Chapter Eight:

TEACHER AND LEARNER INTERACTION AND THE DYNAMICS OF RACIALLY INTEGRATED CLASSROOMS

“The segregation of education, as well as segregated teacher training, led to various problems in South African education”.

(Fraser, 1992b, p.103)

8.1 Introduction

Segregated education imposed by the previous dispensation has major consequences for education today. Teachers from historically white former Model C schools who now teach in racially integrated classrooms have, for the first time in some cases, encountered pupils from diverse racial backgrounds, whereas some pupils from racially diverse backgrounds are being taught by white teachers for the first time. These first encounters could place both pupils and teachers in a predicament. Teachers lack the knowledge of the frames of reference of pupils from the diverse racial groups, and have limited knowledge of teaching in these racially diverse classrooms, where the onus is upon them to create an equitable and just educational environment for their pupils. The question to be asked is:

How does one create a more equitable and just educational arena in a society that can be described as inequitable and unjust? One may ask how do we use the dynamics of culture when in fact those very dynamics are seen to put pupils of diverse cultures at a disadvantage.

(Liston and Zeichner, 1996, p.84)

The answers to these questions are not straightforward, since there are many obstacles for promoting an equitable climate and few opportunities for this. (Liston and Zeichner, 1996). Further, The USA is not a society that affords poor pupils and African pupils access to resources and knowledge. Liston and Zeichner (1996) contend that the USA is a class-based society, which is racially divided and for which the amassing of wealth and status are motivating forces. Teachers should not naively believe that they can correct the societal ills that have a protracted history. Instead educators should have hope and commit to understanding that it is possible to change lives and institutions. They (teachers) should also find the
means to endorse this hope for the pupils. ‘Teaching without hope is a losing proposition’ (Liston and Zeichner, 1996, p. 85). Teaching involves learning, and learning ultimately involves change, modification in, and transformation of the student. If learning has taken place, then change has occurred, thus hope is obligatory when teaching, especially as it ensures that the efforts exerted in teaching are meaningful and valuable to the pupils. Yet it is idealistic to believe that the hope in educational endeavours alone will create a just and equitable society (Liston & Zeichner, 1996).

Education in South Africa is still undergoing transformation (ten years after the first democratic elections) in all sectors, while it changes from a racially segregated education system to an integrated, democratic schooling system. The revised National Curriculum Statement (2003) bears testimony to this. South Africa to a certain extent is also “class-based” and “racially divided”. There is also the overemphasis on the amassing of wealth and status, which acts as a motivating force. Generally, South African society is unwittingly emulating American society.

A significant number of educationists are in favour of improving education and would like education to be transformed immediately. The USA is decades ahead of South Africa in the transformation of its education system, and yet it is still experiencing problems. Teachers in integrated classrooms are trying to employ strategies which they believe would lead to success in creating a just and equitable society; however these strategies are not always the ideal:

We are certain that teachers’ and students’ cultural assumptions affect the teaching and learning that occurs in schools. Therefore, we feel secure in maintaining that teachers need to attend to their own and their students’ cultural identities and assumptions.

(Liston and Zeichner, 1996, p. 89)

This chapter examines the evidence from my study with regard to teachers’ interaction with pupils from diverse racial backgrounds. In an attempt to treat all the pupils fairly, some teachers favoured the use of the ‘colour-blind approach’. The use of this approach was seen in this study to have the reverse effect on African pupils who perceived teachers’ actions as unfair and insensitive. African pupils also interpreted teachers’ reluctance to be drawn into any racial altercations between African and white pupils as unfair. In many cases, African pupils identified favouritism in white teachers’ interaction with their white pupils.
Stereotyping is evident in the teachers’ discussions of black (generic) pupils. Closely related to stereotypes is the labelling theory and self-fulfilling prophecy, which teachers unsuspectingly alluded to. Racial stereotypes may often be seen in various forms at a professional level.

Considering that it is unprofessional for teachers to describe African pupils using derogatory labels, the teachers shroud their derisive remarks in euphemisms.

