language as their home language with English as an additional language. The school began desegregating in 1991 and remains English medium. In 1991, its enrollment was down to 385 learners. To a great extent, opening its doors to black learners has ensured the survival of the school, situated in an area in which the population is aging and which accommodates another highly elite, private girls' school. Changes in staffing were less dramatic: at the time of fieldwork, the principal, a white woman, had been at the school for more than 30 years, while the more recently appointed deputy head was an Indian woman. The teaching staff were majority white women with a few white men (22/34) while black staff (three African, six Indian and three coloured teachers) made up the minority.

## Methodology

Data presented in this paper are drawn from a larger research project exploring language, identity and processes of inclusion and exclusion in four

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<sup>2</sup> The school fees were R5 500 (about USD550) per learner per annum and only 50 per cent of learners paid full or partial fees. Low school fees was further cited as one of the reasons learners chose the school (ex-model C school fees can be as high as R20 000 per annum).

<sup>3</sup> The Sotho group includes three mutually intelligible languages, Tswana, Sotho and Pedi while the Nguni group includes the mutually intelligible languages of Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele. All of these are official languages in South Africa.

desegregated suburban schools in Johannesburg. The research design drew on traditions of school ethnography from sociology of education (Gillborn, 1995), and particularly more recent studies taking up a post-structuralist approach (Hey, 1997; Youdell, 2003, 2004), as well as ethnography of communication (Duff, 2002; Rampton, 1995, 2006). Data collection tools included observation (captured in field notes and through selected video-recording), regular group interviews with self-selected learners (captured in audio recordings), the completion of learner surveys and language network diagrams, and interviews with selected staff members. In this paper I focus on teacher and learner discourses produced in the English classroom of the ‘top’ Grade 10 class at one girls’ school. I spent one and a half days a week at the school for the first half of the academic year in 2005. During this time, I followed two classes, the one streamed as the top academic class and the other as second from the bottom (there were five Grade 10 classes).<sup>4</sup>

I analysed the data using the tools of poststructuralist discourse analysis as applied to classroom discourse (PDA, Baxter, 2002, 2008; Duff, 2002). PDA is concerned with the ways in which knowledge, social relations and identities are constituted through discourse and is self-conscious of the fact that analysis always foregrounds the researcher’s meanings and presents only one of multiple possible readings of the data. PDA draws attention to the highly complex and ambiguous nature of classroom discourse as it unfolds moment-by-moment as well as “the ways in which speakers. . . constantly shift between positions of powerfulness or powerlessness within competing cultural and educational discourses,” (Baxter, 2008, p.69). This enabled me to analyse the multiple and dynamic relations of power in the classroom and the ways in which these feed into uneven processes of assimilation.

I turn now to my analysis of classroom discourse focusing on the English classroom. The ‘top’ class consisted of 35 15–16-year-old black girls, mostly African with one Indian and two coloured learners. The teacher, Ms Smith,<sup>5</sup> is ex-Zimbabwean, white, monolingual English, middle-class, middle-aged, and lives in the suburbs. I begin the analysis with a segment (15 minutes) of an extended whole class discussion and end with a brief analysis of a series of episodes from a range of reading lessons where one learner attempts to insert

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<sup>4</sup> While the particular extracts from classroom discourse analysed in this paper were not discussed in the learner interviews, my analysis is inevitably influenced by discussions with learners on related topics.

<sup>5</sup> All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

local knowledge into the classroom script. Throughout this analysis I am interested in foregrounding the discursive positioning of learners and of the teacher as well as the forms of cultural and local knowledge exchanged.

