



Prominent discourses in South African education from the perspective of community psychology: Challenges and opportunities for youth liberation and well-being

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Abstract

Community psychology takes an explicitly political stance by identifying where power lies and how it is exercised in ways that maintain privilege and discrimination against particular groups. From this perspective, we consider the challenges facing school education in South Africa today. Education is positioned as an important site for the liberation and well-being of our country's majority. However, the state of education is marked by persistent inequalities. From a Foucauldian perspective, this paper presents a meta-synthesis of school education literature and identifies prominent discourses circulating around the country's basic education sector: the discourses of democracy, human rights, and good governance; rights; development; scarce skills; the crisis in education; and privatisation are discussed. We consider the role of these discourses in the wider social processes of legitimation and power in education, and subjective implications for youth. We note the various ways in which discourses responsabilise youth and surrounding stakeholders, and how others position them as resources for the neoliberal capitalist economy. We argue for the role of counter-discourses and a collective emancipatory perspective to advance transformational educational change and embrace opportunities in the future.

Keywords: community psychology, school education, Foucauldian discourse, educational transformation, discourse in education

Introduction

We propose that psychology is a useful site from which to think about transformational educational change in South African school education. At the interface of the country's socio-political histories and the contentious histories of the discipline of psychology in South Africa (Laher & Cockcroft, 2014), we place psychological concepts within a political register (Hook, 2004). Specifically, we deploy a critical community psychology perspective, which takes an explicitly political stance by identifying where power lies and how it is used to maintain privilege and discrimination against certain groups (Evans et al., 2017). Insights from developmental psychology show that the years of basic education constitute formative stages in the lifespan of people (Nsamenang, 2006). From a community psychology perspective, we seek to move beyond ameliorating challenges during these stages towards embracing the values of education for liberatory purposes.

In 2010, the National Planning Commission (NPC; 2011) led South Africa's strategic planning, and constructed the National Development Plan 2030. In their diagnostic report outlining the issues constraining the long-term development of postapartheid South Africa, the commission identified unemployment and the poor quality of education for Black people as the top two key challenges in democratic South Africa. The commission, deployed by the President of South Africa, positioned education as central to achieving the overarching democratic goals of eliminating poverty and reducing inequality. This thus positioned education as an important site for the liberation and well-being (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) of our country's majority. This central positioning is not unlike positioning produced in other nations' development discourses in the sub-Saharan African region (Lemon, 2004).

Background

Despite the centrality of education in national development discourse, the state of education is generally described as marked by stark and persistent inequalities (Spaull, 2019). To untangle this contradiction and reveal the techniques of power that produce a persistently marginalised majority, we review selected postapartheid South African school education literature. We take a critical community psychology perspective (Stevens & Sonn, 2021), which foregrounds the politics of power, to enable us to consider the challenges facing school education in South Africa today. From a psychological perspective, we attempt to understand people in, and surrounding, school education within their social, historical, political, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. This paper analyses the role of discourse in shaping South African school education, and in wider social processes of legitimation and power in education. We consider the subjective implications for youth and surrounding stakeholders in thinking about the challenges facing school education, and the opportunities that lie ahead. This perspective offers an opportunity to rethink and reconstruct systems of knowledge and practice from the perspective of the marginalised majority (Kagan et al., 2020), thus moving towards our imagined transformed educational landscape.

Discourse as a site in South African school education

In examining education in transition in South Africa, it is useful to analyse the role of discourse in shaping the educational landscape. Discourse has tended to be a fuzzy concept, defined within either a formalist or structuralist paradigm (Mayr, 2008). It is thus necessary to specify the ways it is formulated here. We deploy a Foucauldian (1972) conception of discourse to identify the various ways in which South African education is constructed in the postapartheid literature reviewed. The various ways in which knowledge about education in South Africa is constituted, and the accompanying “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p. 49) are discussed. We formulate discourse as a site of power relations—a means by which power reproduces itself (Foucault, 1978). Because discourse shapes subjectivity and experience (Willig, 2013), it is strongly implicated in the exercise of power (Foucault, 1972). We highlight the relations and reproductions of power as they apply to South African youth in basic education.

