

# The phenomenon of xenophobia as experienced by immigrant learners in Johannesburg inner city schools

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*This article aims to describe how xenophobia is experienced by a small selection of immigrant participants in five inner city schools in Johannesburg. The May 2008 xenophobic violence prompted the investigation. Theoretically, the article is also concerned with ways to combat xenophobia in schools with a view to bringing about fundamental social change aimed at deconstructing 'anti-xenophobia education', as the term has been coined. The methodology for the qualitative inquiry took the form of a triple-layered case study: the layers consist of the various groups of participants: immigrant learners, South African learners and educators. Sixteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted and the main method of data analysis was content analysis using Tesch's (Creswell, 1994: 155) method of sorting the content of communications. The findings support the need for anti-xenophobia education in the schools under scrutiny. The immigrant participants reported very little compassion, rather humiliation and degradation in the form of unjust stereotyping, prejudice, bias and discrimination. Although cosmopolitanism featured, 'otherness' is far from being incorporated into an all-embracing 'us'. Distrust between immigrant and South African learners emerged and both groups stereotyped the other as violent, although lack of trust and fear as pervasive issues seemed to underlie the stereotyping.*

## **Introduction**

As in the rest of the world, xenophobia and related intolerance continue to thrive in southern Africa. Issues relating to educational opportunities, access to services, disparate economic status, autonomy and migration are among the manifestations of xenophobia in South Africa (Chakma & Jensen, 2001: 90). Xenophobia is generally accepted as the fear or dislike of foreigners and strangers (Crush & Pendleton, 2007: 66; Livesey, 2006: 40; Saideman & Ayres, 2008: 244). If a group is xenophobic, it is less tolerant of coexisting with foreigners, e.g. members of the group do not want to work, reside near or allow intermarriage with foreigners (Saideman & Ayres, 2008: 39). Many South Africans object to having the

children of immigrants from other African countries attend school with their children (Afrobarometer in Dodson, 2010: 12). In a certain sense, xenophobia is a form of racism that does not use the concept of race as a defining element (Boehnke, Hagan & Hefler, 1998: 586) as both result in prejudice, stereotyping, bias and discrimination (Vorster, 2002: 304). On a political level, xenophobia is about the denial of social rights and entitlements to various resources to strangers or perceived strangers. Socially, strangers (the ‘other’) do not belong to ‘us’; subjectively, they do not share the identity of the group (Neocosmos, 2006: 16) resulting in social insecurity (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010: 223). Dodson (2010: 9) considers racialism (when certain groups become racialised), anti-cosmopolitanism, narrow identity politics and the denial of cultural freedoms as core components of xenophobia. Although racism and xenophobia are often linked in the literature, their interrelation is not the focus of this article, nor is the legality of immigrants. Terms such as refugees, asylum seekers, strangers, foreigners and aliens are all included under the overarching label of immigrants.

## South Africa, land of milk and honey and xenophobia

Post-apartheid South Africa symbolises freedom and prosperity, a safe haven from war, a sanctuary from poverty and a country with economic opportunity and promise. Thus, it continues to attract millions of displaced people from Africa (Harris 2001: 65). Since the advent of democracy in 1994, however, hostility or intolerance towards non-nationals has increased (Crush in Shea, 2008: 139; Kihato, 2009: 27) as South Africans perceive ‘illegal aliens’ to be pouring into the country, undermining the new nation and depriving citizens of scarce resources (Dodson 2010: 5; Mattes, Taylor, McDonald, Poore & Richmond in Crush & Ramachandran, 2010: 214; Neocosmos, 2008: 590). These immigrants are seen to pose a threat and arouse fear. Here xenophobia often manifests itself as Afrophobia: negative stereotyping of people from other parts of the African continent (Azindow, 2007: 175; Motha & Ramadiro, 2005: 18) on the grounds of South African exceptionalism, a perception held by South Africans that South Africa is superior to the rest of the African continent (Dodson, 2010: 11; Neocosmos, 2008: 590-591). Crush and McDonald in Shea (2008: 130) point out that many apartheid-era stereotypes (pertaining to criminality, corruption and dependence on social welfare) have been transferred to African immigrants.

