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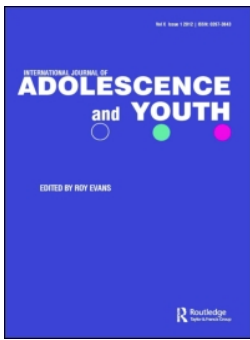
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Hope and future: youth identity shaping in post-apartheid South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study explores what South African township youth presented as significant elements in their identity shaping. The youth participants were invited to take photographs and engage in reflective writing to explain the significance of what they had photographed. The theoretical framework is post modern and post apartheid views of identity, where language is the medium for expressing experiences, feelings and identity. We used a methodological framework of participatory research, in which participants engage in the process of research actively by reflecting on the lives of their own or their communities. Thirteen previously disadvantaged Grade 11 students took photos every day for a week. After which the students selected their most significant photos to write their narratives. This paper focuses on the texts that the students wrote to explain their photographs. The students' photos and texts showed that democracy, family, present context and culture, have most influence on young people's lives.

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KEYWORDS

Identity; participatory approach; reflective writing; township youth; culture

Introduction

The starting point for this study is Grade 11 youths' identity shaping in a post-apartheid society in order to shed light on what youth perceive as important elements in their everyday lives for their identity shaping. Therefore this article focuses on youth living in the township suburbs of Port Elizabeth, South Africa, to gain critical insight into the impact of the apartheid history might have had on their identity construction. Furthermore South African youth of the democratic, post-apartheid, 1994, 'born-free' (Mattes, 2012) era also inhabit an in-between space where historical structures perpetuate an apartheid-like existence in segregated townships with concurrent possibilities of exploring new unregulated spaces beckons for those with economic means. Studying these in-between spaces allows us some understanding of how people shape identities (Bhabha, 1994).

Specifically the aim of this research is to explore a slice of youth perceptions around their own identities growing up in a peri-urban township in South Africa. Youth identity shaping (Gee, 2006) in a post-apartheid society in South Africa differs according to, for example age, place and situation as well as the former racial categories, and legislation of apartheid. It is also a continuous sense of development with a variety of possible identities.

The methods selected for the study, participatory photography and reflective writing, are based on the belief that youth are equipped to express themselves as individuals through their own vision,

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images and words (Howard, 2016; Kaplan, Miles, & Howes, 2011). What the youth select to tell or convey contributes to our understanding of their identity positions (Bhabha, 1994; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Writing reflections, in this case based on photos, can often involve building and exploring identity (Pelias, 2011) which becomes visible in how individuals write about themselves. Bhabha (1994) recognized the power of writing, especially by marginalised groups. He suggests that writing is a 'productive matrix which defines the social and makes it available as an objective of and for, action' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 23). So our focus on youth writing recognizes the emergent, partial nature of what they have chosen to share as nascent in a particular time and space.

The article is presented as follows. It begins by locating this study in the history of South Africa and the new Rainbow Nation. A conceptual framework on identity shaping is then presented, followed by the research methodology. The analyzed written text by the youth are thereafter in focus. The article concludes with a discussion.

Context of the post- apartheid Rainbow Nation

In this study, time and place needs to be understood from an historical perspective. South Africa has undergone a fundamental political shift in the last twenty years with the change to a democratically elected government in 1994. Prior to that, the apartheid ideology had privileged those classified as white, above any other racial groups. This played out in where people could live, go to school or university, access medical care as well as recreation facilities. This systematized poor education access, together with job reservation, resulted in restricted life opportunities for many people of 'colour'. The post-apartheid South Africa has also promised much but has not always been able to deliver, such that the material conditions of many people's lives has remained unchanged in the twenty or so years of freedom (Mattes, 2012). According to Mattes (2012) most poor and working class black people still live in townships but also out in the former Homelands or the rural areas. Mattes also found in a study about change in Post-apartheid South Africa that the generation 'Born Free', turning 16, 17 or 18 after 1996, is frustrated by corruption, unemployment and poverty. Furthermore they are less committed to identify with democracy compared to other Sub-Saharan countries (Mattes, 2012).

