Racial Dynamics at an Independent South African Educational Institution

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ABSTRACT

Historically, education in South Africa has been beset by inequality. Over the last few decades, however, the landscape of South African government schooling has evolved considerably since its distinctive, racially-defined origins. This is largely due to reforms in the education sector, which played a key role in attempting to redress the injustices of the Apartheid system. Since its inception in 1929, the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) has envisioned a value-based and quality education for all learners, irrespective of race, creed or culture. Thus, the media exposure in 2020, which revealed the prevalence of racist practices in approximately 26 prominent independent schools in South Africa was startling, as these discriminatory acts contradicted the vision of ISASA. One such school, which came into the spotlight was Excel College* (pseudonym), an independent school in Gauteng Province, South Africa. In response to the accusations, the school management launched an immediate investigation to address the allegations of racial discrimination against its students of color. A whole-school Racial Intervention Program (referred to as RDI – Respect, Diversity and Inclusivity) was designed and implemented early in 2021.This qualitative study, which comprised eight student leaders, sought to investigate how these student leaders experienced the intervention program. The study sought to explore student leaders' perceptions of the rationale behind the implementation of the Racial Intervention Program (RIP), and of the racial climate in their school, and how they felt about the allegations of racism leveled against their school. The study further sought to investigate the extent to which student leaders felt their experience of the RIP had sensitized them to the need to promote racial inclusivity in their school. Data for the study were collected by conducting individual, online semi-structured interviews, using participants' diaries, and holding a Focus Group session.The study drew on the tenets of the Critical Race Theory and Paulo Freire's conception of Critical Consciousness. The study confirmed that there were allegations of racism at the school, and that many of the students had been victims of – or had witnessed – an act of racial discrimination. Despite overwhelming support for RIP, the initiative was criticized for moving slowly, being teacher-centric and syllabus-driven; and that initially, it did not appreciate students' contribution. However, during the seven weeks of the program (which this study reports on), participants reported grasping the purpose of the program– which was to encourage courageous conversations about inclusion, exclusion, racism and diversity.

Keywords: Critical race theory, Independent schools, Qualitative research, Racial intervention program, Student leadership

INTRODUCTION

One of the priorities in South Africa since the inception of the Government of National Unity in 1994 has been to bring reforms in education; and this has played a key role in addressing the injustices of Apartheid (Gumede & Biyase, 2016). However, after 26 years of democracy, and even though schools in post-Apartheid South Africa have been deracialized (Soudien, 1998), students are still being treated according to racial hierarchies (Samuel & Sayed, 2003). Non-white children in predominantly white schools often feel alienated; and are perceived as second-class citizens (Zulu, 2020); and have had to assimilate to be accepted into an already established set of norms and code of behavior, set up and maintained by whites (Biko, 2004). Khalifa, Gooden and Davis (2016) and Perumal (2013) advocate for culturally responsive school leaders who would envision and create an environment that is inclusive for children who have been marginalized because of their race by developing a community of learners, who are empowered to act responsibly towards one another, and translate this to social action (Shrewsbury, 1997). Student leadership, as demonstrated by the Soweto Student Uprising of 1976, can be a driving force in educational transformation, and Fielding (2001), argues can contribute to promoting racial inclusivity in schools.

The Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) envisions a value-based, quality education accessible to all learners through diverse, high-quality independent schools (ISASA, 2020). In 2020, Bishop's Diocesan College, St Anne's Diocesan College, St Martin's, and Roedean School (Masweneng, 2020) were accused of racist and discriminatory behavior. Zulu (2020) criticized these schools for being lethargic in their response to eradicating such inequality.

In 2020, media reports alleged that many Black students at Excel College* (pseudonym) felt excluded and marginalized due to racist and discriminatory practices. In response, the school engaged an independent inclusivity and diversity specialist who devised an investigative whole-school survey. The results of the survey revealed that 36% of students felt that racism did exist in the school. In response, the school headmaster and an independent specialist designed a 21-week Racial Intervention Program (RIP) entitled *Respect, Diversity, Inclusivity* (RDI) as part of the curriculum for implementation in the beginning of 2021. Learners of all grades would attend a weekly RDI lesson in their register classes. This study focused on the first seven (7) weeks' lessons, which involved issues pertaining to humans as social creatures, and how we are connected, who we are as individuals, as well as respect and inclusion.

