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# Black Learner Perceptions of Teacher-Learner and Learner-Learner Relationships in Multicultural Spaces of Historically White Schools

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to report on a research study which explored the perceptions of black learners with regard to their teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships in multicultural spaces of Historically White Schools in the five educational districts of the Northern Cape province in South Africa. A quantitative research approach, embedded in a descriptive data method of data analysis was employed, where a self-designed 4-point Likert scale questionnaire was given to 1037 black high school learners attending Historically White Schools in the Northern Cape. Learners used for the study included learners in grades 10 to 12. Selected items related to black learners' perceptions of their relationships with their teachers and fellow learners in Historically White Schools. Data were analysed using descriptive analyses. In general, the study revealed that black learners experienced relatively pleasing relationships with their teachers and fellow learners alike. The study is noteworthy, as it reveals that black learners attending Historically White Schools feel accepted and respected by their teachers and fellow learners, which, in turn, is favourable for learners' emotional security, sense of belonging and academic achievement. The study further highlights the critical value of teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships to learning, interaction, socialisation and communication in Historically White Schools, noting the tendency of these schools to assimilate black learners into the existing school culture, which is fundamentally based on Eurocentric values.

**Keywords:** teacher-learner relationships; learner-learner relationships; multiculturalism; Historically White Schools

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## 1. Introduction

The first South African democratic elections in 1994 made it possible for black learners to enrol at multicultural schools, more specifically Historically White Schools. Virtually all of these Historically White Schools, who previously exclusively catered for learners from monocultural (white) backgrounds, responded to the opening of schools for all learners by adopting an assimilationist approach. Elias & Feagin, (2020) view assimilation as a construct that portrays the upholding and promotion of the dominant values, traditions and customs of one group in framing the social context of the school – this process in turn affects the fostering of a positive school climate and the promotion of healthy human relations between people. Furthermore, it is noted that the cultivation of positive social relations between teachers and learners have a positive outcome on learner success, motivation and the promotion of social cohesion in school settings, which are increasingly becoming multicultural in its composition (Alexander, 2016). Social relations in multicultural school spaces, such as Historically White Schools, should as such enhance the relational ties among peers in a class and school, relations between learners and teachers, and relations between parents. Therefore, schools exhibiting positive and sound social relationships among learners, and between learners and teachers, are considered to be cohesive (Carolan, 2014; Mpisi, 2010).

Time constraints, and racial and cultural barriers may lead teachers to direct their efforts to immediate issues instead of investing the time necessary to develop these learner-teacher relationships. On the other hand, weak and distrustful relationships lead to uninvited and uncondusive learning spaces (Marzano, 2011). Furthermore, Hayat et al. (2020) view teacher-learner relationships as a regulatory function for the development of various skills related to learners' social, emotional, and academic abilities. Positive teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships can lead to warm and safe classroom spaces that facilitate meaningful learning and adjustments in multicultural school settings. This may in turn increase learners' motivation to learn, interact with other individuals in a constructivist manner, and sustain healthy and trusting relations (Mpisi, 2010).

Regrettably, sporadic media reports indicate that racism, social exclusion, incidents of violence, intimidation, and bullying levelled against black learners are still rife in the Historically White Schools context of South Africa. A case in point is a media report by News 24 (2020), stating that black learners from former Model C (Historically White Schools) schools in Gauteng, the Western and Eastern Cape, as well as KwaZulu-Natal provinces have posted their lived experiences and encounters of alleged racism at their schools by teachers and fellow learners.

We further argue that within the confinement of Historically White Schools, aspects pertaining to the cultural wealth, values and norms of black learners are perceived to be inferior to that of white middle class knowledge-based trusts, values, and social standards (Lemon & Battersby-Lennard, 2011) – this tendency in turn provides great uncertainty for the promotion of shared experiences, mutual understanding, healthy interactions, and quality relations between

learners and teachers, and amongst learners. It stands to reason that black learners' sense of social identity (culture, heritage, language and traditions), issues associated with the self-esteem and the cultivation of sound human relations, appear to be relegated to the archives in these Historically White Schools (Bazana & Mogotsi, 2017).

Against the latter background, this paper explores the perceptions of black learners with regard to teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships in Historically White Schools in the five educational districts of the Northern Cape province in South Africa. For the purpose of this study, as it relates to the South African schooling context, the term "black" refers to learners of African, Indian and "coloured" descent.