## Lesson overview and turn-taking

Observing the class who were conventionally seated in single desks arranged one behind the other in rows facing the front, I noticed many girls confidently bidding for turns to speak through hand raising or polite interruption (e.g. *Miss? Could you say miss?*). The teacher rarely initiates responses through direct questioning (typical in Initiation Response Feedback/Evaluation, IRF/E classroom discourse structure, Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) but rather chairs a discussion in which her voice nevertheless dominates. The teacher takes 45/92 conversational turns while the girls collectively (35 in the class) take 46/92. However the teacher holds the floor for roughly twice as long as the girls due to the extended length of several of her turns (121/181 lines) while learners contribute 60 lines of 181. Almost all of the learners' turns were self-initiated, either by raising their hands, which was acknowledged by the teacher in the invitation to speak (e.g. *T: yes, Busi?*), or by girls taking up their own turn without the teacher's invitation through polite interruption or following directly on another learner's turn. A fairly high number of turns (27/46) were self-initiated in this way. Sixteen of these 27 self-initiated turns are followed up by a feedback response from the teacher. Unusually, the girls directed more questions at the teacher (11 questions versus four from the teacher addressed to them) than the teacher directed at them. The learners' questions typically attempted to elicit the teacher's experience or opinions and reinforced her self-positioning as an authority on the topic under discussion. Significantly, the overarching patterns of turn-taking in the classroom discourse diverge from the IRF structure. The learner-initiated turns as well as their initiation of three of the four main topics for discussion are suggestive of their power in shaping the classroom discussion. However, analyses of turn taking and of who holds the floor do not take us far enough in examining the complex discursive operation of power relations.

The lesson began with Ms Smith distributing handouts outlining an advertisement for a teaching post ('Northern Sotho teacher needed' for Waterkloof High School, Pretoria) as well as guidelines for writing a Curriculum Vita (CV) appropriate to a job advertisement. As the teacher introduced the CV genre by reading through the different elements of the CV,



the girls initiated discussions on whether certain information should be required in one's CV, (e.g. a photographic image, disclosure of marital status). The teacher encouraged the girls' initiation of discussion topics and soon changed the goal of her lesson to supporting learners in developing verbal arguments. After the class, the teacher confirmed the change in her lesson plan by commenting to me that in the continuation of this lesson, rather than moving on to draw up CVs she would select some of the issues debated (e.g. disclosure of HIV status to potential employers) and draw up summary tables with advantages and disadvantages of the different positions on the board as a preparatory step in learners writing an argumentative essay. The genre of the CV (i.e. the academic content of the lesson) was thus backgrounded as the learners engaged in the real life questions of how one gains access to the world of work and what happens in interviews and selection procedures. The teacher allowed the learners to intervene in and shape the lesson structure and goals, respectfully positioning them as valuable contributors to classroom discourse.

However, the teacher drew extensively on her own views and experience on selection panels at the school (i.e. selecting from her 'local' or experiential knowledge), consistently taking up the authority position of employer rather than interviewee. She used this experience to construct an 'ideal candidate' for the job who was very different from most of the adults inhabiting her learners' worlds.

### Creating a CV: who's the ideal candidate for the job?

The content of the discussion can be separated into five broad areas spread over 92 speaking turns:

- (i) Teacher orientates learners to CV genre (1–3)<sup>6</sup> (22 attempts reorientation)
- (ii) Dimakatso initiates topic change to including a photo image with CV (4–22)
- (iii) Teacher and Karabo initiate topic change to benefits of including marital status on CV (23–44). Later, Rose returns to this topic (47–52)
- (iv) Teacher initiates topic change to people's desperation for employment and links to lying on CV; financial background etc. (52–80)

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<sup>6</sup> Numbers refer to turns of talk (may be more than one line of talk).

- (v) Refiloe unsuccessfully attempts topic change to revealing HIV status (45–46) and later successfully initiates HIV status topic (80–92)

The first extract below follows on Dimakatso's (inaudibly recorded) initiation of the first discussion topic in the class relating to the inclusion of a photo/image with one's CV.

### Extract 1: Discourses of style and aesthetics<sup>7</sup>

8T: alright. In other words if you had **dreadlocks** [pause] [Girls: *hayii* (Noo)] and you applied to a post in a very conservative company maybe then [Girls: *hayii*] the image won't fit//

9Several girls: //Hayi [No] [several overlapping contesting responses]

10T: you don't like that idea?

(Several girls talking simultaneously – dissenting noises)

11Sameera: because it depends it depends on how you dress

12G: [disagrees]General noise of dissent

13T: Shhh. They are just suggesting, you don't **have** to have a photograph they're just say if Uh Maria what would you like to say?

14Maria: I just wanted to say that I understand what you're saying because nobody would want their secretary to come to work looking all untidy and meeting clients and what if she [uhhm uhmm negative](inaudible) I do understand what you say miss

15G: miss miss

16T: oh good one happy learner

17Busisiwe: some people do have dreadlocks but if they dress neat and they can look very nice

(Lots of agreement and overlapping talk)

18T: alright shh shh (pause)

19T: Girls the idea is just to give you a hint that maybe when you're young you like to be more adventurous in your hairstyles and clothing. . . But perhaps later when you are applying for posts you may need to look neater it was just an example

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<sup>7</sup> T refers to teacher; G refers to unspecified learner.

