

AUTHOR:

Prof S Vandeyar¹ 

AFFILIATION:

¹University of Pretoria,
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Rupturing the laws of discourse: Learner agency in the construction of their identity in school discourses

Abstract

Utilising the theoretical frameworks of theory of power and theory of performativity, this case study explored how learners exercised agency in the construction of their identity in school discourses. Data capture incorporated a mix of a survey, semi-structured interviews and field notes. Data was analysed using content analysis. A total of 90 learners participated in the survey. Fifteen learners, three teachers and three principals participated in semi-structured interviews. This paper reports on findings from the semi-structured interviews. Findings were twofold. First, schools used Foucault's mechanisms and instruments of constructing learner identity. Learners were subjected to a constant gaze at schools. Second, learners became agentic in schools and asserted their own identities. Some of these identities clashed with the identity of the 'ideal learner' of schools. Despite established subject positions in schools, learners created their own subject positions to counter limiting and constraining identities that were imposed by the school.

Keywords: Hierarchical observation; ideal learner; identity; learner agency; school discourses

1. Introduction and background context

Disciplinary power is an inherent characteristic of disciplinary spaces such as the hospital, the factory, the prison, and the school (Foucault, 1977). For the purpose of this study, we focus on how this power functions in the disciplinary space of the school. Central to the disciplinary space of the school lies strict discipline, which Walhausen (cited in Foucault, 1977:189) regards as "an art of correct training". Embedded in the instrument of correct training is disciplinary power, which functions to 'train' individuals. It is through this training that an individual's identity is forged. Disciplinary power functions in a subtle manner. It entails minor procedures of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and examination (Foucault, 1977). This power is not a thing that can be seen, the individual only feels its effects. It is an automatic and anonymous power not held by a single authority in the institution, but by everyone that is accorded a position of authority. In many South African

schools, disciplinary power serves as an instrument to construct individuals into an 'ideal learner' identity (Venter & Van Niekerk, 2011).

This learner identity is modelled on the 'ideal learner' that may vary from school to school. The conceptualisation of the ideal learner is influenced by the dominant discourse of the school. It is the dominant discourse that determines the possible identities that individuals may assume. Nevertheless, not only does it do that, it constrains and discourages individuals from inhabiting certain identities. However, in the discourse learners are capable of making their own choices. As power is exercised in the school, learners make their own meanings and consequently exercise their agency (Van den Branden, 2019) by forging their own identities. Some learners opt to be the opposite of the ideal learner while others conform to what the school seeks to construct. The different positions that learners take, highlight the fluidity of identities (Gyogi, 2020; Vandeyar, 2019). Individuals shift and change all the time. The fluidity of identity makes it necessary to explore how learners exercise agency and what informs its exercise (Mercer, 2012).

The concept of learner identity can be viewed from two perspectives, namely humanism (Charteris, 2014) and poststructuralism (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018). The humanist perspective of learner identity highlights the inherent attributes of the individual. Upon entering school, a learner is regarded as being in control of his environment and is self-determining and self-regulating (Charteris, 2014). A learner's control of his/her environment stems from the idea that he/she is naturally capable and competent. He/she is independent of external discourses and influences and can manage him-/herself in school. Humanism attaches sameness to all learners and is universal in its nature. Learners are viewed as autonomous individuals who possess inherent agency, which they can exercise at will without any constraints. According to this view, the school and other external discourses have no influence on learner agency. In contrast, poststructuralism contends that a learner is socially constituted (Norton & Morgan, 2013). The poststructuralist perspective regards a learner as a product of the school. Poststructuralism recognises the constitutive force of discourses and discursive practices beyond learners' control. Moreover, it takes into account the possibilities of a dynamic learner identity that may emerge in the school. Poststructuralism recognises learners' agency in taking up and renegotiating subject positions and acknowledges that this agency is constructed in discursive school discourses. Since discourses are different from school to school, the manner in which learners exercise agency varies. Thus, agency is relational and mediated by the school discourse. For this reason, learners use the school discourse to recognise the subject positions, which they either accept or resist.