## **2. Literature Review**

Humans are social beings by nature and therefore have an innate need to belong, in order to survive (De Haas, 2021). The need to belong is a powerful and important determinant of human behaviour, which has numerous influences on human emotions and thoughts (Wang et al., 2017). The greater the need to belong, the harder humans will work to achieve fulfilling relationships (Pillow et al., 2015). Fiske (2014: xvi) claims that "The environment to which humans adapt is the social group and the culture codifies survival rules for different groups." The multicultural school context is no different, since learners too have the inherent need to belong and consequently teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships are critical for their "survival" at school. Hence, Besser et al. (2020), and Alexander (2016), reason that when learners feel respected by their teachers and fellow learners, they tend to experience a greater sense of security and wellbeing, that subsequently may result in heightened academic commitment, and as such contribute towards an understanding and acceptance of certain imperatives associated with multicultural education, such as an acceptance for diversity, the advancement of quality education, and the realisation of equal opportunities for all learners. Cimillo (2011), Mpsi (2010) and Nussbaum (2003) assert that multicultural education is viewed as a human rights and comprehensive reform philosophy, as well as a school wide process, focussed on changing the entire school space so that learners from diverse backgrounds and social group identifications (race, language, ethnicity, gender culture, socio- economic status, sexual orientation, social class, age, disability, ability status, religious and spiritual traditions and migration status) experience the ideals of freedom, social justice, equity, human dignity and equality.

The aspects discussed below provide an exposition of the importance of teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships. Furthermore, the authors of this paper also explore the implications of such relationships within the confines of multicultural spaces in Historically White Schools.

### **The Importance of Teacher-Learner Relationships in multicultural school spaces**

Teacher-learner relationships are a central part of learners' interpersonal context at school, and influence their social, emotional and academic development (Martin & Collie, 2019). These relationships are also fundamental for effective teaching and learning to take place in a school, especially in organisations confined to multicultural school settings. Positive teacher-learner relationships are usually characterised by respect, friendliness and trust, as well as minimised levels of interpersonal conflict (Aldrup et al., 2018; Mansfield et al., 2016). To this end, numerous scholars in the discourse are in agreement with the aforementioned and are convinced that sincere, unrestrained teacher-learner relationships have the potential to enhance learners' academic achievement, emotional security, sense of belonging and self-confidence (Hayat et al., 2020). The aforementioned sentiments could be linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, positing that human beings can only progress to a higher need once the preceding lower need has been satisfied (Hopper, 2020). According to Aden (2021), and Mafandala, (2020), the opposite also holds true and the scholars argue that adverse, strained and conflicted teacher-learner relationships, on the other hand, have the proclivity to constrain the learners' academic performance, interaction, and socialization, which in turn may result in more negative attitudes toward school, particularly in multicultural school spaces.

Correspondingly, Rucinski et al. (2018) elect to incorporate the social-emotional dimension of the teacher-learner relationship, more specifically in the multicultural spaces of Historically White Schools. In this regard the aforementioned scholars claim this dimension to be a key "predictor of learners' academic success or failure." Likewise, many theories in both education and psychology have attempted to understand the role of teacher-learner relationships in relation to learners' academic success. These theories include the goal theory that explores how goals can be established among learners through the influence of teachers (Khalaf & Zin, 2018).

Another such theory is the attribution theory, which articulates how attributions are learnt by cooperating with others, including teachers (Anderman, 2020). Equally, the self-determination theory postulates how basic psychological needs are fulfilled when there is support from important people in one's life, such as teachers (Qian et al., 2020).

Teacher-learner relationships therefore seem to play a significant role in the social, emotional and academic development of learners, and more so in multicultural school spaces. It therefore becomes important for teachers to be aware of the important influence their relationships with their learners have on the holistic development of learners. It is for this reason that Rucinski et al. (2017) insist that teachers make a concerted effort to ensure that the learners in their classrooms are aware that they care about them as valued individuals and that they (teachers in Historically White Schools) are accessible to support learners unconditionally irrespective of race, colour and other forms of diversity.

### **The Importance of Learner-Learner Relationships**

Navigating social spaces at school, especially in Historically White Schools, can prove to be challenging for many learners, since these spaces are intricate and multidimensional (Uslu & Gizir, 2017:64). The same scholars claim that there are “many different domains involved in school, including classroom social and learning dynamics.” Additionally, these domains may include teacher-learner relationships, peer relationships, family involvement at home, and family involvement at school.

In keeping with the former sentiment, the school community and classrooms can thus be regarded as the social setting in which an array of interactions among learners and their peers play out. These interactions, particularly in multicultural classrooms spaces, have the added advantage of also contributing to the learners’ sense of belonging at school. Uslu & Gizir (2017) concur with the vital role that learners’ sense of belonging plays in the learning process and contends that when learners feel that they belong, they are more likely to participate willingly in the classroom activities. Moreover, these interactions with peers also have the potential to influence learners’ social and emotional adjustment, engagement, academic motivation, and learning (Wang et al., 2019).