This section intends to move between the national, the local and the individual contexts. So on a national level after the end of apartheid and its social divisions, attempts were made to remedy this divisive heritage with Bishop Desmond Tutu and others, using the phrase 'the rainbow people of God' who came together in hope to build a new South Africa. The notion of the Rainbow Nation was taken up by the late President Mandela as a metaphor to recognize diversity within unity: that differences could be accommodated within the larger nation-building project (Joubert, Ebersohn, & Eloff, 2010). Notions of heritage have become foregrounded in South African discourse post 1994 as a means of celebrating the different cultures that make up the so-called Rainbow Nation. For example, symbols of South African unity were negotiated and promoted in an effort to heal previous divisions.

So while differences are valued and celebrated on a national level, there is also tension at a local level between different groupings, which are sometimes seen as tribal. So we recognize that there are tensions between these local and national positions and Bhabha (1994) warned that in post-colonial contexts, marginalized groups might feel overlooked or not adequately represented in the national discourse. In addition while people might draw on local cultural traditions, these are not fixed or pre-determined but instead are 'reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2) so that time and context can impact on the identity positions taken up. Therefore, youth in townships negotiate and explore these 'in-between' spaces of the received traditions and the calls to national identity. In other words their personal, social and cultural identities might be shaped and negotiated against a backdrop of collective national identity as a South African.

Identity and society

This article takes a post-modern, post apartheid view of identity. As such we see identity as shifting and responsive to perceived boundaries and positions (Bhabha, 1994) as somewhat malleable and in a state of flux as opposed to views of identity as something fixed and permanent (McKinney & Van Pletzen, 2004). In addition, identity positions are socially and historically situated in contexts of engagement and contestation (Hall, 2000). People invest in certain identities and value those positions and accept the contexts and discourses that encapsulate them (Gee, 2006; McKinney & Van Pletzen, 2004). Identity can therefore be seen as shifting and responsive to perceived boundaries and positions (Bhabha, 1994). This multifaceted understanding recognizes 'hybrid sites of cultural negotiation' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 178) which avoids binaries as well as a view of culture as a homogenizing unifying force. We recognize that youth are moving in 'in-between' spaces of culture, history, education and place.

Similarly Norton (1995, 1997), Wenger (1998) and Suárez-Orozco and Sattin (2007) argue that identities develop, change and are made visible in relation to others and communicated when we interact with the outside world. Individuals continuously create and develop their identities, linking important experiences for example, language, emotions, cultural and social experiences from different situations to a total experience, with many facets (Suárez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007). In examining identity development among formerly oppressed youth, two understandings of identity are suggested by Vandeyar (2008). One involves reclaiming the past in a form of 'strategic essentialism' and the second recognizes that 'Identity is always influenced by culture, history and power' (Vandeyar, 2008, p. 288). Investment in identity positions produces particular tensions within South African society where there is a seemingly progressive avoidance of racial naming in favour of a position within the Rainbow Nation. So, in attempts to avoid apartheid-style discourse, founded on racial categorization, people now eschew these discomfiting racial categories (Luck & Rudman, 2017) for fear of seeming racist, reactionary, or supportive of apartheid.

Researches on identity in South Africa show for example that youth make meaning of their identity through representations of experiences, events and objects (McLean & Thorne, 2003). Wild and Gaibie (2014) found, that there are links between grandparents' positive involvement and youth social behaviour, connecting grandparents to identity shaping. Thom and Coetzee (2004) emphasise the importance of a strong cultural identity and positive role models to develop identity which Madhavan and Crowell (2014) also found where parents were the guides. Norris, Roeser, Richter, and Lewin (2008) found that cultural artefacts as well as language and religion contribute to cultural identity shaping, with cultural differences in collectivistic identity versus individual identity. Nduna and Jewkes (2012) study showed that poverty, unemployment and aspects of the home environment like family violence, poor houses and being an orphan, were factors that created psychological distress among the youth and had an impact on identity shaping. Students at University viewed education as a leading factor for well-paid job, and education identity was not in conflict with cultural identity (Parkinson & Crouch, 2011). In McKinney and Van Pletzen (2004) study, University students tended to place apartheid in the past and not integrate it into their identity.