The advent of democracy witnessed educational transformation in South Africa. This implied a shift from the old conceptualisation of learner identity, which was western and White-centred to a more inclusive conceptualisation that would accommodate Black African learners (Makoelle, 2014). The shift was evident in policies that were developed to regulate this transformation. These policies gave learners the liberty to assert themselves as individuals and to assume subject positions of their choice. However in practice, the western and White-centred conceptualisation of the 'ideal learner' that emanated from the colonial past of South Africa, is still enforced in many schools. Thus, there is a disjuncture between the 'ideal learner' that the school seeks to construct and the identity that learners, particularly Black African learners, desire. Learners are aware of the agency they possessed as evident from the historical context of South Africa. During the apartheid era learners exercised their agency as evident from the 1976 Soweto riots, where the call was made for transformation and equal

education. Four decades later, although transformation has happened it has been mainly in the form of desegregation and first order changes, where learners from different racial backgrounds are now within close proximity of each other in educational spaces. Integration in the true sense namely, an interrogation of the quality of contact and of second order changes (the curriculum, assessment practices, etc.) is yet to happen. We argue that learner agency is an area worth examining to learn how agency is exercised at school. Accordingly, this study asks, how do learners exercise agency in the construction of their identity in school discourses? What mechanisms and instruments do schools use to construct learner identity? How do learners negotiate subject positions in school discourses?

2. Exploration of the terrain

2.1 *Understanding the concept of learner identity*

The concept of learner identity is complex in nature. Learner identity juxtaposes the concepts of learner and identity in its conceptualisation. This study situates the concept learner in a South African school context, to mean any person that is receiving education in a school (Department of Education, 1996). Identity defined in a general sense, is concerned with the state of being of an individual and how they are perceived (Brown & Heck, 2018). For some, identity can be understood as “a cognitive phenomenon, a cultural process or as personal thing” (Leary & Tangney, 2003:3). For others identity “refers to the internalized and externalized set of meanings, practices, and distributed resources embedded in ways of life and contexts of learning” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014: 37). Others argue that “identity is dynamic and multidimensional, influenced by social environments, socio-political interests, transnational experiences, and discourse itself” (Kim & Duff, 2012: 84) Furthermore, identity can be understood as characterized by multiplicity of self (Vandeyar, 2019). Recognising the existence of multiple identities is critical since learners’ identities are contingent, fluid, complex, comprise of multiple and often contradicting identities (Vandeyar, 2022; 2019). Both conscious and unconscious elements shape an individual's identity. Kumpulainen and Rajala (2017: 24) argue that “identity defines how we position ourselves and our actions”. Identity is seen as inseparable from the social world. Positioning the notion of identity in a school context, Brown and Heck (2018) conceptualise identity as a community-forming process where learners and teachers express themselves and communicate ideas according to a shared set of principles and practices. The community-forming process that is constructed across time and space provides the backdrop of “how people understand their possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2000: 6). Social structures constrain the extent to which an identity can be presented. However, despite constraints and restrictions, people have the capacity to change and obviate the very same social structure within which they are located.

2.2 *Understanding learner agency*

Human beings have the capacity to exercise agency within social structures. Consequently, people have the capacity to construct and reconstruct themselves within a social structure. Charteris (2016: 193) claims that humans “hybridise discourses to agentically initiate their identities in unexpected ways”. Agency is embedded in the actions of individuals in contexts that have clear consequences. Giddens (1991: 33) argues that humans “reflexively monitor” their conduct and those of others within a particular structure. They pay attention, to note, calculate and assess the consequences of their actions. The dynamics of the agency is embedded in a “stratification model” (Giddens, 1991: 56), which explains the ways in which social

systems are produced and reproduced in social interaction. This model monitors “discursive consciousness” and “practical consciousness” (Giddens, 1984: 4). Discursive consciousness denotes the individual’s capacity to rationalise his/her conduct and those of others. Practical consciousness refers to knowledge that an individual uses to carry out actions within the structure. According to Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014: 31) to understand the construction of learner identity and consequently, learner agency, we ought to first understand the “funds of practices, beliefs, knowledge, and ideas”, utilised by learners.

2.3 Mechanisms used in identity construction

“The construction of the learner in the disciplinary space of the school is made possible through the use of the mechanisms of ‘hierarchical observation’, ‘normalising judgment’ and ‘the examination’” (Foucault, 1977). These mechanisms operate as rules and resources that are used in “interaction contexts” of the school, to sustain or reproduce learner identity and relations. Rules make it possible for the school and its agents to act on learners and to subjectify them. Resources refer to facilities such as the architecture and other material equipment used in the construction of learner identity. Linked to these mechanisms is power, which ensures that learners feel its effects and abide by the rules in the construction of their identity (Foucault, 1977). The disciplinary power within the disciplinary space of the school takes a form of invisibility, it is not a ‘thing’ that can be seen, we only see its effects (Foucault, 1977). Giddens (1984) argues that power is not a resource in itself, it is generated from resources. It is through bringing together resources that agents of authority in the school are able to generate their power and act on learners and construct a learner identity.