Similarly, in recent years, a growing number of studies have pointed to the significant role learners’ interactions with their peers play in the development of learner engagement, motivation, learning success and academic achievement (Alamri, 2019; Deng et al., 2020; Mishra, 2020). The findings of these studies, foregrounding the social and academic benefits of learner-learner interaction, are supported by Vollet et al. (2017:637) who postulate that “classmates and friends also fulfill a crucial role in learner motivation and engagement in school.” It is therefore imperative that schools encourage learners to interact with their peers socially and particularly in Historically White Multicultural Schooling contexts. The latter sentiments are highlighted by Wang et al. (2018), who argue that learners who have constructive experiences at school are more likely to engage more with their peers. The same scholars further advance that this peer engagement may in turn result in academically proficient, socially incorporated and devoted learners.

The significant influence learner-learner relationships exert on the teaching and learning process can easily be undermined. The discussion above foregrounds the complexity and multidimensionality of social spaces in a multicultural school context. Hence the interaction between learners in these spaces becomes critical, since it could enhance learners’ sense of belonging. When learners manage to foster cordial relationships and feel accepted by their peers, their classroom engagement and academic motivation may improve. The criticality of learner-learner relationships should therefore not be underestimated, particularly in the case of black learners in Historically White Schools.

### **Implications of Teacher-Learner and Learner-Learner Relationships in the Multicultural spaces of Historically White Multicultural Schools**

Judging from the discussion provided above, teacher-learner relationships and learners’ relationships with their peers form an essential part of the learners’ sense

of belonging and learning. The discussion further foregrounds the significant influence both these relationships have on the holistic development of learners in terms of their social, emotional and academic growth. The importance of these relationships and the influence they exert on the teaching and learning process hold equally true for Historically White Schools in South Africa.

As postulated by Slabbert and Naudé (2020:2), it is critical to understand the historical backdrop against which integration and diversity in a school system transpire to actually appreciate its significance and underlying value for multicultural school contexts. After the attainment of democracy in 1994, the racially and culturally segregated education system that characterised education provision during apartheid South Africa was transformed into a more diverse schooling system, referred to as multicultural education in this study. Given this history of separatist schooling along racial and cultural lines, one can understand the challenges a diverse form of schooling held for the relationships of particularly black learners in Historically White Schools in South Africa.

Certain scholars argue that multicultural education is regarded as a schooling system that has explicitly been planned, taking into account the diverse cultural backgrounds of all learners, in order to structure the teaching and learning context in a manner that will enrich the effective learning opportunities, problem solving skills and critical thinking abilities of all learners (Mikander et al., 2018; Susanto, 2018).

Makhalemele and Payne-van Staden (2020) further emphasise, in particular, the importance of meaningful relationships between teachers and learners in multicultural school spaces. Hence, the process of democracy in South Africa and its concomitant transformation policies made it possible for black learners to access Historically White Schools (Cele, 2021). For the purpose of this study, the term black refers to learners of African and Indian descent, and “coloureds” refers to South Africans who have a racially mixed heritage.

Even though transformational changes endeavored to redress the educational imbalances and inequalities of the past, major challenges remained (Shultz et al., 2022). Many of these Historically White Schools that formerly solely catered for learners from monocultural backgrounds, reacted to the presence of black learners by espousing an assimilationist approach. The assimilationist approach involves the supremacy of values, traditions and customs of one group in outlining the social context of the school (Elias & Feagin, 2020). The adoption of this approach essentially meant that black learners attending Historically White Schools were forced to abandon their cultural identity in favour of the school’s dominant culture, which was mainly of a Eurocentric nature. Black learners were thus expected to fit into the existing culture and curriculum of Historically White Schools, without consideration for their background or lived experiences (Borrero et al., 2018). In this regard Fataar (2010) argues that learners from a cultural origin other than that of the Historically White Schools’ prevailing culture and identity had to identify with and adapt to “acceptable cultural the expectations and behaviour.”

Smith et al. (2020) suggest an alternative to the assimilationist approach and argue that integrated pluralism can serve as a vehicle in enhancing a sense of belonging among black learners in multicultural spaces. The same scholars postulate that integrated pluralism occurs when schools vigorously and purposefully communicate their support for learners' diversity and culture, but simultaneously promote learners' understanding of self and their link to the schools.

