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# The “Good” South African: Concepts of Nation-Building and Social Cohesion in the Public School Setting

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THE “GOOD” SOUTH AFRICAN: CONCEPTS OF NATION-BUILDING  
AND SOCIAL COHESION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SETTING

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this research project is to examine the ways in which the classroom, teacher, and student dynamics of a South African urban primary school create a site for nation-building, citizenship, and the promotion of social cohesion. Understanding that the school serves as an institution for the production of ideology, socialization, and spreading of knowledge, this research will investigate how curriculum, authority, and policy influence what it means to be a “good” South African citizen, and thus, a contributor to forming both personal and national identity. Through observing the “Life Orientation” courses, the research attempts to grasp the kind of civic engagement and/or skills that the government expects children to internalize at this young age. This research further explores the ways in which discipline is used in the classroom, and thus the ability of the learners to respond to these messages put forth by a higher authority—all of which is part and parcel of citizenship. Through messages from students and teachers, it is clear how the concept of the nation that is projected in the classroom is contested and confirmed, resisted and retained by members of the school community. Operating as its own democratic community, but under strict guidance and authority from government policy, this research paints a picture of how the school negotiates concepts of citizenship and nation-building in hopes of reaching state mandated goals of social cohesion. Through understanding the dynamics and conceptions cultivated within this public school, the following paper both adds to existing literature in the field of educational studies, political policy and development in post-conflict societies, as well as the field of social cohesion.*

## INTRODUCTION

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, Constitutional Hill, in partnership with the Gauteng Provincial Government, launched the Thand’Umzansi campaign to aid in the projected state goals of social cohesion and nation-building. Noting Constitutional Hill as the most important actor in promoting the “beacon of democracy, human rights, and constitutionalism,” the campaign seeks to ensure that all public schools show their patriotism, widely (Polity ZA, 2013). Every Monday, students will be required to recite the pre-amble to the constitution and sing the national anthem. Also, the national flag must be present at each public school. This campaign is a primary example of what I will term “visible nationalism”: indoctrinating the love of one’s country, first and foremost, and as recipe to enhance social cohesion and national unity. Though the campaign

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is specific to Gauteng province, its launch is telling of government stated goals of nation-building and social cohesion. The concept of building social solidarity through teaching citizenship and discipline through school systems is not unique to South Africa, however they are particularly relevant when set within this divided and transforming society.

In accordance with national legislature and documentation, the South African government continually states the ways in which social cohesion and nation-building are foundational to an inclusive society. Through stressing a national mentality of “Ubuntu” and “African solidarity,” the state has advertised that it is through collectivization that unity and reconciliation will come about (The Presidency, 2011, p. 3). However, and simultaneously, the transitioning South Africa as a developmental state, under the influence of globalization, is deeply influenced by its emerging free market—the influx of modern capitalism and competition. Thus, the “good” South African citizen is caught between the contradictions of tradition and modernity, of communitarianism and individualism. As has been argued by Barolsky (2013), the process of calling repeatedly upon Ubuntu as panacea to national problems in fact de-politicizes the act of creating national coherence—it siphons off the responsibility of social solidarity onto South African citizens. By isolating social values from larger political and economic structures, the state ignores the ways in which the developmental objectives that are endorsed can prevent this social solidarity from happening. In other words, emerging, neoliberal economic programming (see Barolsky, 2013; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2003), consumerism, and focus on individualism are deepening the socioeconomic divide while the solution posited is simply, solidarity. What is ignored are the ways in which the latter—Ubuntu/African solidarity—is greatly inhibited by the unaddressed, larger political and economic structures that perpetuate division.

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The responsibility of the individual to endorse social cohesion is further exemplified in national legislature. The most recent “Strategy for Social Cohesion and Nation-Building” articulates that the first and foremost component to social cohesion is through volunteerism and civic participation (The Presidency, 2013). Thus, citizens are ideologically framed as the source of tumult and disorder in the state—a failing education system, healthcare, racism, and other forms of domination are not called into question. Further, and as is evidenced by the aforementioned state efforts to building nationhood within the school system, government aspirations of individual-driven social solidarity can and may very well be inscribed onto young South African bodies. That is, through learning what it means to be a “good” citizen—self-driven, communal, traditional, modern—the perspective holds that the country will be transformed. However, within all of these mixed messages and contradictions, concepts of what kind of “transformed” and “unified” nation this produces must be called into question. What kind of social cohesion is being produced if economic and political structures are not addressed? How are divisions even more deeply re-inscribed if self-determination serves as the derivative for social cooperation?

Looking at the school as both an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1970), that produces and reproduces a particular government narrative, and also as a disciplinary apparatus (Foucault, 1988), that inscribes a particular trope of “good” citizenship, this research looks at the ways in which nationalism, national identity, and responsibility for social cohesion are projected on and through the student body at a particular school. In examining the Life Orientation class, a mandated requirement on civics and life lessons that is also a Matric-examined subject, the project will see how this course determines concepts of “good” citizenship, what collective idea of nationhood is being promoted, and, consequently, what this means for prospects of social cohesion.

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This study focuses on the experiences of teachers as well as grade 7 students in an urban primary school of Durban, South Africa. Particularly, this is examined in their relationship to the Life Orientation curriculum and class. As a relatively successful public school that provides educational services for many low-income and refugee students and families, this school is a realistic site where we may begin to see government political imposition. It is a public school, indicating its necessary adherence to national curriculum, but also possesses a high teacher morale and student attendance—aspects that cannot be boasted as universally present in South African schools. Part of the objective of this research is to both understand how government policy plays a role in shaping the students, but also to understand how learners independently think and act outside of their roles in the classroom—a capacity that can be granted in a school of this stature.

This paper is a culmination of theoretical framing, policy analysis, and ethnographic research. To begin, it is important to understand how the South African government defines *social cohesion*, *nation-building*, and *citizenship*. The theoretical frameworks behind each term will be thoroughly explained in the next section of this paper. Primarily, this project will explore the ways in which the South African state “states” its transformative goals of social cohesion and nation-building in this transitioning society, both inside and out of the Department of Education’s policies. Using the school as a site of measurement, it will also look to how tropes of citizenship, the nation, and social cohesion are conveyed to the student body. This research closely studies through what pedagogical and methodological tactics these are illustrated. Special attention must be paid to how the aforementioned contradictions of tradition and modernity manifest themselves within the student experience. Finally, this project will address the schooling apparatus as not only a site of ideological tropes, but also one of democratic

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practice and agency—students are actors, responsible for thinking and responding to imposed authority.

The following research study consists of six sections. First, and foremost, the paper begins with the context of the urban primary school, in question. Following this section is the literature review, which will theoretically and philosophically ground the variety of concepts involved in this paper. It will discuss scholarly critiques of the government’s strategy for social cohesion, draw upon a Foucauldian framework of understanding citizenship, speak to the formulation of democracy and contextualize South African nationalism, and, finally, understand the public school as an ideological, disciplinary, and biopolitical apparatus. I argue that we must understand the theoretical frameworks of the large variety of topics that have influenced this research paper, as through such we may open up space for their intersection and conversation. The literature review is then followed by an outline of the methodological approach used for this paper, describing observation, focus groups, and formal interviews. This section is supplemented by the notable limitations to the study. The bulk of the qualitative data collected is understood and dissected within the data analysis section of this paper, and organized thematically. Finally, I will finish with concluding thoughts, drawing again on the aforementioned theoretical frameworks, and provide recommendations for future study.

This research occupies a unique niche in the literature of social cohesion, nation-building, and citizenship. Although social cohesion and nation-building are two of the most prominent topics on the government’s agenda, the body of literature in this field is slim. Even more specifically, South Africa has little scholarly work that deal specifically with how these concepts are explored and manifested in civil society. While there has been research done in the field of citizenship, and further, what it means to be a democratic citizen in a transforming, post-conflict society, little of this study seeks to look at how this is done through public education.

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The work available also does not put citizenship into full conversation with nationalism and particular narratives of social cohesion. Finally, and because these fields are emerging and relatively new, little research has been done to suggest correlations between citizenship, social cohesion, nation-building, and the institution of the school. It is the hope of this project to open up space for a larger body of research to be explored.

### **THE SCHOOLING OF GOOD CITIZENS**

Due to the multi-dimensional nature of this research, it is necessary to give the adequate background and theoretical frameworks for all of the concepts covered. This section will provide a review of the literature on the theoretical concepts of social cohesion, citizenship, and nation-building. There is a very limited amount of qualitative research on topics of this nature, especially in the South African context. Most educational studies have since studied the transformation of schools post-apartheid, racial integration, curriculum reform, and so forth (see Jansen, 1998, 2009; Lewis & Naidoo, 2004; Shoeman, 2006, among many others). However, this section will also provide examples of international case studies done in public schools.