Understanding the mechanisms of constructing learner identity is critical to understanding how learners exercise agency. It is critical to consider that the “organization of classroom interaction and choices of discourse either by teachers or learners carry implications for how learners and teachers perceive both themselves and each other” (Kumpulainen & Rajala, 2017: 5). It is through the rituals of power that the learner’s identity is constructed to ‘become somebody’ (Wexler, 1992). That is, the learner does his/her school work, obtains good marks, behaves appropriately, and thus has a better chance of accomplishing something in life. Becoming in this sense rests on conforming to the rules and authority of the school. The effects of power, for example, are visible in the spatial arrangements and bodily practices during assembly (Silbert & Jacklin, 2015). This power constructs a homogenous identity of the learner but it also constructs this identity by differentiating between learners in the school, “it separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units” (Foucault, 1977: 170). The use of disciplinary power sees individuals “hierarchized on the basis of their behaviour and academic performance. Individuals are measured in relation to each other and classified according to different abilities” (Foucault, 1977: 177). Foucault (1977: 170), further asserts that “discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and instruments of its exercise”. The act of learning is largely dependent on learners allowing themselves to be disciplined by certain processes that mould them into a particular kind of subject (Silbert & Jacklin, 2015: 327). It is the interconnection between these two notions that makes it possible for the learner to be subjectified and objectified within the school. Silbert and Jacklin (2015) argue that learners are shaped in different school contexts based on the school’s imagined learner. Linked to mechanisms of identity construction within the school is the notion of language. Norton (2010:2) argues that “it is through language that a person gets or is denied access to a social network”. Learners use language to assume different

subject positions and to assert their identities in the school. Linked to power is the notion of subjectivity, which stresses that a person needs to be understood in relational terms. A person is either in a position of power or in a subordinate, marginalised and reduced position of power. Norton (2010: 2) argues that “while some identity positions may limit and constrain opportunities for learners to speak, read, or write, other identity positions may offer enhanced sets of possibilities for social interaction and human agency”. Charteris (2016: 191) claims “the degree to which learners can appropriate agentic subject positions depends on the contextual affordances and the resources of identity recognition offered by peers, teachers and others.” Thus, the manner in which individuals exercise agency differ from one interaction context to another.

3. Theoretical framework

Theory of power (Foucault, 1977) and theory of performativity (Butler, 1998) provide the theoretical frameworks of this study. According to Marsden (2001: 54) disciplinary power characterises the way in which the “relations of inequality and oppression in modern western societies are (re)produced through the psychological complex”. Foucault (1977) claims that learner identity is discursively constructed in school. Drawing on Bentham’s (1843) disciplinary concept of panopticon, a central observation tower from which a guard can see every cell and inmate, but the inmates cannot see into the tower and thus never know whether or not they are being watched, Foucault “moves identity away from biological determinism to examining how identities are forged in society” (Besley, 2010: 126). Foucault (1977: 170) argues that “linked to the architecture of the school is ‘hierarchical observation’ which emphasizes ‘observation’ by those that are accorded power within the disciplinary space”. Observations are to guarantee that learners are constantly under the gaze all the time and that they compose themselves as desired by the school. Linked to “hierarchical observation” is the socialisation of the individual into becoming a learner. This socialisation of the learner includes “learning manners, how to dress properly, how to talk to other learners, and what are correct body postures” (Althusser, 1971:133). Combining both ‘hierarchical observation’ and ‘normalising judgement’ is ‘the examination’. Foucault (1977:184) argues that “it is through the examination that the individual is qualified, classified and punished”. Power ensures that those to whom it is applied feel its effects, and therefore conform to the rituals initiated in the practice of the construction of learner identity.