Similarly, the manner in which many Historically White Schools responded to education transformation, particularly by adopting an assimilationist approach, seems to have failed to instill a sense of belonging in black learners. Learners belonging to the non-dominant group, such as black learners, are subjected to more peer rejection in classrooms where assimilationist peer norms predominantly prevail (Celeste et al., 2016). Likewise, Celeste et al., (2019) contend that black learners "feel alienated and experience a sense of less belonging when schools enforce assimilationism." Accordingly, many black learners and their parents felt excluded and marginalised, because of Historically White Schools' failure to acknowledge their indigenous languages and culture (Ndimande, 2013).

This sentiment is supported by Slabbert and Naudé (2020:3) who argue that "When an assimilationist approach is adopted, attempts at equitable, quality education for learners with diverse experiences are less successful." Additionally, the response of Historically White Schools in accommodating black learners are in contrast with the fundamental pillars constituting positive teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships, as discussed earlier.

Accordingly, occasional media reports alluding to negative and disharmonious teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships experienced in Historically White Schools in South Africa are further proof of transformation challenges. A case in point is the media article reporting on the incident where a Historically white multicultural school passed a policy declaring black school girls' hair styles "untidy" (The Guardian, 2016). Another media article reports on the manner in which a school in the Gauteng province articulated its language policy so that it excluded black learners from the school, because they were unable to speak Afrikaans (Mail & Guardian, 2018). A different media article reports on a learner at a KwaZulu-Natal school who is facing expulsion for making racially derogatory remarks towards the father of a fellow Indian learner (Sunday Times, 2021).

The abovementioned media reports are in direct opposition to the traits, such as that of respect, friendliness, trust, and minimised levels of interpersonal conflict, that should underpin these relationships (Aldrup et al., 2018; Mansfield et al., 2016). In this respect, Roksa & Kinsley (2019) caution that incidents, as mentioned in these media reports, may lead to strained relationships. These latter mentioned incidents may even fail to influence learners' social and emotional adjustment, engagement, academic success, and learning, as suggested by the literature (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019). Additionally, Alvaré (2018) and Marrun et al., (2021) claim that white teachers at Historically White Schools tend to have lower academic expectations of their black learners.

A further danger of the assimilationist approach adopted by Historically White Schools is that learners from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may mistakenly be categorised as learners with barriers to learning, when, in actual fact, the apparent learning or behavioural underperformance may be associated with cultural or linguistic reasons (Cruz et al., 2019).

### **3. Research Methodology**

An empirical investigation, using the quantitative research method, was conducted. A quantitative approach comprises “processes of collecting, analysing, interpreting, and writing the results of a study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A quantitative approach was thus apt, since the researchers sought to collect data from a large population to analyse and discuss the perceptions of black learners on their experiences of teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships at Historically White Schools in South Africa. According to the authors of this paper, the five identified items are central to the reconceptualisation of the relationships of black learners in a multicultural context at Historically White Schools in South Africa.

The study followed a quantitative survey design. According to Creswell (2017) a survey design is used when one gathers facts about a society, or part of it, about the quality of interaction among its people or institutions (Rossi et al., 2013). As the study sought to reconceptualise relationships of black learners in a multicultural context at Historically White Schools in South Africa, this survey design was suitable in providing the methodological direction.

#### **Sampling and Research Participants**

The research site of this study was limited to twenty-seven (27) Historically White Schools in the five education districts of the Northern Cape province of South Africa. The sample comprised 1037 black learners attending Historically White Schools in the five education districts. The learners used in the sample included black learners in grades 10, 11 and 12. All the chosen schools had catered solely for white learners prior to South Africa’s democracy in 1994. The data acquired from the questionnaires were integrated with the data acquired from the literature study in order for the researchers to compile summaries, draw conclusions and offer recommendations.

For the purpose of this paper, the authors focus on the analysis and discussion of five selected key items which were part of an extensive questionnaire used for a doctoral study conducted with 832 black learners (grades 10-12) from 27 Historically White Schools in the five educational districts of the Northern Cape province in South Africa. This research was based on the probability sampling method, in which stratified random sampling was employed. A self-designed, four-point Likert scale questionnaire, distributed to 269 white teachers and 832 black learners, probed aspects pertaining to characteristics, issues and challenges that both learners and educators are confronted with, as well as the scholastic experiences of black learners in multicultural high schools in the Northern Cape. For the purpose of this paper, the authors report on the data component of one

aspect of the extensive questionnaire, namely learner-teacher and learner-learner relationships of black learners attending Historically White Schools in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. This paper therefore only reports on learners' perceptions of their interaction with their peers (fellow-learners) and their perceptions of their relationship with white teachers in Historically White Schools.