Prominent discourses in South African school education

From a Foucauldian perspective, a meta-synthesis of selected postapartheid education literature is conducted to identify prominent discourses circulating around the country’s basic education sector. The review presented here is part of a larger single-case study of an education non-governmental organisation (NGO). We take a critical community psychology perspective, which foregrounds the politics of power, to enable us to consider the challenges facing school education in South Africa today. The discourses of democracy, human rights and good governance; development; rights; scarce skills; the crisis in education; and privatisation are identified and discussed. In light of these, we argue for the role of counter-discourses and a collective emancipatory perspective to advance transformational educational change and embrace opportunities in the future.

Global discourse of human rights, democracy, and good governance

Scholars reviewing the postapartheid landscape of South Africa have signalled to a globally hegemonic discourse of human rights, democracy, and good governance in South Africa during the years of transition from an apartheid state (Neocosmos, 2017). They highlighted the effects of the spread of neoliberalism across the globe, particularly in Africa. Underpinned by a Eurocentric ideology, this discourse purports liberal formulations of power and governance, which assume that democracy and human rights are universal values that should be imposed on all societies. Neocosmos (2017) argued that this discourse represents a new form of imperialism in the ways that it undermines African governments’ (a) decisions about their economies, and (b) national sovereignties via imperial intervention, to enforce Western conceptions of good governance. It ignores the historical and cultural specificities of different societies, and how power operates differently in different contexts. In Foucauldian (1982a) terms, it can be seen as a form of governmentality, a form of power that operates through the rationalisation and management of populations. As a form of governing colonial

power, this discourse constructs subjectivities, regulates behaviours, and ultimately shapes the management of populations.

In the 1970s, from the perspective of the European gaze on Africa, and via this discourse of human rights, democracy, and good governance, Africans were transformed from agents of political change during the struggles for liberation to victims of famine, war, and disease. More specifically, in South Africa, the proliferation of empowerment programmes in the 1990s reified this passivity of the citizenry. Neocosmos (2017) highlighted the irony of these productions of power following the liberation of the country by its own people.

The discourse of human rights, democracy, and good governance can thus be seen as a form of power that operates through the production and regulation of knowledge and the construction of subjects. Foucault's (1982b) concept of power is not limited to the exercise of authority by those in positions of formal power but rather, a pervasive force that permeates all aspects of social life including knowledge production, social institutions, and individual subjectivity. The right-to-education discourse, discussed below, is traceable as a production of this globally hegemonic human rights, democracy, and good governance discourse (Westaway, 2009).

Rights discourse

Reporting on a situational analysis of the state of education in South Africa, Westaway (2012) described a predominant rights-based discourse produced by an emphasis on constitutional rights in the country during the initial years of transition in the early 1990s. Embedded in the right-to-education discourse are legal and juridical claims to entitlements based on constitutionalism. This reflects neoliberal logic, which prioritises individual choice and market-based solutions (Hall & Pulsford, 2019). Under this logic, the role of legal frameworks and market-oriented policies are emphasised in the promotion of education for all. With the democratisation of the country, education for all was designated to the domain of politics regulated by the state, and thus the right to education was positioned as the duty of the state (Smith & Ngoma-Maema, 2003). Circulations of the logic of this discourse appear in education policy post apartheid, for example, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996) which made schooling compulsory from age seven years (Grade 1) to age 15 (Grade 9).