## Xenophobia and education

The main aim of this article is to provide an understanding of the phenomenon of xenophobia in schools, with particular reference to inner city schools in Johannesburg, a popular destination of mass migration (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010: 213; Kihato, 2009: 21-22; Leggett in Landau, 2007: 64; Wagner in Shea, 2008: 4). The phenomenon manifested in Alexandra Township near Johannesburg in May 2008 and spread to the inner city. Xenophobia is described as a social phenomenon with special attention to the detrimental impact on the targets of prejudice, stereotyping, bias and discrimination, in this case, immigrant learners. Furthermore, the article is concerned with ways to combat xenophobia in schools with a view to fundamental social change aiming at deconstructing ‘anti-xenophobia education’, as the term has been coined. As no South African study at present focuses primarily on the experiences of immigrant learners at *schools*, this article adds an important new dimension to the discourse on xenophobia.

Before an attempt is made to deconstruct anti-xenophobia education, the concept is briefly expounded. In South Africa apartheid education or schooling, which had been structured along racial lines (Nates, 2010: S18) was abolished in the new democracy. The education system had upheld 46 years of segregated education during which unequal provision of education benefited white learners. In the post-1994 dispensation the previous curriculum, which differed according to racial classification was replaced by a national curriculum. The theme of human rights protecting human dignity based on the South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights of South Africa, which were directly influenced by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, features strongly in the national curriculum. Citizenship education, which promotes human rights, among others, is included in the compulsory subject, Life Orientation (referred to as social development in grades R to 9) but “ways to address alarming current realities, such as xenophobia, homophobia, femicide” still deserve attention (Schoeman, 2006: 141). The

Education for Democratic Citizenship programme in Europe, which develops new models for citizenship education, stated that this subject should be “instrumental in the fight against violence, xenophobia, racism, aggressive nationalism and intolerance” (Osler & Starkey, 2002: 144), thus emphasising the key role of education in combating racism and xenophobia (Waghid, 2004: 44). Nates (2010: S21), however, argues that South African educators find it difficult to divorce themselves from the legacy of apartheid, and xenophobia is a reflection of the deeper damage done to South Africans, “given the massive psychological damage done by South Africans to each other – under colonial rule, segregation and apartheid, and in the violence of 1990-1994” (Everatt, 2010: 8).

Scrutiny of citizenship education through an anti-xenophobia lens suggests that citizenship education should encourage pro-social citizenship and link with human rights issues to enable learners to “understand and respect our common humanity, diversity and differences” (Burtonwood, 2002: 71). Waghid (2004: 26) proposes that citizenship education should cultivate compassion – “cultivating in learners the ability to imagine the experiences of others and to participate in their sufferings” (Waghid, 2004: 46). It takes a compassionate educator to teach compassionate citizenship (Waghid, 2009: 88). Intellectual exercises are not enough; learners must be moved in some way. To attain empathy (or compassion), citizenship education requires learners to “use their imagination to consider other people’s experiences and be able to think about, express and explain views that are not their own” (Burtonwood, 2002: 73). Sharing the experiences of immigrant learners who have fallen victim to xenophobia and acknowledging multiple readings of the world instead of a single dominant reading, is a move towards respecting cultural differences (Waghid, 2008: 20). When learners transcend by imagining others’ hardships and respond to alleviate unjust sufferings, social justice is served (Waghid, 2008: 21). In essence, Hoogstad (2009: 31) proposes a shift from a culturally-exclusive attitude to a culturally-relative one, by incorporating ‘otherness’ into an all-embracing ‘us’, by openly talking about racism, ignorance and xenophobia, provided that the school has an ethos of accepting and celebrating diversity (Cole & Stuart, 2005: 360).