The teacher reformulates Dimakatso's point about potential problems in submitting a photo image with one's CV with the example that wearing dreadlocks may not be acceptable to a 'conservative company'. Dreadlocks were themselves not outlawed in school hairstyles and some girls in the class wore this style. Unsurprisingly then, the teacher's example meets with much resistance from the learners as seen in Sameera (11) and Busisiwe's (17) turns as well as general noises of dissent and the repeated chorus of '*Hayi*' (No – turn 9). Maria, who supports the teacher's point of view, herself wears short dreadlocks. The teacher does not seem to accept the learners' dissent and reasserts her position adding weight to it with the inclusion of the real life situation of their applying for jobs in the future: 'Girls the idea is **just** to give you a hint that maybe (. . .) later when you are applying for posts you **may** need to look neater'. However, the teacher shows her awareness of their dissent in her hedged responses ("just to give you a hint" and "you *may* need to look neater"). Such hedging can be read as mildly defensive or as an attempt to diffuse potential conflict in their positions on the topic. Despite her hedged response, the teacher continues to draw on a particular discourse of style/aesthetic to construct dreadlocks as an adventurous style that falls outside the boundaries of neatness.

## Extract 2: marital status

The second discussion topic is indirectly introduced by the teacher who had returned to the CV genre (22).

22T: (. . .)You start with your personal details, alright surname and first name then your address a telephone number date of birth you would just fill in there would just put that in there age in case they don't feel like working it all out for themselves (laughter from a few) sex as in gender right, nationality just to confirm that you are a South African citizen marital status [pause] **might** be useful in the job there [Girls: married] yes you could be married (..)

By pausing after the words 'marital status' and stating '**might** be useful for the job there' the teacher is making an evaluation of the merits of including this information thus deviating from running through the CV genre. Karabo picks up this topic by linking marital status to married women with children. From the teacher's input, it is clear that she is unconvinced that women with

several children (4-6) are able to perform the job properly. She positions herself here as a potential employer drawing on her experience on interview panels:

37(...) Girls I've been in on some of the interviews in Ms van der Schmidt's office when we're looking for new staff and it does just give you an idea how much time say from a teacher's point of view are they are going to devote to their lesson preparation marking and so on and say for example let's exaggerate and somebody's got **six** children [protests, laughter]

38G: That's not funny

39One girl: it does happen

40T: it does happen yes, but it's likely that a woman who has six children is going to be very busy when she gets home. Where's she going to find the time to mark *Animal Farm* projects and posters //and things like that//.

In her words 'let's exaggerate and somebody's got *six* children', Ms Smith further positions this possibility as abnormal (an exaggeration). Several learners contest the teacher's position here: Busi (27) who contends that the woman with four children needs a job most; Dimakatso (36) who emphasises the teacher's admission that interviewers are not supposed to ask how many children a woman has; two different girls who chide peers for laughing at the idea of six children (38 and 39) 'that's not funny'; and Karabo (41) who points out that with six children, it is likely that there will be a range of ages with older children sharing childcare of and responsibility for the younger ones. The latter point is particularly interesting in that Karabo challenges the discourse of families and childcare, i.e. the cultural knowledge, that the teacher is drawing on (i.e. a patriarchal, nuclear family of mother, father and children in which the mother has sole responsibility for childcare) as only one of a range of options. While the teacher might have chosen to position herself as interview candidate/job seeker and as a married mother, both positions also within the realms of her experience, it is significant, though not surprising, that she takes up the subject position of authority – potential employer. The former positions might have enabled her to identify momentarily with learners' subject positions and vice versa, while her alignment with the employer maintains a strong social/power distance between teacher and learner, and thus the asymmetrical relations of knowing between teacher and learners.

### Extract 3: Middle class imaginaries - where one lives and use of public transport

In the third extract the teacher demonstrates how a ‘skilled personnel officer’, in her words, can circumvent the constitutional limitations placed on the kinds of questions interviewers can ask, again positioning herself with the potential employer.

