

# **STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANT TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS**

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## **1. Introduction**

Educational reforms in South Africa have been framed by legislative policies that promote democracy and human rights. The South African Schools Act (Act No 37 of 1997) catalysed by the Bill of Rights and the South African Constitution formalised the process of desegregation of schools in South Africa. As a result of these constitutional measures, the public schooling system in South Africa has undergone radical changes. It created the opportunity for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to attend public schools of their choice; as much as this choice was determined by extraneous factors such as high school fees, travelling distances, language of instruction, amongst others. It also created the opportunity for teachers of any race group to teach at public schools. Furthermore, it created the opportunity for black (Indian/African) immigrant teachers to be employed at public schools in South Africa.

A vast number of black (Africa/Indian) immigrant teachers who are employed at South African schools come from the African continent, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Consequently, many South African learners have for the first time been exposed to these immigrant teachers. What is the ethos of reception that South African learners provide to immigrant teachers? What are the reactions of South African learners towards immigrant teachers? What are some of the challenges that South African learners encounter? What are some of the opportunities? What lessons can be learnt from these experiences? Accordingly, this study asks, what are students' experiences of immigrant teachers in South African schools?

Against this context we developed a project to look at experiences of immigrant teachers in general and more specifically how they reconstruct and renegotiate their professional identities in this new context. The findings are discussed in some publications (Vandeyar, Vandeyar & Elufisan 2013). In focusing on students that were taught by these immigrant teachers, as a means of triangulating the data, it became evident that talking about their experiences of immigrant teachers meant also that they expressed views and opinions about South African teachers. The portrait that unfolded was one of immigrant teachers juxtaposed against South African teachers. The picture they created about South African teachers is troublesome in its negativity. The purpose of this paper is twofold; to explore South African learners' experiences of immigrant teachers and to establish in detail what the negative picture of South African teachers is about and what implications it holds for South African society. The findings are presented and subsequently analysed and discussed in an attempt to unpack learners' experiences of immigrant teachers in South African schools?

## 2. Background context

The advent of democracy in South Africa witnessed the reincorporation of South Africa into the international arena and also the dissolution of South Africa's fortified borders which allowed more people and goods to enter the country effortlessly (Klotz 2000). Before 1994 only white Europeans were allowed to enter South Africa as professionals while black Africans were restricted to the supply of unskilled labour such as farm labourers and mine workers (Adepoju 2003). During the *apartheid* era it was government policy to relentlessly limit black immigration and actively encourage white immigration (Morris 1998: 1118). The relaxation of fortified borders particularly afforded immigrants from other African countries that were previously denied access, to now freely enter South Africa.

This easier access brought about challenges and opportunities for black immigrants. First, it exposed many black immigrants, especially those from African countries, to xenophobic violence (Sharp 2008; Steinberg 2008). One of the reasons for these attacks is that some South Africans, especially black African South Africans<sup>1)</sup> perceive immigrants from African countries as competitors for available jobs and resources (Stemmett 2008; Hassim, Kupe & Worby 2008). According to

Morris (1998: 1124) African immigrants generally were blamed for the shortcomings of post-*apartheid* society, including the scarcity of employment opportunities. The general belief held by many South Africans is that more immigrants implies fewer resources for everyone, especially black African South Africans who had hopes for a better future during democracy, but who now find themselves having to share their limited resources with black immigrants. The act of singling out immigrants as scapegoats who can be blamed for society's ills is not only limited to South Africa. This tendency has been documented by many host or receiving countries (United States of America, United Kingdom, and Canada) and in different contexts (Hudson 1993: 22). Foreign nationals in these countries are blamed for social ills such as crime, unemployment and the spread of diseases (Morris 1998; Tshikereke 1991). Various studies have suggested that the perception held by the majority group is that the minority (foreigners) pose a threat to accessing economic prosperity (Quillian 1995).

Second, it provided an avenue for immigrant teachers to enter South African schools. In an attempt to counter the problem of a shortage of Mathematics and Science teachers in South African schools, the Council of Education Ministers recruited teachers from African countries such as Zimbabwe and Uganda (De Villers 2007). According to statistical records of the Gauteng Department of Education<sup>2)</sup> (GDE 2011) there are 137 African immigrant teachers officially employed in three educational districts of Tshwane. We assume that this number may be even higher considering that there are no statistics for those that are employed through other unofficial avenues such as School Governing Bodies (SGB). These statistics clearly indicate an increase in the number of black immigrant teachers in South African schools.