#### **On social cohesion and citizenship**

The body of research regarding social cohesion, especially in the South African context, is limited, yet growing. Originally emanating from a Canadian project of national coherence and integration, its proposed definition was “the ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity...based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity” (Jenson, 1998, p. 4). As it has been undertaken by the South African government, and in the project of national reconciliation, the practicing definition is altered to include measuring the “degree of social integration and inclusion” (The Presidency, 2012). As

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evidenced by the appropriation of this term in the South African context, and as Jenson (1998) points out, there are many definitions to this complicated term. It is widely known at its very core as an attempt to bring order into contexts of transition (Barolsky, 2013). Further, and as Jeannotte (2003) explains in relation to the Canadian transformation, the definition must be malleable in order to reflect a constantly globalizing, post-industrial world.

While it may seem paradoxical and perhaps anti-nation-state to critique utopian prospects of social cooperation, many scholars are in critique of this practice due to its focus to seek consensus on social values. Van Houdt (2008), Mouffe (1995) and others have illuminated the fact that any “consensus” may in fact be the view of civil society’s dominant actors, not actual cooperation. Further, by aiming for consensus, and presumably imposing that consensus, there is little room left for opposition to the hegemonic disposition. Barolsky (2013), Bernard (1995), and Friedman (2012), draw attention to an additional critique of social cohesion, in stating that this projected outcome pathologizes the previously assumed national disorder as fault of the individual citizens. Specifically, Barolsky (2013) points to how the discourse of social cohesion has discussed the social realm—relationships between and across citizens—as a “normative domain” that is curable and in need of intervention (p. 384). Thus, if the social realm is in need of remedy, then individual citizens are held responsible for its ‘illness.’ The shifting of this accountability from the South African government onto the people of South Africa further draws away from larger structural and institutional processes that may be the actual cause of population discord. Therefore, plans set out to help the process of coherence are, advertently or inadvertently, aimed at citizen behavior, not at larger political and economic constructions.

For this reason, in order to understand prospects of social cohesion one must also look deeply into concepts of “citizenship” as put forth by the South African state. While there exists a plethora of primarily feminist, Marxist, and post-modernist critiques of citizenship, naming the

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development of the “good” citizenship as training political communities for state benefit (e.g. Mouffe, 1995; Butler & Spivak, 2007; Foucault, 1997; Sears and Hughes, 2006; van Houdt, 2008 among many others), the South African case proves to hold even deeper criticism. Comaroff and Comaroff (2005) argue that one factor of exhibiting “good” citizenship in the newly democratic nation is promoting social solidarity—as also evidenced by policy regarding social cohesion (The Presidency, 2012). Further, the authors point out the contradictory ways in which these values manifest themselves, however, in the context of the developmental, democratic state. Individuals are simultaneously told to both commit themselves to the goal of coherence, and also act as self-determined, motivated, and rational economic actors. The contradictory nature of citizenship calls into question the types of “social cohesion” that encompasses the projected goal of the South African state. This literature serves an important foundation from which we may look at how “citizen” education takes place in South Africa, begin to understand how these contradictions are visible within such endeavor, and what this means for prospects of social cohesion.

### **Citizenship and citizenhood**

As a surge of academic interest has both noted and evidenced in its construction<sup>1</sup>, the concept of citizenship plays an important role in understanding not only individuals, but also how individuals are embedded within power relations. These power relations manifest tangible social, political, and economic effects onto a nation’s constituents, which, in turn, place high value on holding the “status” of being a “citizen.” Historically, the positioning of citizenship

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<sup>1</sup> As argued by Chipkin (2007), since the 1980s, the amount of academic work on citizenship has been highlighted in the contexts of the United States and Western Europe. The bulk of interest rallied around challenging the prodigal Reagan and Thatcher administrations’ notion of social democracy, the role of the state within such social democracy, and the individual’s adherence to such social democracy.

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grants privileges of the nation-state, including but not limited to property rights, political jurisdiction, education, and the right not to be deported.<sup>2</sup> However, equally important to the concept of citizenship is how one is viewed by the state as a productive, autonomous member of society.

As argued by Chipkin (2007), Foucault (1989, 1991), Butler (1997) and others, the political requisites to ‘good’ citizenship are not only acting as an agent in alignment with governmental objectives, but also possessing an infinite fidelity and commitment to the state. That is, to be part of the ideological identity (as distinct from the legal identity)<sup>3</sup> of citizenship is to feel a close tie with the nation in question—to feel connected to what Benedict Anderson refers to as the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991, p. 7). Later in this paper, I will return to this concept as it is pertinent to recognizing the ways in which citizenship, nation-building, and the public school both intersect with and supplement one another.

In drawing on the theoretical framing of Foucault (1989, 1994) regarding both the “constituting of subjects” and also the “productive aspects of power,” we can begin to understand the implications of both why citizenship is on the agenda of the state and also how its

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<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that the concept of citizenship spans the territory of race, class, gender, sexuality, abled-bodies, and so forth. Historically it has privileged the hegemonic elite in its articulation, and thus the legacy of apartheid and modes of domination present in South African history evidence the inequality that can exist even under the label of citizenship. (That is, of course, in addition to the large amount of xenophobic violence in the nation. However, this is a separate area of exploration.) The stated goal of nation-building, as dictated by the South African government, looks to citizenship as a common denominator of identity, and as a stepping stone to building social solidarity through recognizing the inequalities of citizenship at play.

<sup>3</sup> Especially in the context of South Africa, it is important to delineate between citizenship as an ideological identity and also as a legal identity. During the apartheid years, and especially for non-white citizens of the nation, a South African identity was one with which many did not necessarily connect. This was due to a refusal to be complicit with the state of the country’s political climate, and thus, a visceral expression of hatred towards the identity-label of “South African.” Hence, to legally *be* South African was very different than to ideologically or personally *feel* South African. With aspirations for reconciliation, these terms have become more and more equal, however, the historical underpinnings remain relevant.

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ideological entity has been shaped by government practices and, further, been undertaken as a mode of state organization. The underpinnings of these concerns is an attempt to understand the ways in which knowledge produces power, and, for these purposes, how this power is utilized to create governmental conceptions of ‘good’ citizenship. In the same vein as Althusser’s (1970) conception of “interpellation” and Bourdieu’s (1986-87) notion of “instituting,” Foucault reads the subject as an ideological construction that is both created by and indoctrinated into power structures for the benefit of those power structures. The citizen, therefore, is made legible<sup>4</sup> to the state, and becomes a vehicle through which the government can articulate its own self-definition. In other words, the ‘good’ citizen serves as recognition and affirmation of what the nation *is*. The corollary, therefore, is also true—to recognize and promote the ‘good’ citizen is also to express what the citizen is not and hence, what the nation is not. This process is then simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary. To constitute the subject is to grant legitimacy to certain attitudes, practices and embodiments of behavior deemed “productive” to the national project, and also implicitly defines the state extrinsically—we are not this, we are not that.

As aforementioned, the creation of good citizenship is also embedded within what Foucault (1989, 1991) terms the “productive aspects of power.” That is, the very same forces enacted to create good citizens, also are ‘productive’ component that in producing subjectivities. The discursive formation of good citizenship is thus not only an imposition of power, but also utilizes an individual’s agency. The citizen has a say in his or her own subjective formation. Good citizenship and the indoctrination into this ideology not only involves various mechanisms

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<sup>4</sup> I use ‘legible’ in the terms of James Scott (1999), who studies the ways in which the developmental state dictates certain bodies as embedded in state objectives and processes. The word is used in its literal meaning—to be legible is to be readable. These bodies are therefore not recognizable beyond their contingency to government policy and/or articulation. The state of legibility, therefore, is informed by a particular purpose; illegible bodies fall outside of that purpose, and are seen as both unnecessary and counter-productive to state polity and practice.

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of social control, surveillance, and discipline, but it also produces subjects that are very involved in producing the self. As Foucault suggests:

Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by oneself (1980, p. 162).

This process, of recognizing a citizen’s agency and affirmation in creating oneself as good, legible, and as embedded within governmental projects, is one that I will term *citizenhood*. It is an active engagement, and thus, agency-driven identification with these tropes and/or discourses. Citizenhood is then a created identity through the activity of citizenship—it combines both an internalization of government educational and impositional practices as well as an interactive conversation and thus, production, of the ‘good’ South African citizen.