Student leadership refers to educational principles and practices that give opportunities to young people to find their voices, participate in decision-making, and understand their rights and responsibilities as active citizens (Kambuga & Omollo, 2017). When given an opportunity to lead within their schools and participate in dialogical praxis (Freire, 1970), student leaders are empowered to make a real impact on their school environment (Kambuga & Omollo, 2017).

It was against this backdrop that this study was conducted to explore student leaders' perceptions of a Racial Intervention Program at an independent school in South Africa (Excel College*), and how these school leaders had been influenced to promote racial inclusivity because of their participation in the program. The study aimed to:

1. explore student leaders' perceptions of the rationale behind the implementation of a Racial Intervention Program at an independent school in South Africa.
2. explore how student leaders perceived allegations of racism leveled against their school, and whether they thought these allegations were justified or unjustified.
3. explore the extent to which student leaders feel the Racial Intervention Program had sensitized them to the need to promote racial inclusivity in the school.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Excel College* is an independent high school in Randpark Ridge, Gauteng Province. The school opened its doors in January 1997 and began operating with 279 students in Grades 8 and 9. In1997, the students and staff composition was predominantly white, as the area was still predominantly a white, middle-class to upper-class at that time. Over the years, the demographics started to change; both in the community and in the school, but this change has been relatively slow in respect of the ratio of white students to students of color, which is still the case today, with white students forming the majority of the student body. The school is governed by Christian ethos, but accepts students from all religious and cultural backgrounds. The school prides itself on being inclusive, and claims not to discriminate against any student, based on race, gender, religious beliefs or sexual orientation as demonstrated in the school's code of conduct.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight student leaders, using Microsoft Teams™ prior to their attending RDI lessons. The 60 minute long, semi-structured interviews were conducted prior to participants attending their first lesson of the Racial Intervention Program. More data were collected from the participants' weekly diary entries during the first seven weeks of their participation in program. Participants kept a weekly diary in which they responded to guiding questions and prompts by journaling their viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, and reflections on race-related issues that emerged during each RDI lesson. One in-person focus group discussion was conducted to explore the collective perceptions of student leaders of the RIP after the first seven weeks of their participation.

DISCUSSION

Various themes and sub-themes were identified, analyzed and interpreted with the support of the literature reviewed.

The first theme, *participants' perceptions of the rationale behind the implementation of RIP* revealed that participants all agreed that it was

imperative for the school to confront the fact that many of the students had been exposed to racism. Participants also agreed unanimously that the entire school would benefit from the program that was due to be implemented. The second theme, *student leaders' perception of the racial climate in the school* revealed that while racism was not overtly practised, no one could dispute that insidious racial acts have been occurring; and that many Black students were still being marginalized; in the sense that they were expected to assimilate into the dominant culture; and that microaggressions were directed at them. As opposed to overt racism, which is explicit hatred for – or discrimination against racial minorities, Crisp and Turner (2007) define aversive racism as ambivalent expressions and prejudiced attitudes towards other races. Bonilla-Silva (2003), who defines naturalization as a process where people gravitate towards each other, because of certain preferences, which are biologically driven, and that this is typical of all groups in society. Bonilla-Silva (2003) also states that naturalizing racism is a convenient way of supporting the division of groups of people. The most disturbing evidence surfaced, that pointed to the prevalence of a racial climate in the school, when participants shared their experiences of microaggressions and cultural racism. Microaggressions are closely related to aversive racism. Essed and Muhr (2018) define microaggressions as "everyday racism" (p.1) – she explains this as the manner in which power hierarchies that are based on both race and gender are initially constructed and later, reinforced through "normalizing everyday practices" (p.1) – through passing jokes, telling stories that stereotype others, and making generalizations – even through these may be perceived as compliments. All these could be considered innocent and harmless acts and perhaps, even insignificant, but because they are carried out repeatedly, in the end they are normalized.

