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Parents, homework and socio-economic class: Discourses of deficit and disadvantage in the "new" South Africa

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ABSTRACT: It has been claimed that homework is an effective means of developing good study habits (Cooper, 1994) and fostering positive attitudes (Marzano & Pickering, 2007) and self-responsibility (Brown, in Plato, 2000). If we are to believe this, then we need to ensure that all learners have equal or at least similar opportunities to gain these advantages. However, it seems unlikely in the Republic of South Africa, given the history of discrimination and deliberate under-funding of specific schools during apartheid. In order to discover in what ways and how schools in different socio-economic situations manage homework, we designed a multiple case study of three primary schools in the Eastern Cape. Since we could not assume that homework formed a regular part of the daily activities, we interviewed the principals and Grade 4 teachers of each school. This paper discusses the discourses of the teachers and principals and particularly the language used by them when discussing parents and homework. The study found that parents from the school situated in a more affluent area were ascribed agency and power, whereas parents from poorer socio-economic groups were positioned as disinterested and unable to assist their children. Such discourses reproduce deficit notions and practices resulting in further inequalities.

KEYWORDS: Agency, class, critical discourse analysis, parental involvement in homework, teachers' discourses.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1994 elections, most government schools in South Africa were segregated according to colour; white children went to schools reserved for whites, and black children usually went to township and rural schools that tended to be overcrowded and poorly resourced. Schools for "coloured" learners were also under-resourced but not to the same extent. White schools tended to have smaller classes, better-qualified teachers, and good supplies of books, equipment, and other resources. On desegregation, these schools were called Model C. The unequal spending was a deliberate strategy by the Nationalist apartheid government to advance white South Africans while suppressing black South Africans. In the new South Africa, one of the institutions specifically targeted for redress has been education, since schools are powerful generators, justifiers and transmitters of racialised, gendered and classed thoughts, actions and identities. Therefore the challenge is to shift the "roles, rules,

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social character and functioning of schools" (Nkomo, Chisholm & McKinney, 2004, p. 3) and stimulate new ways of being, thinking and practising that are in keeping with ideals of equity and justice. If we are to achieve equity and justice in South African schooling, we need to interrogate teachers' understandings of parents' ability to assist in homework. This paper shows how racialised and classed notions are still informing teachers' discourses thereby perpetuating inequality.

The concept of extending work done in the school environment to the home setting is intrinsic to our education system. A Namibian study states, "homework is an everyday part of school life" (Eita, 2007) and comments on the benefits of parental involvement in homework to consolidate learning. A successful homework policy is predicated on parental involvement in children's education. As such, parents' role in supporting homework is part of a wider understanding of community, parent and school cooperation in the education process. Singh, Mbokodi and Msila's (2004) study of black parental involvement in education found that parents' involvement in education was crucial, especially regarding homework. [1] They went as far as indicting "parents who played little or no role in their children's homework…contributed to the poor performance of their children" (2004, p. 301). Various international studies (Marzano & Pickering, 2007; Plato, 2007) have indicated that homework, when issued in the lower grades, can be beneficial to learners. Some of the positives include the improvement of a learner's factual knowledge and the learners' understanding of material. In the South African study conducted by Singh, Mokobodi and Msila (2004), mentioned above, the authors write about homework being part of the parental expectation of a "quality education" for their children (p. 301). These authors bring our attention to the spirit of *Masifunde*, which means "let us educate together". The "us" in this quotation refers to parents and teachers. In this instance, therefore, homework can be seen as having the potential to form a bridge between the home and the school.

In order to facilitate parental involvement many schools have put systems and practices in place. Van Wyk (2001) found that 74% of primary school educators indicated that they had "a policy of involving parents in learning activities at home" (p. 121). An official school diary was seen as one method of establishing links between schools and homes (Lemmer & van Wyk, 2004), though only four out of the seven schools indicated that they actually used this method. From their 242 questionnaires to primary school principals, they found "only 58% of schools had a written homework policy which was distributed to parents" (Lemmer & van Wyk, 2004, p. 185). These studies presuppose that homework is one of many ways in which homes and schools are linked but do not examine attitudes of teachers towards parents' ability to assist in the homework. In this paper we argue that how the teachers perceive parents' and caregivers' ability to assist with homework is important, as it has the power to position subjects and thereby reinscribe privilege in affluent schools and, unwittingly, further disenfranchise those at poorer schools. Before discussing the theoretical underpinnings of this research, we briefly describe the school contexts as well as the methods used to generate the data.

