

How post-apartheid children express their identity as citizens

Joubert I, Ebersohn, L, Eloff, I

Children in South Africa are educated to identify with democratic values and democracy in post-apartheid society. As yet, we have no empirical evidence on their views on and identification with the new South African democracy. When given an opportunity to express their life experiences, the nine-year-old child citizens of this case study revealed their democratic identity on various levels. These nine-year-old children expressed a weak identification with democracy on the local level but a strong identification with democracy on the national level. We argue that the weak identification on the local level may influence the children's identification with democracy negatively. It is the key finding of this study that a lack of democratic identification may endanger the sustainability of the South African democracy into the future.

Key words: citizenship education South Africa, young children, democratic identity, democratic values, democracy at risk

The purpose of this article is to explore expressions of democratic identity among nine-year-old child citizens in order to ascertain what likely effects this might have on sustaining democracy in the new South Africa. The rationale for our thesis is that child citizens in South Africa are being educated in school to identify with the values of democracy and to embrace a new patriotism. Yet, their voices in the civic, political or governmental affairs of a nation are seldom heard in social research or in public policy (Holden and Clough, 2000; Hine, 2004; Smith, 2005). Since perceptions of identification

are generally difficult to identify, we decided to examine children's life experiences of the post-apartheid democratic order (in and beyond the classroom) to inform us on their expressed notions of democratic identity (Howard and Gill, 2000: 357).

The political context of South Africa is sketched briefly to foreground the shift from apartheid to democracy and to contextualise citizenship education in post-apartheid South Africa. In 1994 South Africa held its first democratic national elections. In the process all South Africans became citizens with the same, constitutionally protected rights. Prior to 1994 the undemocratic and authoritarian apartheid system categorized the population into four main racial groups, namely white, black or African, Indian or Asiatic, and coloured. The black racial grouping in turn was subdivided in ethnic groups like the Zulu, Xhosa and Venda. Apartheid, mainly supported by the white population, became the official racial ideology and practice in South Africa and divided the society along racial and ethnic lines. The apartheid regime privileged the white racial group over the others in terms of education, job creation, housing and other human rights. Land reform acts divided the different population groups according to geographical areas. Urban black, Indian and coloured people were forced to live on the outskirts of cities in the so-called townships while white people generally lived in their own suburbs in the cities. South Africa became the most racially oppressive nation in Africa and arguably, in the world (Kymlicka, 2004: 157).

The African National Congress (ANC), although banned by the apartheid government, led opposition to the apartheid regime. In 1990 the ANC was unbanned and in 1994 people of all races could participate in the first democratic elections in the history of South Africa. The ANC became the leading political party and formed the new

government. Under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, the first democratically-elected president of South Africa, different racial and cultural groups could build a joint democratic culture as he embraced the idea of unity amongst all racial groups. The idea of the rainbow nation was born, an idea that was captured in the new coat of arms and the national anthem.

Contrary to the notion of unity, Mangcu (2008) states that racial insider and outsider dynamics evolved under the second president, Thabo Mbeki, who succeeded Mandela in 1999. Mangcu (2008) and other political commentators like Van der Westhuizen (2008) state that Mbeki's government deployed race to show indifference to the suffering of people with HIV/AIDS, or the people of Zimbabwe, or the victims of crime, or to silence those who opposed its policies. However, Chipkin and Ngqulunga (2008: 13) state that an overwhelming sense of national cohesion has recently grown among South Africans regardless of social group and race.

South Africa is establishing a democratic society in all areas, including education, but progress is not linear or uncomplicated. One problem that bedevils the development of democratic citizenship is that '...government blatantly contradicts the lessons taught at school' (Moodley and Adam, 2004: 172). Well-intentioned educational initiatives like the Values Project (Department of Education, 2002b) have been undermined by government's lack of delivery in areas such as employment, safety, housing and other preconditions of a normal life (Jansen in Moodley and Adam, 2004). Essential democratic values like accountability, free debate, non-racism and non-sexism are often disregarded by political leaders. This public curriculum contrasts with the democratic values as embedded in the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

Against this background the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2002a: 4-6) envisages a new kind of South African citizen. The curriculum draws its founding principles from the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. As stated in the Constitution, the national government aims to protect these rights so that citizens (including children) should lead productive and self-fulfilled lives in a country free of violence, discrimination and prejudice (Republic of South Africa, 1996: 6-18). The national curriculum aims to educate this new kind of citizen as a citizen who will identify with the values of democracy (Department of Education, 2001).

