Chapter Seven:

HOME CULTURE VERSUS SCHOOL CULTURE

The Pervasiveness of Deficit discourses

“Educational practices must match with the children’s culture in ways which ensure the generation of academically important behaviours”.


7.1 Introduction

Extensive work conducted since the early 1970s in the United States examined the means by which teaching in school could correspond with the home and community structures of black students. These studies tended to concentrate on how pupils who are perceived as “other” because of their colour, language or social class, could be made to fit into the school system (Ladson Billings, 1995). The terminology used in three of these studies on “cultural mismatch”, namely; “culturally appropriate”, “culturally congruent” and “culturally compatible”, suggest the accommodation of the pupils’ culture to the conventional culture of the school (Ladson Billings, 1995, p. 467). In contrast to this terminology Ladson Billings prefers Cazden and Legatt’s (1981 in Ladson Billings, 1995) and Erickson and Mohatt’s (1982 in Ladson Billings, 1995) notion of being “culturally responsive” as this notion has a closer relationship to home and community culture. Questions emanating from her research sought commonalities in teachers’ beliefs and ideologies based on Lipman’s (1993, in Ladson Billings, 1995, p. 478) suggestions that although schools in the USA had attempted reform, “teacher ideologies and beliefs often remain unchanged, particularly towards African–American children and their intellectual potential”. In the analysis of her data Ladson Billings (1995) was able to infer broad characteristics that provided a theoretical emphasis for a culturally relevant pedagogy.

In this chapter my concerns move from a close examination of teachers’ perceptions to teachers’ ideologies and beliefs, as well as their reflections on their own backgrounds and those of their pupils. I draw on Ladson Billings’ (1995) insights into the notions of “culturally appropriate”, “culturally congruent” and “culturally compatible” in the discussion of my findings. Social class was cited as a reason
for pupils’ lack of discipline and, once again, I draw on Ladson Billings’ (1995, p. 10) theory that refers to a “culturally relevant pedagogy”.

**Cultural mismatch between school and home**

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Table 4 Matrix of Ladson Billings’ Terminology

7.2 **“They don’t seem to have the background”**

Teachers can expect to encounter pupils who have varied prior knowledge and experience, although this variety may be much more pronounced in a racially diverse classroom. However, pupils’ experience and knowledge that they bring to the learning situation are often overlooked and the knowledge that teachers believe pupils should have is emphasised. Teachers stress pupils’ cultural deficiency and perceive this deficiency as a reason for many problems experienced in multiracial classrooms. In teachers’ alluding to pupils’ deficiencies they are unwittingly engaging in “cultural deficit discourse”.

“This cultural deficit discourse about people of colour has become the ‘norm’ in social scientific research, despite insufficient empirical evidence to support it” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 5). The cultural deficit
model contends that values that are transmitted through family are generally dysfunctional, and result in low educational and occupational achievement. Further, this model elucidates deficient cultural values with regard to time as present rather than future, instant rather than delayed rewards, with co-operation being emphasised instead of competition, and lesser emphasis placed on education and upward social mobility (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001). An experienced mathematics teacher, Mrs Matthew from Phakamani, sees teaching in a culturally diverse classroom as very challenging and at times, unknowingly, engages in cultural deficit discourse:

E P: Could you please share some of your experiences with me?

Mrs Matthew . . . Uhm, initially it was a bit difficult I found that the African children were a long way behind the white children, no matter where they came from. In my subject where they just don’t seem to have the background.

E.P: Can you elaborate please?

Mrs Matthew . . . It doesn’t matter whether it’s adding or subtracting or whether it’s a far more difficult concept. They don’t seem to be able to cope on the whole. Obviously, there are ones who can but in comparison with their white classmates . . . they didn’t seem to cope and now that was pretty evident I think in the class you were in, sitting in of mine. Uhm, there were some African children weren’t as bright as the whites who are streaks ahead above the African children in the class.

E.P.: What do you think is the reason for this?

Mrs Matthew: Uhm, some of them I think if there, my own feeling and I don’t know if it’s correct or not. Is if their home background is such that they can get help from home as well it’s fine. But as soon as you get a child who’s been through a primary school, a so-called “white primary school” and then arrived here, although it’s possibly better than a African primary school. In their way if they haven’t got a parent who can help them, uhm, doesn’t seem to have made very, very much difference in maths. I can’t, you know, speak for other subjects (Laughing).

E P: Is there anything else that you would like to add that presented a challenge?

Mrs Matthew: It is challenging. You have to consider all the backgrounds of the children when you are teaching, you cannot, and it’s something I learned. You cannot just make an assumption that everybody knows the same amount when they arrive in Standard 6 - they don’t. And uhm, if one can accept that you’re okay because there is a challenge to start with because some of them are definitely educationally challenged (my emphasis), the . . . they haven’t had the background as others.

Mrs Matthew unsuspectingly alludes to “cultural deficit theory” when she refers to pupils’ backgrounds. This notion prevailed in the U S A  as well as in the UK during the early 1970s (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia & Solorzano, 1998; Valencia, 1998; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994).
As in the studies that Ladson Billings (1995, p. 457) refers to, Mrs Matthew locates the basis for the pupils’ shortcomings within their cultural backgrounds. The terms “culturally appropriate, culturally congruent and culturally compatible” refer to studies that were purported to favour accommodation of pupils of colour into the mainstream. Mrs Matthew’s reference to African pupils who had come from historically white former Model C primary schools identifies her desire for pupils to be appropriate, compatible and culturally congruent.

Most of the teachers interviewed attribute the problems those pupils from township schools experience to a deprived or poor school background. In addition, some of these pupils also come from underprivileged social backgrounds. Many pupils who attend Phakamani, Esiphumelelayo and Zama are from “township schools” and have experienced a deprived education system compared with that of their white counterparts. Consequently, many teachers assume that the difference in the educational background of African and white pupils explains the academic problems of many of the African pupils at these schools in comparison with white pupils who have come through a more established and advantaged educational system (Morrow, 1993). Teachers believe that pupils lack the educational and social backgrounds to succeed, and engage in deficit discourse to discuss the pupils’ backgrounds.