As further supported by Butler (1997) and Ong (1995, 1996), what makes the power of creating this citizenhood productive and not simply dominating is that this process is not a singular, hegemonic function. Individual subjectivity is heavily part of this operation, and thus become rooted within this power—the power becomes internalized as the individual’s own beliefs. Thus, and as Butler states, the power emitted by governmental structures is “not simply what we oppose but also...what we depend upon for our existence” (1997, p. 2). The interaction between the state and the agendas of individuals is crucial to our understanding of how power produces knowledge, and how it is this conversation that constitutes the subject-making process. Citizenhood is conceived as an embodiment that is actively produced within democratic communities, such as, and as I will argue in this paper, the school apparatus.

The body of literature on citizenship and citizen-training is broad in scope, and does not have clearly delineated boundaries. Thus, the body of work is both vast and fluid, encompassing

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issues of democracy, nationalism, sovereignty, militarization, and, as demonstrated through this paper, education.

### **Nationalism, nation-building, and democracy**

Anderson (1991) conceives the nation as “an imagined political community, imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (p. 7). The first part to his thesis claim, the imagined, is defined in such a way because members of the nation will never know, and are not necessarily connected to, other national citizens. The baseline of their connection is national identity. The nation is limited because of those boundaries, recognizing the partition of the cultural, political, and historical social structure that it encompasses. The sovereign is symbolic of freedom, and grants a sort of pluralistic dignity, further providing a sense of self-structure and organization. Further, Anderson, joined by Castoriadis (1975), and Chipkin (2007), draws attention to the way in which the nation is a political community through inscribing affect-laden feeling to its citizens—they are bound together as a fraternity. Thus, the nation becomes part and parcel of one’s self-identity. This feeling is both formally and informally known as nationalism, and it is a force that has historically proved itself powerful in both peace and conflict.

In the context of South Africa, whose citizens arguably did not possess a strong sense of nationalism or national identity during the apartheid regime, these concepts of nationhood are stated as goals of the current government. From this desire is born the idea of “nation-building,”<sup>5</sup> or, as defined by the Presidency, “the process whereby a society of people...come

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<sup>5</sup> Many times, the terms “nation-building” and “social cohesion” are conflated with one another in what I believe to be a dangerous manner. To do so is to use national identity as an ‘equalizer’ among all citizens, and therefore assume social cohesion. Again, this process allows for larger political and economic structures to go untouched—it assumes that national unity may be solved with tactics geared towards social solidarity, alone. It is important to delineate these terms as separate and discrete. *Social cohesion* will be used in the sense of finding a shared consensus of

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together within the boundaries of the sovereign state with a unified...sense of being proudly South African, committed to the country” (The Presidency, 2012a). As discussed by scholars such as Billig (1995), Benei (2008), and Rippberger & Staudt (2012) among others, aspirations for the aforementioned nationalism through processes of nation-building are generally seen as part of the motivation for greater economic and modernist development. Deeply embedded in this process, and as presented by Ivor Chipkin (2007), is the aspiration for democracy and civic involvement. Citing James Gibson (2004), he explores the operating assumption that national reconciliation is achieved “helping the nation both to deal with its painful past and to move on to a more democratic future” (p. 1). Both authors use South Africa as their contextual landmark in exploring the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the nationally mandated goals of nation-building in this process.

In its conception, the TRC sought to confront the atrocities committed during the apartheid struggle. Though there still exist contemporary debates over its effectiveness, harm to participants, and operating conjectures, it sought to provide “a principle of commonality that would ground South Africans” (Chipkin, 2007, p. 182). In attempting to create a foundational identity for citizens of the nation, the TRC was thus grasping for a horizontal relationship between persons (Chipkin, 2007; Gibson, 2004). Though this is precisely what is called for in government statements of “nation-building,” the TRC stressed and called for reconciliation on the basis of humanity, not citizenship. Therefore, it is said that the TRC did not produce concepts of nation-building; it built up the conception of “the people” as a democracy. Put into conversation with contemporary discourse on nation-building, Chipkin argues that new attempts and objectives of nationalism fall into what Mouffe (2000) terms “the democratic paradox” (p.

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values, and *nation-building* will be used in terms fostering national identity. The nature of this national identity, however, is up for debate and will be explored in the data analysis.

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55). Though it attempts to grasp for the previously stated horizontal relationship, the state bases homogeneity as the condition whereby nationalism (and, in turn, social cohesion) is possible. The democratic paradox, therefore, draws attention to how “the people” are defined within democratic means, yet the way government policy calls for nation-building and social cohesion are in terms of rational consensus—they are inherently un-democratic in nature. The question that is important to ask is then how we may conceive of a democracy that, in its imposition, simultaneously dissolves the very ideals that it mandates—its democratic character (Chipkin, 2007)?

While this quandary moves us into the abstract, it is important to consider when contextualized against how the South African government conceives the concept of ‘good’ citizenship, altogether. Moreover, this concept also raises questions of the ways in which nation-building may articulate hegemonic disposition more so than invoke democratic agency. As much as the South African citizen is conceived as an effect of interpolating processes of the democratic community, he or she is equally interpolated as “a national subject...according to a measure of authenticity”—one’s fidelity and commitment to the nation-state (2007, p. 199).

Thus, in order to understand concepts of nation-building, it is necessary to go back, once more, to state-developed concepts of citizenship, and how personal identity comes to be rooted within national identity. And further, in what spaces are these articulations made known? In the next section I will argue that the public school is an institution where we may see the convergence of democratic agency of individuals, and the authoritative “stating” of government will.

### **Public education and governmentality**

Althusser (1970) coined the concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), which points to how smaller mechanisms within civil society operate as sites for the production of

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ideology. In this category, he lists the family, church, school among many others. The most dominant, and most relevant for the purposes of this research, is the institution of the school. He articulates the way in which it produces and reproduces ideologies of the dominant, ruling class through perhaps invisible tropes. Not only are these manifested through top-down policy approaches, but also through the ways in which students and teachers set standards of operation—almost always implicitly in alignment with the behavior and values of society’s elite. Similarly, Foucault (1988, 1997) draws on the school as a disciplinary apparatus—an exemplification of government control over the normative realm in society. This concept he terms *governmentality*. It is important to note the ways in which the school can operate as a carrier of ideology, power, and discipline, as this is requisite to students understanding, confrontation, and internalization of citizenship.

Nested within Foucault’s concept of governmentality is the notion of biopower, and further, biopolitical control of populations (Foucault, 1991, 1997; Lemke, 2001). The primary function of these practices is the regulation of people as political subjects—that is, the citizens of the modern nation-state. Biopower is both its own technology and also a method of management within a population. As previously stated, a prime example of a biopolitical structure is the institution of the school. Through curriculum, policy, and pedagogical practice, the school serves as both a site for said biopower to be executed, but also a space in which it is productively received, internalized, and produced by individual citizens. Foucault uses the broader concept of governmentality to support this understanding of schooling. Through understanding how disciplinary institutions project methods and modes of power, and yet recognizing how also allow space for democratic agency to engage with these tropes, we may be able to see how these processes lead to more efficient forms of social control. In other words, power produces knowledge that enables individuals to govern themselves in accordance with

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‘good’ behavior. There must be an interaction between “not only techniques of domination, but also techniques of the self...the contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think government” (Foucault, 1993, p. 203-4). Here we can invoke the previously mentioned “productive aspects of power.” In looking at the school as site for governmentality, or to what Nikolas Rose (1990) refers to as the “pedagogic machine” (p. 122), we can begin to conceptualize how these aspects of power manifest in producing the citizen, and further, how they are highly influential in circumscribing the nation.

Veronique Benei (2008) draws on these concepts in her anthropological research of Indian public schools. Looking at the ways in which nationalism is embodied within the students of the schools she studied, she speaks volumes to how public education plays a large role in constructing proper citizenship. She explains that this is through not only state-imposed policy, but also through citizen agency. That is, students are social actors that engage in the nationalist polity that is echoed in the institution (p. 271). The school then operates as both a site for the production of love for the mother-nation, as well as inscribes a set of behaviors that are deemed appropriate or inappropriate by the school community. It operates as what John Dewey (1907) terms an “embryonic democratic community,” in confirming and dismissing appropriate and inappropriate behavior (p. 32). In this way, the school serves as a microcosmic national society, which then allows behavior enacted within this community to be carried outside, into the public sphere. Benei’s study is a concrete example of the school as a site for converging the technologies of the self and technologies of power. This theoretical backbone both recognizes individual agency as encouraged, but also as having the capacity to be subsumed by hegemonic ideology, resulting in an internalized, top-down conception of good citizenship.