These themes revealed that participants held differing viewpoints regarding how the school (management and staff) addressed past allegations of racism. White participants were of the view that management handled each allegation well, while Black participants felt that often, these issues were merely swept under the, metaphorical, carpet. All participants, however, were hopeful that RIP would succeed in achieving its aims. The third and fourth themes, *student leaders' voice* and *agency and student leaders' experiences of the Racial Intervention Program* go hand in hand, as the study explored student leaders' perceptions of their role as leaders in the school, as well as the role they played in the program; and how this would empower each leader to contribute towards achieving a racially diverse and inclusive school climate. It emerged during the pre-interview phase that of the eight participants, the majority felt confident to exercise their voice, share concerns with management and staff, and participate confidently in conversations on race and racism. Some participants felt that their level of confidence depended on how open the staff member was to these discussions. In this regard, most participants indicated that they would always feel confident and comfortable discussing contentious and sensitive issues with some staff members – and that other staff members were unapproachable and not open to entertaining a different point of view. All eight participants expressed that they were happy to participate in the RIP; and indicated that the program came at the right

time; and that they were certain that it would pave a way for the school to become more inclusive – and that some students would no longer feel marginalized. This was due to the expectation that participants had that they would be given a platform to engage in open and honest communication and liberating discourses. Unfortunately, during the first four weeks of the program, the expectations of the participants were not met, and they were not reticent in their criticism. All participants felt that the program was too rigid – essentially a "syllabus" was being followed and teachers followed each lesson structure and outline quite stringently. Participants mentioned that when an opportunity arose for potential discussions about an issue, teachers would not allow this – arguing that it would interfere with the lesson plan – and not enable them to conclude that week's lesson. This was extremely frustrating for participants, because they felt that they had not been afforded an opportunity to make their voices heard and share their opinions and experiences, which they felt, were vital to ensure that they all find common ground.

Student leaders were also greatly distressed when they found out that the RDI syllabus was identical for all grades, and thus, in each lesson, Grade 8 students were being taught exactly the same content as the Grade 12's. This offended student leaders, who felt quite patronized in the process. Their anger was palpable in the focus group session when this aspect was discussed.

One very concerning sub-theme, which emerged, was the Cancel Culture trend. Participants mentioned that many of the students, particularly male students, were hesitant to participate and respond to questions, or give their opinions during lessons. This stemmed from their fear of being "canceled"; if many in the group did not agree with their opinions. This was concerning, and participants agreed that this hindered discussion during lessons.

Participants also declared that they felt quite disempowered as leaders; and that their voices were not taken seriously because they were denied opportunities to start discussions and/or lead them. They also mentioned how easy it was to display an attitude of "why should I speak up if no one else is speaking up?"

While participants were quite disheartened by the content of the first four RDI lessons, there was a noticeable change when they started with Lesson 5. The rigidity of the lessons seemed to have eased, and the topics in the subsequent lessons lent themselves more towards providing opportunities for students to talk about issues, and to each other. This gave the eight participants hope that subsequent lessons would provide a platform to engage in more discussions and afford them opportunities for growth. From these discussions, it became evident that student leaders had become sensitized to the need to continue having these courageous conversations; and in so doing, contribute towards promoting racial inclusivity at their school. This study focussed on the first seven weeks of the program, because the program would run for the entire year. It is therefore, hoped that future lessons will focus more on discourse and allow students an opportunity to communicate, collaborate and appreciate the experiences of their peers; and foster an inclusive environment for all.

CONCLUSION

It was clear from the study that racial prejudices, discrimination, and inequalities are still prevalent in independent South African schools, and many of the participants in this study had experienced racism first-hand. All participants were convinced that action needed to be taken to combat racism, and were impressed in the way Excel College* had sought to address the allegations of racism leveled against it – through the implementation of the Racial Intervention Program. The eight student leaders welcomed the prospects of participating in the program and contributing towards change – but were disappointed at the slow-moving pace and rigidly-structured and syllabus-style program. They were also frustrated by the fact that they were not invited to participate in liberating dialogues. However, their opinions changed mid-way through the seven-week program; and the majority of them expressed their hope that with dialogues, which were commencing, this would help steer the Program in the right direction. Through the RIP – there was anticipation that its aims of fostering an inclusive environment – where all students would feel empowered to address racial inequalities – and through dialogue, this would contribute to transforming the school climate.

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