

Fresh grounds: African migrants in a South African primary school

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Abstract

In a primary school in Durban, South Africa, young migrants from war-torn countries in central Africa display a strong sense of agency and hope. This is despite the extreme nature of social dislocation they have faced, including in some cases trauma related to why and how they left, xenophobia directed towards African foreigners, poverty, language barriers and lack of communication between parents and the school. This case study foregrounds the experience of xenophobia in addressing the questions of how the migrants speak of their experience and how they respond within the school. It draws on ethnographic accounts of young migrants in Grades 6 and 7 and reports from school managers and teachers. It finds that the migrants do not internalise the negative stereotypes against African foreigners. Instead they display a cosmopolitan identity around the opportunities and resources available and set high aspirations for their success. It is argued that their response can be understood as a form of resistance; instead of assimilation they pursue and celebrate qualities that contradict the negativity of the xenophobia. By doing this, they form a valuable resource for South African education. This work has implications for our understanding of the forms resistance can take.

Key words: African migrants, xenophobia, internalisation, cosmopolitan, resistance, aspirations

In recent years, changes in migration patterns to South Africa have led to the entry of young migrants from countries in central and south-eastern Africa. Little attention has been given to the ways in which such migrants navigate their schooling within South Africa in a context of xenophobia. This article aims to address this gap in the literature through a case study of young migrants in a primary school in the coastal city of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. The research questions are: How do these migrants

respond to their experiences as migrants and what kind of identity do they form within the school?

The article reviews migration into the country, the prevalence of xenophobia, and the responses of migrants within education. The term 'African migrant' is used here as elsewhere in the Southern African literature (Landau 2006a: 228; Nyamnjoh 2010) to indicate a broad category of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, who have in common that they are foreign and from elsewhere in Africa, whether or not they have applied for citizenship and whether or not they are legally in the country (see Note 1 at end).

The article explores the migrants' experiences and identities through a qualitative case study, drawing on interviews with managers of the school, and individual and focus group interviews with groups of migrant children in Grades 6 and 7. The article argues that in response to the experience of traumatic conditions and constant discrimination, the migrants in the study have developed an identity around cosmopolitanism and high aspirations, and that this creates a sense of enhanced possibility within education. It characterises the response as a form of resistance. In this analysis, the article draws on social justice education, which seeks 'clear ways to define and analyse oppression so that we can understand how it operates at various individual, cultural and institutional levels' (Bell 1997: 2). As with other theories within the broad tradition of critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano & Torres 2003), social justice education aims to reveal and to challenge inequality in schools, and to support the full inclusion and active participation of marginalised groups.

The framework focuses on the systematic practices and stereotypes that serve to entrench the domination of one group over others (Hardiman & Jackson 1997), not least within education.

One response is that of internalisation, a concept developed by Fanon (1967), Biko (1987) and Freire (2000). It refers to the ways in which the oppressed come to accept the oppression, and adopt a negative self-image of themselves, 'the oppressed playing host to the oppressor' (Hardiman & Jackson 1997: 17). Internalisation includes the loss of confidence and settling for low expectations; it may also involve enacting on those similar to themselves the oppression that they have experienced. An alternative form that agency can take is resistance (McLaren 2003: 90-93). Such resistance takes many forms, not all of them effective in challenging oppression (Hollander & Einwohner 2004: 549; Yosso 2005: 81). None the less, resistance may lead to the development of a positive sense of both the self and the other (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997: 28). This article frames the experience of young migrants in Durban within the latter approach.

The article begins by examining the literature on migration patterns to South Africa, xenophobia and responses of children to migration, and moves to a discussion of the methodology and findings.

Migration to South Africa

The long period of white supremacy rule in South Africa culminated in the Afrikaner nationalist system of apartheid from 1948 to 1990. In that period, the racialised system of control admitted African people, mainly men, from countries such as Lesotho, Mozambique and Malawi to enter South Africa as labour migrants to work on farms or mines. They had no rights of residence, and departed after the expiry of contracts (Crush & McDonald 2001). In contrast, skilled white people were recruited from Europe and from countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Peberdy 1999).

Relatively few African migrants have formal status, with roughly 5 000 recorded as immigrants in 2003 (Statistics South Africa, 2005). Good information on the total number of African migrants is difficult to establish, as Landau (2006a: 225) explains:

...the region's dynamic communities and extended, highly porous borders make it all but impossible to track movements across them with any consistent accuracy. Moreover, those traversing these borders often have compelling reasons for remaining bureaucratically invisible (for example, to avoid deportation, harassment or discrimination).

Despite public assertions by politicians and officials of there being 'millions' of illegal migrants, analysis indicates that the total foreign population is between 1.6 and 2 million, or 3–4% of the total population (Polzer 2010). The unauthorised migrants include continued labour migrancy from countries such as Mozambique and Malawi (Adepujo 2005), which follows earlier patterns of migrancy.