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[1] Within the South African context, a wide definition of "parent" in the *South African Schools Act* now includes those who have undertaken the obligations of parents regarding learners' education (Van Wyk, 2001). This allows for a more inclusive understanding that reflects the reality of "a variety of family types and household structures" (p. 117).

SCHOOL CONTEXTS

Schools from different contexts were selected to enable comparisons between different socio-economic influences. Drawing on the historically determined nature of schooling in South Africa, three major categories of schools were identified for this study. These are, former "model-C", former "Coloured" and "Township" schools. The table below outlines some of the differences between the schools.

School types	Model C: Well-maintained buildings, big school grounds in quiet middleclass suburb. Fully equipped computer labs and offices.	"Black" township: Run-down area, with informal housing. No formal grass playing area. One computer and 1 photo-copier in school.	"Coloured" Catholic: Small government-built houses. Noisy and close to busy roads. Religious symbols in classrooms. Well-maintained buildings.
Referred to as:	A	B	C
Learner-teacher ratio	26:1	51:1	31:1
Participants	Teacher A(1) Teacher A(2)	Teacher B(1) Teacher B 2)	Teacher C
Number classroom observations	A(1) 3 x 1 hour sessions A(2) 3 x 1 hour sessions	B(1) 3 x 1 hour sessions B(2) 2x ½ hour sessions	4 x 1 ½ hour sessions

Table 1: Schools in the study

Methods

Qualitative methodology informed this study and interviews, focus groups and observations were selected as methods to generate the data. The data was analysed by means of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Janks, 1997; Locke, 2004). As this article focuses on concepts of power and positioning, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used as a metalinguistic tool to examine the data collected from the three schools. CDA is particularly concerned with how "power relations produced by discourse are maintained and/or challenged" and "the practices which affect their production reception and dissemination" (Locke, 2004, p. 38). Patterson, (1997) claims that when doing a critical discourse analysis, one need not ask, "what does it mean?" but rather to ask, "*how* does it mean?" (p. 428). She further explains that the "how" question can be approached by examining "how concepts and practices are taken up by and out to work within particular communities" (Patterson, 1997, p. 428). One of the analytic tools that we report on in this paper is that of a transitivity analysis based on Halliday's functional grammar as reported in Janks (1997). Janks explains that Halliday's grammar offers six different processes or kinds of transitivity (doing, saying, sensing, being, behaving and existing) and that to do a transitivity analysis "one needs to identify every verb and its associated process and then to identify patterns in the use of these processes" (Janks, 1997, p. 336).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals of the three primary schools. They provided detail on the official policy of the school regarding homework as well as insight into the implementation within the community of families. In addition, interviews were conducted with the Grade 4 English teachers who had agreed to participate in the study. Grade 4 was selected as it was hoped that at that stage in their schooling, learners would be significantly familiar with homework. Interviews were taped and transcribed and the transcriptions shown to the participants for verification. Five teachers were interviewed two each from schools A and B and one from C.

Observations

In order to verify the espoused views on homework as opposed to what was actually practised, observations of the classrooms were conducted. In total, 15 classes were observed according to an observation schedule. In some schools, classes were observed at the end of the day when according to the policy, time is allowed for homework explanations. The observation was direct and systematic (Mouton, 2002), as an observation framework guided the observation in each classroom. This ensured that the same occurrences or the absence thereof were recorded across the five classrooms. The framework further enabled us to give more attention to the interactions in the classroom and mostly observe instead of having to focus on constant recording. The interactions in the classroom were also tape-recorded when homework was discussed and only the teachers' instructions were transcribed and documented. The teachers' classroom talk that related to parents' role and home situations has been selected for this paper.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted with randomly selected learners from each Grade 4 class. This was to allow a space for the learners to give their views on homework and to discuss what happens in their homes and whether or not they get assistance at home. (For a full discussion of the focus group data, see Felix 2008).