(Solorzano and Yosso, 2001, p. 4)

Paley (1989 in Liston & Zeichner, 1996) tells an interesting story about her white colleagues and herself who believed that they showed respect by totally ignoring colour. In their opinion “colour-blindness was the essence of the creed” (in Liston and Zeichner, 1996, p. 78). Paley stresses that this denial of difference ‘did not get her very far’, and actually obscured the requirement for knowledge of the African pupils’ cultural backgrounds, which is an essential aspect of education. Liston and Zeichner (1996) advise that diversity and difference should be valued, something that the teachers in all three schools were unaware of since the teachers who were interviewed unconsciously favoured the colour-blind approach.

8.2 “I don’t see black children and white children I see children”

Some teachers emphasised the fact that they did not see a learner’s colour; instead they believed that all the pupils in their classes were ‘the same’. In their opinion if they did not see colour they were treating all their pupils equally. This is a fallacy, according to Gillborn, (1990) who emphasises each learner’s individuality. Some teachers believed that by treating all the pupils equally they were, in fact, being fair:

_E_P_: So for you as an individual, what has this experience of teaching in a racially diverse school done for you?

_Mrs Matthew_: I still need to be more tolerant, (laughing). Erm, but I don’t know if it’s done very much for me because when I face a class I’m teaching children. And that, it doesn’t matter what they are, when you stand in front of that class you’re at, I don’t see African children and white children, I see children.

_E_P_: Thank you …

_Mrs Matthew_: (interrupting) Err you know when you asked that I actually, yes they are African they are white, but when you got to teach them you got to teach them, it’s your job. It doesn’t matter what they are.

_E_P_: Is there anything else of interest that you have found in a racially diverse classroom?
Mrs Matthew: To me when they sat in front of me I initially thought, having been out of teaching for that period of time I would find it very difficult. But when they sit in front of you they are children, it doesn’t make any difference.

Mrs Timothy from Zama also subscribes to the ‘colour-blind approach’:

_E P_: What would be your advice to teachers in multiracial classrooms?

Mrs Timothy: In a multiracial society my advice would be to have some background knowledge of the different umm, cultural groups that you are going to encounter in the school. Uhm and, and then also to see all pupils as being pupils, and not see the colour you know. Uhm be ‘colour-blind’, be aware of cultural difference but be colour-blind. I don’t think there is room in a school where you put things into colour groups; there is no room for that. I think one should see that, well I personally do that all pupils are pupils it doesn’t matter what colour they are, they are pupils. Uhm but one has to be aware of their cultural backgrounds so that one does not do the wrong things.

Mrs Michael from Phakamani concurs with both Mrs Matthew and Mrs Timothy about being ‘colour-blind’:

_E P_: How do you experience teaching in a multiracial classroom as opposed to a single-race classroom in the past?

Mrs Michael: I haven’t found that it has been very different umm, children are children and you don’t actually see them as colour when you teach in a class; [pause] education can achieve colour-blindness.

Mrs Michael has a very effervescent personality and is deeply moved by the transformation in education since 1994. When she says that she does not see colour I assume that she means that she does not discriminate. Most of the teacher who mentioned that they do not “see” colour were most probably not really referring to the “colour-blind approach, but were in fact trying to maintain their non discrimination. They inadvertently claim not to see colour and are unaware of the implications of this claim.

By seeing “children as children”, teachers are not taking cognisance of individual pupils’ cultural or racial differences or the fact that each child is a unique individual. The colour-blind approach posits the treatment of racial and cultural groups no different from that of the dominant group. Teachers who prefer to adopt the ‘colour-blind’ approach assume that if racial issues are addressed directly, it might worsen the situation. The Swann Commission (1985) sees ‘colour-blindness’ as “…negative as a straightforward rejection of people with a different skin colour since both types of attitude seek to deny the validity of an important aspect of a person’s identity” (Gillborn, 1990, p. 164).
Mrs Timothy, like Mrs Matthew and Mrs Michael, are unaware of the ‘colour-blind’ approach and its implications for racial diversity. Despite their belief that the ‘colour-blind’ approach is positive, these teachers are unfortunately misinformed and lack knowledge of the negative connotations of the colour-blind approach. They perhaps have good intentions and do not want to differentiate between their pupils on the grounds of colour.