65T: you see a skilled personnel officer or personnel manager when interviewing will know what sort of questions to ask (pause) sometimes you may ask in a friendly way oh how do you cope with the children or I’ve got a child making a leading comment that gets a response there. So you wouldn’t actually ask uhh how many children? Uh Where do they go to school? What ages are they? But sometimes in conversation you may be able to get that sort of information. **And financial status they can’t really say. you might ask where the person lives so you know if they’re going to be able to get to work on time and see how far away some one who lives far away and maybe has to rely on public transport you know with the busses<sup>8</sup> in the morning then that can be a problem for a job.** Dimakatso, then I’ll go to Karabo

66Dimakatso: miss if you know like personal questions you’re not allowed to ask

67T: you could say in a polite way um (obviously if you really want the job then maybe you could say) excuse me I think that is quite personal (some girls laugh) in a polite way  
[dissenting noise]

68T: I don’t think that would have a bearing on my ability to do the job because I can do and you mention your skills [pause] and the interviewer might pick up something there that it’s getting too sensitive there I’ll go to Karabo?

It is interesting that the tactics of a ‘skilled personnel officer’ are not positioned as unethical whereas a job applicant ‘exaggerating’ i.e. ‘lying’ about their experience or qualifications is clearly labelled as ‘dishonest’. Ms Smith had been asked earlier whether a job applicant’s financial background

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<sup>8</sup> The teacher is referring here to the problems learners themselves experienced in arriving at school on time with the public bus service repeatedly leaving the terminal late. Since punctuality was taken very seriously at the school and even a single late coming was punished with detention, this was cause for distress among the learners and the school management.

could be investigated and had replied ‘not in much detail’ and returns to this topic in turn 65 with the idea that asking where a person lives may give a proxy for their background. More importantly she makes it clear that living far away from one’s place of work (in this case the elite Pretoria suburb of Waterkloof) and needing to rely on public transport (as most of these learners do in relation to the school) would not be ideal for the job: ‘that can be a problem for the job’. Dimakatso (66) contests the teacher’s discourse here by asking how one could prevent the kind of personal questions she is asking (and that are ultimately illegal).

The final extract concerns the topic of whether an employer has the right to ask about HIV status, again initiated by one of the learners. Many of the learners in the class know that this is unacceptable (as evidenced by several learners themselves answering the question Refiloe addresses to the teacher negatively (81)) but the teacher opens up the question for debate. The teacher’s incorrect reformulation of Refiloe’s perspective in the final turn of the extract (92) constructs her own position in the guise of the fictional employer’s:

T (. . .)you can look at it from the **employer’s** point of view, do they want to employ somebody //(lots of overlapping talk from girls)// shh who’s going to get very sick and have a lot of time off work and maybe even become too weak to do the job it might depend on the job there (92).

Refiloe had in fact said that it takes several years for HIV positive people to become ill thus they could be productive employees for some time. Neither the teacher nor Refiloe consider the option of taking Anti Retro Virals to prevent illness and the teacher further stereotypes HIV positive people as getting ‘very sick’ and having to take time off work. Throughout the discussion there is much contesting of the idea that one’s HIV status should be revealed, evidenced in overlapping talk, increased noise levels as well as positions such as Jackie’s:

91Jackie: they shouldn’t know it’s a personal question that I don’t think all of us would be uh//comfortable// ja comfortable to answer that question I mean um people talk and obviously the interviewer is going to tell the people in the office and they will treat you differently that’s obvious

Based on the analysis of the data extracts above, the ideal candidate for the job of Northern Sotho teacher at Waterkloof High School as constituted through the teacher's discourse:

- is conservative in style and does not wear dreadlocks;
- is single or married with no or few children;
- lives close to her place of employment (in this case a school in an elite suburb);
- does not use public transport, which is considered unreliable, and
- is HIV negative.