However, new forms of unauthorised migrancy have developed over time. One group has been spurred by political repression and economic collapse in Zimbabwe. Another came as a result of conflict in central African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda (where about 600 000 Tutsis and moderate Hutu were killed) and Burundi (Manahal 2000). Considerable numbers of people, mainly from urban areas (Adepujo 2005: 41), moved across territories, including to South Africa. These wars led to a sharp increase in migration to South Africa; there were an estimated 250 000 Francophone Africans in South Africa by 2004 (Lekogo 2006). The majority of respondents in this study fall into this grouping.

The literature on migrant children in South African schools is tiny. Only one study (Palmary 2009) provides an overview of child migration to South Africa. While Palmary notes the dearth of information on this, she also indicates that 'the research on child migrants indicates very poor implementation of the legal and policy framework and significant abuses of migrant children's rights' (Palmary 2009: 3).

The most frequently cited reason for migration amongst migrants with children is war and conflict, closely followed by economic factors (Palmary 2009: 34). Differences in the patterns of migration relate to such issues as where families settle, the gender of migrants, whether children are unaccompanied or not, and so on. A second study, on unaccompanied minors (Save the Children UK 2007), indicates that the most vul-

nerable children are those from neighbouring countries who move not far across the borders, and who are very unlikely to be in school, partly at least because of the lack of services available to them, such as social workers. This suggests the need to contextualise child migration carefully.

Generally, the research focuses on children's experiences of war, conflict and migration rather than on their educational experiences. The Palmary study does not extend into educational issues, while Clacherty's work (2006) reports on her educational interventions with child migrants who are not at school. There appear to be no published masters or doctoral dissertations on migrants in school.

Despite the lack of literature on foreign migrants in South African schools, there is ample literature on the ways in which racism has continued within schools, as well as on major shifts (Vally & Dalamba 1999; Soudien 2004; Nkomo, McKinney & Chisholm 2004; Chisholm 2008a; Nkomo & Vandeyar 2009). Previously white, Indian and coloured schools have admitted African pupils, though often on terms of assimilation (Soudien 2004). Race continues its role, though in forms different from those of the apartheid years. As Chisholm points out, urban schools 'are remaking the nation, still along lines heavily inflected by race, yet differently, in a way that permits co-operation and conflict, harmony and violence, cultural chauvinism as well as cosmopolitan nationalism ... In this instance ... migrants appear to be the new "other"' (Chisholm 2008b: 260). Such othering of migrants is set against the official policies of inclusion, manifested in schools in history textbooks and school policies, for example (Chisholm 2008b).

Xenophobia

South African constitutional, legal and policy changes make specific provisions for safeguarding the rights of refugees. The new South African Constitution 'enshrines the rights of all people in our country' (Republic of South Africa 1996). Most rights, such as the right not to be detained without trial or to be subjected to violence, and the right to join labour unions, apply equally to citizens and non-citizens, while specific clauses address the rights that are held only by citizens, such as the right to vote. A section also specifically addresses the rights of children. The Refugee Act (Republic of South Africa 1998) brought South Africa in line with international conventions, and states that a refugee 'enjoys full legal protection, which includes the rights set out in Chapter 2 of the Constitution and the right to remain in the Republic in accordance with the provisions of this Act.' A new Immigration Act of 2002 replaced apartheid legislation (Crush 2001; Crush & McDonald 2001) and South Africa became a signatory to conventions on the rights of refugees. There were amnesties for different categories of African foreigners; over 350 000 who were in the country illegally or who had no rights to stay were given rights to permanent residence or citizenship. It was now possible for African foreigners to consider the possibility of settling (Posel 2004), thus enabling parents to come with their children.

Despite this, the established pattern of authoritarian handling of African migrants documented in the 1990s has continued into the 2000s; state institutions, such as the police and the Department of Home Affairs, the department responsible for handling migrants, have continuously acted in contradiction of the legal and policy framework (Peberdy 2001; Landau 2006a; International Federation for Human Rights 2008). They also demonstrate xenophobic practices: ‘...police officers and officials from the Department of Home Affairs are given such excessive powers over extremely vulnerable people that the bribery, extortion and corruption become not only possible but regular practices’ (Neocosmos 2008: 589).

Official discrimination is consistent with a prevalent hostility towards African foreigners. The term *amakwerekwere*, isiZulu in origin but in common discourse across South Africa, refers to African foreigners in terms similar to the term *barbari* in ancient Greek, i.e. people whose language is strange and unintelligible (Nyamnjoh 2010: 65). Hostility erupted into physical attacks that spread through the country in May 2008. Researchers generally concur that African foreigners occupy the lowest social and economic positions, and are subject to pervasive prejudice and exclusion (Harris 2002; Warner & Finchilescu 2003; Landau 2006a; Nyamnjoh 2010). Nyamnjoh, for example, writes that ‘the hierarchy of humanity inherited from apartheid South Africa is replayed, with white South Africans at the helm as superiors, black South Africans in the middle as superior inferiors, and *Makwerekwere* as the inferior scum of humanity’ (Nyamnjoh 2010:66). Here Nyamnjoh locates xenophobia as intrinsic to racial oppression, as an inherent part of the racial hierarchy.