#### ***Instrument***

A self-designed 4-point Likert scale questionnaire was employed. The first component of the questionnaire (questions 1.1 to 1.2) sought to obtain information regarding learner-learner relationships at Historically White Schools. The second component (questions 1.3 to 1.5) of the questionnaire was intended to determine black learners' perceptions in respect of their relationship with their white teachers. For the purpose of this paper, the authors focus on the analysis and discussion of five key items drawn from the questionnaire which had relevance to two components, namely learners' perceptions on their relationship with their teachers, as well as their perceptions of their learner-learner relationships at Historically White Schools. The authors are of the view that these five items, drawn from the two components, are fundamental to the reconceptualisation of black learners' relationships at Historically White Schools in South Africa.

#### **4. Ethical Considerations**

The research participants were treated with respect and dignity, and their rights and confidentiality were protected. During the process of the research various ethical measures were applied. First, approval from the Ethics Committee of a leading university in South Africa was sought. Thereafter, consent to conduct research in the participating Historically White Schools in the Northern Cape province (South Africa) was sought from the Northern Cape Department of Education. Permission from the high school principals was obtained. Key elements about the research study were shared with participants. Permission to participate in the study was obtained through written consent from the participants. Participants were informed that anonymity would be maintained by not mentioning their names or the names of their schools in the study.

#### **5. Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using descriptive analysis methods. The data acquired from the five key items were integrated with the data attained from the literature study, in order for the researchers to make summaries, draw conclusions and offer recommendations. A leading university in South Africa's computer centre helped with the approval, analyses, processing and interpretation of the aforementioned data.

#### **6. Findings and Discussion**

##### ***The Importance of Learner-Learner Interaction***

Items 1.1 and 1.2 were meant to elicit black learners' perceptions concerning their interaction with learners from different cultural backgrounds. Figures 1 and 2 provide an exposition of learner's responses in this regard.

### Interaction with learners from different cultural backgrounds.

The majority of learners, males (32.4%) and females (38.1%), thought that learners from different cultures had a feeling of unity amongst each other, as depicted by Figure 1. The findings disputed that of the literature that claim that most learners belonging to the non-dominant group, such as black learners, are subjected to more peer rejection (Celeste et al., 2016). This finding further disagrees with the argument advanced by Baysu et al. (2021) suggesting that learners from the non-dominant group, such as black learners in this instance, feel alienated and unaccepted at these schools. The finding is significant, because it gives an indication of how the deliberate intentions of the apartheid education system managed to sow fear, disharmony and disunity among the different races and cultures in South Africa. This finding may even further point to the awakening of South African society to the fact that people from different racial backgrounds possibly had more in common than not.

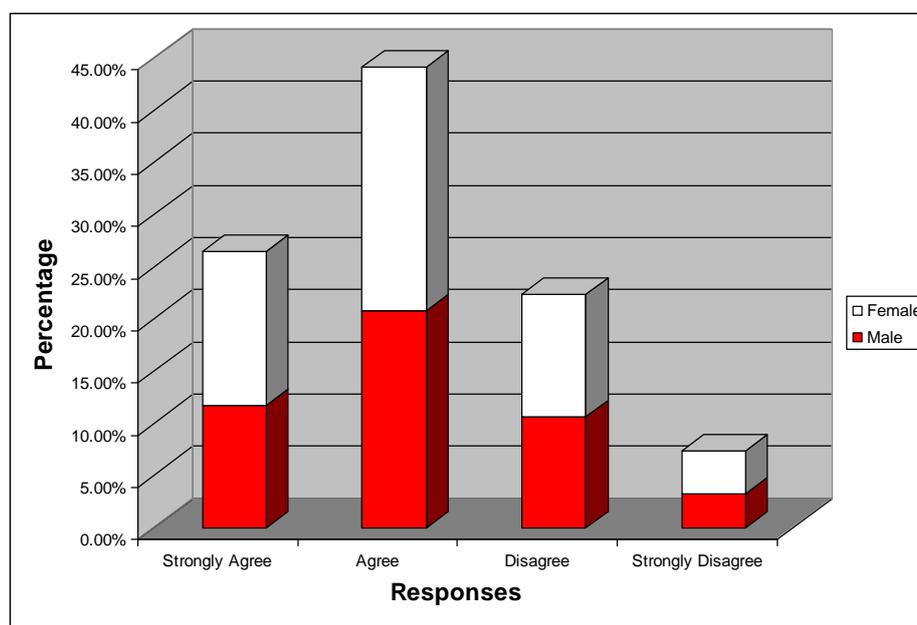
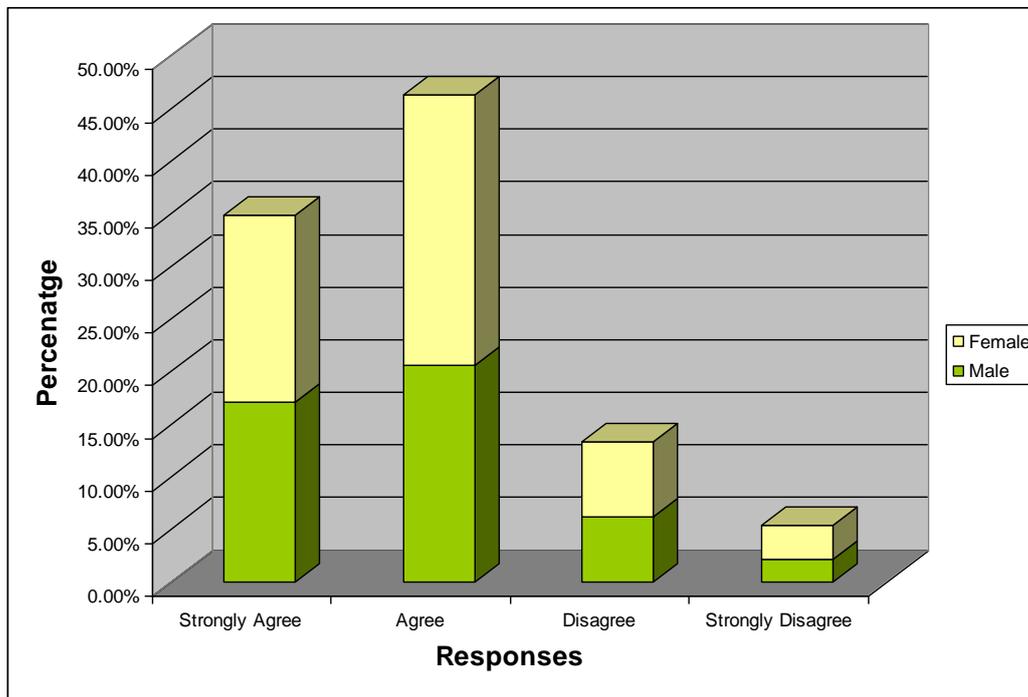