More than two decades into democracy, the rights discourse continues to circulate prominently in school education discourse in South Africa. Despite the rhetoric of access to education and the promotion of quality and democratic governance in the schooling system (RSA, 1996), the context of persistent socioeconomic exclusion of the majority of South Africans renders quality education inaccessible. Spreen and Vally (2006) situated the right-to-education discourse within a broader international human rights framework closely aligned to neoliberal policies (for example, treaties signed by nation-states). They showed how discourse shapes subjectivity and experience (Willig, 2013) by underscoring so-called socioeconomic barriers to accessing education, which include school fees and other related schooling costs (such as uniform, transport costs, etc.). Others have called attention to high

dropout rates, disproportionate cohort sizes in exit-level schooling, lack of adequate learning and teaching material, insufficient time spent in school, and other barriers (Bloch, 2009; Fleisch, 2008). However, within the context of the sustained circulation of the rights discourse, the rhetoric of access to education for all is emphasised while inadvertently masking barriers to education, and downplaying systemic and structural inequalities that affect access to quality education.

In resistance to this dominant discourse in education, Spreen and Vally (2006) offered “another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations. . . . It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point” (Foucault, 1982a, p. 329). They differentiated between the *right to education* (denoting access) and *rights in education* (denoting quality of education and educational opportunities). They argued for a reconceptualisation of human rights in education—one that is extended to include quality of education and educational opportunities. Noting deepening poverty and inequality in the country, and its effects on the quality of education for all, the authors argued instead for rights in education focussing on a conception of rights within a collective human rights framework.

The conception of rights in education offers ways to reconstruct systems and practices in school education from the perspective of the marginalised majority. This perspective relies less on juridical claims and addresses more of the barriers to education—in pursuit of our imagined transformed educational landscape. It encompasses a collective subjectivity that is valid for all, and not just for certain sections of society. This collective conception of human rights acknowledges the intersections between economic, political, and social conditions that enable or disable educational and thus civic and democratic participation in society.

The discourse of human rights, democracy, and good governance remained dominant in South Africa during the years of transition and the early years of democracy. However, in the context of the global financial crisis in 2008, a shift toward a discourse of development in Africa circulated more prominently (Neocosmos, 2017).

Development discourse

The genealogy (Foucault, 1978) of the development discourse is closely tied to the colonial agenda. During the colonial era, the rhetoric of modernisation masked this agenda and constructed Africans as uncivilised and thus needing development. However, during the years of independence, in the 1950s and 1960s, the rhetoric of modernisation was pronounced and coupled with economic growth imperatives in Africa. More locally, the proliferation of empowerment programmes in the 1990s in South Africa operated as apparatuses of this discourse. These were similar to other apparatuses in operation on the continent such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Programmes. These apparatuses of power were used to exert control over the economies of African countries and thus functioned as a mechanism of neoliberal economic governance (Lesay, 2012).

In response to the negative socioeconomic consequences of these apparatuses of development, counter-discourses of development emerged, which emphasised poverty reduction, human development, and the value of social institutions (Clark, 2005). This shift in discourse about development in Africa intersected with shifts in national development discourse in South Africa to enable productions on South African school education. Constructions of development here then centred on the need to address historical inequalities and promote social and economic development through education (NPC, 2011).

More recently, within a more socio-contextually responsive framework of development, the concept of African Renaissance (Adebajo, 2020) has emerged. This aimed to promote African-led development and reduce dependency on foreign aid (Zezeza, 2009). It has circulated closely with the idea of rights in education (Spren & Vally, 2006), and has been extended to highlight the issue of epistemological access (Morrow, 2007). These counter-discourses have together triggered debates about the epistemological muddle that Morrow (2007) exposed. These ongoing debates have fuelled the growth of the subfield of Indigenous knowledge systems (Seehawer, et al., 2021), for instance, and critical knowledges about the transformation (Napier, 2003) and decolonisation (Mahabeer, 2021) of South African school education. We see that debates on the transformation and decolonisation of higher education in South Africa have gained traction (Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020), contributing to shifts in the system and education practice. In advancing the collective framework in schooling, further debates about what transformed and decolonised school education (which centres on Indigenous knowledge systems) might look like in South Africa are needed as we continue to shape our educational futures.

The macro-interactional discourses produce the simultaneous passivisation and responsabilisation of South African citizens. Below, we explore the influences of micro-interactional productions on learners, and surrounding stakeholders, in South African schooling.