The racial system in South Africa from colonial times subordinated all Africans, but did so differentially, and systematically promoted ethnic divisions amongst Africans, for example through the creation of ‘homelands’ based on which ethnic group was meant to be where (MacDonald 2006:66). It is argued here that xenophobia draws on the same patterns. In the 2008 violence at least 41 African foreigners and 21 local African people died, but no other foreigners and no one from the other population groups in South Africa (Misago et al. 2010). This xenophobia applies unequally to white and African foreigners (Nyamnjoh 2010: 66). I personally witnessed this when I (a teacher in higher education) introduced a panel of foreign staff members to a large first-year class. As panel members were introduced, there was loud cheering and clapping for each white foreigner; there was silence for African foreigners.

The stereotypes expressed against African foreigners in South Africa include such comments as ‘they have come here to take the locals’ women’, or ‘they are here to take our jobs’, ‘they are drug dealers’, ‘they are involved in crime’ and so on (Newham 2003; Misago et al. 2010). A frequent attitude is that they are a threat, that they are a drain on the state and that they are given preferential treatment by government officials (Landau 2006a; Misago et al. 2010). In reality African migrants tend to place little strain on state resources, in part because many open small businesses that create new work opportunities (Landau 2006a). While the violence in 2008 drew on specific local

factors in addition to these stereotypes, they played a key role in underpinning participation in and acceptance of the violent attacks (Misago et al. 2010).

Without exploring causes of the xenophobia in depth, it is perhaps useful to note various explanations for the causes of xenophobia, which are not all mutually exclusive. A popular one is that xenophobia arises in the context of competition for resources among poor South Africans; Polzer (2008) provides evidence to challenge this notion. Another highlights the role of nationalism in fuelling xenophobia. Neocosmos (2008) writes of a 'politics of fear' inherent in State and popular discourses of xenophobia. These are based on a sense of South African exceptionalism and citizenship based on indigeneity. He quotes Fanon (1990), writing in 1961, as describing in specific forms the process through which African nationalism leads to attacks on 'non-national Africans'. The legacy of a system that historically marked African people by skin colour, that asserted their lack of right to be in white South Africa, and that characterised them as violent people and unworthy is that the same attitudes are directed against a new 'other' (Misago et al. 2010); one may for example hear a youngster mocking a fellow South African who is darker than most local people as *ikwerekwere*. A third explanation is structural (Cole 2009); it links the role of labour migrancy in serving capitalist interests to a xenophobic ideology in that xenophobia ensures the marginalisation of foreign workers, who are thus persuaded to accept lower wages.

An acknowledgement of the extent of xenophobia against African foreigners also needs to be balanced against a recognition of the opposition to xenophobia within South Africa and availability of such discourses to migrants. Constitutional protections, as pointed out, do exist. And while Sharp (2008) and Neocosmos (2008) identify exclusionary practices, they also report countervailing inclusionary practices that protect the rights of African migrants. During the 2008 attacks individuals and groups intervened to forestall the violence (Misago et al 2010); such intervention drew largely on the inclusive ethic of the anti-apartheid struggle (Dlamini 2009).

These approaches to understanding xenophobia do not however explore its reception and responses among those against whom it is targeted. A further explanation would draw on the concept of internalisation as used in this article. This is explored below.

Migrant children and their responses within education

Much of the international research on migrants in schools has focused on achievement patterns. There is ample evidence internationally that many migrant groups aspire to achieve well in schools (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2002: 1-2). The failure of some migrant groups to achieve is often attributed to discrimination.

A suggestive argument is that by Ogbu (1990) and Gibson and Ogbu (1991), who distinguish between achievement patterns of 'voluntary migrants', such as those who seek to move for better economic opportunities, and 'caste-like' migrants, who move

under conditions of coercion, such as slavery (e.g. African-Americans in the USA). Ogbu's thesis is that the latter group internalise a negative view of their chances within education, while voluntary migrants see it as the route to success and respond accordingly. As Fass puts it, '... [those who] expect to be discriminated against ... do not benefit from the migration' (Fass 2005: 945).

Spencer and Harpalani (2008) reject this thesis for African-Americans, arguing that racism in schools is a more direct factor in explaining under-achievement. Gillborn (1997), in Britain, similarly argues that racism provides a better explanation of differences in the achievement of migrant groups. Portes and MacLeod (1996), examining the role of parents of second-generation migrants, highlight the relationships between socio-economic status, education and discrimination. They argue that '... a favourable governmental and societal reception leads to faster socioeconomic mobility, a more positive self-image, and better integrated immigrant communities' (Portes & MacLeod 1996: 257) and conclude that '... inequalities in the objective situations and subjective outlooks of parents converged with the observed academic performance of children, indicating that both class and ethnic privilege are transmitted from one generation to the next' (Portes & MacLeod 1996: 271).