In their research Whitehouse and Colvin (2001, p. 212) argue that “marginalized families that are considered diverse with regard to language, culture, ethnicity, and class are particularly vulnerable to representations grounded in a deficit discourse”. When families are understood and represented as lacking, diversity is seen to be replaced by difference. This happens when communities become increasingly diverse as is the case in historically white schools in South Africa. The pedagogical instruction in these schools underscores the language values and culture of the mainstream population in an attempt to resist the changing demographics. Furthermore, an implicit belief exists that the movement of culturally diverse families towards emulating mainstream families will assist with establishing economic and educational achievements for children (Whitehouse and Colvin, 2001).

To put it bluntly, the deficit model has a really nasty side: it makes symptoms for causes, blames the victim for the failings, salves the conscience of the advantaged (like you and me), refers the work of would-be helpers patronising, and is powerless to expose or address the structural evils, the corporate sins, and the broader social injustices.

(Grant & Sleeter, 1989, pp. 217-218)
Teachers who engaged in “cultural deficit discourse” also emphasised the difference in the abilities of white and African pupils.

7.3 “…big difference between them and white kids”

Throughout the data collection phase teachers from all three schools repeated their belief that African pupils differed vastly from their white counterparts. Pupils from township schools have been taught facts and are unable according to Mrs Gabriel “to make deductions for themselves. There is a vast difference between the information that the white and Indian children have compared to what the African children have. I can tell the race of the pupil when marking examination scripts, from the knowledge that the pupil presents on the answer sheet”. Mrs Matthew is also of the opinion that the cognitive ability of the African pupils differs from that of the white pupils. She emphasises the African pupils’ lack of cognitive ability in mathematics, and claims that African pupils are “educationally challenged”. Her reference to the cognitive ability of African pupils may be interpreted as her belief that white pupils’ ability is superior to that of African pupils. She adds that intense intervention will not eradicate the poor teaching practices of their primary school years. All the teachers interviewed in the three schools are aware of the deficits that children from townships carry with them to former Model C schools. The consensus among most of the teachers interviewed was that African pupils lacked relevant knowledge across the spectrum. Although these teachers are aware of the poor teaching in the township schools their comments conveyed the impression that they believed that the learners were deficient. Both Mrs Gabriel and Mrs Matthew have identified a deficit in African pupils’ ability when it is compared with that of their white counterparts and would prefer these African pupils to develop compatible abilities. However, if these teachers fail to approximate the pupil’s home cultural patterns it will not be possible for these African pupils to develop compatible abilities (Ladson Billings, 1995).

Mrs Jacob from Esiphumelelayo also sees a great disparity between the ability of African and white pupils. She, however, commented that the Indians fared better than the African pupils. (This remark could have been prompted by my race). Ms John, a Mathematics teacher, from Phakamani, concurred with the view that African pupils are not on a par with white pupils when she stated that “the weak African children tend to be quite a bit weaker than the weak white ones”. Mrs Gabriel and Mrs Mathew’s view about the African pupils’ ability is in total opposition to Hernandez’s (1989) assumption about multicultural education. These teachers according to Hernandez should have high expectations of their pupils instead
they label their pupils as deficient. Mrs James, a mathematics teacher at Esiphumelelayo firmly believes that the pupils’ background affects their performance:

> The maths component might pose a problem because it is so formal. Abstract learning um, okay again blacks, it depends what their home background was because to many African families, maths is nothing. Girls have problems with maths because they automatically, culturally wise, because cultured girls don’t do Maths.

(Mrs James)

This idea about girls not doing mathematics harks back to the Victorian era. Mrs James also claims that fathers prefer to sit with their sons rather than their daughters to assist with mathematics. All these comments made by Mrs James probably refer to the white community in a previous era. However, in the African community, depending on whether the child comes from a township or a suburb or whether from an affluent background or not could, perhaps, explain whether or not parents are able to assist their children. Some mothers are domestics and fathers are labourers. How will they be able to assist their children with mathematics when they themselves do not have the competency?

It is obvious that all the teachers mentioned have, to a certain extent, engaged in cultural deficit discourse, although unwittingly. Cultural deficit discourse alludes to deficiency that is caused by large disorganised families, single-parent families, homes where nonstandard English is spoken, and patriarchal or matriarchal families (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Mrs James specifically alludes to the deficiency of the social structure of the family. In the classroom the “cultural deficit model” is applied to “other” pupils by teachers who were trained in institutions that use “individualistic and cultural deficit explanations for low achievement of “other” pupils (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 5). Some of these teachers who had commented on African pupils and their limited knowledge and ability in mathematics pointed out that in the higher standards some African pupils who had chosen to study mathematics on the standard grade coped just as well as their white counterparts, or even better. Mrs Jacob firmly believes that; “there should be far more streaming” as she feels that this would assist pupils who were de-motivated.

7.4 “…everybody is different, like the culture is different…”

Difference is often perceived as negative and in all three research schools many teachers perceived difference as a problem. The Headmistress of Phakamani conducted an interesting exercise in her Guidance lesson to show that despite pupils’ perceptions of difference there are many similarities:
Mrs Stephen instructs pupils to change places. Not a sound. The pupils obediently move to the places that Mrs Stephen allocates to them. She rearranges the seating in such a way that they now sit opposite pupils from a race group other than their own. The white pupils are obviously not impressed and mumble their dissatisfaction about the seating arrangements under their breath. The white pupils’ dissatisfaction is also evident in the manner in which they pull their desks away from the African pupils. Mrs Stephen has enforced integration. It’s going to be interesting to see what’s going to happen.

These pupils have been together for eight months and the white boys do not know the African girls’ names. However, the African girls know the white boys’ names (the pains) because they are always getting into trouble and notching up demerits.

Mrs Stephen asks the pupils to discuss what they understand by “Multicultural Education”. Surprise! Surprise! The African and white pupils were actually communicating. Mrs Stephen then makes a statement that ‘white boys are racist’. Strangely no one refutes the statement. The African boys cheer and readily agree with Mrs Stephen. Mrs Stephen then asks the African boys whether they know the only white girl’s name and none of them know her name.