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Rippberger & Staudt (2003) also looks at nationalism in public education. However, their study is focused on the United States-Mexico border, and speaks to not only the way in which ‘good’ citizenship and nationalism is taught in schools, but further points to the idea of “binational citizens,” fluid in their national, personal, and civic identities (p. 6). Conducting a comparative of multiple schools in El Paso, Texas, the authors do a thorough assessment of how nationalism is taught in public education, and further, how students negotiate different identities taught through two nationality groundings. As the authors point out in their introduction to the study, due to the primarily theoretical nature of academe in educational studies, there is much room for qualitative research. There must be multiple perspectives through which we may begin to shed light on civics and schooling. Though there is a substantially growing body of research (see Billig, 1995; Sears & Hughes, 2006, among others), there is literature needed in both the South African context and to be put in conversation with the nation’s explicitly stated governmental objectives.

## **SOURCES OF DATA AND METHODS**

### *Methodological approach*

This qualitative research study was conducted over a two-week period in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa. Specifically, this paper is an ethnographic case study of an urban primary school, a visible site for student growth and identity formation in this transforming society. Using a combinatory approach of policy analysis, classroom and general observation, formal interviews with teachers, and focus groups with students, this research entails a multi-dimensional approach to understanding how a school functions with the influence of so many factors. The various techniques and sources utilized converge to form a comprehensive perspective of the primary school.

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My initial interest in this particular school came from a previous site visit, about a month before the start of this research endeavor. Nested within the city of Durban, this institution is unique in that it a home for both refugee and South African learners. This plurality is important to understanding the dynamic of the school, as it is the primary reason why so many of school assemblies are focused on religious and cultural plurality. It is important to note, however, that within these demographics, most learners are black African. There are also some Indian children at the school, but very few coloured and white learners. Most families that attend the school come from a lower, or lower-middle class background.

In this school, most if not all students pass their exams to move forward into the high school level. Using this foundation in understanding that this institution is considered to be a successful school for learners of this socio-economic status, I was attracted to the prospect of learning about how, in the context of what many term a ‘failing’ education system, this school boasted of teacher morale and student success. Further, I was intrigued to find out to what standards such success was based upon, and how that was articulated through the student body. Following conversation with the deputy principal, Mrs. Thomas,<sup>6</sup> I was granted permission for two weeks of classroom observation, and also access to interview teachers and learners within the school. From that point, onward, Mrs. Thomas was my main contact, offering class schedules, introductions to various members of the school community, and, more generally, showing me how to navigate the dynamic primary school.

My research study focuses on the Life Orientation classes, in which a curriculum concerned with social, intellectual, physical, and emotional development is taught. The bulk of my classroom observation took place in grade 7, where children are aged between 10 and 12. My reasoning for selecting Life Orientation to observe was based on: a) its inherent ability and

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<sup>6</sup> Note: all names have been changed for confidentiality and anonymity purposes.

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capacity as a school subject to prescribe modes of civic behavior through curriculum practice, and b) its uniqueness to the South African state. The latter part of my reasoning is important, especially when put into conversation with the distinctive way in which the South African state includes concepts of nation-building and social cohesion as part of national legislation. Through focalizing my studies on this course, I was able to narrow down an otherwise inherently broad endeavor. I found the selection of the Life Orientation modules to be not only enriching in content and curriculum, but also revealing of the permeating values that one can observe throughout the entire school community.

After briefing Mrs. Thomas on my research project, we agreed to both formal and informal classroom observation. In other words, each day I knew exactly which classes I would be attending, but these would be supplemented with a number of other lessons, the content of which I would find out on a daily basis. For example, if I were observing one Life Orientation class in the morning and one in the afternoon, I would often attend a Zulu, English, and/or mathematics class in between the LO courses. In addition, I observed the dynamics of the teachers’ lounge during free periods throughout the day. While this was not the core focus of my research, more classroom and general observation proved to be invaluable in evaluating student-teacher dynamics. It was during the extra class time, especially, that I was able to study the participation and behavior of multiple age groups, not solely my intended respondents in grade 7. While this was an unexpected component to the case study, I believe it to be part and parcel to the success of this research.

In addition to two weeks of classroom observation, though interrupted sporadically by state-mandated testing, I was able to gain access to interview three teachers of the Life Orientation classes. This was done with the immense help of Mrs. Thomas, in pointing to which teachers would be the most comfortable speaking with me. The interview sessions provided an

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account of how the teachers interpreted the curriculum they were instructed to teach, and also offered insight to how they perceived the students, the school, and the nation of South Africa. Contrasting these interviews was the first-hand experience and knowledge of grade 7 learners in the school. I completed two focus groups, both of which took place immediately after their Life Orientation class of the day. Though it varied between the groups of learners, for the most part the participants were very responsive and willing to speak about issues of inquiry. In the first focus group, the teacher of the course suggested particular students to which I should speak, however the respondents in the following group were self-selected. The perspective of learners in South African schools is under-represented within the current body of literature, yet it is requisite to understanding what kind of teaching and learning culture is cultivated in a particular school.

### *Ethical considerations*

All focus groups and interviews were completely voluntary in this study. This research project utilized of written consent forms, verbally confirmed participants’ rights and privileges, and ensured both anonymity and confidentiality in order to guarantee ethical practice. In recognizing the underlying necessity of all ethnographic research as “do no harm,” I was also careful to read verbal and non-verbal cues as directive to my questioning. That is, if I sensed tension within a particular topic or subject matter, I was sure to take necessary actions to reinstate the cordial nature of the interview. I quickly realized that if the questioning happened to move more into the abstract, it was much more productive to re-focus the conversation on personal experience and interpretation. Deeply embedded in this cognizance, and also part and parcel to successful research, is my own awareness as a North American researcher. Especially when contextualized within the ambivalent relationship of the United States and South Africa, taking a self-reflexive role is crucial to proper ethical and methodological concern. Moreover,

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given the historical foundation of South Africa, and in conversation with the institutionalized power dynamics of the researcher and the researched, I have consulted scholarly works that focus on the ubiquitous nature of power and the innocence of voice (see Buck and Silver, 2012; Burnet, 2013; Geertz, 1973; Giroux, 2004; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Mohanty, 1992; Thomson, 2013 among others). While attempting to embody a research process defined by the anthropological turn,<sup>7</sup> it is my belief that the flexibility and self-consciousness of this research design allowed for a variety of life experiences and interpretations to be heard.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

There were many limitations to this research study. First and foremost, having just two weeks for active field research, I did not have enough time to really immerse myself into the culture of the primary school. Had I been there for an extended period of time, I may have begun to understand and get to know the teachers, higher administration, and perhaps made more lasting connections with some of the students. In addition to the time constraint, the time spent at the school in question was not the most desirable; I entered in just before they began their examinations. While this did not have an effect on my interviews or focus groups, I was limited in the classes that I could observe and the amount of time that I could spend each day at the school. This not only limited the data gathered in terms of what I actually witnessed while in the classroom, but it also limited what I could observe, outside of the classroom. As an example, due to exam period the school did not have their weekly assembly, which is generally

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<sup>7</sup> The anthropological turn refers to a movement in cultural anthropology, beginning in the early 1970s. It is also referred to as a decolonized approach to research, as it was prompted by a growing awareness about both anthropology as colluding with European Colonialism, and also how the personhood of the researcher may affect the work that they write. Thus, the turn forces researchers to take a self-reflexive approach to study, articulating and integrating personal interaction and positioning within the research process.

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responsible for teaching children moral and civic lessons. This research project has very much to do with cultivating a culture of citizenship, and while I was able to observe the class in which they harp on success and community, I understand that a large component to this is also fostered holistically in the school environment. For these reasons, the data gathered is very much a preliminary study, with room for further exploration and improvement.

During the research study, Mrs. Thomas helped me in many ways to both find interviewees—students and teachers—and also with class observation. Because she taught the Life Orientation classes herself, it made sense to her that I would tag along wherever she was going for the day. While this proved to be very useful, I cannot help but wonder if she had altered her teaching style in those particular experiences. Further, the interviewees that she pointed me to she justified by saying that they were the most likely to speak to me. I am very thankful for the opportunities with which she presented, but it was a very structured process. Because I was not at liberty to approach any teacher and ask for interviews or class observation, I must conclude that I had a biased sample. Even when it came down to the focus groups, Mrs. Thomas always selected only the best and brightest from the class, and rather dismissively stated that the other students wouldn't understand what I would be asking them. My first focus groups, then, did have a lot of push back against the curriculum and teacher-power, as noted in the data analysis. Taking the bias into account, I noticed a difference in speaking with students that self-selected for the focus groups, without the intervention of Mrs. Thomas. However, these students were still prefects. It is my conclusion, therefore, that my focus groups were limited in only reaching the upper level students in the classroom.

This research project is also limited in the nature of its scope. Because it focalizes on just one South African school, one of its shortcomings is the lacking in diverse, multiple perspectives.

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While I realize a comparative study between multiple schools may have proved to be more fruitful and perhaps would have allowed me to draw definitive conclusions, the time constraints must be taken into account. For this reason, I still find this research study useful in commencing a larger body of work.