These values are democracy, social justice and equity, equality, *ubuntu* (human dignity), an open society, accountability (responsibility), the rule of law, respect and reconciliation (Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy in Ministry of Education, 2001: 6-7). The Manifesto (Ministry of Education, 2001: 6-7) adds to the expectations set by the national curriculum by stating that young South Africans have to become effective, productive and responsible citizens with the ability to act in the interests of society and democracy.

Coping with the social and political realities of a nation-state and living the core values on which just and peaceful democratic societies are built, are possibly unproblematic components of citizenship (De Melendez, Beck and Fletcher, 2000; Savage and Armstrong, 2004). Conversely, the implementation of citizenship can be more challenging. Theorizing about the future citizen, especially the young child, is a largely unexplored aspect of citizenship. Apart from pure theory and practice, children themselves have a voice concerning their citizenship and democratic identity, a voice people need to note.

Background to the study

A democratic nation-state requires the commitment of all its citizens to sustain the democratic way of life. The state also needs citizens who understand the costs of the potential loss of democracy (Wilde, 2005). Citizenship education and notions of the 'ideal' or 'good' citizen have been understood and practiced in different ways over the centuries, particularly in more recent decades.

John Dewey (in Covalleskie, 1994) stated over half a century ago '...there is no social life that can allow for greater human development than democracy'. This view is supported by the liberal vision of the member states of the Council of Europe that foresees societies that are '...free, tolerant and just' and that can only be established on the basis of democracy (Osler and Starkey, 2005: 25). According to Starkey (2005: 24), the culture of democracy and identification with the principles and values of democracy can be achieved through the education of the citizens of the democratic nation-state. Consequently, when referring to a democratic nation-state, the concepts of the citizen, citizenship, democracy, democratic identity and citizenship education are interconnected (Schweisfurth, Davies and Harber, 2002).

According to Osler (in Osler and Starkey, 2005), democracies have recently been under threat. Vandenberg (2000: 3) regards the concepts of democracy, democratic identity and citizenship as essentially controversial and put 'contestedness' at the core of these concepts as a post-liberal argument. In many post industrial nation-states like South Africa, populations have changed. This is mostly due to large-scale in-migration from Asia, Africa and Latin America (Banks, 2004). Banks (2004) proposes that such

populations have to learn to live democratically in the multi-ethnic society and to accept diversity without fear or animosity. The problem of accommodating the needs of both majority and minority segments of the democratic multi-ethnic society looms as a major challenge. James (in Ministry of Education, 2001) states that a loss of democratic identification may affect the democratic society as a whole. This statement is particularly relevant for the 'new' South African democracy (Ministry of Education, 2001) with its diverse population.

1994 brought South Africans together in the hope for a common destiny. The establishment of the new and negotiated democracy was looked upon nationally and internationally as an example of 'the global benchmark for dialogue, for crafting a condition of freedom and equality from a conflict that seemed fatally irreconcilable' (Asmal in Ministry of Education, 2001:9). Since then, much has happened in all spheres of the diverse South African society.

Despite the achievements of the South African democracy, the country is a 'still fragile civil society' (Moodley and Adam, 2004). The high levels of violence, the lack of tolerance, and the limited mutual respect and understanding of different groups for each other, are still part of daily life (Moodley and Adam, 2004; Jansen, 2006). In addition, there is evidence of unequal provision of services to and protection of its citizens, including the children. After fifteen years of democracy South Africans are beginning to reassess the sustainability and security of the South African democracy.

Conceptual platforms of the study

Democratic identity and citizenship education are the conceptual platforms of this study and we describe the relevance of each in the following section.