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Two bodies of theory have been used to explore the data. The first one draws on the literature of parental involvement in homework and the second discusses the notion of discursivity and discourse. These will be followed by the presentation of the data from these schools as well as a discussion on the implications of the findings.

Parental involvement

Homework is a literacy event that occurs within the overlap between school and home spheres of influence (Epstein, 1992). As such, it constitutes an instance of parent and school cooperation, and the learners' positive experience of homework is dependent on both parties. Singh *et al.* (2004) report that the *South African Schools Act of 1996* decentralised school management. This effectively means that parents need to be

involved with their child's education even more than before. Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, Dejong & Jones (2001) explore the parental role and the construction of these roles in their child's homework. They write that the roles are "generally constructed from personal experience and expectations of pertinent others" (p. 201). They claim further that when parents are better equipped and qualified they are more likely to offer their child help with homework assignments. Once again this has implications for the South African context where we are all products of the apartheid schooling situation.

High school research by Singh *et al.* (2004) suggests that black parents who have been disadvantaged by the abovementioned schooling situation do not feel confident in helping their children with homework. In addition, some teachers had stopped assigning homework to their learners, since the teachers believed that no assistance was forthcoming in the home (p. 304). Cooper (1994), Plato (2000) and Sharp, Keys and Benefield (2001) all cite parental involvement as playing some role in whether learners complete their homework or not. Sharp et al. (2001) note that parents are more involved in homework with younger children and that socio-economic and cultural factors play a part in the type of assistance that the parents are able to give (p. 3).

The extent to which parents are involved in their children's schooling and homework is often policed by the staff and institutional practices of the school. If the staff determine (based on evidence or simply their own perceptions formed by historical, social and political influences) that the parents/caregivers are unable or incapable of supporting homework, they might decide not to allocate any homework. However, perceptions can be inaccurate and can lead to oversimplification of complex situations. Furthermore, people coming from lower socio-economic contexts are often positioned in deficit and negative ways. This is where CDA is powerful as an analytic tool because it can interrupt and reframe common ways of understanding and meaning-making which are historically and politically constituted.

Discourse and the power of language to both present and shape understandings

In participating in conversations people draw on the available discourses. Discourses refer not only to the language usage but also to the "processes of producing and interpreting speech (and writing), as well as the situation context of language use" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 3). These discourses, or common ways of saying, become naturalised and assumed neutral and therefore go unquestioned. However ideas, representations and descriptions are seldom neutral and are almost always (in)formed by dominant ideologies. As Holquist reminds us, "each time we talk, we literally enact values in our speech through the process of scripting our place and that of our listener in a culturally specific social scenario" (2002, p. 63).

In South Africa, even though apartheid has officially been abolished for more than 13 years, discourses of racism, white superiority and class prejudice continue to surface, especially in desegregated schools (Dornbrack, 2008). When ideas and representations become part of our everyday common sense. Ideology is most powerful since it becomes invisible (Janks, 1997). Therefore it is essential that educators and researchers remain sensitive and aware of the power of their language

to constitute others in ways that reinscribe inequality. Having discussed discourse, the findings from the study are now presented.

VIEWS ON PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT FROM INTERVIEWS

Interviews with principals

Table 2 below contains verbatim data from the interviews with the principals regarding parental involvement and homework (h/wk). This is followed by the teachers' perceptions in table three.

School A principal	School B principal	School C principal
• parents expect their child to get h/wk • if there is no h/wk parents *query* • the parents will soon *tell* me if I overload or they feel it's too heavy for age group • if a child doesn't understand the parents *write* a letter	• parents are called in (after a lengthy intervention involving the teacher, learner and principal)	• mothers and *parents work* • in *severe cases* of "neglect" letter goes to parents, severe = 2 times no h/wk done • *good & caring parents* will come and *complain* to me that their child doesn't get h/wk • *better* parents get *involved* in h/wk and school life.