A writing task is given to pupils. They are requested to write down their worst racial experience and then discuss this in their groups. The pupils write down their experiences and begin discussing them in their groups. As the discussions ensue, a number of stereotypical remarks are made; for example:

**African Pupils**: white kids are smelly.

**White Pupils**: African kids are stupid, dirty. Smelly, dumb, arrogant and they stink.

**African pupils**: Indians are rich, smell of curry.

(Field notes, August, 1999)

This exercise was intended to show pupils that although they belong to different cultural groups, they all have something in common. Mrs Stephen used diversity to show commonality. Today, racial difference is a common phenomenon in historically white (former Model C) schools but cultural differences abound in all schools. If these cultural differences are perceived as negative, teaching becomes a very difficult undertaking. The onus is upon the teacher to bridge cultural differences between pupils from diverse cultures, through communication (Liston & Zeichner, 1996). It is evident that Mrs Stephen is attempting to do just that.

Pupils also commented on the difference that they perceive between white and African pupils. Amanda, from Phakamani, has learnt about the different religions and cultures and she finds it of great benefit being in a school with other race groups:
**E P:** What have you learnt from your experience of interacting with the different races or cultures?

**Amanda:** Err I am really interested in religion. Specifically the Hindu religion that I like learning about. That’s mainly what I like and what I have learned about since coming to this school.

**E P:** So do you think you have benefited from being in a school with pupils from other races? And whatever your answer is, please give me a reason.

**Amanda:** Ye uhm I think I have. If I didn’t know the people from the different cultures I wouldn’t have a different outlooks on, I don’t know. I would see just the white view, now I can see different things; you can see that people are different.

**E P:** When you talk about “different” what do you actually mean?

**Amanda:** Okay everybody is different, like the culture is different. They sometimes have different holidays. Like for instance Latha. Her religion does not allow her to eat meat; that is different. But at the same time, you see that their differences are interesting and that is very positive in my opinion.

**E P:** Do you think that a racially mixed school has changed your opinion of other race groups?

**Amanda:** Yes, I think it has…as I said just, it is nice to mix with different people. Actually, you learn a lot more and although there is racism sometimes, it is just better. In fact, I come from a culturally mixed background, my dad is Dutch and my mum is Afrikaans and I don’t really speak Afrikaans. I think I am more English.

Liesel is from an Afrikaans background and shares her experiences of difference:

**E P:** What have you learnt since coming from an Afrikaans medium school to an English–medium school?

**Liesel:** All the things that I thought about other people, other religions were wrong.

**E P:** Would you like to explain please?

**Liesel:** I thought, you know, some Indian people they like give milk and things to their funny Gods and statues and things like that. That is what my friend does and I always had these funny premonitions about all that and I was wrong. I mean they worship their God, which they believe in. They do not just do it for fun and to look good to other Indians and things. Their prayers and temple is very serious to them, I have a Catholic friend as well and every, I don’t know, I have learnt quite a few things coming from everyone.

**E P:** What you are discussing is what you have learnt about culture and religion; the Indian, African and English culture…

**Liesel:** (interrupting) The English culture is a bit different. I think the English are a bit snobbish, most of the time and well the Indian culture, I don’t know all that much about it, so I don’t go with Latha to her funny little ‘thingies’, her family functions, even though we are the best of friends. So I don’t really
Both these white pupils have experienced difference as positive and have, since being at this school realised that they have learnt and grown as a consequence of difference. However, a situation where pupils are involved in mixed friendships should not be seen to imply that white pupils are not racially prejudiced (Troyna, 1993).

Teachers from all three schools argued that underlying many of the problems that they experience is the socio-economic background of many families.

7.5 “I think it might be a socio-economic bracket”

Poverty and a lack of resources in South Africa have impacted on the lives of the majority of the African population. Recent statistics show that many blacks live below the poverty line. A number of pupils who come from the townships at the three schools are financially better off than their counterparts who cannot afford to attend these historically white Model C schools. Although some parents are professionals, many pupils come from very humble backgrounds and their parents send them to these schools at great sacrifice.

E P: Would you say that African children attending this school are advantaged or are they disadvantaged in any way?

Themba: Well you know, I don’t think, most of them are not as advantaged as white children, cause when you go back to the homes they are so totally different. A totally different story to when they are here. I mean you go back to a African person’s home – you like in Matric - I think last year or so a boy got like in the 80s for Maths. Top student for Maths, top student for everything I mean, but when you go back home he works harder than, he works harder than the whites you know what I mean? I mean when he goes back home he don’t have electricity. He don’t have nothing. I mean he studies with a candle but you know it is all the hard work that pays off. So I mean that although most of us are disadvantaged compared with white people you can’t really blame them ‘cause you need to work hard and all that,

E P: Can you explain why, in your opinion, African pupils have to work harder than white pupils.

Themba: I think there is kind of like you know – like you know the teachers for instance they understand the white children where they are coming from. They understand what type of neighbourhoods most of them come from, ‘cause the teachers are white and ‘cause most of the teachers haven’t been to let’s
say, townships for instance, so they don’t know what type of life we live. So you know it is all what they imagine (the teachers) what type of life we live that makes them judge us.

The townships that this pupil refers to have very large African populations and it is where many of the African pupils who attend this school live. Some teachers identified the socio-economic situation of African pupils as a reason for the problems that they are experiencing in their classrooms. In the UK initially, “the categories of class, ‘race’, gender, ethnicity and culture intersected or were excluded from, debates surrounding the performance of pupils of Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin”. However, the Swann Report acknowledged the importance of the socio-economic conditions when elucidating the underachievement of both black and Bangladeshi pupils (Rattansi & Mc Donald, 1992). The fact that a few teachers identified this situation, despite engaging in a discourse of blame, indicates that they have identified a very significant factor they may give rise to some of the pupils’ problems.

Mrs Matthew, from Phakamani, finds that African pupils’ approach to their work is different and she is not sure whether this (pupils’ approach to their work) is culturally grounded but she believes it might be as a result of their socio-economic background.