- **Democratic identity**

We employed Banks' theory (2004: 8) on democratic identity which he relates to the different identities of a citizen. He states that citizenship in a diverse nation-state is about the complexity, interactivity, and contextuality of the cultural, national and global identification of the individual. According to Banks (2004: 8-9), the child is able to identify with their race, ethnic and community cultures as a child citizen. The community culture includes families, languages, community beliefs and behaviors. This identification is referred to as a cultural identity.

Banks (2004: 7-9) states that many nation-states in the past alienated their children from their home and community cultures. These nation-states failed to recognize that identification with their culture in terms of race, ethnicity and language was an essential part of the self-determination of children. On the other hand, unreflective cultural attachments may prevent the development of a cohesive nation with clearly defined national goals and policies.

Child citizens are in addition able to identify with democracy and citizenship and this identification is referred to as a national identity (Banks, 2004: 8). Banks (2004) refers to scholars such as Kymlicka (2004) and Ong (2004) who affirm that citizens within democratic and diverse nation-states have to identify with the broad ideals of the nation-state. These ideals are justice and equality; and citizens have to be committed to the

maintenance of these ideals by acting against practices that violate these ideals such as social, racial, cultural, and economic inequalities.

Guttmann (2002) argues for an allegiance to justice and not identification to any human community. Richardson (2005) relates identity to the concepts of equality and diversity. Ladson-Billings (2004: 7) adds to the identity debate by arguing that children from diverse cultural, racial, and ethnic groups have to understand their own cultural identities to function in cultural communities other than their own. To be functional in a democratic society implies that all citizens must work for the betterment of the whole society, and not just for the rights of their own racial, social or cultural group (Gonçalves e Silva, 2004: 207). In the South African context there is a discourse that identity has to be problematized rather than simply taking on board the divisive apartheid terms of race and ethnicity, and of the inevitable divisions of *black* and *white*, and of *them* and *us*.

- **Citizenship education**

Banks (2004) states that a democratic identity can be nurtured in a balanced way, through citizenship education. Citizenship education as described by Alexander (2002) is also called civic education (Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood, 2002) and in the context of diverse democratic nation-states, referred to as education for democratic citizenship, which includes human rights education (Osler and Starkey, 2005). Human rights education places particular emphasis on the rights of women and children (Gomes and Hofisso, 2003: 56).

Current debates on citizenship education are focused on the tensions between diversity (the need of the individual or ethnic group) and the education of democratic ideals (the need of the nation-state). Kymlicka (2004: xiv) agrees that any desirable form

of education has to have two strands: a 'recognition of diversity' dimension that acknowledges the positive contribution of each individual or group's identity, language and culture; and a 'social equality' dimension, focusing on equal opportunities, in part by acknowledging and rectifying historic injustices.

Kymlicka (2004) expresses the concern that the politics of recognizing diversity may erode the politics of the redistribution of economic welfare to minority groups. Ong (2004: 53) elaborates on Kymlicka's contribution and states that the assimilationist notions of citizenship education are challenged by the demands of diversity. The demands for cultural acceptance and the affirmative action mechanisms to increase demographic diversity in major institutions and all areas of public life have shifted the focus of citizenship from political practice based on shared civic rights and responsibilities to a protection of cultural difference in many nation-states like South Africa. This approach of protecting cultural differences is strengthened by new waves of immigrants coming into countries such as South Africa. Banks (2004: 3) argues for a balance between unity and diversity. Only in this way can marginalized, ethnic, cultural, and language groups acquire commitments to the overarching values of the democratic nation-state.

Research design and methodology

The following description is a methodological account of the research process (Seale, 1999). The data presented in this article are derived from a larger research project undertaken in the province of Gauteng in South Africa where we employed an

instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) of the nine-year-old children of one school. Although the generalization of results derived from an instrumental case study was an anticipated research constraint (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 439), we provided a rich description of the case for applicability of findings to other known cases (Seale, 1999).

