Part 4

REFLECTIONS

Reflections and closing commentary on the School Integration Colloquium

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The task of redefining schools as resources for the social and economic advancement of racialised groups is a key aspect of the social change that is now underway in post-apartheid South Africa. Visions of truth, reconciliation, equality, respect, diversity and social justice serve as the driving principles and values behind educational research and evaluation of schools. A democratic South Africa faces the challenges of social transformation that have long characterised the United States since the landmark Supreme Court decision of *Brown v The Topeka Board of Education* 50 years ago. South African citizens are reframing schools as institutions designed to remedy the subordinate status of blacks, coloureds, Asians and other non-white racial/ethnic groups. Some might even argue that South Africa is taking a relatively more progressive route than many states, including my homeland, the US, with the radical inclusiveness of its national Constitution.

To have participated in the School Integration Colloquium sponsored by the HSRC with researchers, practitioners, politicians and NGO representatives from South Africa, India, Tanzania and the US was both a privilege and an enlightening experience. The papers and presentations posed challenging questions that confront not only South African schools but also schools across the globe as they seek to expand their social and cultural boundaries in the twenty-first century. As a scholar and researcher who focuses on issues surrounding social integration within the US, particularly from cross-cultural perspectives, I gained more insight into and awareness of the complexities that not only face educational researchers in their investigation of the viability and implementation of integrationist policies, but also those issues that confront both educators and learners. For the sake of simplicity and readability, I classify the three domains of issues primarily discussed at this colloquium as: (i) concepts and theory; (ii) the methodology; and (iii) policy and practice.

Briefly, drawing on a select number of presentations, I will attempt to sum-marise some of the main points with regard to each of these areas.

Concepts and theory

Colloquium participants vigorously discussed and even challenged each other on the question of what we mean by school integration. Both papers and discussions illuminated how we must more carefully consider the multiple dimensions of integration: demographic, social, linguistic, cultural and eco-nomic across both learner and educator populations. As some argued, school integration goes beyond a shift from homogeneous groupings to the mixing of different bodies – what I refer to as the 'demographic integration'. For exam-ple, understanding the complexity of including students from various racial, ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds forces us to think about the linguistic challenges posed to schools by learners who not only speak a different lan-guage from the linguistic medium of the school but also who speak different languages among themselves. One risk of school integration, as Thobeka Mda's paper indicated, is the diminution of languages that are not the privi-leged ones (for example, English or Afrikaans) spoken in an 'integrated' school. South Africa has declared 11 national languages. Yet, as Mda argues, schools and other national institutions (including the media) have done little to promote linguistic equality. On the one hand, learners across groups will have to share a language to facilitate interracial and cross-cultural communi-cation. On the other hand, for a truly multilingual society, school practices should open themselves up to linguistically diverse practices. The great chal-lenge, however, is how to achieve linguistic equality and also to fully prepare learners for economic competition in a global society that increasingly bene-fits English speakers.

The issues of linguistic diversity expose how we use school integration as a vehicle for assimilative processes. Assimilation and acculturation signify processes that in themselves suggest a melting away of non-dominant cultural features and an emulation of the privileged or dominant groups' cultural prac-tices. Thus, the question remains whether the intention of school integration is to fully prepare historically subordinated groups to acquire the skills and knowledge of dominant groups and/or to promote a radical cultural plural-ism, akin to a vision that is egalitarian and respectful of the differences and

contributions of myriad sociocultural groups. Crain Soudien, Nazir Carrim and Yusuf Sayed's paper suggests that if we do not tackle this question and adequately address it, then inevitably the superiority of some groups will arise in a school context whose formal policy is to create parity among its diverse groups of learners. The Soudien et al. paper also highlighted another social problem that often gets supplanted in a society historically preoccupied with matters of race and racialism, and that is the increasing significance of socioeconomic class. While listening to their presentation I almost experienced a moment of *déjà vu*, especially as I thought about the work of my colleague, William Julius Wilson, one of the most pre-eminent, contemporary American sociologists. In the late 1970s Wilson wrote a controversial and hotly debated book entitled the *Declining significance of race*. He declared that with expanded opportunities achieved after the US Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and various formal affirmative action programmes, the African-American middle class burgeoned. Yet without careful attention to the macro-social conditions that occurred in the national economy (for example, deindustrialisation, loss of factory and manufacturing jobs; large employers moving away from central cities, a shift to a service and more technological society) and that continued to either exclude or displace the poor, a large black underclass would be left behind the growing black middle class.

Though a different nation with its own unique economic history, South Africa, too, faces a widening chasm between its black poor, middle and upper classes. Soudien pushed a hot button issue and argued that as South African communities continue to tackle the issues confronting them about school integration, they must also handle the sensitive topic of the complicity of the black middle class in expanding the gap between the haves and the have nots – those who have access to quality education and better-resourced schools and those who do not. This fundamental difference has a consequential effect on the social and economic mobility processes of millions, and schools and families will collude in the social reproduction of inequality if they do not think more carefully about what it means to redistribute resources and access to resources across class lines, as well as racial and ethnic ones.