**E P:** What else struck you most about coming into a racially diverse classroom from an all white classroom?

**Mrs Matthew:** Difference in sense of value, umm.

**EP:** Can you explain that, please?

**Mrs Matthew:** Uhm (clearing her throat) excuse me. Some of them oh I don’t know whether it’s a, it’s a African or Indian or white way, I think it might be a socio-economical bracket. Outlooks on life are different, umm. Some of them don’t see the need to do things in a particular way.

**E P:** When you say “them”…

**Mrs Matthew:** (Interrupting) I’m, I’m thinking of (Sighing) I don’t know well they just, it, it’s just, I, I’m pretty sure that what I’m saying is, it has nothing to do with colour at all… I’d, I’d, I think it’s got to do with your socio-economic background. You’re either at the top of the scale or the bottom of the scale. I don’t really believe that what I see in class has anything to do with whether you are African or white.

**E P:** So what are you actually saying?

**Mrs Matthew:** I’m actually saying that I don’t think a culturally diverse school made very much difference to me, in that I have taught in Britain where I had, I, I taught in a high class umm, public, private school. I don’t know what they call it.
EP: (interjecting) Grammar school?

Mrs Matthew: And but I was there to observe education and then I would go to a dockside school in Liverpool. And I mean colour made absolutely no difference, but the kind of behaviour I saw in the dockside school in Liverpool in comparison to the government school is no different to what I see here. As to whether the child is at the bottom of the scale or the top of the scale. Colour made no difference; the way you behave didn’t have anything to do with colour, but where you are on the scale.

EP: So you are saying that it’s a socio-economic problem then?

Mrs Matthew: Yes. It’s got nothing to do with your colour. I think if you, if you’re brought up at the top of the level you behave in that kind of way and if you’re brought up at the bottom end of the scale…

EP: I just need to clarify what you are saying. You’re talking about working class?

Mrs Matthew: (interrupting) Yes working class, and whether you’re working class or whether you’re professional or whatever. I’m pretty sure that’s what makes the difference, not colour.

EP: So you’re actually talking about class differences?

Mrs Matthew: I’m talking about class differences as rather I do, I don’t think that colour; I, when I think of one of my classes that you didn’t sit in, I have African children whose parents were, I don’t know, doctors or what?

EP: Professionals?

Mrs Matthew: Professionals let’s put it that way, but they were a lot different from their white counterparts and when you got a child who was in the bottom at the end of the scale whose father was a laborer whether he was African or white made no difference. I don’t think colours got anything to do with it, I think it’s where you’re brought up.

Mrs Matthew’s reference to her experience in the UK is significant as she cites examples which specifically relate to social class in her mention of the Grammar school and the dockside school in Liverpool. Earlier in her interview she engaged in a cultural deficit discourse where pupils’ backgrounds were cited as a reason for poor performance and the socio-economic situation is closely linked to the cultural deficit model. With reference to social class Brandt (1986) discusses race, class and gender as an interface and describes how operating in combination and in conjunction with other forces may be used to oppress. He refers to Kuper (1979 in Brandt, 1986) who cites the case of South Africa to show how race class and power operated in conjunction to oppress the majority.

Mrs Nicholas, from Phakamani, expresses a dissimilar view to most of the teachers interviewed. She claimed that most of the problems in the school were a consequence of the white pupils who come from
a working-class background and bring their learned behaviour from home to school and are only reflecting their parental influence on their behaviour towards pupils from culturally diverse backgrounds. Mrs Jacob from Esiphumelelayo firmly believes that the problems that she has with her classes are related to social class:

**Mrs Jacob:** It is so ugly to say it but they are of a different class to others.

**E P:** When you say different class, what do you mean?

**Mrs Jacob:** All around they at a uhm bow do I don't know. They are a scruffier child. They are of a lower social class. It sounds so ugly but I feel certain children shouldn’t be in this school. It is a nightmare for them because they don’t know bow to cope. They can be taught so much all round. (I believe that the following remark made by Mrs Jacob was influenced by my race. I may be wrong). I can't complain about Indian children because I find that normally I find that we've got the higher-class Indian children in our school. I have been conscious of a lower level, a lower class of African children - they have problems, that's what I find.

She then revised her terminology,

**Mrs Jacob:** And I think the word of being “lower class” is wrong; they are of the more problem background child. Children who have got lots of problems, broken homes where there is no money, extreme poverty, there is a lot of those - social problems I mean to say. There is more of those now than twenty years ago. I never had those kind of problems what I am having now.

Mrs Jacob’s revision of her previous remark is evidence that she is not being intentionally negative. She concedes that her comment was not in good taste. She is a very competent teacher as I showed in Chapter Five. Her remarks are made without intending to be derogatory. She has claimed that she wants all her pupils to succeed, yet in many instances in her interview she inadvertently makes contentious comments.

At Phakamani, Ms John also mentions social problems across the race groups.

**Ms John:** I think sometimes you have to be careful when you are doing like word problems. How you word them and just remember that, your experiences your home life is not the same for everybody else but that also is the same for some of the white kids as well. Their home circumstances are quite bad. What you experience come up against. You have to be careful the way you structure something around there. Because we don’t deal with a lot of that, it's not really it's not like an English class where you always talking about… social problems. Some of these children have really big problems.
Mrs Timothy from Zama feels that teachers definitely face greater challenges today and, like Ms John from Phakamani, she also finds that teachers have to tread very carefully when discussing social issues in Geography for fear of offending the different race groups in the class;

**E P:** Do you think that you face greater challenges now than you did previously?

**Mrs Timothy:** Uhm, yes I definitely feel one faces greater challenges. There are, one has to take into account especially in my subject, sometimes discussing certain issues, that one does not offend the different race groups in your class. Because sometimes pupils can err misconstrue what you are actually saying in trying to get across to them...When discussing rural problems and a lack of development and why it is difficult for the RDP to uhm fully problems in rural settlements. Like economic problems, uhm and if I point out that people there are very much entrenched in their cultural and traditional background, uhm and it is very difficult make them advanced because they are so linked to their tradition and culture, the African pupils get a little bit antagonistic towards me.