We chose nine-year-old children of an inner-city school in the school district of Tshwane South in the city of Pretoria. The school is a public institution situated in a central-city neighbourhood called Sunnyside. This area consists mostly of apartment buildings where the majority of the school's children live. The neighbourhood was previously largely occupied by whites but since 1994 it reflects the population of the residents of any mid-city area in South Africa, which is mostly black. Sunnyside became even more diverse after 1994 with an influx of families from Africa and other parts of the globe, e.g. Mozambique, Rwanda, Zambia, and China.

Sunnyside is known for its crime and unemployment, and there are many homeless children living on the streets. In a centenary booklet on the school the principal of the school wrote the following about the community:

‘The community we serve can be seen in one of two different ways:

- The sinister, dark, dirty and negative side of crime, drugs and lawlessness; or
- The vibrant, throbbing society where true friends are made and where our school is charged to produce people who will be inspired to become leaders of tomorrow.’

As a result of the diverse neighbourhood the school is multi-racial. The children have different home languages but the school’s language of instruction is English. In view of the fact that it is a public school the national curriculum is employed with its

vision of: 'A prosperous, truly united, democratic and internationally competitive country with literate, creative and critical citizens leading productive, self-fulfilled lives in a country free of violence, discrimination and prejudice' (Department of Education, 2002a).

We focused on the nine-year-old age group of the school as they were the mature group among the very young children. These children were in grade 3, which was the last year of the first phase of school (Foundation Phase). The 142 children were divided into four classes, each class with its own teacher. Another reason for choosing this age group was that these children were born in the first decade of the young South African democracy. They were regarded as a special group of children and referred to as *Mandela's Children* (Barbarin and Richter, 2001).

Although diversity and race are still significant in modern South Africa, we did not specifically identify the racial or language groupings of the children. One reason was our intention to let them reflect openly on their life experiences of democratic South Africa in order for pertinent issues to emerge from their expressions. Informed by the literature, we understood that the most likely issues that would possibly emerge were expressions about their race, gender, social status and families. Another reason was that they had been educated about citizenship through the new national curriculum, which emphasizes the values of democracy such as social justice, equity and non-racialism. Therefore, we assumed that their expressions as child citizens of the new democratic order could reveal valuable insight of their views about democracy, democratic values and their democratic identity.

As interpretivists we claim an approach to inquiry that was qualitative and

subjective in nature. We assumed that children's subjective experiences and understandings were real and should be taken seriously; that one can '...make sense of' them by interacting with them and listening to their voices' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: 3; Terre Blanche and Durrheim, 1999: 123; Evans, 2004: 15). We documented the voices of children on complex relationships and notions at the young age of nine years – a group, according to Cohen (2005: 221), regarded by most adults as a minority and insignificant group in civil society. Our underlying assumption was that these young children were nevertheless competent social actors who could report on their experiences as child citizens and who through their engagement in discussions could reveal their democratic identity.

We employed interviews as the primary mode for data collection in the form of focused interviews (Adendorff, 2004). In both the group interviews (whole class) and the focus group interviews (small group) we used participatory instruments or task-based activities which included written activities. Written activities were drawings, a letter to Nelson Mandela and the completion of a sentence when doing a role-play activity, namely *If I were the president...* These instruments were designed to be child-centered to facilitate self-expression, which empowered them as participants (Mouton, 2001: 99; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 305). The constructivist grounded theory analysis as described by Charmaz (2000) enabled us to comprehend the experiences of the children and enabled us to come to some understanding of their democratic identities.

We employed strategies to further enhance scholarly rigour. The different task-based activities enhanced a rich description of the children's dialogue and their expressions. In addition, we also made constant comparisons of findings including

member checking (Seale, 1999). In several cases we verified children's self-reporting by talking to them individually and noting their comments on their artifacts, for example their drawings. The anecdotes presented in this paper reflect the personal expressions of the children.

The research design and methodology as described above assisted us in researching our main research question: How do children perceive their democratic identity in post-apartheid South Africa? In the next section we discuss our findings.