Third, it exposed immigrant teachers to students in South African schools. Students in South African schools were unfamiliar with and unaccustomed to immigrant teachers, especially those from the African continent, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Little if any studies have focused on student experiences of immigrant teachers, particularly in the South African context. This article seeks to fill this gap within the field of immigrant education.

### **3. Research**

Five secondary schools located in three educational districts of Tshwane,<sup>3)</sup>

namely Tshwane North, Tshwane West and Tshwane South<sup>4)</sup> in the Gauteng province of South Africa were used as research sites. Using maximum variation sampling research sites were selected based on the (pre-1994) classification of schools namely, a former white model C<sup>5)</sup> school, a black township<sup>6)</sup> school, a former coloured<sup>7)</sup> school, a former Indian<sup>8)</sup> school and an inner city<sup>9)</sup> school. The rationale for this choice was to explore whether the diverse socio-cultural context of these schools played a role in influencing the professional identities of immigrant teachers. In total five African immigrant teachers (three from Zimbabwe and two from Nigeria), five principals and five different focus groups consisting of six learners per group participated in this study. The learners that formed the focus group included learners from different social, economic, cultural and language backgrounds. In order to increase the richness of the data, African immigrant teachers were also selected according to gender (three males and two females). Data for this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations, researcher's journal and field notes. Semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers and principals were 45 minutes to an hour in duration. The duration of the focus group interviews with learners was approximately an hour. Follow-up interviews with teachers and principals (where necessary) were between 45 minutes to an hour in duration. Observations of teachers and learners occurred on the school premises and coincided with the interview period. Data was analysed using the content analysis method. This study adhered to the ethical code of conduct, by ensuring that ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the institution in which this project was registered. Permission was sought from all the relevant authorities and consent letters were signed by the relevant teachers, principals and parents of learners.

This article reports of the data that was obtained from the focus groups interviews with learners. We wanted to know if there was consensus in the picture that emerged or were there differences in the ways different groups talked about their experiences of immigrant teachers?

#### **4. What are experiences of students regarding immigrant teachers?**

Findings of this study were multi-fold in nature. First, student experi-

ences of visible markers of immigrant status of teachers. For almost all students accent, unfamiliar surnames, pronunciation, culture and dress codes were clear indicators of the immigrant status of teachers. Accent enabled students to easily identify the immigrant status of teachers.

Sometimes the accent counts ... like it is different from the way South Africans talk. He is fluent in English but he pronounces some things differently from the way we pronounce it (Khumalo, Grade 11).

First thing is the surname is strange, then for example, like our traditional names, the way he pronounces them (Sipho, Grade 10).

The way she talks. When Nigerians speak you hear their pronunciation, it is not really the way South Africans speak (Suvaan, Grade 9).

It is the accent, the way she dresses ... it usually describes Nigeria the way she dresses (Zama, Grade 8).

The culture is not the same. Like most South African culture they don't cover their body but immigrants from other parts of Africa they wear these colourful dresses (Lindiwe, Grade 10).

Second, student experiences with regard to the social climate and ethos of reception. There were mixed reactions from students in this regard. Some responses highlighted a lack of discipline in the class of immigrant teachers and the negative effect this had on their learning in class.

Like if you go into her class and you interrupt, she just says "go out, get out of my class", even though you don't, she just ignores you, and concentrates on those who are paying attention (Mamello, Grade 10).

[S]ometimes going to Maths class is a *slow down*, I hope you understand what I mean. Because of distractions that we get from those that are not interested, it makes the class to be chaotic. It is like half of us are listening, not actually half, a quarter or only seven of us are listening and the rest of the class are not paying attention (Kgadi, Grade 9).

Some learners do not respect her. They mock at her accent, because she is from another country. They do not listen to the teacher and do their own thing (Thabo, Grade 11).

Others admired the classroom climate of immigrant teachers which



were welcoming and very conducive to learning and discipline.

I like going to Mr Adebajji's class. It's quiet and controlled. Students know that they have to work. We really learn in his class. He is a good teacher (Sonja, Grade 9).

Maths is my favourite subject because it is taught by Ms Ogina. We cannot play around in her class, she really means business. You know that when you go to her class everyone will be doing their work. She doesn't take nonsense from students. She is strict and wants us to do well (Fatima, Grade 11).

Like Ms Elufisan always wants to know about our culture and stuff. He takes an interest in the way we live, our language, our culture. He wants to learn about the South African way of life ... he teaches us English (Sibongile, Grade 8).

Third, student experiences of immigrant teacher's professionalism and work ethic. One of the learners in the focus group interviews aptly summed up the general feeling of all learners when he expressed his views about the professionalism of the immigrant teacher, who taught him.