In different terms, internalising a negative set of expectations, linked with the experience of discrimination, is likely to lead to poor achievement by migrants. Generally, this literature would predict that first-generation migrant children who do not know the major local language and who experience acute xenophobia are likely to underperform, as will the next generation. However, there is no one pattern that applies, and it is important to bear in mind that '... children's integration and performance will vary according to where they move from, where they move to, why they move, and how old they are' (Fass 2005: 944).

In order to probe these issues, a qualitative case study, focusing on a specific group within a school, was undertaken. The use of interviews and focus group interviews with the young migrants was motivated by the need to capture the texture of their language, about themselves, their situation, and the others with whom they interact (details of participants are given below).

Introductory interviews with the principal and deputy principal were held to gain an understanding of their perceptions of the migrants and their relationship to the school. In addition, the teachers of the relevant grades were asked to write a short report on their perception of the migrants in their classes. These data were supplemented by the analysis of results, and observation by the researcher.

The fieldwork was conducted in 2007/2008, with one interview in 2010. The school was selected on the basis that it was known to have a high proportion of migrant children. Permission was willingly given for access to the learners within the constraints of the timetable.

The school is a primary school near the beachfront of Durban, a major port and tourist

destination on the east coast of South Africa. Legally, under apartheid, it admitted only white children and had only white teaching staff. At that time (as now) the medium of instruction was English; in earlier years, it would have been much better resourced than schools for other racial groups. However, even during the apartheid period, most children were working-class, and according to the principal, academic achievement had not been the school's strong point.

With the end of apartheid, pupil numbers grew while the racial composition changed radically, with all but the poorest of white children moving to other schools. Large numbers of African children of limited income have entered the school, many of whom travel from elsewhere in the city.

The school is neat and clean, though unprepossessing. The impression given is of a well-run school in which there have been no renovations in recent years. During school breaks, or at the end of the school day, children play sport or simply move freely on the sports ground. Apart from the one employee who patrols the gate, there is no obvious emphasis on security. While the school is professionally run, it has few of the resources that are evident in those formerly white schools that enjoy higher status.

The school is located in an area that was long seen as deprived, though in recent years there has been a rapid increase in the values of properties close to the beaches, and the construction of upmarket apartments. Just one block behind these apartments are some buildings in very poor states of repair. Because of the low cost of some of these apartments, the area attracts new, low-income arrivals. The area has the local reputation of being a haven for prostitution and drug dealing, in which Nigerians are reportedly heavily involved (Leggett 2002; see also Health Systems Trust 2005). The principal reported that the parents of some migrants have moved their families to a suburb not far from the city centre, but continue to locate children in the school, in her view because they value the education the school provides their children.

The school has a relatively high proportion of African migrant children – roughly 15%. Of the 1 420 learners at the time of the study, 64% were local African children, 16% white and 4% Indian. 'Local' African children include those who come from the Eastern Cape Province and were perceived by the principal as struggling academically. As in many formerly white schools that were desegregated, the racial composition of staff differs markedly from the racial composition of learners. Of the staff of 43 teachers, about 16% are African, 24% white, 8% coloured, and 51% Indian.

Parents of some migrants at the school can be found amongst the car guards or street hawkers along the Durban beachfront or in the central city. Casual conversation with car guards often reveals that some with limited English may nonetheless have considerable educational qualifications – engineer, agronomist, and so on. The employment equity legislation in South Africa, designed to undo the privileges brought to white South Africans by apartheid, nonetheless prefers all South African citizens, white or black, to foreign citizens. Given high unemployment, 25,3% in early

2010 (Statistics SA 2010), this makes employment beyond the informal sector very difficult for migrants. Those with middle class backgrounds are now exposed to the vulnerabilities of the poor.

The principal reported that migrant parents seldom interact directly with the school. Her attempts to encourage one parent to stand for election to the school governing body failed. She stated that ‘they don’t feel they have the right to be involved’, ascribing this to the feeling that they have not been in the country long enough to know how things run, and that they work very long hours.

The school has developed rules for the handling of issues of xenophobia, including potential expulsion for the use of pejorative terms about migrants. Charities that support refugees have worked closely with the school, and there are specific interventions to promote a fully inclusive approach, such as classes in English for parents. The school fees (about \$340) of many migrants are paid by a support agency, and in addition many qualify legally for state fee remission on the grounds of poverty.

Grades 6 and 7, the two highest grades in the school, were selected for the study because of the greater proficiency in English at this level, and potential for easier communication between researcher and researched. Most migrant children in the school have no English when they arrive. In 2008, of the 271 pupils in these grades, 48 were identified by the principal as migrants.

The parents of each participating child signed consent forms; the anonymity of respondents and the school was preserved. The intention had been to interview parents, and children were asked to take consent forms home. Some said directly that their parents would not agree to this, because they would fear I would report them to Home Affairs. They were correct; I received only two responses, each with the simple word ‘No’.