Findings

The children's perceptions of themselves as democratic citizens were largely shaped by their life experiences. The nine-year-old children expressed their identity and status as citizens in the democratic dispensation of South Africa. Their understandings of their democratic identity emerged explicitly and implicitly on two distinct levels:

- Children's identification with the cultural community
- Children's identification with the democratic dispensation of South Africa

We explored the children's expressions of their democratic identity against the conceptual platforms described earlier.

The nine-year-old children expressed their cultural identity in terms of their perceived citizenship. They identified themselves as child citizens, a distinctive group of citizens with unique qualities, living as citizens in democratic South Africa. As child citizens they required that they be respected and listened to. When participating in the activity on *Children's rights and responsibilities* Participant 47 (P47) of Class 4 wrote: 'We [the

children] have the right to be heard.’ In addition, these child citizens wished to be seen as active role players in the democratic dispensation. During a focus group interview on a letter to Madiba, the children of Class 3 expressed the following:

‘Children [can] make South Africa a better place by stopping robbers, stop to killing animals and plants, love each other and love our country.’ (P5)

‘I belief that we as the youth can make a difference ...by asking for no adult television, by stopping poverty, by creating better and more jobs for all South Africans.’ (P1)

Many children saw themselves as morally and socially responsible citizens. When participating in the role play instrument *If I were the president...* Participant 1 of Class 4 wrote:

‘When I become the president I want to be kind, brave, help people who lives in the street, who are sick. I want to stop violence crime and all the bad things that is happening today in South Africa. ... I want to be a president which is a good one. May all the people support me. And to be a honest president.’

In the context of the diverse South African society, the children expressed their racial attachment only in relation to their identification with their family. When responding to the question *What I like and don't like about South Africa*, a child wrote: ‘I like my Pedi culture’ (P19 – Class 1); another child made a drawing of herself and her mother in Indian attire (P36 – Class 1). In terms of other cultural attachments like language and gender the children raised no significant views.

The expressions of the children about living in the local community not only dealt with their relationship(s) with members of the local community but also included experiences about the services offered in the local community. In a democracy, government provides services to citizens on all levels (national as well as local or district). The provision of services on local level has to be based on democratic values and principles adapted for the particular local circumstances. Democratic values refer to values such as equity, social justice, an open society and respect. Democratic principles include citizens making choices through participation, debate and discussion on the one hand and local government acting accountably to citizens about their governing decisions (Ministry of Education, 2001: 5; Rushforth, 2004: 30-31). Therefore, the concepts of communication and participation are related to democracy on local level. Expressions of the nine-year-old children about the services offered to them in their neighbourhood emerged from the data as expressed by Participant 7 of Class 3 who wrote ‘We [children] need services to build the country’ when participating in the activity *Slogans for posters meant for peers*.

Data from the instrument *What I like and don't like about South Africa*, completed by participants of Class 1, revealed their positive attitudes about different services in their immediate life world:

‘I like the hospital’ (P4, P39)

‘I like the tap in our flat’ (P13)

‘I like going to the park’ (P26)

‘I like my school’ (P23, P48, P47, P49)

The expressions of the participants of this case study revealed their gratitude for services, which may indicate an understanding of the various systems of government and an awareness of the citizen’s critical as well as appreciative role towards government. They seemed to be committed to communication and participation as child citizens in their local community. However, many of the children also expressed criticism of the services offered to them in their local community, such as services related to safety. In the context of the high crime rate, the children articulated advice to the police and traffic officials

about strategies to combat crime. This in itself is further evidence of the children's expressed commitment to democracy in general and to participation in the wellbeing (specifically safety and protection) of the local community. In *Letters to Madiba* the children wrote:

'Madiba, employ more traffic cops at night and in the morning' (P29 – Class 4)

'Please make the cops work harder in the night' (P33 – Class 4)

'Put lots of traffic cops on the streets' (P45 – Class 4)

'We [children] need more police to help us build the country' (P7 – Class 3 – *Slogans for posters meant for peers*)

The children did not seem to identify entirely with their neighbourhood for they reported overwhelmingly on negative experiences related to crime, violence and an apparent lack of services, especially services for securing their safety. Their feelings of vulnerability possibly signify a sense of defencelessness, causing their seeming lack of identification with the democracy on local level. During a focus group interview, the children of Class 3 commented on living in the inner-city neighbourhood and their concerns.