Scarce skills discourse

The “scarce skills” discourse features prominently within the South African national development discourse in education. The scarce skills construct is heard regularly in mass media, television talk shows, and radio programmes wherein it is pervasively used to describe the education–economy relationship in South Africa (Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016; Vally, 2019). This discourse purports that education is not teaching what the economy needs. Another version of this discourse is the “mismatch” discourse, which claims that people don’t have the right skills, and that’s why they are unemployed. Herein “skills shortages” are constructed as the reasons for the persistence of poverty, inequality, and employment, while “skills development” is constructed as the solution (Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016; Vally, 2019). Through these constructions, skills development is positioned as a means to attain national development goals.

Critical scholars reveal the various ways in which this discourse constrains responses to structural unemployment. Vally and Motala (2014) incisively underscored that, in fact, many factors, unrelated to education and skills, contribute to the nation's pervasive unemployment challenge. The number of South Africans living below the poverty line, the unemployment rate, and the weak economic growth since the 2008 global financial crisis are prominent developmental challenges identified.

This scarce skills discourse, particularly when echoed by mass media, and in the context of mass unemployment and inequality, is seductive and plays on the anxieties of both parents and youth (Vally, 2019). While parents wish to see their children succeed, youth are led to believe that education should provide them with a competitive advantage. This socialises youth to expect to realise their potential via the market: by marketing themselves and meeting their needs via the market (Vally, 2019). These processes and accompanying practices promote a misguided conception of education wherein meeting the needs of the economy is constructed as the purpose of education. Within this discourse, "skills" are constructed as synonymous with "occupations." This promotes a reductive understanding of education that advances prescriptive learning and a focus on qualifications and occupational preparedness (Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016). This produces skewed education reform priorities post democracy (Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016), and simplifies the multifaceted purpose of education (Vally, 2019).

As the country seeks to shape and advance our educational futures, these notions cannot be accepted and advanced through policy and practice. We do note, though, that counter-discourse is emerging. Critical scholars have begun to trouble the narrow conceptualisations purported by this discourse. They disrupt the basic assumption of the linear relationship between education, the economy, and skills by asserting that unemployment is a structural problem of capitalism, not related to worker-skills supply (Vally, 2019). Balwanz and Ngcwangu (2016) revealed how this scarce skills discourse has shaped national development priorities and accompanying practices that are institutionalised and normalised. Focusing their analysis on the Sector of Education and Training Authorities (SETA)'s Sector Skills Plans, the authors argue that the skills shortages diagnosis has had far-reaching implications, and demonstrate its influence on South African legislation, government policy, the establishment of new departments, authorities, and councils, as well as on the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)'s research initiatives and funding. Moreover, they critique the methodologies used to identify scarce skills/occupations; they demonstrate the highly contested and inconsistent implementation of these constructs amongst the various education policy documents analysed. The scarce skills discourse does not offer the conceptual tools to grapple with the trends in the South African economy and does not address the most critical issues facing our nation's education sector (Balwanz & Ngcwangu, 2016).

The scarce skills discourse emerges from human capital theory, a contested theory that is argued to ignore non-skill factors influencing the economy (Vally, 2019). Within this ideology, constitutive constructions promote a particular regime of truth: one that reflects the

perspectives, values, and interests of neoliberal capitalism and productionist theories. In addition, these constructions promote a particular regime of truth, a certain version of reality that reflects capitalist interests. Within this capitalist version of reality, people are considered to be resources. These formulations have enabled the marketisation of education, discussed below, and obscured some of the values of education concerning social justice and democratic citizenship and conceptions of education as having intrinsic value rather than reduced to the need for economic growth.