If the anti-xenophobia education lens is to be widened the views of Supple (in Burtonwood, 2002: 71) who stresses the need to attend to whole-school ethos; that learners need an atmosphere of trust, respect and non-discrimination where they will feel safe to speak and have their contributions valued, are relevant. Waghid (2009: 88-89) deliberates on cosmopolitanism in the fight against xenophobia. Cosmopolitanism recognises the rights of others to be treated hospitably, and such an approach to education would entail that public schools in South Africa as host country do not deny access to immigrant children. Waghid (2009: 88-89) further cites the use of a different language of instruction, instead of the home language of immigrant learners, as an example of how the latter are subjected to social injustice. Instead, immigrant learners should be introduced gradually to the new language of learning and teaching by South African educators and other learners.

Zooming the lens even wider, it would appear that xenophobia is often one of the most visible signifiers of a culture of exclusion (Shea, 2008: 127), also called aversive racism marked by exclusion and cold-shouldering (Cole in Cole & Stuart, 2005: 351). The national curriculum follows an inclusive approach, implying that all kinds of diversity should be accommodated. If educators want to practise inclusive education and teach learners about inclusivity, however, they themselves should first of all be able to embrace the diversity within the broader society. This constitutes a formidable challenge; given most educators’ own personal and painful history of apartheid (Nates 2010: S19). Xenophobia does not just violate human rights and social justice; it runs counter to the very heart of inclusion. Immigrant learners have a right to education on a political and social level. Politically, section 27(g) of the Refugee Act of 1998 specifies that refugees and asylum seekers have the same rights as South African citizens pertaining to education and healthcare, and section 5(1) of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 declares that “a public school must admit learners and serve their educational requirements without unfairly discriminating in any way”. Socially, the cosmopolitan approach as opposed to cold-shouldering entails far more than admission to a public school – admission is just the starting point. Social exclusion, however, (inability to access education) results from requirements, such as payment of school fees, transport costs, costs of books and uniforms, which semi-destitute parents cannot afford (Landau, 2007: 67).

If the lens is focused directly on xenophobia, learners “lament taunts by teachers in the classroom and by learners in the playground” (Motha & Ramadiro, 2005: 19). Timngum (in Livesey, 2006: 50-51) notes that some immigrant learners experience physical violence. In interviews conducted with Congolese refugee youth in Johannesburg, the latter related that they felt ostracised by South Africans because they were ‘*makwerekwere*’, a derogatory term used by black South Africans to refer to foreigners (Hlobo, 2004: 60-61). The term *ikwerekwere* (singular of *makwerekwere*) represents not only a black immigrant who lacks proficiency in the local South African languages, but also one who hails from a country assumed to be economically and culturally backward in relation to South Africa (Azindow, 2007: 175). This is an apt example of South African exceptionalism as discussed earlier. Even more disturbing is the purported practice among educators to allow learners to bully and be rude to immigrants without intervening (Rulashe in Livesey, 2006: 51).

Against this background, a qualitative investigation into the phenomenon of xenophobia as experienced by immigrant learners in Johannesburg inner city schools was conducted.

## Methods

The methodology for the qualitative inquiry took the form of a triple-layered case study: the layers consisting of the various groups of participants: immigrant learners, South African learners and educators. South African learners and educators were selected as they were considered data rich and they could contribute to the inquiry and assist in getting beneath the surface to generate “thick” description (Geertz in Charmaz, 2006: 14). Data was gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews (sometimes exceeding 60 minutes which, in retrospect, we regarded as too long), recorded on audiotape and supplemented by field notes. The interviews were conducted in English. All the immigrant learners had lived in the country for a minimum of seven years and their English proficiency was fairly good as opposed to our limited or lack of proficiency in their respective home languages.

The Gauteng Department of Education groups Johannesburg schools according to the inner city area and the suburbs. There are eight inner city schools in this grouping. The purposeful selection of participants posed some difficulties, e.g. we initially approached the Department of Education for enrolment figures of immigrant learners, but the statistics did not cover all schools in the Johannesburg inner city. As a result, we approached the eight inner city schools directly to establish the number of immigrant learners. Five racially integrated, former Model C schools with a predominantly black learner enrolment (due to the area’s demography) were willing to divulge the information and agreed to be part of the study. In addition, the Department of Education granted consent for us to conduct the research. The selection of participants included an immigrant learner, a South African learner and an educator in each of the five schools. Both males and females were included in the selection and all the learners were between the ages of 13 and 18, the developmental stage of adolescence. Immigrant learners were selected on the basis of a personal experience of xenophobia.