Becker (1970, in Gillborn, 1995) refers to teachers who depend on their surrounding society to provide them with pupils who meet the standards of their image of the ideal client; in this case, the pupil. However, social class among other factors may produce clients who fail to meet the expectations of the teachers and this, together with ethnic difference, may impinge on the teachers’ perception. According to Cole (1989, p. 39), “working class failure is endemic to schooling in capitalist countries. If pupils are unable to measure up to the teachers’ expectations the easiest way out is to blame the pupils’ socio-economic background”. (Hernandez, 1989; Garcia, 1993; Troyna, 1995; Liston and Zeichner, 1996).

There is the belief among certain teachers that they should teach pupils of the same race as they believe that teachers would relate better to pupils of their own race.

7.6 “I don’t relate to them as well as someone of their own culture”

Ms Luke has experienced antagonism from African pupils which, she interprets, as a consequence of racial diversity.

**E P:** What can you tell me about your experiences with pupils from the diverse cultures?

**Ms Luke:** I have got a specific class 8E; you probably know them who actually support each other, and use their cultures to enrich the class. I had felt personally that there doesn’t seem to be antagonism. However, I had felt personally antagonism from the Muslim boys. I can tell you now without even asking them, who they are, who the Muslim boys are in the class because they just don’t co–operate. They tell me straight to my face, “I don’t like you. I don’t like your lessons, you mean nothing to me”. And I just said, well you
have to be here, you have to get over it”. So if you want to pass English you have to sit here and listen to me and if you don’t appreciate it, it is just not my fault.

**E P:** What do you think is the reason for this antagonism?

**Ms Luke:** I think it’s cultural; in their culture a woman means nothing and to have a woman teacher; they just don’t respect me at all.

**E P:** But the majority of their teachers are women.

**Ms Luke:** I know, uhm, maybe I feel it more because I see them more than the other teachers. Because I see them five times a cycle and my lessons are so interactive I can feel where there is antagonism and when they want to co–operate and when they don’t. Uhm, I think a lot of other lessons are “this is what you need to learn, copy down the transparencies there is your work”, with not as much interaction, so people don’t notice it as much.

Ms Luke a sweet, pleasant, friendly first year teacher is very enthusiastic and excited to be teaching. However, as is evident from this excerpt from her interview is saddened by the behaviour of certain boys. Ms Luke appears to be hurt by the aggression of these boys and state what she believes to be the reason for their behaviour. I unfortunately omitted to enquire about the source of Ms Luke’s information regarding the Muslim boys. I am not sure whether or not her statement about being disliked by the Muslim boys was based on an assumption. If Ms Luke’s statement was based on an assumption, then it is an unfair assumption based on the behaviour of a few Muslim boys.

Many teachers stated that they were not familiar with the various cultures. For example, Mrs Matthew from Phakamani laughingly described her first encounter with a culturally diverse school as a ‘culture shock’ because she had come from St Anne’s, which, at the time, was a predominantly white girls’ school. The words ‘culture shock’ could be interpreted as Mrs Matthew’s consternation at being confronted by a mixed race class. Perhaps, because she was from a white background and was educated in white institutions and had taught white classes, she was not prepared for a culturally diverse class. In the previous chapter, a certain teacher mentioned that teachers’ backgrounds had not prepared them for culturally diverse classrooms. It should also be remembered that the majority of white teachers had not encountered pupils from culturally diverse groups in their classrooms prior to the early 1990s. Within a multicultural society such as South Africa, the onus is upon the school to reflect the multicultural character of society. However, Mr Khumalo from Phakamani, the only teacher of colour on the staff, is adamant that this is not the case in his school:
E P: I understand that you come from an ex-DET school. Would you please share your experiences here at this school?

Mr Khumalo: What, what I have noticed as an individual is this that it is quite different in terms of certain culture. As for integrated classes, I wouldn’t say they are good or bad they are like a pendulum, sometimes it is not a good experience. So to say culturally and religiously as, as, as well as Ulbm English language or position and good management of these schools and good competition. I would say integrated schools are good then the same time when it comes to other aspects in terms of culture in terms of tradition and religion integrated classrooms are not good, because there is this question of undermining other cultures, other languages. One language is taken as supreme than the other.

E P: Do you think it is good for pupils to learn about one another’s cultures?

Mr Khumalo: That is my belief that I think that it is very important that we have to teach culture as culture to help to teach about food that we eat. Help to teach about, ah as well as our religion then tolerance level is going to be uplifted.

E P: What is your relationship with the staff?

Mr Khumalo: Err it is difficult because what I used to like they do not like. One in terms of music when we have staff parties they play their own music, I am alone. In terms of beverages as such you come up with the whole staff, they don’t understand why they have to cater for that because they have all been used to certain types of drink.

E P: What strikes you or stands out in your mind from your experience over the past five years?

Mr Khumalo: Err what strikes me is negative. What strikes me, what stood tall among every other thing, is the question of ignorance. We don’t know each other. Socially in terms of the type of food we eat and in terms of religion (repetition). We don’t know each other. Though we try to respect each other, what is it you going to respect if you don’t know? So what I’ve seen is we still individualistic in terms of approach. And that will take some time to be rectified… culture, language.

E P: A member of staff mentioned that you are a great asset to the school in getting staff to understand the African culture. What are the contributions that you have made?

Mr Khumalo: One ubm, I am one person who stands firm for his cultural group, for his language, for his beliefs. I won’t change and I won’t be changed by this situation. That is why I am still the very same person who joined the staff. I am not easily influenced by that, so one thing we err err, usually have some sessions though they are not called formal sessions where I tell them about culture in terms of what happens if we have a bereaved family.

E P: ‘them’? When you say “them”, who are you referring to?