Crisis in education

Similar to the ways in which the scarce skills discourse masks unemployment as a structural problem of capitalism, so too do discourses of crisis under neoliberal capitalism. Discourses of crisis function to obscure the “structural macro-economic problems to a lack of educational productivity . . . and thereby shift the responsibility for negative aspects of economic restructuring onto teachers, schools and, ultimately, students and communities” (Ramírez & Hyslop-Margison, 2015, p. 168). Specifically, because it refers to the “ongoing crisis in South African education” (Spaull, 2013, p. 3), the trend has been the shifting of responsibility and accountability for educational outcomes from the state or education system to individuals, particularly parents, teachers, and learners themselves. While learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and to actively participate in the learning process, teachers are expected to take greater responsibility for the success of their students (Peters, 2017), and parents are expected to be more involved in their children’s education (Munje & Mncube, 2018). The longstanding discourse of crisis in South African education obscures the context in which schooling happens in the country and the broader systemic issues within the education system.

South African youth are oftentimes interpellated into responsabilised positions and their poor educational outcomes are referenced as evidence for the ongoing crisis in education. Literacy and numeracy results from the Annual National Assessments, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study as well as outcomes from the Southern African Consortium for Monitoring and Educational Quality are closely analysed and cited by education research experts to demonstrate the ongoing levels of crisis. The National Senior Certificate (the Grade 12 exit-level examinations) occupies a particularly glorified position in discourse about South African education, and is used as a barometer of the health of the country’s public education system (Department of Basic Education, 2021). This anecdote offers a poignant example of how these outcomes are constructed: “Of 100 pupils that start school, only 50 will make it to Grade 12, 40 will pass, and only 12 will qualify for university” (Spaull, 2013, p. 3) and “only 6 will get an undergraduate degree in 6 years” (Spaull, 2019, p. 3). This kind of evidence, presented by experts in the field (e.g. educational economists), is reproduced and sensationalised in mass media. What is then reproduced by these entrenched constructions of broad non-achievement is the reification of the human capital constructions of the relationship between education and the economy—and thus scarce skills and mismatch discourses. In summoning the discourse of crisis to construct the broken and unequal state of education (Amnesty International,

2020), references to the lack of teacher knowledge and low access to technology (Spaull, 2019), the lack of teaching resources (Lebeloane, 2017), poverty and inequality (Spreen & Vally, 2006), high dropout rates (Branson et al., 2014), and crumbling school infrastructure (Amnesty International, 2020), amongst others, are made.

These discourses of crisis, typical to neoliberal capitalist states, obscure the structural problem of capitalism and are thus incompatible with a collective framework to advance rights in transformed, decolonised, and socio-contextually appropriate school education.

Privatisation discourse

In addition, the discourses that circulate in South African school education enable what is constructed as “low-fee schools for the poor” (Languille, 2016, p. 1). A “solution” to the “crisis in education” is said to be privatised low-fee paying schools. In this way, market logic is used to generate market solutions through the marketisation and privatisation of education. We thus see the emergence of, for example, Spark and Curro Meridian Schools, positioned in the educational landscape as so-called “low-cost” or “low-fee private schools for the poor” (cited in Languille, 2016, p. 1), and said to be “the poor’s best chance” at quality education (Tooley, 2000, p. 1). Embedded in this occurrence is the rhetoric of choice: guardians have the choice to send their children to low-fee schools. Again, market logic, on which this discourse is founded, operates to mask the socioeconomic challenges of the majority of South African households accessing public schooling.

Srivastava (2016) described a first and second wave of the analysis of low-fee private schooling—a growing phenomenon in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. The former is what was considered to be a mushrooming of low-cost private schools in specific contexts, experiencing poor educational outcomes with little state support. The second wave constitutes corporate-backed chains of low-fee private schools, supported by multinational companies, equity funds, domestic corporations, and private investors (Languille, 2016).