Method

We have done a qualitative ethnographic inspired and interpretative study to capture the participants' perspectives, of their own identity shaping (Altheide & Schneider, 1996b). As indicated earlier, in this study we have used participatory photography (Kaplan et al., 2011) and reflective writing (Pelias, 2011) to understand youth identity shaping. Through multimodal representations, like photos and text, the youth could choose to show how they perceive themselves through selecting different events and practices (cf. Howard, 2016). The study is of an explorative nature from the participants' point of view and our own attempts to understand these. The participants' writing is also partial and subjective and influenced by the context of the research. What also is of importance for the study is the fact that one of the researcher is European, both authors are over 50, and both would be classified as 'white' in the

previous dispensation but also in the post apartheid society, and this may have inhibited the youth from writing about 'white privilege'. Furthermore, the hegemonic power of the English language cannot be overlooked as use of the English language is seen as providing access to a future, where jobs and status are (cf. De Klerk, 2002; Nomlomo, 2006).

The written texts are the focus of the research gaze in which youth reflective writing was a means to engage with the photos in a dialogical discursive exchange (cf. Bhabha, 1994).

Setting

This study was conducted in a former 'disadvantaged' high school, grades 8–12, which had been established during the apartheid era for isiXhosa youth and these unequal educational structures persist into the present (Fleisch, 2008). The school is surrounded by established brick homes where families, with socio-economic means, have chosen to send their children elsewhere to perceived better schools, known as ex-Model C schools. This has meant that this school now serves a wider population as learners travel from poorer areas in neighbouring townships and from informal settings close to the school. Despite the majority of the learners having isiXhosa as a home language, English is the medium of instruction. The school was chosen as the researchers had been in contact with the school for another project (see Lundgren, Scheckle, & Zinn, 2015) and had knowledge of a poetry programme, run by a local isiXhosa poet, going on at the school which gave the researchers access to the school.

Participants

All students in grade 11 involved with the poetry intervention were invited to participate in the identity project. Out of 13 students, five boys and eight girls, bilingual in isiXhosa and English, wanted to participate. They were included as research partners in line with our participatory approach. All of them came from working class, were poorly resourced and travelled by bus from surrounding townships almost every day. They selected to write their reflective writing in English though they had the choice to use their mother tongue, isiXhosa, English or translanguaging (cf. Garcia & Wei, 2014). But the hegemonic power of the English language cannot be overlooked (cf. De Klerk, 2002; Nomlomo, 2006).

Data collection

The study was initiated with a meeting with the principal at the school followed by an introductory meeting with the teacher and the youth, where we stated the importance of youths' lives and realities being presented and visualized through the eyes and lenses of the youth themselves.

No questions were formulated for the youth which could lead, or guide the youth to perceive any special interests or intentions of the study except for the aim, namely to understand how the apartheid era impacted on the identity of the born free youth. The youth had the agency to collect and select data that had an impact on the shaping of their identities.

The group of youth, their teacher, an interpreter and the researcher met after school for two hours for six days. The youth were provided with cameras and briefly guided on how to use them. They were asked to capture in photos, moments of their lived experiences that had had an impact on their identity shaping. From the initial photos, two or three photos were selected. These photos then became the focus of the reflective writing. To support this process they were also guided in reflective writing to express events illustrated by photos. Participants' writing went through a process of drafting and revising using the photos as prompts. At the two last meetings the youth finalized their writing and shared their motivations about what they thought was most important in their identity shaping.

Ethics

The learners who chose to volunteer and their parents of, were informed about the study including its aim. Students (if over 18) or parents signed the requisite consent forms which indicated their willingness and awareness of their rights to anonymity and their right to withdraw. Data from the study has been treated as confidential and students' dignity has been protected (cf. Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC], 2018). According to ethics we have given the participants pseudonyms which serves to ensure anonymity while at the same time personalising them and their contribution.