The theory of performativity conceives “identity as a paradox that is inherently unstable and revealing norms requiring continuous maintenance” (Hey, 200: 439). This conceptualisation of identity provides grounds for agency to be conceived as contingent, non-unitary, complex and inter-discursive (Charteris, 2016). Butler (2009) argues that these norms are used to regulate people through a process of ‘interpellation’ or ‘hail’ (Davies, 2012). Interpellation is defined as “an act of calling an individual which subjectifies the individual and initiates him or her into the subjected status, and therefore into a certain order of social existence” (Davies, 2012: 882). Butler (1998) argues that agency is the effect of power and is constituted in the discourse. Learners are transformed and acted upon prior to any action that they might take, notwithstanding radically reworking designated or prescribed identity (Butler, 2009). Learner identities that emerge from the school context are not fully expressed identities. Foucault (1970) asserts that there is no presence of power without resistance. Discourses, that are constituents of historical processes and power relations that exist in a school, make possible the self-knowledge.

4. Research strategy

The meta-theoretical paradigm of this study was social constructivism. According to social constructivism meaning is always social arising in and out of interaction with a human community (Crotty, 1998). The historical and cultural setting and context inform the kinds of meanings made by human beings. Meanings about the 'lived world' are formed through interaction with others and through cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives (Creswell, 2013).

The methodological paradigm was a qualitative inquiry and employed a bounded case study and narrative inquiry approach. The case study approach allowed for the holistic, in-depth study of the particular individual or event (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010) and focused on an empirical inquiry that investigated a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context" (Yin, 2014: 16). The case comprised of grade 10 learners and teachers at three different schools. Narrative inquiry is a method which is used to collect, analyse, and represent participants' stories as told by them and relates to the individual's personal experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The research site comprised three South African secondary schools situated in Johannesburg, Gauteng. School of Excellence was a former white English medium, a well-resourced public school that was established during apartheid and catered to learners from diverse backgrounds. Independent school was established in 1993, as a private school but subsequently changed to a public school and catered to most African learners with a sprinkling of learners from diverse backgrounds. Masibambane High School was a no-fee, English medium less-resourced school. It catered to learners from child-headed homes, some of whom were living in shacks. The rationale for selecting these differing schooling contexts was an attempt to capture rich, thick data and provide different accounts of how learners exercised their agency. In principle, the construction of learner identity, through the use of similar mechanisms and instruments, could possibly be the same. However, learner experiences in exercising agency could likely be different within these schooling contexts.

Participants of this study were purposefully selected (Creswell, 2013) and comprised of Grade 10 learners, aged between 14 and 16, teachers who taught Grade 10 learners and the principal at each school. Grade 10 learners were the main participants of the study. Teachers and the principal at each school were interviewed for purposes of triangulation of data. The rationale for selecting Grade 10 learners was that they were at the adolescent stage of development where awareness of their identities and the social world became heightened.

To aid in the selection of participants, a questionnaire was administered to one Grade 10 class of 30 learners in each school. Based on the responses received five learners across gender and socio-economic status per class were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. For the purposes of triangulation of data, one Grade 10 teacher who taught these learners and the principal at each school was selected to participate in this study. The teachers and principals were secondary participants in this study and served as multiple sources of evidence to triangulate data to address internal validity (Yin, 2014). Triangulation is viewed as a useful technique as it provides multiple perspectives on a single phenomenon (Cohen & Manion, 1999).

Data capture comprised a mix of a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and field notes. Interviews conducted with participants were audio recorded. Data was analysed using the qualitative content analysis method. This was achieved through an inductive content

analysis process. The qualitative data was subjected to an iterative, reflexive and interactive open coding process that yielded categories and emergent themes (Petty, Thomson & Stew, 2012). The codes generated from the data were continuously modified by the researcher's treatment of the data 'to accommodate new data and new insights about the data' (Sandelowski 2000, 338).

Research trustworthiness was achieved by applying the principles of transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability (Butler-Kisber, 2010). To enhance case to case transferability we adopted a strategy of selecting schools from socio-culturally diverse settings. Credibility was enhanced by prolonged and varied engagement with each setting and accomplished through triangulation and in-depth data collection by means of semi-structured interviews. To promote dependability we meticulously maintained records of interviews and a detailed explication of the data analysis process for purposes of the audit trail. The trustworthiness construct of confirmability was achieved by employing reflexivity, triangulation, purposeful sampling and data saturation. The Ethics Committee at the university granted approval to conduct this study.

5. Findings

Findings reveal that learner identity and learner agency were discursively constituted and were twofold. First, schools applied Foucault's disciplinary instruments of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment in constructing learner identity. Learners were subjected to a constant gaze at schools. And second, learners demonstrated that they could either resist or conform to dominant discursive discourses in schools. Learners became agentic in schools and asserted their own identities.