In addition to reproducing the persistent marginalisation of the majority, this technique of capitalist interest has implications for teachers, succinctly captured by Languille (2016) below by

reducing the number of teachers, who are partially replaced by technology and low-paid academic assistants; deprofessionalising teachers through close supervision of teaching by curriculum specialists; and equating quality with digital schooling. These chains profit from South Africa’s labour market conditions: a high level of unemployment that allows them to employ academic assistants on a stipend and to deprive teachers of social benefits that are granted in the public sector, such as medical aid, housing allowance or pension plans. (p. 1)

Critical scholars working in this emergent low-fee private sector in education critique these techniques and call for quality public education for all. This quality education for all should

be provided by the state rather than usurped by private businesses that purport to be doing so in response to the so-called crisis and for the so-called public good.

Discussion

In the findings above, we have summarised the prominent discourses in the literature, also keeping in mind that discourses may be individualised and thus lead to particular subject positions. Certain discourses position people as victims, passive, or compliant, thus feeling unable to influence their circumstances. Alternatively, other discourses position people as responsabilised, expected to make choices, and having the agency to make these despite contextual realities. In others, people are constructed as mere resources to support the neoliberal capitalist economy.

From the review of prominent discourses, we see the effects of the colonial gaze on the production of knowledge and the construction of subjects and practices in South African school education. During the years of transition, we have witnessed juridical claims to entitlements and accompanying education policies. These claims and accompanying policies function to exert control over African countries and their systems of education and produce responsabilised teachers, schools, young students, and communities who are interpellated into constrained positions that serve the market economy. However, counter-discourse is also present. Critical scholars call us towards a collective, emancipatory framework that enables quality education for all. These counter-discourses expose the structural problem of capitalism and foreground social justice and democratic citizenship as values of education and advocate for the intrinsic value of education rather than the need for economic growth that dominates.

Drawing from Foucault (1972), discourses are thus neither merely inventions nor hypotheses but form from complex processes of authoritative definitions that may lead to the exclusion of many. In addition, the existence of common discourses is a function of exterior relations and uncritical adoption by people. We are reminded to examine the contexts, authorities (that delimit), and the systems-related parameters that inform these discourses. These processes thus point to the fundamental role of power relations. Foucault objected to ideas of knowledge, truth, and what we know about education being viewed from outside the networks of power. Discourse is the site of power relations; it is the means by which power reproduces itself (Foucault, 1978). What this means is that being aware of these prominent discourses avails us the possibilities of critical knowledge to enable us to speak truth to power, exposing domination for the ways that it functions and therefore hoping to enable effective resistance through alternative discourses.

The power/knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1972) thus becomes a lens to use to consider our current socio-political landscape. Using these tools, we can explore the relations of power that shape the social and institutional practices and the subjectivities active within organisations. Discourses are therefore a key mechanism to reveal the ubiquitous and de-centralised forms of power that evolve in many contexts, also uncovering the ways of

constituting knowledge and the accompanying “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1982a, p. 49). This underlines how the object appears historically and operates as an effect of relations between groups of statements. Discursive relations also establish the conditions of possibility for statements about objects of knowledge, but discourses are then frequently used without reference back to their origins, but rather as taken for granted in their use.

In relation to educational literature and practice, and considering these identified discourses, we also need to ask where the silences or absences might be. In addition, might there be hidden discourses or counter-discourses that are circulating, and what forms do these take? When we consider working towards emancipation in the sphere of education and considering the potential for collaborative partnerships, what sorts of lenses might enable us to construct alternative discourses? And how can we develop what Neocosmos (2017) called excessive politics, excess beyond the domain of politics regulated by the state? How can we begin to better influence the state? Confronting and untangling that which troubles us becomes important—establishing what might be valid for all and not only for certain sections of society (Neocosmos, 2017). This opens up new possibilities for counter-resistance.