Analysis

Consistent with the ethnographic approach a content data driven analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 1996a) through reading the youths' written texts in conjunction with the photos was used to communicate meaning from the texts: this involves a movement between concepts, coding and interpretation by the researchers (cf. Altheide & Schneider, 1996a). Firstly, we interpreted what was in the photos to find themes. Secondly, the researchers read the texts independently to identify common themes in the texts around youth identity shaping. We were looking for everything guided by the themes from the photos, like situations, settings, meanings and nuances in the texts. This was done by highlighting explicit written concepts and categories around youth identity in each participant's text. We took a collaborative approach (Smagorinsky, 2008), discussing our understandings together and negotiating possible categories. Thereafter we examined what was common across texts and what was exclusive to certain texts.

Finally from multiple reflexive readings, consensus was reached around the following broad categories namely; *present contexts*, *culture*, *family* and *hope for the future*. Present context included references to the environment, democracy and inequality, culture included references to isiXhosa culture both in the past and in the present, family is about grandparents, absence of parents and loving parents. The last category included hope, better lives, heroes and dreams.

Independent multiple readings without predetermined categories or themes followed by collaborative discussion of the emergent categories (Smagorinsky, 2008), contributes to the validity and trustworthiness of the analysis

Presentation of data

The data discussed here emerged in response to the query about how the apartheid era impacted on their identity shaping in the post-apartheid years after 1994, when South Africa became the Rainbow nation. From data we see how youth in townships negotiated and explored 'inbetween' spaces of the received traditions and the calls to national identity to shape their own individual identity. These results focus on what the participants chose to write about in relation to their photos from which various categories, mentioned above, emerged. As a caveat, we do not see these categories, *present contexts*, *culture*, *family* and *hope for the future*, as definitive categories and indicators of categories for identity shaping, but as a means to organize our understanding of their writing. We recognize that these overlap and are intertwined in our youths' lives, which are not lived in such clear-cut categories and that these impact on each other. Many of the youths' texts also moved from acknowledging their backgrounds and families and segueing to their hopes. We also recognize that youth identity positions change and the same cohort might respond quite differently to the prompt today. So we are not attempting to fix positions but to rather understand their perceptions at the time of the study.

Present context as an identity indicator

Some of the youth in this study expressed a consciousness of inequality despite the democratic process having started in 1994. The youth refer to the informal houses, represented in photos and in writing,

and note that poverty is linked to unemployment. 'People live in shacks because of unemployment, because they don't have money to buy houses for them to stay (in)' (Kholisa). The same theme emerges in a comment on the village by Simpihwe, 'Our village are poor people they live in shelter, they do not have water and electricity and toilet'.

Kholisa attempts to distance herself from the poor environment by using the pronoun /they/. Later in the text the Kholisa talks about /we/ 'After 20 years of democracy we still have a long way to go in dealing with racial inequality and improving the lives of black people'. This recognition of the unequal services to surrounding communities was a rebuke about the lack of development and the continued influence of apartheid in the socio-economic conditions in which people lived 'These poor areas are the legacy of Apartheid'. Simpihwe writes about 'our village' identifying with the people he is writing about but also distance himself with /they/. When the youth write about democracy after 1994, when the first election was held, they ask questions wondering for whom a democratic society was established. 'Was this the democracy we wished and hoped for? Was it meant for us?' (Anele) and 'These poor areas are the legacy of Apartheid ... but why are shacks still standing?' (Kholisa). Both students resort to rhetorical devices of asking questions rather than attributing blame and do not expect an answer. What could be read in the youths' text is a disappointment that though democracy has meant all people can vote, the material conditions of many of their lives remains unchanged. The inequality is significant and Kholisa reflects on poverty and employment while referring to life 'people lives in shacks because of unemployment'. This inequality is clearly related to black housing and the preponderance of informal settlements. Kholisa gives voice through language, using repetitions like 'After 20 years of democracy' and Anele goes back to the spirit of ubuntu 'this freedom of expression has turned us into impracticable daughters and sons of the soil, lacking the spirit of UBUNTU, humanity in which we are know of'. They have been waiting for better lives and to get humanity back, where ubuntu is a part of the culture and their identity.