Much of these features form part of a 'discourse of bodily use' (Paechter (after Foucault), 2001, p.44) which encompasses styling the self; childbearing and illness/health. Such aspects are controlled in particular ways in the ideal candidate. In discursively constructing an ideal candidate for the job, Ms Smith simultaneously constitutes the imaginary subject/learner she is interacting with. While this ideal subject is frequently resisted by those learners who offer counter discourses as we have seen, the teacher's position of authority and her dominance in the classroom script which follows from this, ensure that the discourses she draws on and reconstructs are most powerful. Several learners are positioned by the teacher as agentic (Davies, 1990), as people who can and should be heard or who have worthwhile opinions to contribute. But those whose voices are most strongly heard (i.e. those who benefit from the reformulation and repetition of their turns by the teacher) are those who draw on discourses most similar to or aligned with what the teacher constructs as the employer's point of view, (i.e. the position of authority) and thus which most closely articulate her own position. Striking in the discussion is the way in which the teacher presents her 'internalised cultural discourse' (Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson 1995, p.455) as the norm or as 'knowledge of the world'. The authority of the teacher's discourse is reinforced by her continual self-positioning alongside the employer rather than as a job applicant and interviewee. I would argue that this represents the teacher's inability to step outside an authority position, or a refusal to take up a less powerful learner position, even if momentarily. As such, she alone "determine[s] the conditions of knowledge and its production and reproduction" (Soudien, 2007, p.443) in this context. Consequently, the teacher misses an opportunity to lessen the social distance between herself and her learners, and to reduce the asymmetries in relations of knowing.

## Missed opportunities in Gugu's attempts to insert 'local' knowledge

Further examples of such missed opportunities on the part of the teacher are found in her responses to the repeated attempts of one learner, Gugu, to insert knowledge from her own life world, or in Moll's terms, her own 'funds of knowledge', into the classroom script in a number of reading lessons. In the first brief example, Gugu provides a gloss for the 'beer' that the character Napoleon in Orwell's *Animal Farm* is brewing with the Zulu word, 'umqhombothi' and at the teacher's invitation, provides a brief explanation of this. Since it was uncommon to hear a language other than English in the official classroom script, Gugu can be seen as attempting to localise classroom discourse and knowledge (re)production by inserting her 'local knowledge' in this example in two ways: in the use of an indigenous, local language in the English classroom; and in the insertion of knowledge of local beer brewing practices. The teacher's question (*T: and what is that?*) reveals her own lack of knowledge of a term fairly commonly used and understood in South Africa. However, after Gugu's brief explanation, the teacher immediately returned the learners' attention to the text.

In a second example, the learners were engaged in animated off record talk about the reference to 'street name' in a text:

The class is going through the answers to a test paper which they have already written. It begins with a comprehension exercise – a text to read followed by questions. The teacher asks the girls to take turns in reading aloud. They change turns after each reading a paragraph. In the middle of the passage, the class is interrupted by the Art teacher coming in to ask the English teacher a question. Nozipho, Suraya and Gugu who are sitting in the back right hand corner seem to be arguing about the text. The teacher apologises for the interruption and asks Nozipho 'is there something wrong?' Nozipho replies 'we're talking about the street name'. The teacher then asks 'do you have the same street name?' which elicits laughter from the girls and Gugu explains 'we don't have a street name'. Responding to the teacher's surprise at this, Gugu goes on to explain that she has a house number and that her father has painted a sign for the garden stating their house number and address [E.g. No 246 Section 6, Diepkloof]. The teacher comments 'that was very industrious' before she indicates to the next student to return to reading aloud from the comprehension passage.

(English lesson 25 April 2005 – Extract from field notes)

Gugu responds to the teacher's question of whether she has the same street name by taking up the position of knower, attempting to educate the teacher about norms in her residential area in Diepkloof, Soweto which differ from previously white suburban norms. She explains that they do not have street names but that she has a house number and her father has painted a sign for the garden stating their house number and address. The moment of off-record



group discussion by the girls and their responses to the teacher can be read as one where they knowingly wield power. They were highly engaged and animated in their own off-record discussion and their shared laughter at the teacher's question shows their pleasure in taking up the positions of knower in relation to the teacher's position of (ignorant) learner. While a momentary exercise of power by the girls, the teacher's dismissal of this knowledge through a somewhat patronising comment ('that was industrious'), and her immediate refocussing of the learners' attention on the comprehension text constructs her resistance to Gugu's positioning of her as learner.

In a third example Gugu mentions the *tokoloshe* in relation to the teacher's explanation of a hobbit as 'small people with funny ears' (in the context of a political cartoon, rather than a discussion of the novel, *Lord of the Rings*):

The class is working together on a set of political cartoons that the teacher has handed out with accompanying questions. The teacher reads the word 'hobbit' and asks "Girls, have any of you seen Lord of the Rings?" to which some answer 'yes'. The teacher comments "then you know small people with funny ears". Gugu responds with the word '*tokoloshe*' and the teacher asks her 'what is a *tokoloshe*?' (. . .). Girls in the class respond with laughter and Gugu gives the very brief explanation "it is small and evil and blue" and then continues to laugh with the rest of the class. The teacher makes no further comment on this and returns to the political cartoon.