Mr Khumalo: The white staff. Because they would actually give kids demerits who have shaved totally in the err the hair as such and I would actually tell them it is the culture if one comes from a bereaved family everyone has to shave their hair. Then after that it means that the question of starting a new life without a
certain member. So the hair mustn’t be there as such so they would understand that. And then number two, in terms of general feeling, in terms of our own religion, I would actually tell them as to what is happening in their own language as such. One thing this err question of kids when they talking with African kids the kids wouldn’t look through their eyes as such they look down to the floor. To us it is a respect, you don’t look at a older person through the eyes, you show disrespect. Have to look down to say you are sorry about that as such. But in terms of white culture, they say ‘look at me through my eyes’ and then if you as a kid if you don’t answer back they will say ‘answer me’. As such, you were raised in the African culture, if you answer, they will say you are disrespectful. You don’t have to answer; you don’t have to chat back with an adult. So those things I usually tell them…

_E P:_ (Interrupting). _Would you say that your contributions have assisted with cultural understanding?_

_Mr Khumalo:_ Yes, even religiously [pause] the other field that I have also improved the school is at the question of choral music with the choir. Before I joined, there was no choir. Then I started the choir, then this year we won two trophies. Then I started the choir with fourteen girls; now it’s a fully–fledged choir, like fifty kids as such, and then they are even looking forward to next year. So what I am saying in a nutshell this is what I know white teachers don’t know. So my coming here struck what you call it ah, in terms of everything.

Mr Khumalo was very negative about every aspect of his experience at Phakamani. (It could be possible that my race prompted Mr Khumalo to remark about the absence of an Indian teacher at Phakamani, contributing to the lack of understanding of the Indian culture). Mr Khumalo inadvertently fell into the ‘them and us’ trap by using the word “they” continuously. Mr Khumalo had many valuable insights to share with his colleagues about the African culture, which they welcomed. Mr Khumalo believed that he could not converse with his colleagues as they had nothing in common. Mr Khumalo appeared to be the one who was aloof as many of his white colleagues had tried to approach him without success. Mr Khumalo kept to himself and preferred not to socialize with the other members of staff.

While Mr Khumalo complained about not being able to relate to the white teachers, Ms Lazarus from Esiphumelelayo believes that she just cannot relate to the African pupils.

_Ms Lazarus:_ Perhaps I don’t relate to them as someone of their own culture would and that is why they don’t listen to me because they don’t see the value of it. I am not too sure.

_E P:_ Is there anything else in the past eight months that you would like to share with me?

_Ms Lazarus:_ I must say that the white students and the African students, they don’t work together well at all. I don’t know what they are like out of school or at home, but I am constantly having to moan at the African students for interfering with the white students.
For teachers who experience problems with cultural diversity, Garcia (1991) advocates that teachers have two basic goals. The first goal is that of transmitting knowledge; and the second of socialising their pupils to live in a culturally diverse society. Ms Lazarus believes that it could be her fault, because of her ‘culture’. Mrs Jacob believes that, because of the different cultures within the same class, one group tries to impress the other. “They are trying to outdo one another to see who is now going to be the leader of the group”. She feels that the problems that she and other teachers are experiencing could be related to, what she calls, the “colour change” in the classrooms. “Maybe the cultures are different, or you see I don’t know how Indian children, African children and white children are differently brought up”. What can be inferred from this remark perhaps is that she knows how whites are reared and that white pupils’ rearing is superior to that of other racial groups. Alternatively, she could mean that she is not aware of the cultural background of these pupils.

Mrs Naidoo, the only ‘Indian’ teacher at Esiphumelelayo maintains that there is a total ignorance of the various cultures that exist in our country because pupils are not exposed to them. What Mrs Naidoo found irksome was that Indian pupils appeared to be negating their culture in favour of the dominant school culture.

**E P:** Do you think it is because they are in a predominantly white school that they do not want to acknowledge their culture?

**Mrs Naidoo:** It could be. Yes! Yes! I also found that the Indian children they compromise a lot of their culture when they are in a multicultural school, which is also sad. Last year, when I did my teaching prac, I actually took off quite a few lessons to do err, like a culture study thing. It was one of my assignments. I just told all my standard sixes that I want them to do a display and a speech, almost like a presentation on their cultures. And err, the Indian children came up to the front and said “ja, ja this is a sari and we have to wear a sari, ja, and you people must have heard we eat with our hands and very reluctant. It was sad because it is a beautiful culture; it is such a rich culture. But they compromise so much. I don’t know if you heard uhm, what children in 8G call Dhiren, they’re calling him Dirran and the first time I heard that I said

“Excuse me, it is not Dirran”.

“Yes Ma’am, my name is Dhiren” (pronounced Theeren).

So I said

“What are you calling him Dirran for? Why are you calling him Dirran?”

**E.P:** I have also heard Khirtan (pronounced Kheertan) being called ‘curtain’.
Mrs Naidoo: You see why is he compromising his name? That is his name why should anyone be calling him 'curtain'? So that is what I have found and it is sad and I think I should start doing that, a cultural presentation all over again. Because at the end of the day the children really enjoyed it and I said to them the only way that we are going to eliminate prejudices and preconceived attitudes is if we know more about each other. And where unfortunately in our syllabus, we haven’t had the opportunity to do that and it is so important. It is vital that we know more about each other because that is the only way we are going to live with each other.

Mrs Naidoo is very proud of her culture and it is apparent that she is opposed to assimilation. Having been exposed to cultural diversity abroad, Mrs Naidoo is adamant that Indian pupils should be proud of their culture. She believes that although they are a minority in the school they should not allow themselves to be assimilated. A young Indian woman who has very strong beliefs and is prepared to defend them in any situation is an appropriate description of Mrs Naidoo. She tries to instill these values in her pupils and from the above excerpt it is obvious that some of the ‘Indian’ children are allowing themselves to be assimilated into the western culture specifically, by allowing their names to be anglicised. Mrs Naidoo is also not afraid to challenge management about certain issues which she finds contradictory in the treatment of certain pupils. She firmly believes that it is very important to teach pupils about the diverse cultures in the school as a means of eliminating prejudice. Her beliefs bear close links with Hernandez’s (1989) assumptions as Mrs Naidoo is adamant that having a better understanding of the diverse cultures and their traditions will promote harmony. To a certain extent Mrs Naidoo has leanings towards anti-racist tendencies although she is not aware of it. Her insistence that pupils should not submit to assimilation is evidence of this. In addition, her political views of the previous dispensation and her passion for equality and gender equity bear testament to this.