Culture as an identity indicator

One aspect of identity that emerged was being a part of collective cultural group with certain values, traditions, language and clothes. The collective is expressed in photos with traditional items, dances and habits. In writing, the collective is expressed by Zuko who mentions 'It takes a village to raise a child' thus recognizing the value of the community contribution and the sense of Ubuntu. The youth also highlight important traditions that contribute to shaping the individual's identity in the choice of photos which illustrate how young boys become men through the initiation process where they are also circumcised. Zuko writes 'A man can only be a man if he endures 3 weeks in the bush with no mother to cry on, no female around but now the health department has stolen our youth, letting them being touch by delicate hands in their private place'. The youth has a strong cultural affiliation not only to traditions and culture but also to language 'the heritage of my mother, the precious gift called language' (Zuko) which contributes to identity-shaping. The heading of the writing reflection is 'I am a proud Xhosa man' which draws on two photographs from an initiation ceremony, a girl traditionally dressed for dancing, a Xhosa symbol and one picture of the environment. The photos position Zuko as having a strong cultural identification which is being threatened. He recognizes this relentless cultural erosion while invoking Xhosa terms to reclaim it, with phrases like 'we have lost our culture,' to carry the name "Indoda" to the bush' and 'Isikhaka' and 'Isibheshu'. Maybe Zuko's focus on the past is a means of keeping his culture alive but might also suggest the limited possibilities for his culture to move, inviolate, into the twenty-first century.

While Zukos's writing harks back to the traditions that had benefitted men, it is, to some extent stuck in the past. Chantel gives specific behavioural advice to girls. In the process she distances herself from identifying with 'a lot of people, do not take care of themselves. Most of the younger ladies do as their pleased'. Chantel's two photographs show a beautiful yellow flower on one and pink flowers on the other. When she is writing she uses a metaphor 'When we pass by beautiful flowers we should wish to be more like those roses' suggesting the importance of physical beauty and remaining untouched.

Within the society there have been role-models for the teenagers but those are gone. Though there is a referring back to the importance of the community and collective perception and understanding of the value of education 'Community people would like to see you as a well educated person' (Chantel). The representation positioned Chantel as hopeful and optimistic for the future. Therefore individuals shaping of an identity can be seen to be a product of their culture and also of personal growth within a society which constantly develops and evolves.

Family as an identity indicator

Reflections on family were often linked to hopes for the future in youths' writing. As youth reflected on their heritage, four specifically noted how their parents, mothers and grannies had contributed to their sense of self as young people. Particular tribute was paid to the perseverance and strength of grannies as Babalwa writes 'when I look into your eyes, granny, I see the beauty of perseverance'. She recognizes that her granny faced 'mountains of struggle' in raising her grandchildren, but 'granny, you told us to hold on' so that now they will 'smile again and sing a song of victory'. She values the sacrifices made by her granny with 'oh hail unto you warrior' as her granny's resilience and doggedness in the face of difficulties is acknowledged. This granny had choices and took over the care of the grandchildren in the absence of parents. No explanation is provided as to the parents' wellbeing or whereabouts but the granny's presence and goodness seem to compensate for the parents' absence. Siseko, in recognizing the role played by his granny, comments on his own status as a 'talented orphan' for whom granny 'stood up as a parent'. Similarly he recognizes the challenges faced by his granny when 'poverty takes part' and they were reduced to 'eating a white pap and a glass of water. Sometimes there is nothing to eat at all'. Despite the extreme poverty and insecurity, the youth lived in hope as his granny had a vision of seeing him grow up and looking after the gran. This is reflected in the echoing of the granny's phrase 'one day is one day': a reminder for hope. This phrase has also been used in advertising the South African lottery or lotto, which ends its radio advertisements in various African languages with the tag line 'Lotto: One day is one day'. Although Zikhona writes about the 'most wonderful parents that I could ever wish for' and spends some time discussing their admirable qualities, she also says 'I must not be ashamed about them and they wont feel ashamed about me'. No reason is given for the possible shame for either party and after that caveat, Zikhona only has good things to say about her parents and their role in her life.