We like the way he teaches us. It is different from South African teachers by the way. He is very committed to his work; he always come to class every day; he doesn't miss a single class. He always makes corrections and he always explains to people who do not understand. He always repeats if we do not understand, for us to understand. And another thing he is not lazy to write on the chalkboard (Sipho, Grade 10).

Yes, after all they are good teachers more than South African teachers and they are hard workers. They are committed to their jobs (Priya, Grade 10).

They are the best. So like the way I see it they know Maths. And they can present their knowledge to other people (Alison, Grade 11).

For me Eish, she put you under pressure. She can give you three assignments in a week and she wants it by Friday (Bongani, Grade 11).

Fourth, perceptions that students held of immigrant teachers. The initial and immediate reaction of some students to the phenomenon of black

immigrant teachers was that of categorisation. Many students labeled these teachers as '*Makwerekwere*'.

Some of my teachers are foreigners ... they are 'makwerekweres'. They come here to our country and want to tell us what to do and how to learn and stuff. They think they are better than us. They should go back to their countries (Xolisa, Grade 11).

I don't like them (black immigrant teachers). They come and take our jobs when they are the 'makwerekwere'. They should go back where they came from (Tumi, Grade 10).

Furthermore, in focusing on students' experiences of immigrant teachers and how they verbally expressed this in interviews that were conducted with them, it became evident that talking about their own experiences of immigrant teachers meant also that they expressed views and opinions about South African teachers.

[I]mmigrant teachers, should definitely be allowed because this people they come with new ideas and experiences to South Africa (Nazeer, Grade 10).

In South African schools it should be only foreigners teaching because to be honest mostly they are smarter. Their level is very high compared to our South African teachers. They are serious about teaching and really teach us well (Sipho, Grade 10).

Immigrant teachers are hardworking and really committed to their jobs. I don't know what it is but somehow some of our South African teachers ... they don't just pitch for class, sometimes they do not even prepare for what they are going to teach and some of them you know they just give you off, or give you homework. They don't really teach us.

## **5. Analysis and discussion of findings**

Over the past few years the phenomenon of black immigrant teachers in South African classrooms has become commonplace. For many students in South African classrooms this is their first encounter with black immigrant teachers and for some, with black immigrants as a whole. Consequently, what they learn about black immigrants and black immigrant teachers in particular, is based on their experiences within the proximity of the classroom and school environment.

Findings of this study reveal that what students learnt about black immigrant teachers can best be conceived as a process. It became evident that in the process of learning, students were called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking and to learn to adapt. Students initially reacted to the visible markers of 'otherness' of immigrant teachers, by creating an ethos of reception that was unwelcoming. This could be attributed to xenophobic sentiments and its associated climate in the broader context of South Africa. It would seem that perceptions held by students about black immigrants were influenced by South African society at large.

Many students in South Africa led an insulated life that lacked international exposure to black immigrant teachers. This, coupled together with a history of *apartheid* saw some students trying to make sense of this new phenomenon by means of plugging immigrant teachers into new a category namely, '*makwerekwere*'. Understandably so, given that during the *apartheid* era, citizens of South Africa were packaged into convenient little boxes. The appearance of immigrants from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries and from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka required a reorganisation of thought processes about nationalism and belonging. One way of making sense of this was to create another category which indicated their exclusion from the body politic of South Africa. South African students are left alone on how to deal with the history of *apartheid* which is still very much on the shoulders of their parents and their frame of learning. The initial reaction of South African students to immigrant teachers can be partly ascribed to the sharing of limited resources, but more importantly it is the fact that neither South African students nor their parents had the opportunity to find balance or the time to heal. And rather than healing in a protected space they are being thrown into an international competitive education system. Some students will be equipped to do that because they are on solid ground but if you are historically disadvantaged you are not on solid ground to meet this. In South Africa, international competition is not an abstract policy; it enters the school through immigrant teachers and immigrant students.

Subsequent reactions however, revealed that stable and enduring patterns of human learning arose from consistent patterns of transaction between South African learners and immigrant teachers. Students began to reflect on direct participation and direct encounters within the



events of everyday life (Houle 1980). This allowed them to learn new things based on the innate variations of life-experiences one attains each day (Smith 2001). The way South African students processed the possibilities of each new experience determined the range of choices and decisions they saw and allowed them to create themselves through the choice of actual occasions they lived through. Exposure to immigrant teachers over a period of time allowed South African students to change their initial perceptions of immigrant teachers. Many students appreciated the professionalism and excellent work ethic of immigrant teachers and began to see the benefits of being taught by these immigrant teachers. Contrary to findings in the voluminous literature where immigrant teachers' differences were constructed as deficiencies in schools and faculties of education (Schmidt 2010; Subedi 2008), this study has shown that immigrant teachers are an asset in the South African schooling system.