In education, it was the people who overthrew the apartheid state but then in the agreed settlement, we began again to look to the state. In the evolution of the Outcomes-Based Education curricula, and then the move to Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements, what may be argued is that such ideas continue to be insidiously colonial (Subreenduth, 2013). This argument is based upon the origins of these ideas because they were strongly influenced by practices from the Global North. More than 25 years after these changes in education, we see that the majority are still disadvantaged in the system. However, there is promise, for example, in investigating Indigenous knowledge systems and how these could be foregrounded and better integrated into education (Seehawer et al., 2021). The latter authors call for comprehensive educational transformation, grounding teaching in local contexts and epistemologies. This is founded on excessive collective subjectivity that is valid for all and not just certain sections of society. Further possibilities might evolve from adopting approaches like Freire’s (2000) humanising pedagogy of education, which promotes engagement between the learner and the educator. This is firmly based on the understanding that learners are not objects who just sit there, to be bombarded and fed with knowledge, but come as contributors and knowers within the corridors of education.

In the broader education literature, there also seems to be silence on the developments after the Fallist movements within the higher education sector (Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020) in trying to transform education, especially teaching and learning. We could ask whether there has been any conscientisation of educators concerning the calls for decolonisation. Might there be pockets of eagerness from educators to pursue such ideas, or do we still have resistance and conflicts that still emanate from years and years of debates about transforming education? From the perspective of psychology, we are now talking about African psychology—what is African psychology and what is it the psychology of? (Nwoye, 2015,

2017). Perhaps similar questions can be asked of education, and whether basic education is heeding decolonisation imperatives, and working to dismantle oppressive structures.

Critical community psychology draws in part from Foucauldian analyses (along with other critical fields such as critical race theory, queer theory, feminism, and postcolonialism), taking a political stance by identifying where power lies and how it is exercised in ways that maintain privilege for minorities and discrimination against particular groups (Evans et al., 2017). It offers an opportunity to rethink and reconstruct systems of knowledge and practice from the perspective of the marginalised majority (Burton & Kagan, 2004) and thus move towards imagined transformed societies (Kagan et al., 2020). Evans et al. (2017) proposed that the critical community psychologist should be working alongside and in solidarity with those who have been most harmed by the social arrangements in the current context—to expose the aspects of the various systems that lead to the most harm for citizens and to pair together research and social action to agitate for equitable resource allocations (both socially and economically) to recognise and promote the voices of the oppressed. They stated: “Community research and action is about using our power as researchers to create new spaces of dialogue, debate, reflection, questioning, and empowerment alongside those most affected by social injustice” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 108). Promoting social justice is, therefore, a core value in the field (Kagan et al., 2020) through implementing strategies for change, such as furthering people’s critical consciousness, creating new forms of social relations or social settings, developing alliances and accompaniment, and advocacy and policy analysis (Kagan, 2015).

The aim of this discussion is not to deny the currency of the dominant discourses, but to propose options to complement these with contributions from an Africa(n)-centred critical community psychology perspective (Ratele et al., 2022). This work is prefatory to a larger project that will interrogate the role of a specific NGO in a space where recent educational successes point to the possibilities of counter-discourses in operation. These NGOs are centrally positioned in the development discourse and although they have been critiqued for maintaining the status quo (Matthews, 2017), collaborative partnerships between NGOs, as non-state actors, and state actors have a potential role to play in our context of complex socio-contextual challenges and poor educational outcomes.

Conclusion

The description of the prominent discourses in this paper forms the lens for the next stage of the work in process, that is, reviewing the NGO’s annual reports in the study period 2012 to 2022 through a grounded process. This was an interesting time for the organisation in terms of repositioning itself. Therefore, the work will continue by examining what sorts of discourses are being used to construct the discursive objects and subjects in that context. We hope to uncover what discourses are used to construct the organisation’s activity systems and members’ narratives and then, what subject positions are made available by the discourses circulating. Finally, we hope, in the broader national and international contexts, to discover

what the challenges and organisational possibilities are when working towards an emancipatory perspective on educational transformation.

We recognise that the discussion and conclusion sections of this paper raise many questions, but we hope that these are provocative enough to lead to debate and to identify counter-discourses. Drawing on our backgrounds in critical community psychology, we hope that this work will, in a modest way, advance a transformational social justice agenda that could have wider applications in South African school education to embrace the opportunities in the future, and lead to more fundamental systemic changes.

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