(English lesson 9 May 2005 – Extract from field notes)

Similarly to the first incident presented above where Gugu uses the example of 'umqhomboti', the officially monolingual linguistic space of the English classroom is again momentarily interrupted by Gugu's use of Zulu/Xhosa semiotic resources in the word '*tokoloshe*'. This moment can also be read as Gugu's attempt to insert 'local knowledge' into the curriculum and thus to shift the conditions of knowledge (re)production in the classroom. However, Gugu's attempted connection was largely ignored as the teacher did not take up the topic but rather directed the attention of the class back to the text under study.

These brief moments are powerful in the context of this classroom in that they give Gugu the opportunity to draw attention to the different discourses and semiotic resources which she draws on as well as to deliberately position herself outside of the teacher's ideal subject/learner position. In doing so she exposes the partiality of her English teacher's knowledge and makes visible

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<sup>9</sup> *Tokoloshe* refers to a well-known creature in Zulu and Xhosa folklore who is short, dwarf-like, hairy and evil with a long penis hung over its shoulder; it is considered to have powers to inflict harm, even death and often said to rape women.

the cultural script from which she draws thus disrupting the teacher's self-positioning as powerful and authoritative knower. The girls' responses of laughter index their own pleasure and sense of power in these moments where the teacher's discourse is shown to be one of many. However, while Gugu's discursive moves disrupt the subject positions that the teacher constructs both for herself and for her learners, the fact that they are not taken up means that she is constrained in positioning herself as legitimate knower, and is unable to radically alter the dominant classroom script.

## Conclusion

In interrogating the discursive space of a Grade 10 English class in a desegregated school, I have aimed to make visible the dominant and competing discourses or cultural scripts as well as the discursively constructed relations of power. The overarching structure of classroom discourse appears less tightly controlled than in more typical examples of teacher initiation, learner response and teacher feedback/evaluation (IRF) sequences with some learners being enabled to take up positions of agents in initiating discussion topics and asking questions of the teacher. However in analysing the particular discourses in the discussion, I am arguing that the teacher constructs one kind of ideal subject/learner that constitutes her own learners as outsiders. The particular discourses of style and bodily use she constructs are simultaneously raced, gendered and classed. I have attempted to show that such positioning is not uncontested as several learners draw on their own 'funds of knowledge' to take up counter discourses to the dominant classroom script. The data thus point to the incomplete and uneven nature of processes of assimilation as the girls continually cross the different worlds, discourses, that they inhabit. The attempts of selected learners to resist the teacher's dominant discourses at strategic moments, thus recognizing her everyday or experiential knowledge as partial, are encouraging and draw attention to the complex and shifting relations of power and of knowing in the classroom. But these moments are not fully acknowledged by the teacher who seems unconscious of the partiality of the script on which she draws.

Missed opportunities in the data analysed are constituted by the teacher's refusal to take up the position of learner, despite the invitations from Gugu and others. Ms Smith is comfortable relinquishing speaking turns to the learners and allowing them to pose questions as long as these continue to

position her as knower. While this is not unusual in that teachers are inevitably positioned as authoritative, the teacher and learners' different racial positioning here produces an *additional* effect of conflating whiteness with knowing and blackness with ignorance. It is the repetition of such relations of knowing in the daily, and in many ways unremarkable, experiences of black learners in classrooms like this that works to sediment the "positioning [of] white people as bearers of preferred knowledge" (Soudien, 2007, p.443). The troubling discourse produced by Maria, cited in the introduction is, I argue, an explicit reproduction of these sedimented, unequal ways of knowing: '...us as black people, what do we have to really say that we are proud of?' Learners such as Gugu, Karabo and Dimakatso who are able to insert their voices into the dominant white, middle class oriented classroom script have the potential to disrupt asymmetrical relations of knowing. However, such disruptions will have most impact when the teacher is willing to position herself as learner, and her learners as knowers, in strategic moments, and is able to acknowledge the partiality of her own knowledge about the world. Enabling teachers to become aware of the partiality of their own cultural scripts, as well as the ways in which their discourses work to position their learners as legitimate or illegitimate members of the classroom community is an important task of teacher education that aims to address asymmetrical relations of knowing in South African schooling.

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