Finally, it must be noted that I was limited due to my appearance as a white, United States-born female. When I was introduced to the classes, most of the children were quick to ask questions of pop culture, begin rapping or singing, and generally wanted to seem impressive to the visitor (me) in the room. I found myself as very self-aware during this process, also, in understanding how this may have affected classroom participation and/or behavior.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

### **Life Orientation and State Visions of Citizenship**

Education, as both process and foundation, is often considered internationally as panacea to both individual and national problems. Whether such reasoning is based upon the perception of education as key for modern development, the recognition of education as a human right, or the use of education as recipe to empower local and national communities, the broad consensus of valuing education has been almost universally established. However, and as has been taken up by scholars of the field, education alone as the cure-all for global strife is highly contested. With such assumption, political questions such as who controls the means of production (e.g. funding structure, language of instruction, centralization of control), and also who controls the cultural production (e.g. curriculum, implicit goals and cultural ecology of the school, identity formation) are ignored. However, to leave these questions unanswered is dangerous, as questions of the power of the school’s influence in molding individuals and the kinds of the influences that are emitted are not addressed.

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With the investigation of these questions, and in conversation with the growing interest in citizenship and civic education, there exists an outcry of concern regarding how schools are not fully succeeding in cultivating and nourishing “good” citizens or “good” citizen behavior. In other words, this trepidation is laced with perceptions of weakness in school curriculum in creating and shaping particular kinds of subjects—those who both desire the subjectivity of ‘good’ citizenship and also those who are seen to be productive to state values such as democracy, loyalty, discipline, nationalism, and civic engagement. As evidenced by the three instated changes in curriculum since the apartheid era, the South African government is concerned about the construction of the South African citizen. In the most recent changes to the Life Orientation course, it is clear that such concerns have been addressed and are articulated to students on the receiving end. This section will explore how textbook and curriculum materials communicate messages of citizenship and nation-building to children in South African primary schools using the Life Orientation curriculum.<sup>8</sup> The rationale for focusing on this field of interest is due to its primary concern with holistic education, with a focus on self-in-society training.

### *Definition and foundation of Life Orientation*

The state curriculum in South African schools is currently in transition. Proposed in 2010, the *Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS)* is still slowly being introduced into the nation’s primary and secondary schools. The primary school curriculums were changed and solidified from 2012-2013, and grades R-7 are utilizing these new, government-sanctioned textbooks. As defined by the Department of Education, the improved policy document is

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware that the articulation of good citizenship and citizenship practices are also transmitted through other state-mandated curriculum structures, such as in the liberal arts classes of English, social studies, sciences, etc. Because of the limitations of this research paper, these subjects are not mentioned here, however it would be fruitful for further studies to analyze these topical areas, as well.

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“single, comprehensive and concise...that will provide details on what teachers need to teach and on a grade-by-grade and subject-by-subject basis” (DoE, 2012a). The latter part of this statement is exemplified through the Life Orientation curriculum, which separates a student’s learning capacity into four phases: 1. Foundation phase (grades R-3); 2. Intermediate phase (grades 4-6); 3. Senior phase (grades 7-9); 4. Grades 10-12. In the foundation phase and the intermediate phase—those with which this paper is concerned—the curriculum is broken up into three sections to be taught throughout the year. The foundation phase outlines *Beginning Knowledge, Arts and Crafts, and Movement Skills*, while the intermediate phase plans for *Personal/Social Well-Being, Creative Arts, and Physical Education*. Within the curriculum materials, the documents dictate the topics to be covered, and how to teach those topics, during each week of the school year. Outlined specifically by the number of hours spent on each area of concern, the materials further articulate the resources needed, the order of topics to be covered, and how to issue exams on all lessons. The textbooks emulate a formulaic recipe, stating step-by-step instruction on how and what to teach learners, and at what ages learners are ripe to understand such lessons.

Broadly stated, Life Orientation prepares learners for life and looks to equip learners for “significant and successful” living in this transformative society (DoE, 2002). The government models its holistic focus, concerned with the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, and physical development of learners. Further, one of the more implicit goals of the curriculum is its role in helping learners make informed decisions in order to better one’s standard of living. By encouraging the utilization of an individual’s rights and citizenship responsibilities, it further articulates the ways in which the citizen is integral in shaping the emerging nation-state. Through communicating the importance of care for both self and society, outlined lessons promote issues regarding health, environmental justice, human rights, cultural and religious

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diversity among other areas of interest. It is pertinent, then, to discuss the values both explicitly and implicitly stated within the curriculum materials, embedded into the aforementioned areas of interest.

### *Articulation of a common destiny*

The Life Orientation curriculum focuses heavily on developing a common humanity and national and continental solidarity between learners. In other words, there is an omnipresent theme of being, ontologically, African. The vocabulary of textbook materials is inundated with words that inscribe attitudes and morals, and further, are often focused on achieving outcomes of success. For example, there exists a heavy focus on learning skill sets, acquiring attitudes, and embodying particular values. In addition, to act with “respect, “dignity,” and “adher[ence] to authority” are all dictated as requisite to the identity of good citizenship (DoE, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). Throughout the different phases of Life Orientation standards for learning, values and concepts of good citizenship are referred to through health, physical, social, and civic perspectives. The school, therefore, is conceived as an environment or institution whereby morals and moral education can flourish—it is the key to creating a South African identity based on values that become embedded within personal and national identity. To embody the South African constitution, as desired by the Department of Education (2002), is one of the key goals of the Life Orientation curriculum—to make citizen rights and responsibilities “liveable” by individuals while legible to government processes (Asmal, 2002).

With grand desires and ambitious dreams of a reconciled nation out of antecedent racial segregation, it is surprising that throughout the Life Orientation curriculum materials—for the first two phases—the word race appears only once, and the term racism, not at all. Diversity, and how it is encouraged and endorsed, is expressed solely through the celebration of religious

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pluralism and the recognition of cultural heritage days. Beginning in grade R, an important section to learners’ coursework is singing, learning, and dressing in accordance to traditional and cultural practices. Also learned in grade R is the presentation of a variety of role models from various cultural backgrounds. Again, however, the explicit articulation of race is never mentioned. What is plainly addressed is cultural embrace and heritage days, and gender. Through topics such as “what makes me special,” the coursework has a large focus on identity and getting to know oneself, however not through the lens of race (DoE, 2012a, p. 16).

As we progress into older grades in the primary school, these practices are affirmed and reaffirmed through dialogue surrounding what it means to be South African, and how to operate specifically within a democratic society. Through established time based upon learning about one’s constitutional rights and responsibilities, speaking to “identity formation” through the “contributions of men and women towards nation-building,” and rhetoric based on “fulfilling personal needs and potential,” the upper grades of the primary school spend a large majority of the Life Orientation curriculum on the self in society (DoE, 2012, p. 34).

### *“Good and loyal South African citizens”*

Concepts of nation-building and living successfully within the nation of South Africa are both implicitly and explicitly stated in Life Orientation curriculum materials. In the grade R standard, understanding South Africa is communicated in lessons such as learning about important South Africans, knowledge of South Africa as a nation, and singing traditional songs. Further, it also speaks to understanding and respecting yourself and other citizens of South Africa—this is all part and parcel of what it means to be “Proudly South African” (DoE, 2012b, p. 76). To produce good citizenship is not only obtaining knowledge of the nation-state, but also fostering a love and respect for the nation, itself. Through lessons of “keeping our country

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clean,” the affirmation of laws, and empowering one’s self within the context of society, the implied goal of Life Orientation instruction is to raise a population of South Africans with a very firm personal identity as grounded within national identity. As evidenced in the title of the handbook for teachers of public schools, its objectives are part of “building a culture of responsibility and humanity.” Moreover, the responsibility in ensuring the right to citizenship is explicitly stated within policy documents, and such right “expects that [South Africans] will be good and loyal...citizens” (DoE, 2013). Specifically, and as stated, this means (1) obeying the laws of our country, (2) ensuring others do so as well, and (3) contributing in every possible way to making South Africa a great country.

As further stated in the Life Orientation documents, teaching the right to citizenship is one of the major pillars of the curriculum structure. “The concept of being a citizen and a good one at that is not uncomplicated,” and the individual is expected to obey laws, adhere to authority, and be a voter. The specific role that Life Orientation plays in this process is its function as

build[ing] skills for participation, voting, self knowledge, freedom of expression and so on, to **empower young people to be apart of a democratic South Africa** (DoE, 2013, p. 32, emphasis mine).