There are a number of models of assimilation but one in particular is known as the ‘ice cream plus salt’ theory, which is a one–way process where the minority groups or groups whose culture is less dominant actually relinquish their culture and are completely incorporated into the dominant cultural group (Garcia, 1993; Hernandez, 1989).

The assimilationist view is prevalent at all three schools. Pupils are being assimilated into the dominant culture and this is evident from Mrs Naidoo’s outrage. ‘Assimilation is defined as a weapon for cultural imperialism or the take–over by one group of another. This is what is happening at historically white Model C schools on a small scale (Garcia, 1991). In America, an attempt was made to Americanise minority groups by replacing their mother tongue and culture with the American way of life and to rid non-American children of their cultural attributes (Garcia, 1993). Although historically white schools in
South Africa are not consciously trying to ‘westernise’ pupils it is evident that African and Indian pupils are trying to become part of the dominant culture by being assimilated.

Power in historically white schools is perceived to be in the hands of management, teachers and white pupils, and it is this power that creates the ethos of the school and that perpetuates the power of the system. Discourse and power according to Foucault’s (1982) analyses are regarded as structuring principles of society. In his opinion power is relational and not a monolithic possessed by one social group to use against another. In the school situation, it is evident that power is used, perhaps inadvertently, against another social group and pupils from diverse racial backgrounds.

Pupils who come into historically white schools from very different school cultures and who do not match the system that they have entered will tend to be at a disadvantage in the school (Hernandez, 1989). From the interviews conducted with pupils, some “matched” the system since they had come through historically white primary schools. However, many pupils did not “match” the system. These children, by attending an historically white school, do not possess the cultural capital to access the cultural capital of the school. The theory of cultural capital is that certain knowledge represents the “cultural capital” that pupils might use at a later stage in their lives, by acquiring the principles of the dominant culture (Apple, 1996; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985 and Brandt, 1986). In society, according to some theorists, a certain number if people are able to access this cultural capital, while others are unable to (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985). This is evident in Sifiso’s reflection on his background:

**EP:** Could you comment on pupils beliefs that teachers do not understand the pupils from other race groups in your class?

**Sifiso:** Well I can’t really say anything because I come from a very white background, so uhm, I personally wouldn’t know.

**EP:** You say you come from a white background, what do you mean?

**Sifiso:** Well, ma’am my mum’s employers took me in when I was a baby. I was brought up in a white home as if I am one of their own children. I’ve been in a white nursery school, white primary school and now I’m in a multicultural high school so..., so I have come from a very different society background. I have been brought up differently to the normal African child from the township. I have always lived in the suburbs and I have always associated with whites. So for me it is very difficult to say.

**EP:** Have you been called a “coconut” because of your background?
Sifiso: I have been called that a lot of times and I do feel offended some times because I am African and uhmm, well I don’t, I do feel very offended but I don’t do much about it. It is not my fault that I have the type of background that I do. I did not ask for it.

E P: Do you feel that it is an unfair criticism of you?

Sifiso: I wouldn’t say it is an unfair criticism of me, I would probably say it is a true criticism of me.

E P: Are you saying that they are justified in calling you a “coconut”?

Sifiso: I don’t think they are justified but I do feel that it is the truth. So that…I am an African and I am proud to be African.

E P: So the fact that they call you a “coconut” does not affect you then?

Sifiso: Not really, I just ignore it.

E P: How do you identify with your African heritage or have you lost it?

Sifiso: I err…I haven’t necessarily lost it, I still go to the rural areas with my biological parents and I do a lot of things there. I haven’t lost my heritage but I feel that I have just uhmm…I battle with my language that is my real problem.

E P: Do you only speak English?

Sifiso: Mostly and I speak a bit of Zulu and Sotho, but mostly English

E P: What is your home language?

Sifiso: It is English but it should be Zulu

Sifiso, unlike his counterparts from township schools, has already been assimilated into a western culture as a result of his white foster parents and is quite comfortable in his school. In the early 1990s open schools in South Africa encouraged pupils to adopt the ethos of the schools (Carrim, 1993; Naidoo, 1996; Christie, 1992). Despite the changes to the education policy, the ethos of historically white schools remains the same and their expectations parallel those of the open schools in the early 1990s. This remark indicates reluctance on the part of teachers to change and, more specifically, teachers are averse to the changing of the ethos of their schools. There is a danger that African pupils will be assimilated by the school, instead of them changing the school. African pupils will be become part of the cultural ethos and adopt the values of the white schools and, consequently, be estranged from their communities (Carrim and Sayed, 1991). This is what has happened in the case of Sifiso, who has only interacted with whites.
However, this is not the case with Zaida, who has attended an Indian primary school. She feels very insecure in this predominantly white school and believes that because she is “different”, she will be rejected.

**E P:** Do you find that you get along better with African and Indian pupils?

**Zaida:** Uhm, I find that I get along with everybody. It’s just when I am around white people - I just like keep quiet. I don’t know [pause] I feel very uncomfortable around white people.

**E P:** What makes you feel uncomfortable around white people?

**Zaida:** Ma’am I don’t know [pause] because I wasn’t brought up with them, It was the first time. Uhm, you see on TV is white people, but when you meet them in real life [pause] I feel very insecure about myself.

**E P:** Why should you feel insecure?

**Zaida:** Seriously I don’t know. Even when I go to the shop I can, if it is an Indian saleslady, talk to her, but if it’s a white person, I don’t know.

**E P:** Do you think it could perhaps be your background that has caused you to feel insecure among whites?

**Zaida:** It’s uhm, the way, uhm, my upbringing. I wasn’t brought up surrounded by white people. My surroundings were just like Indian and African and so [pause] I am normally just surrounded by Indian and African people.

**E P:** You mentioned that when you first came to this school you were afraid when you saw all the white children around you. What were you afraid of?

**Zaida:** I was afraid that they were going to judge me and say no how can… I was just afraid of them…. I feel that if I am not perfect they are going to reject me.