To establish rapport, a game (‘Standing Ground’) was used, in which all present were asked to stand if a statement applied to them. This was clearly fun, and the youngsters responded with alacrity. The activity, recorded on video, also provided some information about the respondents and their attitudes – which were generally a bouncy confidence.

Selection of respondents depended largely on who was available at the time of fieldwork. Questionnaires were administered, and focus group and individual interviews conducted. Thirty respondents completed questionnaires that aimed to provide demographic information.

Focus group interviews involved three groups of seven learners. As (for reasons that were not clear) more girls than boys arrived at the interviews, it was decided to have one group of boys and two of girls. Questions were broad, asking what they liked and did not like about coming from other countries, what they found welcoming or not welcoming within the school, and so on. Interviews took place with 15 learners in

Grades 6 and 7, selected by the principal on the basis of balance between genders. The questions focused in particular on the experience of leaving the home country, whether they had been at school in the home country, the reasons for leaving, the current occupation of parents and what the parents say to children about the school, and their academic progress. In 2010 an interview took place with three boys and five girls in the same grades, focusing more on issues of language.

Eighteen girls and 12 boys completed the questionnaires. Thirteen were in Grade 7 and 17 in Grade 6. The average age was 13 years. They came mainly from countries affected by war. Two were born in South Africa of foreign parents, and are thus second-generation migrants. Of the rest, 13 were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, six from Burundi, five from Rwanda, and one each from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania. On average, the age at arrival was roughly seven years, and they had thus been in the country on average five to six years. Few had experience of schooling in their home country, given that the period before their arrival often involved movement and disruption.

The average number of people in the household is given as six, but it seems likely that that was an under-recording, as some respondents did not include themselves when counting the numbers. The great majority live in apartments and not houses, probably in over-crowded conditions, making studying difficult. According to the principal, migrant children's families often share their apartments with more than one other family. Despite the disruption of the experience of migrancy, however, most respondents report having both a mother and father in the household, which we know from other sources would contrast sharply with the experience of many local children. Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes and Milburn (2009) find amongst migrants that having two or more adults at home provides greater supervision and discipline.

The linguistic background of the children varies considerably. Many speak French or an African language in the household, but the majority report that more than one language is spoken at home. The three most commonly reported African languages are Swahili, Kirirwanda, and Kirundi. Research in the United States indicates that English fluency predicts future achievement of migrants well, suggesting that the children in this study are likely to underachieve (Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes & Milburn 2009). However, it is also clear that English is the language of choice for interaction within the migrant group, while proficiency in languages is obviously a source of pride, with one learner claiming eight languages. Against the pejorative term *amakwerekwere*, which focuses on unintelligibility, the youngsters assert their superior ability to communicate.

The 15 respondents interviewed were drawn almost, but not completely, from the 30 who completed questionnaires. The interviews provided an opportunity to check demographic details more deeply, though many respondents do not know what their parents did in the home country – perhaps parents do not dwell on the past with their

children. They reveal a pattern of both continuity and discontinuity from the occupations in the home country. A salon worker in the DRC, and her husband, a shoemaker, find similar work in South Africa; a teacher becomes a truck driver, and an office worker a car guard; an agronomist is unemployed.

The study does not attempt to provide an understanding of all relationships in the school related to the migrants – for example, there is no access to the perceptions or experiences of the local children or of migrant parents. Findings cannot be generalised to other contexts, not least because of the relatively high proportion of migrant children in this school, and its generally positive orientation towards the migrants. The article describes the responses of the migrants within a particular context.

Findings

The study was interested in finding out how these young migrants respond to their experiences as migrants and what kind of identity they form within the school. It was also interested in the ways the young migrants respond within education to their situation.

From the outset, it was evident that the respondents presented themselves in lively and assertive ways. At the initial meeting there were immediate questions as to the purpose of the research and how the information would be used. A request to record the initial activities on video was discussed and a decision made to accept this provided it was for research purposes only and not for presentation, even in a conference setting. Those respondents who spoke in these terms demonstrated an awareness of research processes more typical of educated adults than of children of their age

Experiences of migration and xenophobia inside and outside the school

How did these young migrants speak and feel about being a migrant? Some had been very young at the time of migrancy, and did not recall what happened, but reported what they had been told. Generally, the memory is one of hardship, pain and a desire for a better life. A Malawian child, who left when he was 2–3, remembers his parents telling him ‘... that there was war and that our house was burnt down’. A Congolese child says, ‘I was so young. I heard lots of stories. Stories about wars, and bad education and that the DRC was a bad environment.’ Another similarly recalls, ‘Just the fight and shooting, and my parents had to run from side to side, we didn’t know how we would get to SA. And the raping of people, and they almost killed my father. Because he was a soldier of Mobutu, they almost killed him, and that is why he came to South Africa.’ Another child, a Rwandan, was born in Tanzania, to which his family had fled before moving to South Africa.