Statements about colour-blindness, as well as the general understanding of colour-blindness, indicate the dangers of the use of the colour-blind approach (Banks and Mac Gee Banks, 1997; Garcia, 1991; Gillborn, 1990 and Troyna, 1989). I have observed teachers in their classrooms attempting to implement the colour-blind approach to their detriment, since African pupils perceive this as teachers disregarding them and their needs. It was obvious that these teachers have the misconception that treating all pupils the ‘same’ is a good practice. Teachers are afraid of being labelled “racist” and being accused of treating pupils unfairly. As a result, they believe that being ‘colour-blind’ is the best solution to their problems. By teachers adopting a colour-blind approach they lessen their problems and increase their freedom of action (Banks & McGee Banks, 1997). In addition, Garcia (1991) asserts that cultural diversity should not be regarded as another complication that exists in the classrooms. He advises instead that teachers make a difference in the lives of their pupils by ridding themselves of misconceptions about people. Some people have a deep passion for improving life, but the necessity of “understanding the change process, strong relationships, knowledge building and coherence making among multiple priorities” cannot be over emphasised (Fullan, 2001, p. 13).

Fullan (2001) refers to improving one’s “moral purpose”. This is where teachers are expected to make a difference in their pupils’ lives. ‘Moral purpose’ involves the evolution of human beings over time and their relationships with each other. Teachers need to understand the nature of change, as well as the importance of improving their moral purpose if they wish to make a change in the lives of their pupils.

Some teachers believe that they treat all pupils equally, yet few pupils agreed that they were treated the same. Evidence collected in the classrooms showed that, no matter what individual teachers believe, there is no such thing as colour-blindness when ethnicity is involved, and it is on this evidence that Gillborn (1990) rejects the ‘colour-blind’ approach. During a particular period it was “fashionable” to ignore cultural differences and teachers claimed “I treat all my students alike”; this, claims Garcia (1991), is tantamount to ignoring differences, which in essence “submerges rather than purges” (Garcia, 1991, p. 5).
Despite many teachers believing that they were being fair to all their pupils by treating them equally, a number of African pupils perceived the teachers’ treatment of white pupils as different from the treatment they received. African pupils believe that teachers are ignoring the problems that they (African pupils) experience and, consequently, pupils perceive teachers as being unfair:

8.3 “…turning a blind eye…”

Pupils strongly believe that the white teachers are not prepared to deal with problems and, therefore, these white teachers ignore any problems that surface and brush them aside, specifically if these problems pertain to race. A number of African and Indian pupils believed that teachers did not want to get involved for fear of being seen as taking sides, so teachers opted for non-involvement in the black pupils’ opinion. Black pupils felt that they had no recourse and perceived the actions of these teachers as unfair. Themba, a class captain of one of the classes that I visited, was adamant that teachers refrain from involvement in African pupils’ problems with white pupils:

\[\text{E P: Why do you say that teachers do not want to get involved?}\]

\[\text{Themba: They are just turning a blind eye. They don’t want to face that there is racism that the country hasn’t totally changed, that it’s going to take some time. I think they just don’t want to face those facts. Teachers do not address problems because they prefer to ignore them. They don’t deal with the problems that we are actually facing here.}\]

Lesego and Tshepo from Phakamani claim that teachers pay no attention to them when they complain about the white pupils’ behaviour towards African pupils. They believe that they represent the majority of African pupils from Phakamani in his opinion. Lesego and Tshepo state that the school always emphasises that “they do everything to help their pupils”. However, they found this to be contrary to what actually transpires at the schools. The black pupils believe that they are marginalised because their problems with white pupils are not being addressed in a satisfactory manner.

Some pupils perceive teachers as unfair, when teachers themselves believe that they are being fair by treating all their pupils equally. Marijke from Esiphumelelayo, on the other hand, believes that when white teachers treat pupils of other race groups just as they treat white pupils they are being very fair.

\[\text{E P: So what can you tell me about your teachers?}\]
Marijke: They are all very nice to all the cultures, there are no favourites or stuff. They don't discriminate against people because they are African. I mean if she works very well they give her the respect and praise she deserves. They don't go according to skin colour or culture.

E P: Do you think that is only with your teachers?

Marijke: No, with all of them. I think so.

E P: How can you talk for other teachers who do not teach you?

Marijke: Okay, I do choir or I did choir and I do First Aid and now I do pipe band and interact with teachers as well, and there are other colours, religions and races in the specific groups and all the teachers treat them just as they treat normal people, the white people.

E.P.: Who are the normal people?

Marijke: The white people.

E.P.: Are you saying the others are abnormal?