Interviewer: 'What would you tell the leaders of South Africa about living here?'

Participant 1: 'Children should play without being afraid of being hurt or killed.'

Participant 6: 'Stop crime because we will all die.'

Interviewer: 'What message do you have for other children in your neighbourhood?'

Participant 1: 'Don't waste food – out there are street kids.'

Interviewer: 'How would you help the street kids?'

Participant 5: ‘Give them job and places to stay, to build their lives up again to be something in life.’

Interviewer to Participant 5: ‘You live in a house in ... [another neighbourhood of the city]. What can you tell us about your neighbourhood?’

Participant 5: ‘We are not allowed to walk in the streets on Fridays and during the weekend. We are not allowed to walk in the streets at night. People drink and fight in the streets.’

Concerning their national identity the children articulated a common identity with democratic South Africa, a ‘notion of South Africanness’ as described in the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy (Ministry of Education, 2001). The participants used the concept democracy in relation to the notion of freedom, the person of Nelson Mandela and the South African flag.

‘I like 10 years of democracy’ (P5 – Class 1 – *What I like and don't like about South Africa*)

‘Dear Mister Mandela, Thank you for teaching me about democracy’ (P3 – Class 3 – *Focus group interview*)

‘Mr. Mandela, thank you for ten years of freedom’ (P61 – Class 4 – *Letters to Madiba*)

‘He [Mr. Nelson Mandela] made the country a democratic South Africa’ (P5 – Class 3 – *Focus group interview*)

‘I love the flag because it is a democracy country’ (P15 - Class 2 – *The South African Flag*)

Most of the children identified themselves as South African citizens living in democratic South Africa. Children encapsulated their feelings of belonging to South Africa as:

‘I am proudly South African’ (P11 – Class 3 – *Letters to Madiba*)

‘South Africa is my best world’ (P1 – Class 3 – *Focus group interview*)

The first expression above could be related to the ‘Made in South Africa’ slogan, which is used in the media as part of a brand name and promotion of South African products.

In addition a child referred to South Africa as:

‘a democratic South Africa’ (P5 – Class 3 – *Focus group interview*)

Many children identified with the democratic ideal of uniting a diverse population into one nation as the participants of Class 3 said when participating in *Letters to Madiba*:

‘Mister Mandela fight for freedom so that all kinds of colour can come together’

(P10 – Class 3)

‘...thank you for making white and black united’ (P13 – Class 3)

Similarly, in the activity *What I like and don't like about South Africa*, the children of Class 1 said:

'I like my country because it has different people' (P46)

'I like different people' (a heading for a drawing about Indian and black persons – P25)

In this regard, expressions about unity and diversity were also present in numerous expressions when the children of Class 2 participated in the instrument about *The South African Flag*. Children related the symbolism of the flag to the idea of the 'rainbow nation' (P5, P20, P30, P40, P41). In *What I like and don't like about South Africa* Participant One (P1) made a drawing of different people standing around the flag, symbolising the diversity and unity in the South African society. The acknowledgement of the children that citizens have to find ways to live together in harmony may be related to the vision of a 'truly united, democratic country' of the national curriculum (Department of Education, 2002a). The children did not report on their own race in relation to the national context but expressed the idea of different races uniting or standing together. This finding may imply that the participating children, at the age of nine years, had developed to such an extent socially so as to encourage the acceptance of diversity and the commitment to unity and the democratic values such as tolerance.