With the school principal’s permission we explained the purpose and procedures for the research during a staff meeting in each school. Participation was voluntary, and on the basis that the educators are familiar with the learners, the staff (inclusive of the School-based Support Team, now known as the Institution-level Support Team) was requested to identify one immigrant learner according to the mentioned criterion and one South African learner who shared a class with immigrant learners in each school. If more than one learner per category was identified, the educators completed nomination forms and the learner who had the highest number of nominations was selected. A similar process was followed to nominate educators as participants. The following criteria applied: the educator should have knowledge of xenophobia and previous experience of working with learners who had experienced the phenomenon of xenophobia and educators did not necessarily have to be South African citizens. Educators could either nominate three educators to participate in the study, including themselves, or they could unanimously nominate one person as participant. Each educator nominated had to accept the nomination. If one educator was not unanimously nominated, the nominees completed a short questionnaire to establish who was regarded as the richest information source. We then selected the educator who appeared to have had the

most interaction with and experience of immigrant learners or knowledge of learners who had experienced xenophobia.

Although the initial idea was to interview one immigrant learner at each of the five schools, during the selection process at the second school two immigrant learners were identified and the principal informed both learners who were eager to participate. We decided to interview both learners as they both met the criterion; therefore, the number of the envisaged interviews increased to six interviews with immigrant learners: three girls and three boys. Four participants were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and two from Angola. Their duration of stay in South Africa ranged from 1 to 13 years. Thus, we conducted 16 interviews in total, which were audio taped and transcribed, including the non-verbal communications recorded in field notes. Three South African educators who had accepted the nomination later withdrew, because they felt that immigrant educators would be a source of rich data and should be interviewed instead. They were consequently replaced by three immigrant educators.

Each school allocated a room to conduct the interviews. Nominees were approached and informed of the research process and their rights as participants, and informed consent was obtained. In compliance with ethical requirements, we obtained signed letters of consent (from educators, learners who were 18 years old, parents of learners); assent (from learners younger than 18 years); or verbal permission (due to some parents' language barriers, in certain instances one of us called at the immigrant learners' homes to obtain verbal permission from parents). Each participant chose his or her own pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

As registered educational psychologists we were wary of the risk of secondary trauma. If the participant displayed any discomfort or exhaustion, we suggested a break before resuming the interview. If the participant became too emotional to continue, we suggested continuing later, or the next day. If a participant wished to terminate participation, his or her wishes were respected. Despite these measures, all the interviews were conducted continuously. In addition, we furnished participants with our contact numbers should the need arise to contact us. We returned to the schools after approximately two days to conduct a short interview to ascertain the participants' well-being, among others, by checking briefly on post trauma stress symptoms, such as nightmares, flashbacks, startled responses and concentration problems. Apart from practical assistance rendered to one participant afterwards, no one else required further intervention.

The main method of data analysis was content analysis using Tesch's (Creswell, 1994: 155) method of sorting the content of communications. We scrutinised the recorded data independently. Field notes contributed to an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of xenophobia.

## Discussion of the findings

Themes and categories that emerged during data analysis are discussed below in an effort to determine how immigrant learners experienced xenophobia.

### The concept of xenophobia

All 16 participants were familiar with the concept of xenophobia. The immigrant participants' explanations indicate an understanding of the meaning of the concept, as well as the connotations associated with the phenomenon. Xenophobia is associated with "We are poor ... we must go back to our country ... we come and dirty their country," and "people calling me '*amakwerekwere*', ... taking their jobs away from them". The general description of xenophobia was related to blood, violence and killings. A South African learner remarked: "This is our country, although it may sound as if I am being harsh or being insensitive, but this is our country".