Marijke: No! No! No! No! No! It’s not what I meant, It’s just that they treat the majority as they treat the white people.

Marijke’s reference to white people as ‘normal people’, although she hastily corrects herself, could perhaps be interpreted as an underlying belief she has that only whites are normal. Perhaps Marijke mistakenly referred to whites as normal and the inference is made that she considers everyone else abnormal. Marijke is from a white, Afrikaner, middle-class background and attended a white Afrikaans primary school. Her only interaction with black and Indian children was at high school. Thus, her background may have influenced her perceptions and ideas. Marijke claims to have Indian and African friends. She firmly believes that there is no discrimination as far as teachers are concerned. Marijke also maintains that there are no favourites because teachers praise pupils if praise is due, irrespective of ‘the colour of the learner’s skin’. Although she is happy with the situation at her school, she says: “They might want to bring in different colour or culture teachers”. It is not clear whether this comment was as a result of her earlier faux pas. Marijke is very happy at Esiphumelelayo, and consequently believes that all pupils enjoy the same treatment and should share her elation.

Kristen, from Phakamani, agrees that it is necessary to have more teachers from other cultures because African and Indian pupils will have teachers from their own cultures to relate to. Although many of the pupils believe that the teachers were not treating them fairly, a few believe that teachers are fair.
Deshni, from Phakamani, found everything different; the school, the pupils, the teachers, but despite everything being so different and her inability to explain “different from an Indian school” she likes her present school. She commented on the fairness of the white teachers and she found the principal very fair in her treatment of all pupils. Sipho concedes that the principal is very fair: “She treats us equally. If you are naughty she doesn’t care; she gives you the same punishment”. However, at Esiphumelelayo, Zaida contends that teachers are ignoring problems:

**E P:** What can you tell me about your teachers?

**Zaida:** Some teachers are quite nice but actually, most of our teachers, they end up picking a lot on us. We just come now from Home Economics, a group of girls, okay it’s four whites and four Africans. And our teacher she says uhmm, she kicked all the African girls out, and she says right next week they are not cooking. She made the whole class, only the white people will cook. Because we said, yes, the African girls were naughty, but the white girls were also naughty.

**E P:** Which were the classes that were combined?

**Zaida:** It was 8G and 8F, but she kicked the African girls out, but she’s white and she didn’t kick the white girls out.

**E P:** So why were the African girls sent out?

**Zaida:** Uhm, ma’am because they were making a noise, It’s not only them it was also the white girls. They were both making a noise, she won’t kick the white girls out, and it was so wrong, so wrong! That’s one and then there’s Mrs Stephan, she often picks …like… and them they’ll make a noise she won’t say something, until it gets really noisy…But the African girls or Indian girls they won’t allow us to do something, but sometimes…

**E P:** So what is your complaint really? What does the teacher say or do?

**Zaida:** Nothing. She just goes on about rights and all that stuff.

**E P:** What rights?

**Zaida:** Uhm she has rights and so do we, but we gave up our rights; we are in her classroom. And Mrs Visser she is always picking on the African boys in the class, she ignores the white kids, she will make the African kids do punishment…but she will quickly forget when the white people are naughty.

Zaida believes that teachers are “turning a blind eye” at Esiphumelelayo, thus avoiding any conflict. When pupils are disciplined for bad behaviour Zaida perceives it as unfair. Zaida’s class is at the lower end of the Grade 8 classes and one of the most problematic classes that I observed. This class gives Mrs Visser, the Afrikaans teacher, endless problems. The group of African girls who are confrontational with
Mr Peters and Ms Lazarus come from the same class. Zaida is not happy at this school and says that she only came to this school because her mother coerced her. She said that she would have preferred to go to a predominantly ‘Indian’ school in the Indian Township where she lives. Zaida herself is not the best-behaved learner. She was confrontational, rude, and defiant on a number of occasions and it is apparent that her negativity stems from her unhappiness at this school. She perceives that teachers are being unfair and seems to ignore the fact that pupils need discipline. Just to indicate the type of behaviour that I observed in this class, I present an excerpt from my field notes in the Science classroom to illustrate the lack of discipline in this class.