Others were somewhat older at the time. One boy reported how he had fled his primary school in Burundi at age 13 when rebel soldiers arrived to recruit children

and through a series of chance encounters ended on a truck. The driver left him on the streets of Johannesburg, where he spent a year before getting support from a refugee agency, which placed him with a Congolese family in Durban. He had lost all contact with his family, and did not expect ever to find them.

Where youngsters could report on the experience, most reported it in terms of disruption and most identified armed conflict as their family's reason for leaving. In some cases, the respondents were not clear about the reasons for leaving, and in a couple of cases a general desire for a better life was given as the reason, raising the question as to how they respond to both the traumatic experiences and the aspirations that informed their flight.

Asked what they did not like within the school, they volunteered, 'When the children tease us and call us *kwerekweres*.' Teachers too are cited as being xenophobic. One mentioned an incident in 2005, 'When a certain person called this girl, called her a certain name, *kwerekwere*, and went to tell a certain teacher, who shall remain anonymous, she went to tell the teacher, and the teacher started laughing instead of sorting the matter out ...'. There is pain in the statement of another child that 'Most people in this school disrespect, especially children, they want to play with Zulus, not refugees'.

However, the school was certainly perceived as an area of relative protection, as the great bulk of these experiences occurred outside the school: 'Outside, they say, move, you kk, you *kwerekwere*.' The recall of hostile incidents communicated how the othering takes place: 'One of my friends spat, and this group of girls came and said, "Please don't throw spit because your spit will be jumping on us, and then we will get HIV".' Two girls laughed at an incident, and one reported: 'Strange things, the other time we were walking, both of us, this man came and poured water on us.' The other girl: 'I went home wet.' They reported their exposure to stereotypes – 'They are jealous because they say we are taking their jobs' – and claim that South Africans are 'racist' because they 'look down on us'.

In these accounts there is a sense both of the common experience of discrimination and of cheerful resistance. However, there was direct anger in relation to their uncertain legal status and their experience of the Department of Home Affairs. The accusations were specific and articulate: 'They don't give us what we want, like the IDs, they never give us ... They always take bribes because it takes a long time to get the right documents.' One gave an account of a specific meeting: 'When we went to the City Hall to meet the Minister of Home Affairs on 1st March, and why we aren't getting the IDs and stuff, the Minister said that if you are here for more than five years, you are considered a South African, no matter what anyone says. How come some of us were here 10–12 years, when you go to Home Affairs, when you ask for a South African ID they won't give it to you, they say come again, they give you excuses?'

These accounts are more about getting the 'right documents' to enable them to stay

without problem than about South African citizenship – consistent with the findings of Landau (2006b) that African migrants in Johannesburg are seeking opportunities, but not to be rooted in the new environment.

Migrant identity

The remarkable finding of this research is the positive identity that migrant children in this context appear to be developing, despite their experience of xenophobia both inside and outside the school. This identity is one which clearly distinguishes them from local South Africans and which elevates themselves in relation to South Africans through the adoption of an oppositional, broader, more cosmopolitan identity. Another important feature of this identity is the relatively strong orientation to learning and educational achievement. And indeed the school, once noted for its mediocre academic achievement, is now extraordinary for its high achievement.

The respondents spoke of themselves as a group ('we', 'us'), clearly distinguished from other children: 'I think it is because we are more committed than they are, and have a vision and some of them don't.' When asked what makes them feel not welcome in the school, one responded: 'When the children tease us and call us *kwerekweres*.'

Potentially the research process itself may construct respondents as a group, but there is consistent evidence of a degree of commonality. In one meeting a boy sat silently, and I was told that he had not yet learnt enough English to participate; there was a sense of the others taking responsibility for assisting him. In addition, at each meeting there was lively interaction amongst the youngsters, questioning and challenging (e.g. a debate on the meanings of 'migrant' and 'refugee').

While many came from situations of violent conflict where their families may have been on opposing sides, if such divisions continued to be relevant amongst the migrants, they were not articulated or visible. Similarly, Triulzi (2007) gives an account of a railway building occupied by African migrants in Rome, in which migrants from conflict-ridden countries find acceptance, whatever their roles in those conflicts.

In response to a focus group question: *If I were to ask you, what nationality are you, what would you say?* there was no clear-cut response. Some indicated that they were South African, others that they were not. In one group, a girl said, 'I am proud not to be from South Africa'. When one boy referred to 'our country' and he was asked which one he referred to, he said, 'By my country I mean ... [long pause] Congo.'

Landau (2006b: 138) refers to 'an idiom of transience and superiority that defines the migrants as much by what they are (migrants) as by what they are not (South Africans).' This lack of rootedness was first evident in the initial game, when youngsters were asked to stand up if they had been to various parts of the world; a significant proportion claimed to have visited countries in Europe or the United States. The interviews though revealed no such visits; it seemed it had become a

competition to pretend to have been in places they would have liked to have been in. In the questionnaires, asked where they expected to be in ten years' time, not one gave the country of origin. Unlike the adult migrants in Landau's Johannesburg study (2006b), there is little sense of connection to their home countries. There appears to be a sense of rootedness in a cosmopolitan, local identity.