### Language

All immigrant participants stated that they experienced humiliation when using English in the classroom. They were embarrassed when classmates laughed at them because of the way they articulated words, their

accents, or use of the wrong word. English pronunciation with a French accent was described as “weird” and led to teasing. Consequently, some participants experienced feelings of loneliness, because they felt ignored and were unable to socialise: “I feel ignored, I feel bad. I feel upset ... upset about classmates and I feel very alone”. All five South African learners felt uncomfortable when immigrant learners conversed in their vernacular in their presence. They felt that “it can be intimidating because you don’t know what they are saying about you”. The South African learners seemed to distrust immigrant learners and language differences exacerbated the problem. The South African learners projected their fear of ‘the other’ (or xenophobia) into language by being concerned that they were the subject of discussion. Interestingly, language caused both groups of learners to feel ‘othered’ and vulnerable, although at different moments and under different circumstances.

## Feeling different

Five of the six immigrant learners indicated that they felt different. One participant said: “The South Africans just give you this look ... that you are not part of the place where you are trying to belong. That’s why that’s the only thing that makes me feel different, that you can’t fit in.” Another participant remarked that South Africans view immigrant learners as if “... we have a dad who doesn’t have an arm and a mom who’s just suffering ... that’s the picture the world has given ... you know ... of Africa ... we are probably dirty too and we have mosquitoes flying all over us”. Learners did not experience a sense of belonging and acceptance. This is confirmed by the comments of some of the South African learners: during breaks “usually foreigners [are] amongst themselves because many people do not interact with them ... They will just be sitting amongst themselves”; “most of the time we just tell them and each other where they keep their side and we keep our side and that is how it is”. It also emerged that interaction occurred only when the need arose, and if it was beneficial to South African learners: “I mainly go to [them] actually, for help [in mathematics or science]”.

Educators also contributed to the immigrant participants’ feeling of difference, as one immigrant learner stated: “Sometimes teachers joke, but their jokes sometimes affect people. They are making fun of you in front of the class. You know, like in front of the class that ‘If the police comes by your building, your mother and father jump out from the window’ [suggesting that they are illegal immigrants] and people laugh. Sometimes you are like, ‘Sir, I don’t understand the question’, you pick up your hand and ask ‘I cannot understand the question’. He is like: ‘You must go back to Congo and they must explain’, but as a joke, but inside it pains me, even though I laugh. But it’s painful, because I feel different. It’s not where I belong. It’s not my country”.

## Discrimination by South African learners

All immigrant learners experienced some form of discrimination at the hands of South African learners. The predominant theme that emerged from the interviews was name-calling, including terms such as ‘*amakwerekwere*’, ‘*ingogongo*’, ‘*kwang*’ and ‘crocodile drivers’. Discrimination also occurs in classrooms in the guise of teasing, which sometimes goes unnoticed by the educators. One immigrant learner remarked: “It’s just a joke and people like ... it’s just a joke, but it always hits home, it always hits somewhere and ... yeah, it happens often actually”. It was evident that the name-calling and teasing were painful and difficult to accept. One educator remarked: “There are times, when I had to confront the offenders, but there are times I had to pretend that I am not hearing what I’m hearing”. Another educator said that xenophobic incidents were a reality and the school should provide counselling at school or at the Centre for Violence and Reconciliation. Most South African learners understood that “derogative comments hurt”.

## Adequacy of the education system and xenophobia in the syllabus

Most immigrant learners felt that the education system was adequate, but xenophobia was not covered in the syllabus: “[I]n grade 10 Geography, we did immigrants and migration and things and we spoke about what are the factors that might pull people to come and why people might be pushed to leave a country ...

it was very brief, very ... it didn't speak about what's really happening ... and so people are never going to understand it and they'll never know why we're here, they'll never empathise with us, they'll never sympathise." Learners from the DRC felt that they were receiving "a good education in South Africa". It was evident that the principals at all the participating schools had addressed the issue of xenophobia during assembly: "[I]n assembly the principal was talking about xenophobia and was like 'No guys, we are all the same, we are all Africans, so these things should stop. Here at school, I don't want to hear that one person cried because of xenophobia, someone did this to him or that. It must not be here at school', that is the only thing I heard". This remark also suggested that xenophobia was not addressed adequately in the syllabus.