It is 8:30 and pupils are in the classroom for their Science Lesson. This class is at its noisiest best. Girls are yelling on the tops of their voices for the class to keep quiet. The entire class is badly behaved and speaks continuously. Vinash and Collyn shout at the rest of the class to ‘shut up’. The class quietens down sufficiently to allow Mr Bernard to greet them. Mr Bernard is a temporary teacher. He has long blonde hair, which he ties back at the nape of his neck and the pupils describe him as ‘cool’. He really appears to be unaffected by the noise. He is certainly very laid back and the pupils are aware of this. He was a saxophonist on a cruise liner. Perhaps that is where he gets his patience. Mr Bernard has no control over the class and appears to be immune to the noise.

Krishna and Cedric appear to have formed an alliance and are having a whale of a time misbehaving and disrupting the class together.

Elaine continuously shouts out ‘guys shut up’ as loudly as she can in order to be heard above the noise then, as if having awakened from a short nap, Mr Bernard tries very meekly to quieten the riot. As can be expected without any success.

Ayanda, Masego, Lungilwe, Mbatho and Zandile who are sitting right in front of the class are having their own conversation in the vernacular and laughing raucously. From all over the classroom come shouts of ‘shut up’. Every learner in the class whether African or white is extremely loud and pays no attention to Mr Bernard’s weak attempts to restore order in this unruly class and give them some work to complete. Pupils walk in and out the classroom as they please. Seelan, sitting right in front of the class, is extremely disruptive. Ismael went to Mohammed as they tried to work something out together.

Chantal, Simone, Kelly and Candice who left the class at the beginning of the period have just walked into the classroom. They have been away from the classroom for approximately twenty minutes. They stand at Seelan’s desk, probably to assist with his noise making. Mandy and Zaida walk out of the classroom without permission from the teacher.

Sascha and Emma chat quietly to each other and pay no attention to the rest of the ‘madding crowd’. They are two of a few pupils who are actually working on the task that Mr Bernard has handed out. Ayanda and Co. continue to speak in the vernacular and have
not touched their work. Untroubled by the noise in the class Mr Bernard saunters around the classroom. Some pupils actually ask him for assistance, while the majority of the class is quite happy to be noisy and disruptive.

Despite having no control over this class, Mr Bernard appears to have a good rapport with the pupils. I suppose it is obvious because he does not reprimand the pupils nor does he insist that they work quietly. However, because he was not able to discipline the class it is apparent that pupils are taking advantage of his laid–back attitude. Possibly a reason for Mr Bernard’s attitude could be the fact that he was a locum teacher.

(Field notes, 16 August, 2000)

Had Mr Bernard been a disciplinarian, then pupils would have accused him of ‘picking on’ the African and Indian pupils and being unfair to them. However, because he does not discipline the class not a single pupil interviewed mentioned Mr Bernard. I am not claiming that these pupils are fabricating stories about the teachers but the field notes about that particular class makes me question the validity of some of the pupils’ claims about certain teachers.

Pupils’ perceptions were obfuscated by their beliefs that they were victims. Vusi claimed that teachers are unfair. He maintained that there were specific teachers who had, in his perception, been unfair to pupils. Pindiwe, also from Esiphumelelayo, a very emotional girl, was afraid to take the problems that she had with a specific teacher to the principal for fear that she and the other African pupils would be ostracised by that particular teacher. Although teachers appeared to be very fair on the surface, according to Pindiwe, they could be quite vindictive. Throughout my observations it was not possible to identify any vindictiveness on the part of the teachers. However, teachers do relate better to pupils who are committed to learning and perhaps this is what pupils perceive as unfairness. There is a tendency on the part of teachers to emphasise cognitive achievement and, as a result, there is a widening of the gap between the high achievers and the weak students or “disengaged” students. The “disengaged” students are unable to establish significant personal relationships with teachers and other members of the school; consequently, their inability to engage in learning may be traced back to their lack of motivation. It is imperative that the emotional development of pupils should accompany cognitive development. “Pupils who are emotionally developed have the personal and social skills that enable them to motivationally engage with other pupils, and this assists with an increased cognitive ability to achieve” (Fullan, 2001).