Hope for the future as an identity indicator

In writing about trusting their family members, Babalwa and Siseko also suggest that this has given them hope 'that the sun will shine again' and 'that I'm going somewhere'. While Anele questions achievements of democracy that 'we see police officers lacking conscious killing people for marching against poor sanitation', he ends with 'we still believe and motivate ourselves as the leaders of tomorrow'. He also invokes Madiba's words 'I have fought against white domination, I have fought against black domination' as a guide for future action and the goal of a free democratic society but acknowledges that we are still waiting for 'better lives, equality harmony and peace in our land'. In contrast Lelethu tells a story from her grandmother about triumphing over life's adversities, where though 'her dreams were dispatched, her visions were nightmares, but she still believed in the world of success although everything seemed to be up-side down'.

Appreciating family overlaps with a positive outlook and hope for a better future in much of the writing. For example, Babalwa specifically attributes her own strength to her granny's perseverance in the face of 'Mountains of struggle'. It would seem that they have endured together and now 'the sun will shine' and they can 'sing a song of victory'. Her granny's perseverance and sacrifice has given her hope for the future. Similarly Siseko recognizes how his granny 'stood up as a parent' and raised a talented orphan despite the poverty and hungry days. His granny's belief in the future has kept him going and now he is proud to recognize that he has come from poverty but this will not limit his future prospects as he ends with 'Im come from nowhere but I'm going somewhere'.

Viva chose a photo of the Red Location Museum in New Brighton - a museum with photographs of important people in the struggle for democracy and equality. The writing focuses on the 'legends' who fought for freedom and democracy as Tata Madiba, Steve Biko and Chris Hani and uses a repetitive style within three stanzas which create a sense of distance between individual and the past. Instead there is a sense of a shared collective identity informed by a sense of the importance of history. It is also a hopeful reminder of what has been left behind with the 'bad days',

Gone are the days of slavery

" " " " " apartheid

" " " " " group areas act

The bad days are gone

Discussion

To address the aim, which was to explore a slice of youth perceptions around their own identities growing up in a peri-urban township in South Africa, the study has gained critical insight into the impact of apartheid history on this group of born-free youth and their lived experiences. For the understanding of their own history it is important for the youth to share their perceptions. Though they were born in a Rainbow Nation era in free democratic South Africa, some apartheid structures have continued as evident in the study. Although these youth do not have experience of living under apartheid legislation, they are aware of persistent inequalities in their lived experiences though the removal of legislation seems to have opened up some possibilities for the future. Working together with the participants was a way of recognizing the importance of hearing the voice and experiences of the marginalized and reflects Bhabha's (1994) concerns that the marginalized be heard. This was an attempt to hear those voices and understand their experiences.

The participants' sense of place and location were reinforced through their photos and writings. The youths' images depicted shacks, toilets, nature, flowers and family members. Through the photos and the writing it was obvious that the past, the present and the future is intertwined. The youth positioned themselves as youth with hope for the future though they felt marginalized, in relation to the democratic process, education and a better environment for all. To some extent responsibility for their present condition has been attributed to the government as the youth craft their identities in the township settlements.

Through the presentation of the photos and written texts in the classroom and after the study, the youth had the space and agency to reconstruct their identities orally and verbally using the English language. South African youth are summoned to be part of the nation state and have a South African identity while at the same time wanting to maintain their local links and affiliations, as Zuko claimed in his 'proud Xhosa male' position. For these young people, identities involve work and investment in various 'available social and cultural resources' (Gee, 2006, p. 166) where in an ever-changing world young people have to adopt new identities and drop others. Gee (2006) reminds us that this self-fashioning and shape-shifting is not a new development, having started in earlier, but has been accelerated with the demands of our fast-changing modern world. For many of Gee's youth and for those in our study, identity work involved looking forward and preparing for the future in different ways as well as considering which of their experiences had shaped their sense of self. The fact that, save one, participants did not mention race or explore how this construct may have contributed to their sense of self was noticeable in a country infamous for its racial categorizations and concomitant social structuring.