Figure 1. Percentage of learners' response to whether most learners from different cultures had a feeling of unity amongst each other

### Relationship between learners from different cultural backgrounds in the classroom

Judging from Figure 2, most of the learners, male (37.7%) and female (43.5%), agreed that the relationship between learners from different cultural backgrounds in the classroom was good, even though most Historically White Schools adopted an assimilationist approach. This finding disputes that of the literature (Celeste et al., 2019) and the media report (Sunday Times, 2021) arguing that black learners felt marginalised and left out. These findings are significant, as they point to the presence of some of the critical tenets underpinning learner-learner relationships at Historically White Schools. These tenets are the learners' sense of belonging, and an encouraging social classroom setting (Uslu & Gizir, 2017). This finding can

further serve as a catalyst to address incidents of disharmony and dissention at not only Historically White Schools, but also schools in general.



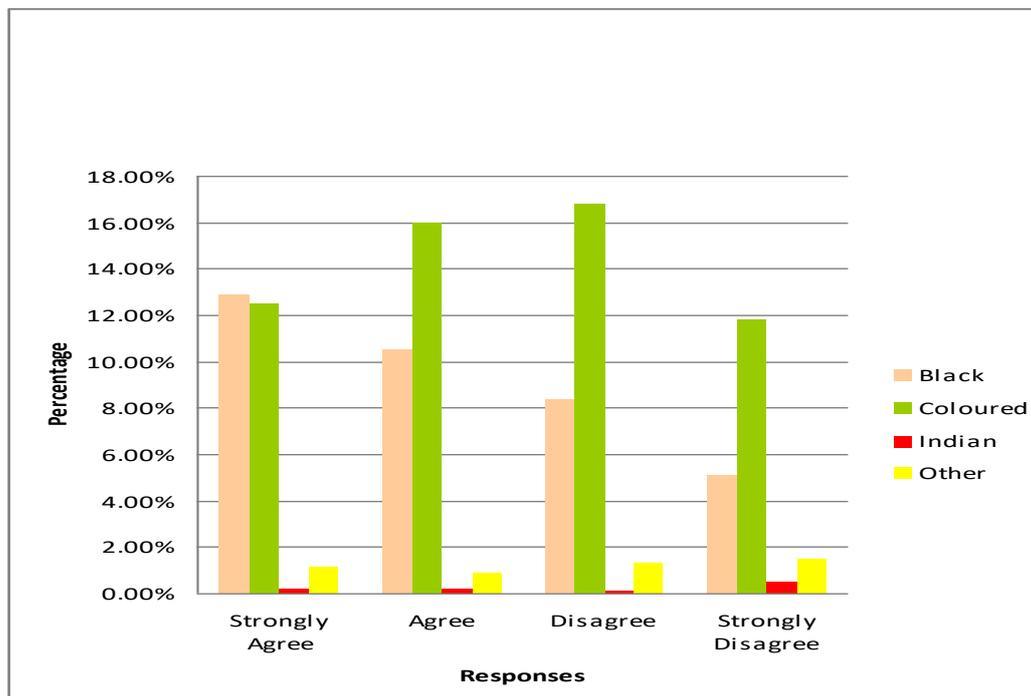
**Figure 2. Percentage of learners' response to whether the relationship between learners from different cultural backgrounds in the classroom was good**