**E P:** Is it important to you that they accept you?

**Zaida:** Yes Ma’am, it is important for me. I like to be accepted by people that I see everyday.

Zaida’s problem borders on poor self-concept and self-confidence. Zaida comes from a traditional Muslim background, where there is limited or no interaction with whites. Consequently, due to her lack of self-confidence and self-concept, she cannot interact in this environment that is predominantly white. Zaida has experienced change is both anxious and uncertain.
7.7 “You learn to live with it”

Pupils in all the schools frequently expressed positive views about cultural diversity. When discussing the variety of cultural groups in their schools they tend to identify the benefits of knowing individuals from the various cultures, as well as the extensive knowledge gained from knowing about these cultures and religions.

‘You learn to live with it,’ says Tarryn once she got used to having pupils of diverse cultures in her class. She mentions a Korean girl in her school to emphasise the diversity of cultures. She confesses that to a certain extent she has resigned herself to being surrounded by these diverse cultures, and has concluded that ‘it’s nice not to have the same people in your class.’ She does not socialise much in class and gets on with her work immediately. Tarryn does not appear to have any close friendships with any pupils in the class despite being positive about the diversity in her class.

Tshepo enjoys the cultural difference and the fact that pupils are able to exchange cultural traditions and that he can teach pupils about his culture but then he believes African pupils who attend multicultural schools are also relinquishing their culture, “because some of us are not going to understand our languages”.

Garcia (1994) refers to Americanisation, which is a process that eliminates the language and cultural differences. In the South African context, by pupils being forced to study English as a first language and because of the total disregard of mother tongue in historically white schools, a very similar pattern to that of the ‘Americanisation’ notion is evident. This may not be intentional on the part of the schools; nevertheless, ‘westernisation’ is happening. Tshepo’s comment about the loss of the vernacular provides the evidence.

Lesego agrees that a multicultural school provides pupils with the opportunity to share their cultural traditions. Marijke states that she was mistaken in her perceptions of other religions. However, after befriending pupils from diverse cultural backgrounds, her perceptions were altered. Lerato believes that he has learnt about the diverse cultures as well as their religions. Although all these pupils have very positive comments to make about cultural diversity, there is no evidence to suggest that they have learnt anything of value nor have my observations clarified that the African pupils have friendships outside their racial/cultural group. They talk to pupils of other races/cultures, laugh and joke with them but, in class,
they sit in their own racial/cultural groups. When I observed these pupils during breaks they invariably gravitated towards pupils of their own culture.

Amina belongs to the Muslim faith claims that she is not affected by the “Christian” ethos of her school, “I don’t forget my culture” (meaning religion). Because she is Muslim Amina wears a pair of trousers under her tunic. Her religion requires that her legs are covered at all times. The white and African pupils were curious and wanted to know why she dressed in such a fashion. She found that some pupils were very curious about her religion and wanted to know more. Gillborn (1995) would applaud this curiosity if it were well intended. Schools in the UK teach about Islam but unfortunately disregard the Afro-Caribbean culture. Schools should address the issues of the various cultures and religions in a school (Gillborn, 1995).

Zaida has a problem with assimilation and she strongly believes that the African and Indian pupils are being engulfed by the western culture. Assimilation is not equal to success (Garcia, 1994). The idea that prevailed in America was to force non-American children into the American mould, and Garcia (1994) provides evidence to prove that assimilation may actually inhibit academic success rather than promote it. During observations it was relatively easy to detect that teachers related better to pupils who had come through historically white primary schools than pupils from the township schools. In other words, pupils had been assimilated into the system earlier and it made life easier for teachers.

‘I’ve accepted them as people; they’re the same as us’ is what Tarryn has to say and this will probably please Zaida, as she is quite adamant that she wants to be accepted for who she is. Lesego contends that “we might not be the same colour but inside we’re the same”. Idealistic, perhaps, and over ambitious and Lesego agrees with Zaida, but he would like to see the situation where people would “be as one” but he confesses “it’s like a dream”.

Marijke came to an English school from an Afrikaans one and claims that “these people accept you with open arms; they don’t discriminate because they know you are Afrikaans”. In Marijke’s opinion, she believes that everybody at her school “has an open mind and accepts you”. However, African pupils hold opinions that differ from Marijke’s. They believe that the white pupils see African pupils as intruders and have still not accepted them.
“You learn to live with it”. Tarryn believes this is one way of coping in a racially/culturally diverse classroom. “If pupils from other cultures are in the school, there is nothing that can be done about it”, says Tarryn. “All races must just learn to live with other races”. Fighting, she believes, is pointless because it then becomes an “endless war”. In their study Verma, Zec and Skinner (1994) found that the removal of barriers to social contact was more significant to pupils than inter-racial mixing.

7.8 Summary

From my findings reported in this chapter it is evident that teacher ideologies and beliefs have remained unchanged, specifically towards pupils from diverse racial backgrounds. Consequently, in the analysis of both pupil and teacher interviews, as well as classroom observations, I was able to infer teachers’ predilection for the “cultural deficit model”, closely related to assimilation or accommodation into the main stream. Ladson Billings’ (1995, p.467) discussions about the three terms, “culturally appropriate”, “culturally congruent” and “culturally compatible”, utilised by studies on “cultural mismatch” applies here. These terms used in the studies highlight the intention for pupils to be accommodated.

Although the principal of Phakamani used difference in a positive way, teachers have still not come to terms with using diversity as a tool. Instead of seeing difference in a positive way, teachers view it negatively and find difference problematic. It was evident that most of the teachers who mentioned difference were comparing their white pupils with their African pupils.

Culture featured prominently throughout this chapter and African pupils were adamant that teachers do not understand their culture while teachers believed that they do not relate to pupils of other cultures. Teachers identified pupils’ socio-economic backgrounds as the reason for numerous problems in the schools. In their mention of the socio-economic backgrounds of pupils, it was evident that teachers were engaging in cultural deficit discourse.

Despite teachers’ appearing to be negative, a number of pupils were positive about the racially diverse classrooms and claimed that they had actually benefited from these classrooms.