The focus on individual empowerment as method to a successful, democratic nation is imperative to understanding the contradictions mentioned earlier in this paper. That is, with the definition of good citizenship as self-empowerment and determination, but also as cultivating a culture of humanity and African solidarity, multiple messages are sent to learners through the Life Orientation curriculum. The following sections will address how learners negotiate these messages, and what this means for the culture fostered within the school. It is important to note another way in which the heavily structured, week-by-week, curriculum is representative of an

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undemocratic way of demonstrating state visions and goals. The prescriptive approach to values as laced with a insular sense of nationalism can be viewed as part of an authoritarian teaching style, thus obfuscating the development of democratic citizens. For example, in chapter 17 of the grade 4-6 Life Orientation curriculum, there is a section entitled “Be a Nation Builder!” in which learners are instructed to memorize the national anthem by heart (DoE, 2012, p. 76). It also asks questions regarding how the national anthem unifies the country and why Mandela is so loved as a national leader (p. 81). The same ideas are pointed to in the grade 7 Life Orientation book, in its discussion of what it means to be a success—this section is supplemented by the chapter, “Proudly South African” (DoE, 2012b, p. 35). In understanding the ways concepts of nationalism are articulated to students, it provides a background into specific behaviors that were exhibited in the school.

### **Ke Nako! Cultivating nationalism in and out of the classroom**

Each year, the primary school embodies a new theme that is to be undertaken by the entire school community. Taking a line from the official 2010 World Cup slogan, the 2012-2013 premise is “Ke nako,” a Sotho phrase meaning “it’s time.” Recognizing that the World Cup is seen by many to be a tangible moment of national pride and nationalism for South Africa, the use of this phrase as the foundation for the school is noteworthy. To equate such nationalism as successful and therefore legitimate enough to use as a backbone for the school environment is telling of how administrators and teachers desire the school to be run. Through weekly school assemblies, celebration of heritage days and religious pluralism, the recitation of the national anthem and, finally, the presence of the South African flag in every classroom, it is clear that fostering a school spirit and pride is deeply rooted in a sense of national pride, and further, African solidarity.

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As I walked on to the grade R playground, I saw a group of young boys gathered together in a circle, huddling and hugging one another around the neck. Before long, I heard the familiar sound of *Nkosi Sikelel iAfrika*, and watched as other young students beamed at them. After this moment of togetherness, the boys scattered and began to play their soccer game. Paralleling the *Ke nako!* slogan, these 5 and 6 year old children were beginning to embody a sense of nationalism. This observation was reified in my interactions with one set of grade 7 learners, in their conceptions of who they are as South Africans and how that has been articulated to them. The idea of not having a sense of national pride seemed outrageous to some of the learners, as demonstrated through a resounding agreement to being “proud” South Africans. After further inquiry into why these learners felt so strongly, one boy responded, “because you have to. There’s no way around it” (grade 7 learner, focus group). The communication of nationalism was confirmed in my interview with Mrs. Sami, a teacher of the Life Orientation curriculum. She responded similarly to the question of being a proud South African, and was almost beaming when she was asked whether loving your nation was important. She states, along similar lines that “at a certain point, you have to love your nation. Every country has its problems, but what can you do about it?” (Mrs. Sami, formal interview).

In my conversations with the learners, I began to see how students embodied a sense “visible nationalism.” That is, the subtle inscription of nationalistic pride within each individual at the school. The overwhelming presence of South African-ness without an ability to explain it in words evidenced that some how, these learners had been taught that it was both truly important and also crucial to their identity, that they belonged to this country. One grade 7 learner both verbally and physically confirmed the ways in which this pride was taught in through curriculum instruction. She was quick to explain that she learned the meaning of all six colors on the South African flag, and was overflowing with visible excitement when she stated it

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was the only country in the world with so many colors (grade 7 learner, focus group). However, when asked about the different racial groups in South Africa, and if they ever talk about race in the classroom, all of the learners remained silent. Before long, one learner responded quite vehemently that they talk about religions all of the time—that heritage days and religious pluralism was expressed at least once a week both in Life Orientation and in school assembly. However, none of the learners offered insight into how they spoke about race and skin color in the classroom.

While learners briefly mentioned how they covered topics of gender and the plurality of language, the little amount of time spent speaking of race and racism in the classroom is telling, especially when considering the amount of time dedicated to cultivating national pride. Given that goals of social cohesion, cooperation, and co-existence, are contingent upon the peaceful interaction of different race groups, I found this observation enlightening to the kind of social cohesion that is cultivated in the school. While it is clear that love for one’s nation permeates through many of the learners, articulated concepts of racial acceptance were not present in conversations of difference and acceptance.

Let us now return to the spirit of *ke nako*, the refrain that this primary school has appropriated as its own mantra. The parallels between its original use during the World Cup and its contemporary application to the school are relevant. While many consider the World Cup as its own personification of national coherence, this idea is just as strongly contested, as the basis of the World Cup was purely competition and a guise of national unity. Moreover, after the spirit and camaraderie dissipated, supposed unity and coherence followed suit. As Eusebius McKaiser states, “South Africans...pretend to be the Rainbow Nation that is a perfectly coherent and multicultural dream” (McKaiser, 2010). Although the World Cup fell into the nationalism-speak and embodiment, and as McKaiser further points out, to conflate, not embrace, individual

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differences into a nationalistic agenda is detrimental to the supposed dream of unity and reconciliation. Put into the context of this primary school, the way in which the school views itself as an incubator of national pride, and utilizes such as a pathway to cultivating a sense of team spirit and togetherness, is problematic in the very same sense as the World Cup’s epitomized nationalism. Without covering topics such as race and racism, the foundation for proposed coherence is lacking, especially when considering students’ perspectives of political issues. These views and voices will be extrapolated in the next section.

### **Classroom as performance space**

#### *Maintaining discipline and order*

While there are clear manifestations of nationalism throughout the primary school, and an almost catechistic indoctrination into national identity, learners offer different and often rebellious opinions regarding how they understand curriculum practices and lessons in the classroom. Despite learners concerns, the classroom space is kept neat and free of disruption. In other words, some students feel that they must respond to questions in accordance to what their educators would like to hear. Often utilizing call-and-repeat tactics of instruction, teachers run orderly classrooms, generally free from critical questioning and/or push back to curriculum practices.

Walking in the grade 7 Life Orientation classroom, I was greeted with a chorus of learners saying good morning to the teacher and to me (I was referred to as ‘visitor’ for the duration of my time at the school). From this point onward, and as I watched from the comfort of my chair in the back of the classroom, the class got out their notebooks, and turned to silently watch the teacher. Reading through the textbooks that were passed out at the beginning of each class, the teacher would call on students to read passages. After the passage was read, it was the

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learners’ responsibility to echo what the teacher found important enough to read aloud. For example, when observing a class on the importance of environmental protection and respect, Mrs. Thomas read, “It is our *responsibility* to keep our country *clean*” (Mrs. Thomas, classroom observation). The class then repeated this phrase a total of three times, with particular emphasis on the words responsibility and clean. The call and repeat type of learning was present, without fail, in every classroom that I observed. After these sort of sessions, learners were expected to work quietly and independently in their workbooks, completing exercises that were related to the previous lesson.

On the day of this same lesson regarding environmental protection, the first thing Mrs. Thomas said, in a very stern voice, was, “Look at the state of this classroom! You all should be ashamed of yourselves... paper everywhere! What have we talked about?” It soon became apparent that it was not unique to Mrs. Thomas’ classroom to speak to learners in this fashion. It was not uncommon for me to hear teachers yell, “you’re lying” if a child didn’t have his or her assignment for the day, or seem outrageously angry at students if they asked to go to the toilet while another student was out of the classroom. In almost every classroom, there were an established set of ground rules, and teachers would act very frustrated and would yell at students for a deviation of these rules.

The teachers’ reactions to learner misbehavior were not necessarily unprecedented, but rather indicate the ways in which teachers at the primary school deal with stress. Many educators, in the classroom environment, took to coldness and raising their voices often. From the teachers perspective, they explained that misbehavior is one of the key stressors that they have to face on a daily basis. Though perhaps not cruelly intended, this pedagogical and methodological approach of discipline has tangible effects on learners. From the learners

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perspective, one young woman mentioned that she feared her teachers. Another boy supplemented this viewpoint by stating:

“I mean, we don’t really get to ask questions. And even if we do, there’s not really a point. Sometimes the teacher won’t answer them, anyway” (grade 7 learner, focus group).

Not forgetting the factors of misbehavior and teacher stress that could influence *why* teachers act in this manner, it seems that learners do not have a space in the classroom to express opposition or opinion on curriculum practices and materials. It is clear that some learners feel compelled to keep their opinions as separate from the material they learn in class.