Pupils claimed that teachers disregard their complaints, Verma, Zec and Skinner (1994) found in their study that pupils claimed that white teachers did not take them seriously. In the United Kingdom, there
are specific whole school policies in place and if teachers ignore the pupils’ complaints, they are not taking cognisance of the school policy and legal action could be instituted against them. However, in the three schools where this study was conducted there was no evidence of such policies, and, consequently, some teachers may prefer to ignore pupils’ complaints. All three principals mentioned that they do not tolerate racism in their schools, but this does not constitute a policy. Among others, two of the main issues that concern pupils are that schools should make pupils feel more comfortable and less tense, and that teachers “do not care”. This is what is referred to as the “alienation theme” (Fullan, 2001, p. 154). Many of these pupils who complained about teachers and their unfair treatment could be experiencing some form of alienation. In the interviews, African and Indian pupils indicated that they noticed favouritism among many of the white teachers.

8.3.1 “The white girls talk constantly…”

Some Indian and African pupils complained that white teachers are guilty of favouritism. Three pupils from Esiphumelelayo feel quite strongly about favouritism, especially Zaida. She claims that, “The deputy Principal does not punish white girls; only Indian girls are punished for dying their hair”. Zaida also sees teachers having preference for their own race. She believed that the Afrikaans teacher ignores the white pupils when they are naughty, but ‘picks’ on the African boys. She perceives this as favouritism. During my observations this was not apparent. The entire class is badly behaved and Mrs Visser reprimanded the entire class and did not ‘pick on’ any particular race group. Zaida perceived racism, favouritism and unfair treatment, which I was unable to identify throughout my observations. Zaida is unable to see anything that is positive in the school and this clouds her perception. I am not trying to discredit Zaida’s claims in any way, but I believe Zaida saw this interview as a means to give vent her feelings and, accordingly, this interview evolved into a diatribe against teachers and white pupils.

Lerato sees favouritism because “the white girls talk constantly, but the African girls get into trouble when they talk”, although he concedes that some teachers are fair he claims that others favour their own race group. Some white girls, he says, “suck up to the teachers and they don’t get into trouble for bad behaviour” and, in his opinion, they are the worst behaved pupils in the class. He also perceives favouritism in the English class where he claims that his English teacher, because she is an Indian, ‘she favours the Indian children’. From my observations this was not apparent. The teacher in question, Mrs Naidoo, works with all pupils and pays attention to everybody in the class. I did not observe any Indian learner being given preferential treatment. Sibonelo and Candice claimed that Mrs Naidoo is fair to all;
they also refuted Lerato’s claim and pointed out that even though Mrs Naidoo’s niece is in her class Mrs Naidoo does not give even her preferential treatment.

Keshni only noticed favouritism in her Afrikaans class where the teacher paid special attention to Sanet, because she is from an Afrikaans background. During my observations it was apparent that the other pupils felt neglected because Mrs Botha asked Sanet to do everything for her. According to a number of the other pupils, Mrs Botha only pays attention to Sanet because she is Afrikaans speaking.

The lesson that I observed was a literature lesson and Sanet was asked to read and the other pupils to follow in their books. They fooled around and paid no attention at all to the lesson. This class was not as badly behaved as the class that I had observed with Mrs Visser, but it was evident that they were not interested in the lesson. Mrs Botha, the Afrikaans teacher, did not display favouritism in the Afrikaans class during my observations. I assumed that because Sanet was one of the most competent pupils in the Afrikaans class, Mrs Botha had asked her to read. However, none of the other pupils were involved in the lesson. Although some pupils were not aware of it, they discussed the presence of stereotyping in their schools.

8.4 "Most people look...on blacks as people who are stupid”

There was evidence of stereotyping in a few of the pupils’ discussions although they did not mention the word ‘stereotyping’ as such. “The United States is very colour conscious and colour affects the way people view their separate and interrelated worlds” (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001, p. 2). The same can be said of South Africa and we could question how race or racism affects the education of pupils from racially diverse backgrounds. Solorzano and Yosso (2001) state that in order to answer this question on the education of students from diverse racial backgrounds it is essential to define and examine racial stereotypes. A stereotype may be defined as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalise) our conduct in relation to a category” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 3). These stereotypical traits may be applied in educational situations to justify certain beliefs about the diverse groups. Tarryn comments on an opinion held by certain whites:

_E P:_ How would you feel about African pupils who get top marks in class?


_Tarryn:_ I think it's good for African pupils to achieve top honours in school because people, most people look on African people, that is if you're white, as people who are stupid. But then that's good because then we've got lots of competition; that's not just all white people.