While poverty will make travel overseas unlikely – unless a youngster gains a scholarship to study abroad, which is possible – it is striking how a cosmopolitan, non-nationalist identity is articulated that contradicts the notion of indigeneity. Such cosmopolitanism can be read in these terms in two ways, one as an internalised shame over African identity, the other, more positively, as a rejection of attitudes that judge you by a narrow national identity.

At the last focus group interview, the respondents resisted attempts at classification, and articulated an identity that they would share with others – possibly reflecting the inclusivity that the school prides itself on, an inclusivity that echoes the South African Constitution:

How should I speak about you?

What do you mean?

Should I call you South Africans?

No. [in chorus]

Are you migrants?

No.

Are you refugees?

NO!

It is how you see us. We are people. This is everyone's planet.

This seems a rejection of both South African and migrant identity, but is more complex; in subsequent discussion, they agreed that they are indeed migrants and refugees; the issue was how they wished to be spoken of. Against the negative ascriptions of African foreigners they claim their value as human beings. This is potentially an area where the inclusive ethic of the school and national curriculum may play a role (Chisholm 2008b).

Responses within education

An examination of the academic results of migrants compared with non-migrants in seven classes in Grades 6 to 8 shows that whereas migrants generally outperform local children in all grades, they significantly outperform them in two out of the seven classes (see table overleaf). Far from being constrained by unhappy experiences and outsider status, it seems that the migrants draw on them to achieve academically as well as to develop a perspective and thoughtfulness: 'You get to know two different things, instead of just living in one place, seeing the same thing all the time', and 'You learn more about the country you are going to or are in.'

This speaks to more than dogged determination to achieve or the carrying out of

parental injunctions; there is a suggestion that they see their migrancy as a resource, the opportunity of being in a role that turns marginality to advantage. Fass (2005: 945) writes that ‘the experience of migration through its very dislocations and the contrasts it encourages, one might argue, has its privileges.’

Against the stereotypes of dependent foreigners who do nothing for themselves, the migrants assert their commitment to learning, and their positive sense of the school. The principal quoted one Burundian from a particularly poor family: ‘I am like a sponge and I want to learn everything you know.’ He had through scholarships achieved admission to a prestigious university and graduated well. Similarly, the respondents spoke frequently about a determination to achieve academically, supported by their parents, many of whom insisted on specific careers: ‘They [the parents] tell us that we must go to school every day and stay until Grade 12. Listen to teachers and try to understand what the teachers say. Learn English so that you can be valuable in the world,’ and ‘I must keep on studying maths and physics. They want me to become a CA [chartered accountant] or engineer.’ This is not without tension: ‘They want me to go to university and become a doctor or a lawyer, which I don’t want to become, I just want to vomit. I just want to become a singer, I can sing. To become an international singer.’

The youngsters speak of their focus on work: ‘Migrants tend to do better. They try hard.’ ‘I come to school to learn, not to play, when they [parents] were young like us

Analysis of academic results of migrant and non-migrants, by grade and class

Grade	Status	Numbers	Mean score	Statistical significance at 0,05 level of significance
6a	Migrants	8	684	Significant
	Non-migrants	33	553	
6b	Migrants	6	592	Not significant
	Non-migrants	34	512	
6c	Migrants	8	624	Not significant
	Non-migrants	32	585	
6d	Migrants	4	677	Not significant
	Non-migrants	38	609	
7a	Migrants	7	653	Significant
	Non-migrants	29	539	
7b	Migrants	7	548	Not significant
	Non-migrants	29	541	
7c	Migrants	8	622	Not significant
	Non-migrants	28	595	

they didn't have the opportunity to learn, I must focus on the teacher and the lesson, study, work hard so I can achieve in life, and have success.' Teachers are seen mainly in positive terms: 'They are so beautiful. Understanding, accommodating, caring, you know what, all those words.' On a couple of occasions a youngster would ask if they could now return to class, as if anxious not to miss anything.

In the Standing Ground game some questions focused on careers; the jobs to which the youngsters responded with greatest enthusiasm were those of doctor and (especially) business person. In contrast, not one aspired to becoming a police officer or teacher. The recording shows them cringing when asked if any planned to become a teacher – this might be no more than a youthful display of scepticism towards education, or a rejection of paid employment. In a society where the stereotype is that migrants take jobs, the migrants put forward a view of themselves as independent professionals, potentially in fact job creators.

The sense of achievement permeates the language of the migrants, and seems central to their common identity. The principal stated that the academic standard of the school has risen with the migrant children, and ascribes this to their determination and hard work. Some academic and sports scholarships are offered to successful students by more prestigious schools; the great majority of these are won by migrants.