### **The Importance of Teacher-Learner Relationships**

Items 1.3 to 1.5 were asked in order to elicit black learners' perceptions concerning their relationship with their white teachers. Figures 3 to 5 provide an exposition of the learner's responses in this regard.

#### **Relationship with their white teachers**

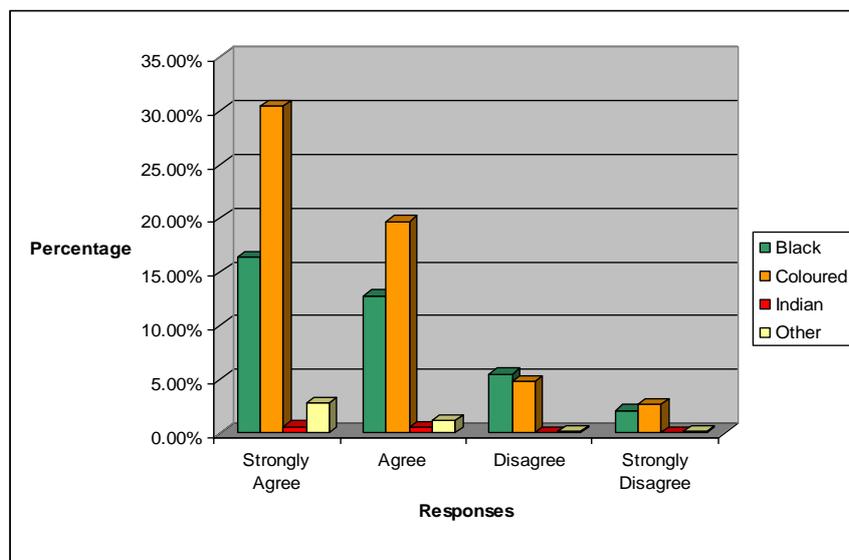
According to Figure 3, the majority of learners, namely black (23.4%), coloured (28.5%), Indian (0.4%) and other race groups (2%), agreed that white teachers had higher academic expectations from white learners than from black learners. There seems to be consensus between the findings of the literature and the findings of the study claiming that white teachers had greater academic expectations from white learners than for their black counterparts (Tevis et al., 2022). This finding is particularly concerning since teacher-learner relationships are fundamental for the academic development of learners (Martin & Collie, 2019). More so, the relationship is also supposed to be built on trust (Mansfield et al., 2016; Aldrup et al. 2018). It therefore means that if these teachers have lower academic expectations from black learners, these learners might lose trust in their teachers, thus compromising these critical relationships. The aforementioned state of affairs may in turn impede the academic development of black learners, consequently perpetuating the perceived narrative of the academic inferiority of black learners.



**Figure 3. Percentage of learners' response to whether white teachers had higher academic expectations from white learners than from black learners**