5.1 Hierarchical observation and normalising judgment

The construction of the learner in the disciplinary space of the school was made possible through the use of the mechanisms of 'hierarchical observation' and 'normalizing judgment' (Foucault, 1977). These mechanisms operated as rules and resources that were used by the school, to sustain or reproduce learner identity and relations, which made it possible for the school and its agents to act on learners and to subjectify them. Hierarchical observation is linked to the school's gaze of the learner according to the hierarchical authoritative ranking at the school. Prefects (senior learners who is authorized to enforce discipline) were the foot soldiers who meticulously conducted their tasks,

At the assembly every morning, our prefects walk between the class-lines checking whether everybody is in their full school uniform, whether students' hair is of the required length and style... for girls long hair, braids, and plaits. Fingernail length is also checked by these prefects. Learners must conform to the school's code of conduct. There will be consequences if they don't (Mr Smith, white, male principal, School of Excellence).

Normalising judgement took the form of the school's code of conduct. It seemed that schools had applied disciplinary instruments in constructing learner identity. Participants at all three schools claimed to have received the school's code of conduct. They claimed to "have read it even though they did not go through the whole document" (Annelise, School of Excellence). Lerato's (Independent School) frustration was that "it was huge ... like carrying a Bible ... stipulating all the rules and regulations". Many of the learners at Independent school claimed to have stopped reading the school's code of conduct.

5.1.1 Reinforcing learner behaviour

Each of the three schools applied different measures to reinforce learner behaviour. Learner behaviour was reinforced through the use of the merit and demerit system. Schools made use of accolades to encourage good behaviour and different punitive measures to curb negative behaviour. If bad behaviour was left unpunished, the school's construction of an 'ideal learner' identity may be unsuccessful. The following outlines how each school reinforced learner behaviour.

5.1.2 Merit and demerit system

At School of Excellence, learners seemed to possess the right kind of cultural capital. "This school has good learners; learners that know how to behave. Seemingly, they were well brought up" (Mr Smith, white male principal). It seemed that teachers were not subjected to much disruptive behaviour from learners at School of Excellence. The majority of participants at this school expressed that they were there to excel in academics and sports, which were rewarded with incentives

There are incentives and rewards. Definitely! Like for academics and sports. they do things like certificates and colours. Umm ... they have this new system of like giving gold braiding to the kids that participate in activities at national level. We have a red and white blazer for like your hard work and achievement at school. We have a merit system ... badges ... this merit system goes to a trophy and like a pro-merit award (Mpendulo).

All the participants mentioned that the school applied detention to reprimand unacceptable or bad behaviour. One of the participants had the following to say:

We have disciplinary measures like with detentions, demerits mainly detentions; break detention, afternoon detentions like we are supposed to sit or stay like that for the entire session ... write down the whole code of conduct on a piece of paper ... or they call parents if the child is being too troublesome. They take away some of that child's privileges (Mrs. Abrahams, Coloured female teacher).

5.1.3 Talk and no action: Lack of an effective disciplinary system

At Independent School emphasis was placed on "curbing bad behaviour of learners" (Mrs. Engelbrecht, white female principal). Little if any initiatives existed for reinforcing good behaviour. Furthermore, learners seemed to exhibit a lack of fear for the disciplinary system of the school. Participants expressed that they "did not care much about what the school did to curb negative behaviour" (Themba). Drawing from participants' accounts, it seemed that the punitive system was marred with loopholes. There seemed to be inconsistency about how punitive measures were applied:

The demerit system only existed for three weeks and it did not work no matter what! This school is all about talk and no action. Learners are still waiting for demerits. Nobody gets demerits. No one has been to an afternoon detention. All teachers do is shout at learners and after that they let them go (Tlhomelo).

There is no discipline ... we do what we want ... they talk; we don't take them seriously anymore ... there is no action ... at the end of the day, aah ... they not going to do anything. It's just nothing ... weird. We do as we please. We just don't care ... they don't care (Lerato).

5.1.4 Violation of learners' human rights

At Masibambane High School, the reinforcement of good behaviour was unapparent. All effort seemed to be placed on curbing bad behaviour of learners through measures that included corporal punishment. Participants claimed "the school resorted to punitive measures such as "teachers inflicting pain on learners" (Jabulile) or "chasing learners out of the school" (Ayanda), which "violated their human rights"(Simon). Jabulile expressed her disapproval of having received corporal punishment because her homework was incomplete, "we are also human ... I should not be beaten for not doing my homework". Furthermore, some of the participants claimed to be humiliated by teachers, which often took place in the presence of other learners. One of the participants said:

The teacher would take my shoes and I would need to walk barefoot. My shoes will be returned much later in the day (Jabulile).