However, in candid settings such as our focus group, learners were more than willing to share radical opinions concerning political corruption, the government, and their school. One particularly vocal boy spoke volumes to how he is opposed to Zuma, and the current state of the South African government, yet when asked whether he ever got a chance to talk about this in school, he replied with “it depends on who you talk to. In class? Never.” (grade 7 learner, focus group). Thus, it seems that learners are complicit in their own making as productive citizens—some are implicitly asked to internalize their own opinions, and not disrupt the classroom environment. And yet, all six learners in this particular focus group agreed that they did not mind much. As evidenced by learners’ viewpoints, the school grants them the skillset of critical thinking and capacity to pushback against discourses taught in the classroom—just as long as it is done in a non-disruptive manner.

### *The disconnect of Ubuntu*

The concept of Ubuntu is one that has both historical and political tenets within the country of South Africa. As a long-standing tradition, promoting social solidarity and care for

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the human spirit, the phrase is utilized in government policy as panacea to national problems, and therefore it is also projected through the school. Mr. Avula, a teacher of the Life Orientation course, articulated that

“children don’t see race. These kids, they didn’t live during apartheid so they will never know what racism is. And you can’t say it [racism]...saying it is like saying sin in a sinless world” (Mr. Avula, formal interview).

Mr. Avula teaches the creative arts area of the Life Orientation, and stated multiple times his concern with teaching the country’s history of race and racism. He gave an example of a play they had recently acted out, in which white and non-white characters in the play had to use different facilities. He said that it was hard for his students to understand the reasoning behind that—the systematic separation of races. With this as an influencing factor, Mr. Avula continued to speak highly of the sense of Ubuntu and community in the school. In the same vein, Mrs. Sami spoke to the diversity of teaching staff, which she claim sets “a model standard” for their children (Mrs. Sami, formal interview). Finally, Mrs. Thomas also cherished the amount of cooperation in the school setting, idolizing the community as a space of co-existence and tolerance.

From observing the teaching staff, the school is integrated and flourishes in the department of diversity. However, and interestingly, when speaking with some of the grade 7 learners, I was surprised to find pushback to discourses of Ubuntu and racial integration. One learner articulated her sincere disillusionment with the concepts that are presented to them, stating,

“They tell you all these things, they go on and on about Ubuntu and how we can all get along. They’re lying. You see, like, if I’m Zulu, and you’re Zulu, then we have Ubuntu. Otherwise, there’s always going to be a barrier” (grade 7 learner, focus group).

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Other learners expressed similar sentiments, and mentioned how you would never see a black person sitting with a white person during school. According to them, that just “didn’t happen.” Finally, the conversation progressed to the extent where all six of the learners concluded that it would be much better if South Africa only had one racial group. Comparing the nation to that of Sweden, in which there exists a homogenous population, the learners said that such racial uniformity is the reason why it operates so successfully as a country, and South Africa would do well to be the same.

Further, the learners confirmed that while they are taught about Ubuntu and utopian visions of South Africa as a nation, they do not speak at all about race, racism, or skin color in the Life Orientation curriculum. When concerned with how the school promotes ideas of social cohesion and co-existence, this is important to note. Further, when asked about whether learners enjoyed the celebrations of heritage days and traditional African practices, one learner expressed his concern with how they were holding back development practices:

“South Africa is a developing country. The only thing that’s stopping it from being a fully developed country is the rest of Africa” (grade 7 learner, focus group).

Some learners are clearly vocal about their opinions regarding the mystified version of Ubuntu that their educators and government policy put forth. However, the paradoxical viewpoints between the learners and their teachers may suggest another aspect of performance to classroom behavior. While they may be asked to learn and repeat the celebration of heritage and Ubuntu, outside of the classroom, their viewpoints demonstrate resistance to take on these lessons as prescription for behavior.

*“We are a democracy, here.”*

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Multiple times during my observation in the school, and especially when speaking with Mrs. Thomas, the above phrase was repeated and stressed. Her first example involved the explanation of how there were many complaints of having white tennis shoes as part of school uniforms. Mrs. Thomas stated that parents were tired of having the sneakers wear out only after a year or two of use. As a solution, all families were allowed to vote on what shoes learners would wear at the primary school. After a collection of feedback, the school changed its policy to wearing black shoes, starting next year. Throughout the duration of the conversation, Mrs. Thomas was beaming with pride over the solution—she felt as though they were truly embodying the democratic spirit that is considered requisite to the new South Africa.

One learner was particularly vocal about his views on democracy in the primary school, and also cited the example of the sneaker controversy. However, he portrayed quite a different persona than Mrs. Thomas in stating,

“Oh yeah, democracy, cooperation. All they talk about is that tackie decision, like we all did something together. That was about money, and nothing else” (grade 7 learner, focus group).

This learner offers interesting insight into how democracy may become fantasized within the schooling environment. Contrastingly, another learner spoke to how democracy was fundamentally “the most important idea for South Africa,” but when asked what democracy means, she was stumped. She mumbled something about freedom of speech, but was quickly laughed at by the other learners in the discussion. The learner in question had clearly learned about the importance of democracy, and realized it as important to the nation, but knew very little of its manifestation and/or concept.

Given the aforementioned disciplinary mannerisms of the school, and further, the teacher-student relationship as representative as one of superior-inferior, the ways in which

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democracy is taught can be interpreted as undemocratic in nature. While values of choice, decision-making, and self-determination are ideologically spread through and by the school apparatus, the manner in which this is done is somewhat contradictory to these values. The attempt to advocate the importance of democracy in this way then dissolves the very same ideals that it mandates. Thus, this spreading can also act performative measure within the school.

Despite the ways in which democracy is imposed within the school, it is important to note that the school does, indeed, act as what Dewey (1907) terms an “embryonic democratic community” in even enabling students to hold criticism of the institution and government apparatuses. Although this criticism is often held on the periphery, the simple fact that students have the capacity to think oppositionally speaks to how the primary school operates as a site for multiple opinion, interpretation, and criticism. As illustrated through the pushback of curriculum tropes, the candor of critique in our discussions, and the desire to ask questions in class, some learners are ready to engage in critical dialogue. However, the classroom environment remains an isolated space, absent of critique or questioning.

### **“You must teach them.”**

While observing the amount of strict discipline and control that teachers exhibit towards learners, I also was concerned with the ways in which teachers spoke about learners. In my discussions with both Mrs. Thomas and Mrs. Sami, they repeatedly spoke of students as needing to be disciplined. Further, Mrs. Sami explained how it is important to teach students to exactly what to do and when to do it, insinuating that learners come into the school system practically blind to standards of behavior. In the classroom, every time Mrs. Thomas would scold a child in a particularly harsh manner, she justified this action to me by stating that “they just never learn. You have to tell them over and over again until they get it” (Mrs. Thomas, formal interview).

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This patronization of the individual student as source of discord is not isolated in the classroom environment. Often times when I was observing the staff break room, I would overhear conversations of teachers calling a learner a “hopeless case” or a “flop.” While this could be attributed to a number of factors, including but not limited to stress and frustration with misbehavior, the ways in which blame is placed onto the individual mirrors the school’s heavy focus on decision-making and self-determination.

When prompted by Mrs. Thomas (undoubtedly with the intention of impressing me, as a visitor), multiple students were asked to stand up and share with the class how they helped their school. Because the school recently had a large fundraising campaign, each student who was asked to share talked about the amount of money that he or she had raised for their institution. Directly following this fact, each student then shared what they earned as reward for this good behavior—whether that be pizza for the learner and his or her family, a remote control car, and the like. These stories were part of the over-arching lesson of decision-making, and how integral a role this is in deciding your future. Mrs. Thomas held a discussion in the class,

*Mrs. Thomas:* “Now, let me ask you, does it matter where you come from?”

*Learners:* “No”

*Mrs. Thomas:* “What does matter, then? What matters is how you commit *yourself* and the *decisions* that you make.”

It was not uncommon in the classroom environment for students to finish the teacher’s sentences. In this case, all of the learners also joined in chorus on the emphasized words above, demonstrating that this was a lesson that they had learned and been asked to internalize many times before. Learners in the school are taught to make decisions that will propel them to excellence, and are further taught to have great pride in themselves and their school for that excellence.

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Both the identification of decision-making as the key to success and the pathologizing of the individual as in need of remedy are telling of how the school functions as an extension of governmental conviction. Whether consciously or not, the rhetoric that is communicated to learners resonates very much with government policy on citizenship, nation-building and social cohesion. Here, the contradictions of what it means to embody good citizenship are reified, as well. On the one hand, learners are told that they are responsible for propelling themselves to success, for realizing their own potential. They are taught, as phrased by one of the grade 7 learners, that “you just have to think about yourself, and your money. That’s what’s going to get you success” (grade 7 learner, focus group). Further supplemented by classroom rules such as “no borrowing or lending of any kind,” the model of self-determination is present in the school. However, on the other hand, learners are encouraged to give back to their school, dictated to embody African conceptions of Ubuntu and community. And as exemplified by a few of the learners mentioned previously, children are highly rewarded with individual gains for that community participation.