With increased mobility and access to opportunity, one of the dangers that face social groups once the veils of certain oppressions are lifted is succumbing to the marginalisation and subordination of others along social dimensions different from race and ethnicity. I am reminded of a quote from scholar

Nancy Hartsock, who wrote that depending on our standpoint in the social grid of life, none of us is purely victim or oppressor. That is, while one may hold a subordinate social standing on the dimension of either race or ethnicity, he or she can have privilege in terms of class, gender, religion and/or sexual orientation, to name a few. We know that school integration has occurred in a conscious and direct response to the emergence of a racial and ethnic democracy, but what about those other privileged identities that still characterise our societies? Not only must we consider the intersections among race, ethnicity and class in a school with a heterogeneous learner population, but we should also consider a host of other identities, which the Soudien, Carrim and Sayed paper, along with Balagopalan's paper on understanding 'inclusion' in Indian schools around caste, religion and language, discuss. Other social categories and multiple identities exist in South Africa, such as gender, sexuality, HIV/AIDS-status, as well as nationality and regional origins. No doubt, considering all of these domains of social difference and paying attention to them in school practice entails much commitment, strong educator training and sufficient revenue. However, if the goal is to aspire to the most expansive purposes of social integration, and consequently to attain a transformed society whereby all of the society's constituents have open access to its opportunity structure, then as the presenters have argued, these conceptual and theoretical areas must be addressed.

Methodology

Research methodology issues were raised both explicitly by the presenters themselves and implicitly by the conceptual social phenomena requiring further examination. As a member of a discipline (American sociology) with a strong positivist orientation, I was heartened by the reception that qualitative research, such as interviews and observations used by many of the presenters, has garnered among the South African research community. In addition, the descriptive, statistical data presentation of Mohammad Sujee on the demographic trends and shifts of schools in the Gauteng Province generated much interest. His paper provided critical and relevant regional information about the movement of learners across different school types, which has great implications for access and mobility outcomes across different racial and ethnic groups. Using provincial-wide survey data, Sujee informed us that the

deracialisation processes in schools are occurring more rapidly among learners than educators in the Gauteng Province. The reception of Sujee's presentation led to the recommendation by the colloquium participants that similar analyses be applied to all nine provinces in order to provide a nationwide portrait of the school integration scene in South Africa.

Overall, all of the methods employed by the contributors of the colloquium help to widen our understanding of how school integration issues have played out in the last decade. Still, given the complexity of the questions of intersections across different identities and the questions about the relationships among migration, assimilation and mobility, there exists a need for more utilisation of mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative, to provide us with more insight into *why* and *how* these social processes occur. On one hand, more sophisticated statistical techniques employing representative data of national schooling patterns and trends are required. To complement these data, qualitative researchers will need to investigate more in depth how parents, learners and educators understand their actions and choices toward schooling? Moreover, how do the 'hidden curriculum' and invisible social dynamics in schools influence learner achievement? How and why do some groups of parents become more involved in their learners' schooling processes than others? These are questions that highlight the critical need for 'polyangulation' in research, the idea of moving back and forth among various data-gathering processes to validate the claims and observations from school settings, as Nazir Carrim argued. Finally, some discussion emerged about our responsibilities as researchers to be reflexive and address how our own identities, what we research, how we approach the research setting, how we are experienced by our informants, and how what we even address in our work influence the conclusions that we draw. These are all key and quite relevant questions for consideration as the research and evaluation of school integration in South Africa continues.

Policy and practice

Lastly, we come to the issue of 'walking the talk' of research. Researchers expend much time and resources in examinations of the social issues, but how do we implement our conclusions and recommendations effectively? As I reflect, this is an area to which an entire colloquium can be dedicated.

Although more attention was given to the first two areas in the colloquium, I can offer a few brief observations. Harvard University researcher Gary Orfield, one of the foremost experts on desegregation in the US, shared findings and insights about the complexities of integration in US schools. In his conclusion, Orfield stated that the most difficult challenge yet for educators is to develop curricula that immerse learners in each other's lives and create a milieu of interdependence such that the values, purposes and appreciations of school integration can truly be attained. Moreover, in a developing nation, another difficult challenge for implementation is effective resourcing of education. Some consensus emerged among the colloquium participants that increased private and public funding are needed to strengthen the social science research industry. Increased funding will be needed as schools attempt to level the playing fields across different social groups, especially the previously disenfranchised.

In sum, South African social scientists, educational researchers and policy makers will continue to seek explanations for the disparate educational achievement and socio-economic gaps among different racial and ethnic groups. As they seek to understand both the benefits and consequences of integrated schooling contexts in society, they will require more nuanced understandings of numerous social processes. The findings of both present and future research will highlight the impact of schools as structures of cultural, economic, social and political meanings. New research should lead not only to cutting-edge scholarship but also to substantial policy interventions that improve educational opportunities for all, but especially for historically and socially disadvantaged groups.

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References

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