Table 2: Principals' perceptions of parental involvement

Material processes are foregrounded in all three schools. These are processes that are "types of doing" (Janks, 1997, p. 336). The material processes ascribed to parents are, "query", "write" and "tell" (verbal) for School A, suggesting that the parents have the necessary resources and know-how in order to act in the best interests of their children. The material processes imply that these parents hold the school accountable and are secure in their right to do so.

Principal B makes only one reference to the parents and this reference is in the passive voice suggesting that the school has the agency to decide when parents may be involved. It appears that parents are summoned to the school as a last resort only when the principal decides that he has exhausted all other channels. Similar to school B, school C principal positions the parents as being unavailable ("parents work") and therefore the school asserts its authority to intervene and only in "severe cases", are the parents called in. Agency is ascribed to parents only in exceptional cases of "good and caring" parents and those who are "better", which is not the norm. The material processes of "involving" and "complaining" position these *atypical* parents as having the necessary social resources to engage meaningfully with the school. Unlike the parents from school B who have to be called or the parents from School C who receive written notices, these 'rare' parents have the power and choice to decide their level of involvement.

Observations, such as can be found in Tables 2 and 3, on the lack of activity of lower income parents in the schooling process are "routinely provided as evidence that low-

income parents 'just don't care about their kids' or 'don't think education is important'" (Smrekar, 1992, p. 5).

Interviews with teachers

In many ways, teachers' discourse reflects the principals' positioning of parents as shown in Table 3.

School Teachers A	School Teachers B	School Teacher C
• if it is picked up that a child isn't writing h/wk down the *parents will contact* the teacher • the parents tend to phone each other • lots of parents that my child hasn't written down his h/wk so we don't know what he is supposed to do • I'll have a parent *phoning in* and saying 'but I never knew about this' • I'm so sick of parents *coming to me and complaining*, so I decided no I had to come up with some sort of plan here • parents sign h/wk books • I say to the parents 'if the child hasn't done it, put a cross next to it and don't sign. Don't sign and say the child has done it and then I assume its done	• there are very poor parents who *can do absolutely nothing* about it • I can't give them the new learning areas like natural science, the grannies *won't understand* it • the parents don't have the information • so I give work and the parents *can't help* the children • the parents *won't understand* the homework	• we write letters to the parents • parents don't come • I send letter home and let them know that they aren't doing their part at home. • in most cases both parents work. When parents come home don't have time for children as busy with other things • parents don't have time to take their children to the library, so I get the information for them. • the black children no help from their parents. • parents called in if problem. Not many actually come.

Table 3: Teachers' perceptions of parental involvement

The italicised phrases in the table above from the teachers at School A reinforce what principal A has said about the parents. Once again, the processes ascribed to the parents are material, which positions them as assertive and powerful. They are portrayed as active agents in their child's education and homework. When a mental process is used in association with the parents at School A, it is delivered with a positive emphasis. This positivity is shown by the fact that parents phone each other or ask the teachers questions, indicating that if the parents are unsure about anything they will be assertive in gaining clarification. There is also a network of parents where homework issues are discussed. The social class of the parents at school A "provides parents with more resources to intervene in schooling" (Smrekar 1997, p. 7). These parents are assumed to have higher: schooling levels, social status and incomes all of

which will contribute to their sense of entitlement. This is an example of what Sharp *et al.* (2001) refer to as the socio-economic and cultural factors that enable the parents to give their child assistance.

The teachers in School B attribute negative mental processes ("can do absolutely nothing", "can't help", "won't understand") to the parents. These negatives are absolute, without modality, and construct a deficit discourse. The parents are perceived as having limited mental capacity. Therefore, the perceived lack of financial capital available to the parents in School B translates into a lack of mental capacity.