### **A united nation?**

The school operates as an incubator of government policy, in all of its paradoxes and articulations, and puts forth the same problematic goals of social cohesion. The school, and thus, society, positions the individual as an independent, rational actor, capable and culpable of empowering oneself into positions of success. As mentioned previously, government policy shifts the responsibility unto the individual for ultimate reconciliation and solidarity, while refusing to problematize larger political and economic structures that foster competition, not community. In the same vein, this school setting fosters each person as individually responsible for success and failure, regardless of whether or not there exist previous disadvantages resulting

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from those larger political and economic structures. What is beginning to result, as exemplified by a few of the grade 7 learners, is a drive for tangible success through good marks, monetary gain, and access to higher education. While perhaps well-intended, and aiming to equip students to live communally but also independently, there are many contradictions for learners to sort out. They must be individualistic, but are told to embody Ubuntu; they are in a democracy, but are not given ample opportunity to speak in class. Understanding the school as a microcosmic national community, the school circumscribes the kind of South African individual that is desirable for the nation. And according to the students, who are repeatedly told that they are the problem, to be desirable is to be the self-determined, rational actors that the state asks of them.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that when asked whether South Africa is a united nation, most of the learners with whom I spoke said no. Quick to name barriers such as race, class, and culture, one girl stated that in order for South Africa to be united, she would “give everyone a taste of the good life. Clean up neighborhoods, get them maids, go into rural areas...” (grade 7 learner, focus group). In this case, she is equating unity and social cohesion to standards of economic living—not simply cooperation. While the equation of money to happiness is problematic, this young woman offers a further suggestion into what would make the country run smoothly. She states,

“Give me education. Give me health. We need to talk about safety. The government doesn’t want to fuss with all of that...they only talk about Ubuntu. But that doesn’t matter with all of this other stuff going on” (grade 7 learner, focus group).

Here, she insightfully articulates one of my own concerns, as a researcher. She recognizes the prescriptions of the government as obsolete when the state remains unconcerned with the underlying issues that very much determine social cohesion and cooperation. As hinted to in

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other children’s previously stated conception of the fantasy of Ubuntu, these learners are sharp to understand state politics—even if they feel unable to do so in the classroom setting.

### CONCLUSION

As demonstrated by the Thand’Umzansi campaign, the project of nation-building and social cohesion is an ongoing, contemporary project of the South African state. In understanding how these tropes are articulated through one primary school, this research paper explores how the school can—and does—operate as an extension of government policy, and how schooling is integral in the shaping of conceptions of “good” and successful South African citizens. This research pays specific attention to the Life Orientation curriculum and its role in molding learners in the school. Moreover, this qualitative study informs how the school simultaneously operates as its own democratic community, providing its students a space in which to respond to discourses of citizenship, national polity, and thus, the opportunity to become part and parcel of their own citizenhood.

Learners are particularly keen to connect with the nation of South Africa on a basis of pride, as a land of both fantasized transformation and of conflict. Though some learners are quick to critique government policy and practice, their identities remain grounded as “South African.” This deduction is particularly interesting, however, when realizing that learners are resistant to the tropes of Ubuntu and African solidarity as put forth by the nation-state. It is evident that even at this young age, learners begin to define the “good” citizen as having love and respect for their nation, but also embodying values of competition, self-determination, and success (as marked by material gain). In addition, the “good” citizen is one that is both disciplined and respectful of authority. Through affirmations of these behaviors in the classroom, learners themselves produce “good” citizenship.

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Thus, this paper is as much a statement about the confluence of government, education, and citizenship as it is an exploration of the personal identity as influenced by political identity. While internalized messages of citizenship are certainly manifold, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The vectors of national pride, self-determination, community, and discipline are entrenched within the construction of what it means to be an individual within this transforming society. It seems as though these individual identity parallels this transformation, in ways that are both reflective of and productive to the nation-state. While the “good” South African citizen is undoubtedly told to love thy nation, he or she is also asked to remain tied to tradition, yet emerge into modernity—to live collectively, but without sacrificing individualism. Government policy articulates these directives clearly, and the school in this study produces similar tropes.

How is it, then, that learners are asked to be part of government-mandated goals of nation-building and social cohesion? Though the state tends to conflate these terms in its policy documents, it is clear that they are not necessarily sequential. In a nation that is often defined by its tumultuous, racialized past, reconciliations with an emphasis on the differing facets of identity must be embraced—not ignored—in the school environment. That is, while the school tends to create nationalistic citizens (the only cohesion amongst students seemingly established), most of the learners with whom I spoke are critical of racial integration and particularly the acceptance and love of racial difference. Further, by endorsing discourses of self-determination without engaging in conversation surrounding race and class relations, it seems as though divisions are deepening. Policies of nation-building—as based within blind recitation and visible nationalism—in educational settings, therefore, are rather obsolete—a self-reflexive lens on what drives race and class divisions (e.g. increasing gap between the rich and poor, healthcare disparities, access to education) is what should be undertaken as emphasis.

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Finally, the focus on finding a consensus for social values, finding exactly how individuals are to embody the “responsibility of the right to citizenship” (DoE, 2012), disregards the ability of individuals to embrace the many aspects of identity that they do. In fact, the very language used to describe the phenomena of social cohesion produces its own limitations—limitations that manifest themselves and are reproduced within schools. For future research endeavors, therefore, I think it fruitful to exercise a new understanding of this phrase. With recourse to Leon De Kock (2001), social cohesion can and should be defined as a stitching together of the people of South Africa—to form a national quilt through understanding innate differences. To aspire to this kind of social solidarity will take much more than a focus on civic participation, advertisements of Ubuntu, or recitations of the national anthem. Instead, new ways of “stating” social cohesion within the schooling apparatus may consist of an extrapolation of race relations, a critical understanding of government structure, and an embrace of one another as citizens of a new South Africa. Whether that embrace be through pedagogical love in the classroom, an extension of friendship among learners, or a critical engagement with curriculum material, it may very well be one step to drive a much larger, transformative purpose of unity and reconciliation.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

For this specific research endeavor, it would have been helpful to spend a longer period of time at the school in order to get a more well-rounded vision of the school environment. This research could have been more comprehensive with a year-long study of observation, speaking to most if not all of the teaching staff, and a larger variety of learners in the school.

More broadly, because the academic fields of educational studies, citizenship and social cohesion are growing, this research can be expanded in many ways. To begin, there is little

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research regarding how South African public schools teach concepts of citizenship, and further, how the Life Orientation curriculum plays a role in this process. It would be beneficial, therefore, to expand this research to include multiple schools of varying socio-economic levels, racial classifications, and geographic regions. In addition, given that citizenship is taught in many other ways than simply in the Life Orientation classroom, including but not limited to Social Studies, English, language instruction, and the overall culture of the school environment, it would be interesting to expand this research beyond the course subjects studied in this paper. Finally, it would also serve purpose to expand this research to the upper levels of public education—that is, looking at high schools and gather experiences of their learners and teachers.

Concerning the field of social cohesion in the context of South Africa, there is a small but emerging body of research. However, more studies regarding how public education influences government goals of social cohesion and nation-building are needed. It is the hope of this research paper to open up this important space in academic literature.

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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Please note: These are framed as guiding questions—many times, interviews evolved organically, discussing topics beyond the scope of these areas of inquiry.*

### Formal Interviews: Teachers of the LO Curriculum

- a) How long have you been working at Addington Primary?
- b) What subjects do you think are most important for students? Why?
- c) What do you think it means to be a successful citizen of South Africa?
- d) Do you think that Addington prepares its students well? Why?
- e) What careers do you hope that students go into?
- f) Do you think it’s important to discuss nationalism and love of the nation in schools?
- g) What is your opinion on singing the national anthem in schools?
- h) What does social cohesion mean to you?
- i) Do you think Ubuntu exists? In the school? Elsewhere?
- j) What do children learn about citizenship from LO?
- k) In your view, is Life Orientation effective?
- l) Is there anything you think it should include that it doesn’t cover very well?
- m) How do learners respond?

### Focus Groups: Grade 7 learners

- a) What does South Africa mean to you?
- b) Are you proud to be a South African?
- c) What do you think it means to be successful in South Africa?
- d) What does Ubuntu mean to you?
- e) Do you think there is Ubuntu present in this school?
- f) Do you think it’s important to love your nation? Why?
- g) Does race matter?
- h) Do you think South Africa is a united nation? Will it ever be?
- i) What would it take for South Africa to be united?
- j) Do you think that there are still problems that remain from the apartheid era?