## Experience of school environment

The responses indicated a feeling of satisfaction among immigrant learners about inclusion in the school and its activities. In this sense they felt equally treated and were included in extra lessons and school events. They were content at their schools and felt that they had been accommodated. One South African learner maintained that the educators were harsh towards immigrant learners. Some immigrant learners felt that they should be offered counselling to enable them to cope with the adjustment of settling in another country, and intensive counselling was suggested for immigrant learners who had been traumatised. Five out of the six immigrant participants indicated that they felt safe at school, and the immigrant learners' general experience of the inclusive and hospitable school environment on a macro level was juxtaposed by their experiences of discrimination and feelings of being 'othered', vulnerable, different and isolated on a micro level in the classroom and in their personal lives.

## Socialisation

Immigrant learners preferred socialising with learners from their own countries, as they did not trust their South African peers. Socialisation with South Africans occurred, but on a limited scale. Integration appears to be a lengthy process, as other learners do not look beyond their differences: "My friends mostly are Congolese because ... the way they move Congolese on that side, coloureds on that side, South Africans, I mean, white people on that side". All the South African learners interacted with immigrant learners "often at school", but there was no social contact outside school. The school space was still racialised, depicted by Dodson (2010: 9) as a core component of xenophobia. Race seemed subsumed; a structure that still framed ways of being and knowing.

## Emotional experiences

The immigrant participants experienced xenophobia as an emotion felt physically in their hearts, heads, stomachs, chests and even eyes. It went beyond physical violence to emotional violence that seemed longer lasting. They experienced insecurity, because they did not always know what to expect, and anger and upset feelings were common, as they could not reconcile themselves with the violent behaviour exhibited by South Africans. This, in turn, triggered memories of the hardship and suffering endured in refugee camps; the pain, heartache and sadness caused by uncertainty and death also surfaced as immigrant learners relived their emotional encounters. On the other hand, three South African learners perceived immigrant learners to be "... very rough. They usually do not take jokes, so we have to watch how we speak to them. They are very violent". Thus, on the surface, the stereotyping of people as violent appeared on both sides, although lack of trust and fear as pervasive issues seemed to underlie the stereotyping.

## Conclusion

The experiences of xenophobia by a small selection of immigrant participants in Johannesburg inner city schools support the need for anti-xenophobia education (at least in the schools under scrutiny, as the participants indicated that xenophobia was not covered in the syllabus). This would explain why the immigrant participants reported very little compassion and instead, humiliation and degradation in the

form of unjust stereotyping (poor, dirty, helpless with only one arm, suffering people), prejudice (taking our jobs), bias (only fit to clean houses and scrub toilets), and discrimination (name-calling resulting from South African exceptionalism and jokes in poor taste). Although cosmopolitanism featured in the sense that the participants were included in extra lessons and school activities, suggestions that immigrants return to home countries, teasing when speaking English incorrectly and social isolation, reflect the opposite of hospitable behaviour. ‘Otherness’ is far from being incorporated into an all-embracing ‘us’ – an educator even strengthened the sense of the class as ‘us’ against ‘them’ when he jokingly referred an immigrant learner back to the Congo to have a question answered. Educators will also benefit from anti-xenophobia education, as ignorance may be at the root of this kind of insensitive ‘joke’. Most immigrant participants echoed a strong sense of not belonging, social exclusion and cold-shouldering (“South Africans just give you this look”). Distrust between immigrant and South African learners emerged and both groups stereotyped the other as violent. On an emotional level, the immigrant learners were lonely, upset, insecure and angry – emotional states that are not conducive to learning.

In order for anti-xenophobia education to be instrumental in the fight against xenophobia, it should address the deeper damage done to South Africans in the past (Everatt, 2010: 8) to rebuild trust in the self and others. Low levels of trust between the South Africans and immigrant learners were reciprocal, and mutual distrust contributes to a cycle of antagonism and exclusion (Steenkamp, 2009: 445). Fear is the opposite of trust, and rebuilding trust will address collective fear, which plays an important role in the process of ‘othering’ (Koskela, 2009).

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