Learning became a holistic process of adaptation for South African students. It was not just the result of cognition and xenophobic sentiments, but involved the integrated functioning of the total person; thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving. Learning was best facilitated by a process that drew out the students' beliefs and ideas about immigrant teachers so that it could be examined, tested and integrated with new, more refined ideas. Social knowledge was thus created and recreated in the personal knowledge of the learner. Furthermore, the transfer of learning via experience allowed South African students to apply what was learned in new situations and to learn related information more quickly. Hence, South African students could effortlessly draw comparisons between South African and immigrant teachers in terms of teacher professionalism and work ethics. The picture they painted of South African teachers is troublesome in its negativity. The portrait that unfolds is one that depicts South African teachers as lacking not only in terms of academic ability but also in terms of academic concern. There seemed to be a general sense of lethargy and apathy with regard to work ethic and a sense of commitment to their calling as a teacher. Furthermore, these teachers seemed to lack a culture of learning and teaching.

What implications does this picture hold for South Africa? The implications of this negative portrait have far-reaching consequences for South African society as teachers are expected to be positive role models for students. Teaching is a noble vocation precisely because a

teacher influences not only the minds of learners but has a holistic influence on the learner. Learners spend most of their formative years (as child, adolescent and young adult) in the care of teachers. As Noddings (1984) has argued, an 'ethic of care' in the classroom is vital to the well-being of students. In the absence of an 'ethic of care' and a positive classroom and school culture that provides broad and deep access to learning the building of an environment of caring relationships that will hopefully extend beyond the school into society, is almost impossible.

This picture not only suggests the breakdown of the moral fibre of South African society, but also highlights a culture of academic apathy and a lack of motivation. Siphso, a grade 10 learner, aptly captures the serious implications this could hold for the future of South African teachers.

In South African schools it should be only foreigners teaching because to be honest, mostly they are smarter. Their level is very high compared to our South African teachers. They are serious about teaching and really teach us well (Siphso, Grade 10).

Areas for future research could include the following: What are immigrant students' perceptions of South African teachers? How do South African teachers feel about the negative image South African students have about them? It is important to pursue these future research questions as they not only serve to generate new knowledge and understandings of the schooling system in South Africa, but they create opportunities for South African teachers and students to reflect on ways to improve and develop, to meet global standards of education and morality. There is much more at stake here than just the education of South African children. These questions speak to the threads of the moral fibre of South African society that seems to be falling apart.

## **6. Conclusion**

Aside from the rapid and ever-changing curriculum reform efforts in South Africa, stakeholders in education should seriously consider reforming and revising in-service and pre-service teacher education. Such an action may just contribute to injecting much needed quality back into the education system of South Africa, which is currently in a state of extreme crisis. Furthermore, such an initiative may just be the catalyst needed to offset the current lackadaisical and non-committal

attitude of many South African teachers, as it may provide a competitive edge and bargaining tool for the Department of Education. Employment of teachers should be based on merit, qualifications, commitment, work ethic, culture of teaching and learning, a calling and most of all an 'ethic of care' and a pedagogy of hope, love and compassion. Quality education of learners should not depend or be defined by the immigrant or nationality status of teachers.

## Endnotes

1. Black African South Africans: The terms coloured, white, Indian and African derive from the *apartheid* racial classifications of the different peoples of South Africa. The use of these terms, although problematic, has continued through the post-*apartheid* era in the country. In the context of this article, black African South Africans refer to the group of people who are of African ancestry and who are classified as 'black' in colour.
2. Gauteng Department of Education: Gauteng is one of the nine provinces of South Africa.
3. Tshwane: A number of old Pretoria municipalities as well as others that fell outside the greater Pretoria area were combined into one metropolitan area called The City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality.
4. Tshwane North, Tshwane West and Tshwane South: different geographical regions within Tshwane.
5. Model C schools: A government attempt to cut state costs by shifting some of the financing and control of white schools to parents.
6. Township schools: Schools situated in *apartheid* designated suburbs for black (African) communities.
7. Coloured: a term used in the *apartheid* South Africa to define citizens that have a biracial identity.
8. Indian: A school that formerly exclusively catered only for Indian students.
9. Inner city school: schools situated in the city centre.

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