Some learners feared being subjected to disciplinary measures, while other learners displayed a disregard of disciplinary measures. It was clear that the manner in which some schools punished learners was illegal. Learners expressed their discontent of the ways mechanisms and instruments were applied, and how it constrained learner identity, learner agency and suppressed the emergence of possible subject positions.

5.2 Learner agency: asserting identities through the school system

Learners navigated through the mechanisms and instruments, and school discourses to affirm their own subject positions. Learners exercised learner agency by asserting and re-negotiating learner identity through conformity and resistance.

5.2.1 Crafting the ideal learner

School of Excellence seemed very clear about the kind of learner they sought to construct. The school prided itself in producing learners who achieved "a high standard of education required to equip them for tertiary education" (Mr Smith, white male principal). It seemed that this message was equally understood by learners. Maria remarked, "I think the school would want someone who is academically sound". Akhona mentioned that the school sought to construct "a learner who was responsible for academics and possessed leadership qualities". Mpendulo claimed "teachers were concerned more about the marks of learners and they would not settle for any low marks". Maria, Mpendulo and Luyanda, all felt they "had what it took to become the kind of learner the school sought to construct as they did well academically and participated in sports". Zamani, held a different view of school and the ideal learner. It could well have been that he "hated school ... hated classrooms and the way the school functioned in general", that was why he lacked interest in being the kind of learner that the school sought to construct. Zamani, further mentioned that "I do have my moments where I'm really, can I say not in the mood ... I don't think I'm that type they are trying to craft". Interestingly, despite possessing the right kind of parental cultural capital, Zamani did not see himself as what the school sought to construct.

5.3 A particular brand of learner: identity imposition

Learners at Independent School voiced frustrations over their experiences at school. There seemed to be incompatibility between the kind of experiences Independent School provided to learners and the experiences learners desired. Miss Chavani, (female Indian teacher) remarked that the "school sought to construct a learner that would perform well at school".

Performing well at school included “obtaining good grades, completing tasks, attending classes and behaving well”. Furthermore, she mentioned, “a learner should have manners and tolerate differences”. However, it seemed that the kind of learner the school sought to construct was resisted by learners. All participants held the view that “the school held a fixed view of the ideal learner”. That view, participants argued, “blinded the school from recognising the kind of learners they were”. Nyakallo remarked that the school focused on a “certain group of people instead of checking whether this ideal learner we are looking for ... might be like a different brand, but then they focusing on one particular brand”. Lerato added,

I feel like they trying to make all of us about academics, and they wonder why the child fails ... and I feel like they don't understand that. They don't get that not every student is going to be academically strong.

Tlhokomelo seemed frustrated by the school's persistence to want to construct them into something they were not,

They have tried to build me in a particular way, ... they will never try to build me in that type of way. I am still who I am, even if they think they are trying, it's not working at all. I mean there is no difference!

According to Lerato the school is “trying to enforce ways into your mind so that they can look good”. Furthermore, participants chastised the school for “constraining their identities and their potential”. Dineo mentioned that “they are not opening up opportunities for us, and who we are”. Dineo, Lerato and Tlhokomelo accused the school of “failing to recognise differences”. Learners were, according to Dineo constrained as they “did not have many extramural activities from which to choose”. There seemed to be limited choices in subjects and in sporting codes that catered to a particular group of learners:

Some are good at sport, some are not. When it comes to subject choices you know we have the basics. We don't have art, even don't have consumer studies. Someone may prefer technical maths, we don't have it, you understand! Subjects are limited. ... So you are literally forced to stay in a small box while we as individuals in a high school are trying to build ourselves. We are trying to find ourselves, regarding who we are! (Dineo).

Participants held different views regarding how the school allowed them to freely express themselves. It seemed that participants saw themselves as having two identities; learner identity and personal identity. Nyakallo felt constrained by the concept of the ideal learner, hence she “could not be [herself]”. Tlhokomelo mentioned,

They don't! They don't! They don't allow you to be who you really are...this school is also judgemental of you being yourself, expressing who you are...you fear that you will be judged by the learners and the people in the school. They just do not accept you for who you are...so you just kind of like compose yourself together so to avoid being judged.