In School C the processes attributed to the parents are material but negative. These utterances from the teachers at this school are very similar to the ones from the teachers in School B. Passive voice is used, when referring to parents, constructing them as inactive in their child's education. The school appears to have the agency to choose what action to take and when if they identify a problem with homework

DISCUSSION

Parental involvement in their child's schooling is often determined by cultural and socio economic factors (Sharp *et al.,* 2001). The parents at School A tend to be middle to upper class, and therefore the teachers expect them to be involved. The motivation for involvement stems from the parents themselves, as can be seen from Table 3 above. Clearly the parents in this school both want to be and are involved in an academic sense. It can be deduced from the above that these parents feel powerful and do not expect to be challenged; rather they expect explanations. It is apparent from the following phrases ("parents will contact", "phone in", "come and complain", "coming to me and complaining") that these parents have a sense of entitlement. Fairclough (1995) states that "by looking at language we are really looking at local examples of commonly held beliefs" (cited in Clarke, 2007, p. 113). If one refers to Table 2, it can be reasonably assumed that these parents believe they have the right to enquire, question and make suggestions about their child's homework situation.

In the following quotation, Principal A describes a typical parent evening at School A – a situation that is not mentioned by the interview participants in the other schools.

> Then we have our meetings with the parents. If you come into the hall you will see that we have a desk and in front of it two chairs for mom and dad. Then behind them you will have a row of people and people move forward. They want to come in and chat to us why their kid isn't performing. You have that reference to be able to explain to them if you see "0's", you can say to them that they can see that their children haven't done their homework. Teachers have to be able to cover themselves. (Interview with Principal A)

From this extract, the physical involvement of the parents is visible. The fact that Principal A relates that there are "rows of chairs of people just waiting", also that "both parents attend" and want to engage with the teacher is informative. The accountability on behalf of the teachers further shows that the parents are quite dominant in this schooling situation. The parents at School A are portrayed as being assertive participants. They are powerful. They are active agents in their children's

education and are therefore empowered. They hold the teachers accountable. These parents can negotiate with the school from a position of strength that their jobs, income and lifestyles – their cultural capital – afford them.

However, if it is true that the parents at School A have expectations of the teachers and education system, then it is also true that the teachers at this school also have expectations of the middle-class parents. When referring to the issue of parents signing homework diaries and checking up on homework, Teacher A(2) had the following to say: "Then there is an issue of whether the parents have signed because it's (homework) been done because you'll find that the signature is there but the work hasn't been done. I see it as the parents are lying to me." {Teacher A(2)}

Teacher A(2) appeared insulted by this notion. She holds the parents to a high standard. Teacher A(2) does not, however at any point in the interview speak of challenging these parents about the "lies". It appears that while she does not agree with this practice she does not feel that she has the authority to challenge the parent about this. Here the power balance is in favour of the parent. This could stem from the fact that in the original concept of a Model C school (and still today), there is a governing body that manages the school. This body deals with finances, disciplinary issues and practices, and it is made up of mainly parents, with some teacher representatives. Also the parents pay high school fees, which appear to entitle their involvement in the school.

School A makes allowances for the time consumption of after-school activities, such as sport, but still expects learners to complete homework when it is necessary. The staff at this school is clearly aware of their responsibility to produce learners who are capable in more than one area (academia and sport).

The outlook and perceptions in relatin to what part parents play in their child's education is noticeably different in schools B and C. The way that these parents are positioned feeds part of a deficit model that appears to be reflected in staffs' reasons for not assigning homework. From the analysis of the data in Tables 2 and 3, it can be seen that the expectations and perceptions of teachers and principals in schools B and C are similar. While there are differences between the two schools, they are minor. The teacher participants term the parents who are active in their child's education and homework as *exceptions*.

While the school policy states that homework should be given on a "regular" basis, it was found that very little homework was being given. In fact Teacher B(1) mentioned, during classroom observation that her "learners were tired because they had to do homework every day as the researcher was there". She explained that because of the size of her Grade 4 class – 54 learners – and issues of lack of parental involvement and the home environment, she only assigns oral homework such as learning times tables everyday.

At the initial meeting with the teachers at school B, Teacher B(1) warned that the Grade 4 teachers did not give much homework because when they did the learners did not complete it. She described the reason for this as "Black students do not do homework as it is not part of their culture of learning". The assumptions that the staff at this school have formed of its parents start with the socio-economic and continue

through to the issue of literacy. In the interview with Principal B about homework books or diaries his comment was that, "Our parents can't afford anything extra."