At one meeting with learners, the researcher had just been given some of the academic results. When the learners present became aware of this, there were intense attempts to get him to reveal the information. One respondent, aged 12, said, 'We do better than them [South Africans], and it could be that we went to more strict schools in the countries that we came from. Or that our parents are strict with us about learning.' Another learner concurred about the attitude of parents, and added: 'When we came here we saw that the South African children are not serious about learning.' The youngsters seemed determined to emphasise both their success and their ability to hypothesise the reasons for it. There is also an implied rejection of the identity of South African children.

Many respondents made references to their success, speaking of '85% in all subjects' or 'I think I am doing very well. My marks are 79%. So I am doing well.' Evidence comes from school reports and from comments by teachers: 'I do quite well, because the teachers tell me so. Better than other SA children.'; 'My report card shows it. I want to do well, that is why.'; and 'Very well. Because I have never failed. Better than other children.' There is independent evidence of this success, though it does not apply to all migrants – see the table on the previous page.

The emphasis on achievement was not limited to formal studies. One teacher commented on their enthusiastic participation in sport and other extramural activities, while one respondent spoke with pride of his role in interpreting between migrant newcomers and teachers.

Conclusion

This article has provided evidence of the development of a strong, positive, cosmopolitan, achievement-oriented sense of identity among young migrants who came with their families from war-torn African countries to settle in Durban.

The literature tends to suggest negative outcomes for a migrant group faced with poverty, social exclusion and language barriers. That the group in this study is characterised instead by confidence, high aspirations and claims of achievement suggests a significant role for agency. Clearly most parents insist on study and achievement; other aspects, such as the confidence, assertiveness and the emphasis on English as the common language, may not derive from parents.

Migrant groups which succeed draw on various forms of cultural capital as support (Yosso 2005; Devine 2009). What is distinctive about this group is the sharp dislocation between the negativity of the discrimination and the insistently positive characteristics that the migrants display.

The concept of resistance within education (Willis 1997, McLaren 2003) typically suggests ways in which researchers come to see in the hostility or passivity of youth the seeds, generally wasted, of some challenge to the prevailing authority. As McLaren points out, 'Students reject the culture of classroom learning because, for the most part, it is delibidinalised (eros-denying) and is infused with a cultural capital to which subordinate groups have little legitimate access' (McLaren 2003: 91).

Such a description does not fit this group, who, faced with the possibility of reacting to any exclusion within the school, instead cheerfully and confidently claim all the benefits it offers. It is thus argued that their responses need to be understood as a form of resistance, not to the school, whose resources they wish to appropriate, but to the negative definitions of themselves set out by the xenophobia.

Describing this as resistance raises issues addressed by Hollander and Einwohner (2004), who identify a key difference amongst scholars of resistance over whether it is transformative or not, and what the content of this transformative resistance is. The evidence from this article suggests that developing a vision of a society that is hopeful and inclusive when such a vision is being denied is a form of resistance, whether it takes the form of visible confrontation or not. Similarly, Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argue for the recognition of what they term 'counter story-telling' as a form of resistance to racism, and Yosso (2005) includes within what she terms 'resistant capital' the development of positive values of the self.

While Hollander and Einwohner (2004: 544) categorise types of resistance according to whether there is 'recognition by targets' or not, their definition of 'target' (ibid.: 536) includes social structures, which cannot recognise anything. Some forms of resistance, such as Gandhian *satyagraha*, make strong distinctions between the injustice being resisted and the people implicated in it; the 'target' is the injustice, not the person (Terchek 1998).

Such resistance takes work, both the commitment to study that many speak of, but also the work of developing the articulate engagement with each other – for most, in a foreign language – through which resources can be shared. That it is cheerful and confident does not negate its capacity for challenging the oppressive relationships. Whether such resistance can be sustained beyond the school in this form, and whether instead the migrants come to internalise the negativity about themselves as they near adulthood, and direct their energies towards resentment and hostility, remains to be seen.

In conclusion, migrancy opens a window within which there is a heightened possibility for agency. An incoming group, of different national and ethnic identities, might work to assimilate itself into South African society. They do not take that path, perhaps because they do not want inclusion (Landau 2006b) or because society rejects them; nor do they aspire to return to the home countries. Although they articulate an identity that is at once cosmopolitan and inclusive, with time, unless they move to other countries, they will need to find some place in South African society.

At present, though, their presence demonstrates and celebrates positive qualities that contradict the negative characterisation of foreigners. It is argued that these young migrants are a hopeful resource within South African education.

Note: Where necessary, and to provide an insight into the structural relationships, use is made of the South African racial terms of ‘African’ (black people of African descent), ‘Indian’ (South Africans of Indian descent), ‘coloured’ (black people of mixed descent), and ‘white’ (those of European descent). This is not intended to signal any endorsement of the validity of these categories as anything but social constructs. To distinguish foreign Africans from South African ‘Africans’, the term ‘local’ is used for the latter (though the latter include South Africans who have a history of migrancy within the country).

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