From the participants' accounts, there seemed to be limitations to what learners at the school could become. Participants felt they could not be themselves.

5.4 Freedom with conditions

At Masibambane, participants felt that the school “allowed them freedom, but with conditions”. All participants mentioned that even though they felt free at school, they felt that every move they made was closely monitored. Thandeka claimed “being constrained came in the form of their choice of hairstyle”. She mentioned, “teachers chose for [them] the type of hairstyle”.

This “did not sit well with [her] because [she] wanted to be comfortable and beautiful as [she] was unique”. For Amahle and Jabulile, “constraints came in a form of being instructed about the length of your hair”.

Within school discourses, learners had different perceptions of and understandings of their identities and the kind of learner that the school sought to construct. Some of these identities clashed with the identity of the ‘ideal learner’ of schools. Consequently, the way they exercised agency was not uniform. Some learners bought into the whole idea of schooling, while other learners resisted and defied school. Despite established subject positions in schools, learners created their own subject positions, as they believed that the school was limiting and constraining their abilities.

6. Analysis and discussion of finding

According to Foucault (1977) individuals enter the school without possessing a learner identity. Subjecting individuals to hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment construct a learner identity. All three schools in this study used these mechanisms to construct an ‘ideal learner identity’. Foucault (1977: 176) argues that “a relation of surveillance is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching as a mechanism that is inherent to it and increases its efficiency”. Learners were subjected to a constant gaze from the principal, teachers, prefects and peers. The conduct of learners was closely monitored in schools. Learners were required to always be on their best behaviour. Uniform checks were conducted daily and learners were called out if they were not in full uniform. In some instances, learners who did not wear their full school uniform were refused entry into the school. Names of so-called rebellious learners were noted for record keeping so that they could be known by authorities. The purpose of observation was not only to ensure that learners behaved in a seemly manner but “to provide a hold on their conduct ... to make it possible to know them, to alter them” (Foucault, 1977: 172). Interpellation, an act that “subjectifies an individual and initiates him into the subjected status, and into a certain order of social existence” (Davies, 2012: 882) was very apparent in these schools.

Mechanisms of constructing learner identity incorporated power and showed explicitly how power functions in the school. The principal, teachers, and prefects operated in the form of a pyramid (Foucault, 1977) to give effect to power. Power allowed these authoritative figures to see everything that happens in the school. It seems that hierarchical observation and normalising judgment through the school’s code of conduct constituted the ‘strict discipline’ process of the school and effectively contributed to the construction of an ideal learner identity (Foucault, 1977). However, the school’s construction of an ‘ideal learner identity’ seemed to create an ethic of discomfort for some learners as their established identities were challenged and re-constructed.

All schools in this study used a demerit and detention system in disciplining learners. This shaped learner identity and fostered the appropriate and desirable behaviour from learners. This finding is aligned with findings in the literature that claim demerit systems, taking away privileges, time-outs, detention and picking up litter are viable options to discipline learners (Ebrahim, 2017; Deakin, Taylor & Kupchik, 2018). However, at Independent School the inconsistent application of disciplinary measures led to a lack of fear of being disciplined. Otto and Ukpere (2020) argue that inconsistency of disciplinary decision-making leads to loss of confidence and abuses, which could weaken morale, and affect productivity. Learners at this

school knew that authorities at the school were not going to act against ill behaviour, and thus abused the system. Disciplinary measures at Masibambane High School took the form of corporal punishment and in some instances a violation of human rights. At times learners were physically assaulted for failing to complete tasks on time or for arriving late to class. "We are human ... I should not be beaten for not doing my homework". Findings in the literature also emphasise the fact that corporal punishment violates internationally recognized human rights to freedom from cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment, and freedom from physical violence (Vohito, 2021).

7. Learner agency: asserting identities through the school system

Learners exercised agency in non-unitary, complex, and inter-discursive ways (Charteris, 2016) and navigated through the power to promote their agency. The 'ideal learner identity' enforced by the school through hierarchical observation and normalising judgement was seen as inherently stable and revealed norms that required continuous maintenance (Butler, 1998). However, the construction of an ideal learner identity was met with resistance from learners as they disapproved of the application of the mechanisms in constructing 'learner identity' and sought to affirm their multiple identities.