Kralovec and Buell (2000) write that, "Parents from low socio-economic families are looked down upon and therefore their voices are not heard" (p. 79). This issue of undervaluing parents can be seen in the way that the teachers refer to the parents at these schools. Negative phrases such as "parents who can do absolutely nothing", "parents don't have the information", "parents can't help the children", "parents don't understand the homework'" "parents don't come" show the reader that parental involvement in these schools is not expected, valued or in some cases even welcomed.

There is a sense that the parent will not be of much help in the process. Not one positive comment was made about parental involvement (except for the "good and caring parent") at schools B and C. The parents or guardians at school B are constructed as passive; they are perceived as having nothing to give the school. The perception in this community and school was that most learners do not have a two-parent family. Teacher B(2) reported that, "Most children live with their grannies." While this was true for some of the learners it was not true for all of them.

It appears that at this school the teachers have power. Phrases from the teacher interviews, such as, "I can't give them new learning areas for homework", "I send a letter home", "I get the information for them", "I give the work", foregrounds the teacher and constructs the parents as "outsiders" who have no useful input into their child's homework. The teachers position themselves as the responsible, active agents in the learners' education from which the parents seem excluded.

Furthermore, the parents are constructed as being without material resources, which is understandable when one thinks of the South African situation of poverty, Aids and apartheid. What is worrying, though, is that because these parents are perceived as having no material resources, the staffs of Schools B and C also perceive the parents as having no mental resources. The discourse which informs the assigning of homework in these schools or, in this case, the lack thereof, appears to be exacerbating and reproducing the existing social inequalities.

OBSERVATIONS OF CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT OF HOMEWORK

In the observation of the management of homework within the classroom, the focus was again on how teachers' language positioned parents and learners. From the interviews it was clear that homework featured regularly in the classroom practice of school A but not as frequently at schools B and C. This was consistent with the observations.

As in the interviews where the parents were seen as supporting homework at school A, so too in the classroom the teachers drew on this parental support in policing this practice. Teacher A(1) asked learners individually whether homework had been completed. If the answer was negative, the teacher would write a note to the parent in the school-issued homework diary. In addition comments such as "now I have to write to you mother again" positioned parents as being complicit in the policing and surveillance of homework. Indeed Teacher A(2) indicated the notes that parents had

written to her in the homework diary. Certain learners were a focus of the homework practice as they had, in the past, written homework down incorrectly or neglected to write it down at all. These learners had their diaries checked at the end of the day to ensure that the correct information was carried home to the parents. This extra check put the learners under "pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be subjected to subordination, docility, attention to studies and to the correct practice of duties and all parts of discipline" (Foucault 1977, p. 182).

These formal and controlled homework practices were enabled by the circumstances of the school involved. The spacious classroom size with the relatively low student-to-teacher ratio which led to less incidental noise, the quiet surrounding suburb, the fact that the classroom door was not constantly being opened and the material aspect of the homework diary all allowed the teacher to apply technologies of control. The policing policy was supported by the panoptical position of the teacher to most effectively survey and monitor class activities. From a central position she was able to perform policing functions of surveillance, the economic functions of control and checking and the religious functions of encouraging obedience and work (Foucault, 1997, p. 173).

Through parental support of the homework practice, the learners at school A were systematically being homogenised into being subjects who were capable of contributing to society in a positive way. They were also being trained to accept authority and to function in a disciplined way in society. Parents and teachers were united in establishing homework practices at a primary school level, which, it is claimed leads to positive future study habits needed for future academic success.

At school B, the presence of the observer-researcher contributed to the issuing of homework as teacher B(1) said she had "prepared homework because I knew you were coming and I didn't want you to come for nothing." Homework was not a normalized practice as, according to teacher B(1), "We don't really do written homework because there are too many kids in this class," suggesting that it was not expected or pragmatic to police the homework of the 54 learners in the class. Parents were only mentioned when the researcher asked about signing of the homework exercise books. Teacher B(2) replied, "Parents don't have to sign homework books. Only if there is a problem must they sign." Once again the parents are almost marginalised in the homework process and only included when problems arise. Connell (2004) raises relevant observations about the above. She writes that "working class families are bearers of educational histories which are often difficult or truncated, leaving parents with little familiarity with upper-secondary or post-school pathways" (p. 227). But on the other hand the stress and pressure placed on learners in school A is not as explicit as in schools B and C. The pressure on learners to conform to certain ways of completing tasks in School A can be construed as opportunities by teachers to individualise and even, at times, demean learners.