However, the children voiced a desire for change in securing their future. They were critical about the change they promoted in their neighbourhood, which was mostly related to social change. To enhance the desired change on local and national levels, they

were committed to participating personally and also held the political leaders accountable for implementing change. When completing the instrument *If I were Mr. Mbeki...* children of Class 2 acted in role play and wrote the following:

‘If I were Mr. Mbeki I would change the community’ (P9)

‘If I were Mr. Mbeki I would change the country’ (P34)

‘If I were Mr. Mbeki I will take care of South Africa, I will change the rules and give people money and will make sure our country is safe’ (P36)

Analysis of the discourses that emerged in the study strengthens the argument that the children’s voices implicated their identification with the South African democracy and democratic values on different levels. They identified themselves as important, active and responsible citizens. Their cultural identification was strongly contextual and situational in the sense that they identified with their immediate families but not entirely with their neighbourhood. They expressed concern about crime and lack of services related to their safety on the local level. Concerning the national level they nevertheless maintained an idea of South Aficanness, and emphasised positive values represented by Nelson Mandela as well as the South African flag. They identified with the concept of being a citizen in the South African democracy based on national loyalty, a sense of belonging and by accepting democratic values such as an open society, freedom, the rule of law, social justice and pluralism. There seems to be a relation between the children’s identification with democracy and democracy as an ideal constituted by the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1966).

At the outset of the article we reported on the importance of race and how race became a dividing factor in South Africa and how the Constitution of South Africa (1996) promotes the democratic values and unity amongst all South Africans. Although we intentionally did not ask the participants of this case study to report on their own racial association they did mention their race in a positive sense but only when referring to their families. This may indicate that their own racial affiliation was not problematic and that they identified with it in a positive way within their families. In terms of their expressions on race in the national context they expressed a desire for all races to unite and to work together for a common South African future. Consequently the children's expressions about national politics seem to align with the ideals of cross-racial unity and democracy. However, we agree with Arber (2008) that working with race and ethnic relationships can never be simplified, as strong arguments suggest that we are seeing new layers of racism in the post-colonial world (James in Arber, 2008: v). Race and ethnicity possibly need constant reassessment as part of the identity of every citizen, as Arber (2008: 47) states: '...it is this notion of identity as non-unitary, fragmented, contradictory and constructed that has proven most important to the emancipatory politics of our time.'

Our insight is that the youthful participants of our case study can rise above the harmful division of race and that their cultural identity in terms of race need not prevent their development of a cohesive national identity. However, we find the expressions of the young respondents about their dangerous neighbourhood alarming. The negative experiences of the world in which these children live, for instance the gunshots they heard during the night, may jeopardize their democratic identity. We agree with Robins (2005) when describing the tensions between the liberal democratic language of human

rights and the negative everyday experiences of citizens – in our case child citizens. We concur with Banks (2004: 10) that the significant gaps between the democratic ideals of a nation-state and the institutional practices and factors such as race, inequality and high crime rates are some of the major threats to the democratic identity of a citizen. In our study inequality and high crime rates seemed to be especially significant.

Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed the children of our case study as perceptive child citizens reporting on their life experiences in democratic South Africa. The children performed as independent actors when reporting their views on democracy and their democratic identity. The young participants revealed some degree of understanding abstract concepts like democracy and freedom.

To assist the nine-year-old children in subscribing the democracy, politicians and educationalists need to take note of their voices. We posit that there is an inconsistency between policy (The Bill of Rights and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa as enhanced by the national curriculum) and the life experiences of the nine-year-old children living in Sunnyside. It is critical for all relevant sectors to address this inconsistency.

In view of the racial conflict which shaped the history of South Africa and which still exists, the spontaneous expressions of the children about race emerged as a surprise. They reported positively on their individual racial affiliations and on diversity in South Africa. They regarded the South African democracy as a unifying force, a strength that

can 'bring all kinds of colour together'. South Africa nevertheless remains a society in flux. In these uncertain times in the history of the country, the safeguarding of democratic values and the preservation of a democratic identity by all its citizens are important. We propose that the ostensible lack of local identification in terms of their unsafe neighbourhood may affect the future democratic and national identity of the children negatively. Further, a lack of democratic identification may endanger the sustainability of the South African democracy. Our statements are affirmed by Osler (2005), who argues that if people do not access services like protection from violence on the basis of equality, they may feel excluded and that the sense of belonging and national identity, which is a prerequisite for participative citizenship, may be lost.

Through citizenship education, child citizens could identify with democracy and the values of democracy. In addition, citizenship education may well equip children to be able to sustain the democracy if they experience the application of democratic values in their daily lives.

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