As expected with an understanding of identity as fluid and hybrid, (cf. Suárez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007), there seem to be some tensions between seemingly challenging identity positions. These possible positions can be seen as a means to recognize primary and secondary discourses. In relation to *identity* at a national level, the big 'I' position could be seen as a South African rainbow nation youth which comprises many facets, such as immediate socio-economic environment, families, culture and education

opportunities, amongst others. At a local level, the little 'i' position recognizes the day to day situatedness of their environmental context. An intra or interpersonal dialogue can allow the youth to understand their own lives within the historical context in which their current lives unfold. So the backdrop of the rainbow nation invokes a common or national identity, or big 'I', for South African youth going forward twenty years into the democratic era. These national big 'I' positions suggest a more unified rainbow nation understanding of what it is to live in the multilingual, multi-hued, modern nation state. This is a somewhat aspirational position that belies the difficulties inherent in the lived experiences of the individual participants in this study. Although together the youth are part of this national identity position or big 'I', the little 'i's at the local level of their everyday lives, are more immediate. In the photos and the reflective writing the youth recognize their families' challenges in coping with poverty, informal shack housing and prevalent unemployment. The national 'I' seems somewhat removed from their lives.

To conclude, the youth have described a national identity 'I' and a local individual or small 'i' identity. During the study the youth were able to 'read' the past through their photos to make meaning and create hope in the future. The use of reflective writing around their photographs opened 'in between spaces' to explore their present social situation. Furthermore the participating youth were ending their secondary studies so could be seen to be in a period of transition, between among others, secondary and tertiary studies or between being a school pupil and being an adult while still coping with the negotiated identity pulls to being an obedient grandchild, being an educated young person, being an informed and liberated female or being a proud Xhosa male (cf. Bhabha, 1994).

This interesting finding deserves further attention and research using participatory methods which may allow for the use of other media to explore a sense of self over a longer time period. In fact the absence of comments of colour was quite significant considering the discourse in the media and some political rhetoric specifically invokes this. However, Vandeyar (2008) warns that while avoidance of references to racial categories might be seen as challenging the apartheid era constructs and thus be understood as progress towards a united nation, using these terms might also be less acceptable.

Reflections

The small-scale nature of this research with few participants allowed for deep engagement around the photos taken as well as support throughout the writing process which together produced rich data. In addition the separative multiple readings of the texts with independent coding contributes to the trustworthiness of the study. Finally the carefully structured process of the intervention contributes to the credibility and trustworthiness of his study.

Despite interesting findings this study has limitations. The youth are not representative of all youth in grade 11 in South Africa and the number of participants is small. Even so the importance of hopeful thinking should be recognized among the youth. We also recognize that issues of colour or race may be somewhat muted as both authors would be classified as white in the previous dispensation and this may have inhibited youth from commenting explicitly on 'white privilege'. Another fact to be aware of is how our presence contributed to the youths' perception of their identity shaping as manifested in what they chose to share and write about.

While the youths' language competence was not our focus the choice to write in English cannot be overlooked. It is possible that the choice of language accommodated the researchers' limited knowledge of isiXhosa and that discussions around their photos was conducted in English. As the research originated in a school context, the fact that schooling and assessment in English is a normalized practice might have carried over into out-of-school contexts as the 'legitimate' medium. Norton (1995) suggests that in choosing English, second language youth are taking up positions of power as they use the language as a means of communication in order to become more skilled. This opportunity to participate could be seen as such an opportunity to engage and communicate without the burden of assessment. Nevertheless the hegemonic power of the English language cannot be overlooked as use of the English language is seen as providing access to a future, where jobs and status are (cf. De Klerk, 2002; Nomlomo, 2006).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Berit Lundgren is an associate professor in Educational work. The author's research fields are identity shaping, critical literacy, literacy and multilingualism.

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