Identities are fluid, complex and can change over time (Vandeyar, 2019; 2022; Charteris, 2016). Learners in all three schools were heterogeneous subjects possessing complex and multifaceted identities. Their learners identity shifted and changed based on their interactions with particular actors and particular contexts within the school environment. Some learners believed that they were more than just learners. They viewed themselves as having dominant identities that were ignored by the school. Learners identified as sport players, dancers, writers and not just an academic learner. They expressed the view that schools ought to be educational spaces where their true selves can be realised. The school should not only be a place for constructing a learner identity, but it should also be much more than that. The school should facilitate learner talents. Failure of the school to assume such a role led learners to devalue the school. Similar to findings in the literature (Omodan & Ige, 2021; Marais & Meier, 2010) at the School of Excellence learners were recognised as heterogeneous subjects that held multiple identities, but the school failed to affirm learners' diverse backgrounds.

At times learners' personal identities clashed with the learner identity that the school sought to construct. As Dineo (Independence Schools) stated, the school was trying to keep them in a box when all they wanted was to build their own identity. Being kept in a 'box' frustrated learners as their other identities were constrained. Lerato stated that not only did learners possess their own learner identity, they were also much more than that. The decision of learners not to read the code of conduct at Independent School could be viewed as assuming a subject position of rebelliousness. Findings in the literature also suggest that problem behaviours include those breaking explicit rules as well as those infringing implicit norms or expectations (Segalo & Rambudam, 2018; Sun & Shek, 2012). It could be that learners chose to exercise their agency. Foucault (1970) asserts that there is no presence of power without resistance. Discourses, that are constituents of historical processes and power relations that exist in a school, make possible the self-knowledge.

It seems that learners in all the participating schools demonstrated 'double directionality' as they allowed schools to construct learner identities and they negotiated their own identities (Charteris, 2016). As Akhona stated that although he allowed the school to shape his learner

identity, he made concerted efforts to negotiate his chosen identity. At Masibambane High learners believed that their identity was important and therefore needed to be taken into account by the school. They demanded that they be treated with human dignity, and respect by both teachers and other learners. "We also human isn't ... I should not be beaten for not doing my homework"

Mechanisms of constructing learner identity incorporated power and thus learners had to abide by this mechanism and accept the imposed 'ideal learner identity'. However, it became apparent that despite their awareness of possible repercussions learners attempted to challenge such power and embrace agency. They negotiated their learner identity within the portals of power while constructing their own chosen identities in school. In classrooms, learners took the initiative in their learning and engaged each other on certain subjects. They would discuss topics they found challenging. This was done by forming groups and positioning themselves according to their own abilities. Learners expressed how they felt about the school and authority. Similar to findings in the literature (West & Williams, 2017) in instances where learners felt the school was unaccommodating, they resorted to grouping themselves and forming a community of learners that shared similar values. It was in such a community of learners that they felt they could be anything as they were not judged for who they were. While the school tried to shape their learner identity using traditional western norms of an 'ideal learner' (Soudien, 2007) these learners bounded by power dynamics of the school superficially accepted this imposed learner identity, but remained true to their own identities.

8. Conclusion

Human relations play an important role in determining learners' academic progress. Attention must be given to the social relations that learners have with fellow learners and most importantly, with teachers and the principal. The discontentment of learners with people in positions of authority directly correlates with a drop in academic performance. People in positions of authority need to be open to opposing views of learners and to encourage dialogue. Not all learners who attend upper-middle class schools attend school for the purpose of the acquisition of specialised knowledge. Some learners attend school having a dominant identity which is not that of the 'ideal learner'. Learners see themselves being more than learners and schools ought to take into account their contradicting identities. Perhaps schools need to assist learners to reach their full potential by letting them decide what they want to be and be supportive of learners' choices. Schools should encourage more subject positions for learners and not impose an identity onto learners. Learners were making a call for a new form of learner identity to cater for changing times. The traditional and historically "ideal learner identity" crafted from a western perspective and imposed on learners by schools were at loggerheads with current interests and experiences of contemporary learners at schools. Learners in schools subversively transformed, refused, parodied and ruptured the laws of discourse, thereby reconfiguring and redefining their identities (Jackson, 2004). Understanding all learners' experiences and the cultural capital they possess would avoid cultural clashes and the subjection learners to symbolic violence. Learners hold multiple identities that are contradictory to the 'ideal learner identity'. This study recommends that schools integrate identities and discourses that learners bring to school and in so doing rupture the current laws of school discourses.

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