Teacher B(1) did try to instil the notion of consequence with regard to practising of writing and tables. She had spot checks and if the learners performed well then they had no formal writing or multiplication tables for homework. If the learners, however, could not perform, then writing practice was assigned for homework. Unlike in school A, there was no individualising or strict record-keeping in school B, not because the teachers wre unwilling but because of circumstance. The material aspects such as

having 54 pupils, which produced incidental noise, the teacher being interrupted by students delivering tuck shop money or asking for the school's one stamp, were all prohibitive.

The observation of Teacher B(2) class at school B followed much the same pattern. Furthermore, she shared that she could not set and mark homework for the whole week as "I have many other duties at the school." Teacher B(2) had, however, assigned homework on the first observation day. Next day, only a third of the class had completed the homework but Teacher B(2) reported that this was normal as the learners had to "deal with no electricity, no money and no lights". There were no repercussions for not completing the assigned tasks as the learners could not be kept after school hours due to a lack of transport.

There was no formal, written homework policy at school C. During the observation time period at this school, no formal homework was assigned to the students. Learners were given tasks during class time and were told that if they did not finish the tasks during class time, it would be for homework. Teacher C had a system for learners who under-performed. A special sheet was sent home and the parents were meant to make an appointment with the teacher to discuss the situation. These learners and parents were then given a "special homework book" with remedial exercises in it, that they were expected to work through together. Teacher C shared that, "I can only give the special homework book once the parents have come to see me as the activities in it involve the parent sitting with their child." The learners who had to complete these remedial exercises were individualised but for different reasons from the learners at school A.

What was encouraging in this practice was that teacher C had allowed for differences in her classroom. She had made special provision for learners who needed remedial attention. Likewise it was significant that she included the parents in this process. At the time of the observation of her classroom, teacher C had four learners who had these special homework books. These learners were given homework every day. The homework exercises in these books, however, were not at Grade-Four level, as these learners had not acquired the "necessary" skills in the preceding grades. Teacher C felt that regular and monitored homework would benefit the learners, but this depended on parental involvement and support. What was significant was that teacher C first established contact with parents and ensured that they would know their side of the homework contract and would be able to fulfil this arrangement. This personal contact empowered the parents to be actively and supportively involved with their child and affirm the importance of the learning process as well as reinforcing the schoolwork and role of the teacher. The propinquity nurtured by both school and home was to the benefit of the learners. This activity positioned parents as able and active in their child's education and parents responded positively to this positioning.

CONCLUSION

In focusing on teachers' discourses around homework, this study shows how disadvantage can be perpetuated in the guise of allowing for the challenging home situations of learners. While teachers themselves seemed to recognize the benefits of regular homework, the logistics involved in developing the necessary support from

parents seemed to mediate against such cooperation. Discourses powerfully positioned both learners and their parents in particular ways which served to produce and reproduce inequalities in society. Deficit discourses ascribed to working class learners and their parents constructed them as having limited (if any) resources to draw on. This worked to legitimise the lack of homework. The middle-class learners, on the other hand, were positioned as resourceful, powerful and capable. These subject positions, if taken up by the subjects themselves, enhanced the existing capital, which worked to further advantage those already advantaged by an unfair system.

In the "new" South Africa, it seems that class is becoming a more significant marker than race and, as more affluent learners leave the township schools to join the ex-model C schools, those left behind will need to work even harder to ensure that they too have opportunities to develop the self-assurance and confidence needed to cope with the challenges that lie ahead. From the ways in which the principals and teachers referred to the middle-class parents, it appears that they locate these parents as possessing the favoured cultural capital needed for engagement with the school. The working-class parents, however, were perceived as lacking this capital. Such talk discursively reproduces existing divisions. Teachers need to become aware of the discursive power of their everyday talk which works to re-constitute and reinscribe advantage and disadvantage.

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