Staff room talk reveals many interesting truths about teachers’ attitudes, beliefs and perceptions according to many researchers. When teachers discussed the cycle tests that were being written at the time at Esiphumelelayo stereotyping was evident on the part of some teachers; “The Indians are always cheating. I caught two Indian boys cheating in the maths paper. They definitely bring it to school from home. Indians are always caught cheating”. The conversation continued about Indians and the reasons why they cheat, ‘because it comes from their background as businessmen who are always cheating’.

On another occasion, also in the staff room, a Science teacher was talking to a relief Geography teacher. I was seated next to the Geography teacher, and the Science teacher was seated to my left.

Mrs Moses, “With due respect (addressed to me) I find the Indian boys to be the most problematic because they are always cheating. I don’t mean to offend but they are always the ones found cheating. They are always dishonest. Whenever there is a problem with cheating the Indian boys are involved”.

Mrs Moses was most probably unaware that she was drawing a stereotypical picture of Indian boys at her school. Although there were a few Indian boys who were guilty of cheating, her comment implies that all Indian boys cheat which, of course, is untrue. What is also a misconception is that all Indian men are businessmen.

The self-fulfilling prophecy, the labelling theory, and teachers’ expectations of their pupils as discussed by Meighan (1994) are very evident at all three schools, but especially at Esiphumelelayo. The well-intentioned and conscientious, white teachers are committed to equality but their words and actions; although unintentionally so, also produce familiar racial stereotypes. When differences exist between two groups on characteristics relating to status such as wealth, housing and education, stereotypes develop when these distinctions are made conspicuous (Gillborn, 1995). Stereotypes have close links with culture, as may be seen in teachers’ perceptions. Many teachers have expectations of pupils irrespective of what their true potential is. Meighan’s (1994) study of teacher expectations showed that pupils perform as badly as the teacher expects them to. There is a tendency on the part of black (generic) pupils to comply with the teachers’ expectations of them, as a result of the teachers conveying to the pupils their expectations based on stereotypes. The results may be dangerous claims Garcia (1991) who refers to a study where it
was concluded that in the main teachers are not aware that their behaviour varies according to whether they are addressing high or low achievers.

Three racial stereotypes are identified by Solorzano and Yosso (2001, p. 3) “intelligence and educational stereotypes; personality or character stereotypes and physical appearance stereotypes”. The stereotype traits may be exploited to defend “having low educational and occupational expectations for students of colour, placing students of colour in separate schools and in separate classrooms within schools, remediating or “dumbing down” the curriculum and pedagogy for students of colour and expecting students of colour to one day occupy lower status and levels of occupations” (Solorzano and Yosso, 2001, p. 3). Although there has been a paradigm shift in South Africa to an outcomes based education model, which is claimed to enhance the chances of the historically less fortunate, many teachers would identify with the stereotypes identified by Solorzano and Yosso (2001) as was evident from the many casual comments made by teachers.

8.5 Summary

This chapter provided insight into certain teachers’ marked preference for the colour-blind approach. From the information provided by teachers it may be concluded that teachers are not aware that they are using the colour-blind approach and the implications this could have for teaching; they naively believe that it is a solution to dealing with racial and cultural diversity in their classrooms. Although there were a number of remarks made by teachers, which could be interpreted as racist, I encountered very few naturally expressed attitudes from teachers who could be identified as racist. However, staff room talk in many instances centred on stereotyping and the ‘us and them’ theory. Staff room talk sometimes revolved around categorisation of certain pupils including labelling. Racial stereotypes, unfortunately, are found to impact on pupils, as well as the communities that they come from. Most of the teachers that were interviewed in the three schools engaged in a discourse of stereotypes with regard to pupils of colour. “Too often, the social issues of welfare, crime, drugs, immigrants, and educational problems are given a racial face or are racialised through stereotypical media depictions of people of colour” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2004, p. 3).

To reiterate, it was not the intention of this study to investigate racial prejudice or racial issues. However, both teachers and pupils dwelt upon race throughout their interviews. Since a considerable amount of
the data reflected the issues of conflict and hostility among the pupils from the various racial categories it was imperative that I address these issues in depth. The next chapter deals specifically with issues that pertain to racism, perceived racism and fights, as well as name-calling along racist lines.