#### **White teachers are able to interpret customs and non-verbal behaviour of learners from different cultures**

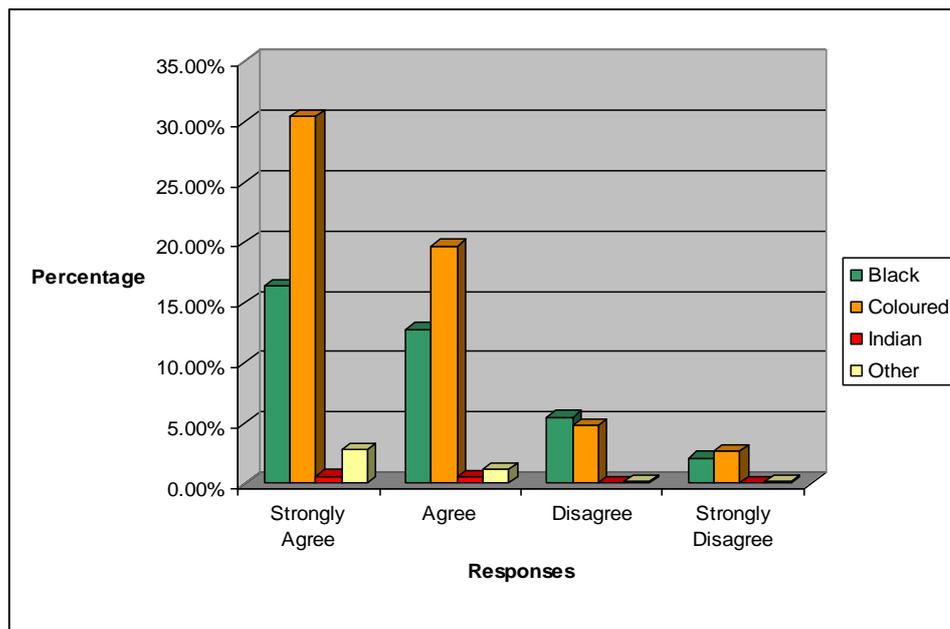
Figure 4 depicts the learners' responses on the question on whether white teachers are able to interpret customs and non-verbal behaviour of learners from different cultures. Most learners indicated in the affirmative, namely black (19%), coloured (36.8%), Indian (0.6%) and other race groups (3.3%). The latter finding is in disagreement with the literature, which states that most black learners felt marginalised since white teachers at these schools are unable to interpret their culture (Ndimande, 2013) or considering their background or lived experiences (Shultz et al., 2022). The finding is profound in that although white teachers and the school ethos embrace mainly Eurocentric values, being able to interpret customs and non-verbal behaviour of learners from different cultures is rather progressive. The finding, relating to white teachers' ability to interpret black learners' culture, further points to deliberate efforts made by these teachers to nurture the important teacher-learner relationship, which is central to enhancing learners' sense of belonging, social, emotional and academic growth. More so, the finding bodes well for the imperatives of multicultural education to provide schooling to all learners, taking into account their cultural backgrounds, the aspect of quality education, and the realisation of learning opportunities (Mikander et al., 2018; Susanto, 2018).



**Figure 4. Percentage of learners' response to whether white teachers are able to interpret customs and non-verbal behaviour of learners from different cultures**

#### **Trusting relationships with white teachers and fellow white learners**

The greatest percentage of learners, namely black (29.2%), coloured (50.1%), Indian (1.1%) and other race groups (4%), as indicated by Figure 5, stated that they had trusting relationships with their white teachers and fellow white learners. This finding is profound and concurs with the literature claiming the importance of meaningful relationships between teachers and learners in the multicultural classroom (Makhalemele & Payne-van Staden, 2020). The finding further confirms the argument of Vollet et al. (2017), advancing that cordial learner-learner relationships enhance learners' sense of security and subsequent intensification in academic commitment. This finding is particularly significant, given the deep seated mistrust that continues to exist among different races in South Africa, especially if the previously cited media reports are considered. The finding can well be as a result of the progress made with regards to transformation in multicultural spaces of Historically White Schools since the early days of democracy. The finding may further suggest that Historically White Schools have made a concerted effort to create school spaces of acceptance, social cohesion and unity across the various racial and cultural divides.



**Figure 5. Percentage of learners' response to whether they had trusting relationships with their white teachers and fellow white learners**

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of the study was to determine the perceptions of black learners with regard to their teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships in multicultural spaces of Historically White Schools in the five education districts of the Northern Cape, South Africa. We argue that both teacher-learner, as well as learner-learner relationships are important for the learners' sense of belonging, social, emotional and academic development in Historically White Schools. Furthermore, the researchers strongly highlight the critical value of these relationships to learning, interaction, socialisation and communication in Historically White Schools, noting the tendency of these schools to assimilate black learners into the existing school culture, which is fundamentally based on Eurocentric values. The study further argues that in instances where Historically White Schools have elected to respond to the enrolment of black learners with assimilationism, these schools run the risk of leaving black learners feeling excluded and alienated. Instead, a case is being made for Historically White Schools to strive to employ multicultural education as a vehicle to create an inviting and conducive schooling environment. This learning environment should be structured in a fashion where teaching and learning considers the cultural backgrounds and lived realities of all learners (Alexander, 2016). The insights gained on black learners' perceptions of their relationships with white teachers and fellow learners may serve to inform policy, practice and initiatives for the development of future multicultural school programmes aimed at enhancing teacher-learner and learner-learner relationships in Historically White Schools in South Africa, as well as abroad. Such future relationship enhancing programmes may succeed in assisting minority learners (in the South African context, black learners), to feel accepted and included at Historically White Schools. A future study is envisaged where the guidelines for the development of future teacher and learner relationship enhancing programmes will be explored.

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