The Methodology and the Substantive Issues in Research:
a Review of an Article

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Abstract

*This paper is a review of the article
'Social difference and the politics of
schooling in Africa: A Ghanaian case
study' by George J. Sefa Dei (2005). It
reflects on the methodological
orientation and how it affects the
theoretical and substantive issues
underpinning the study. The author
makes a valid argument about the
configurations of power in knowledge
production in higher education, as it
relates to gender, ethnicity and
religion. Nevertheless, the
'economical' description of some
aspects of the methodology, and
limited use of data from
underrepresented participants of
higher education appear to defeat the
purpose of the investigation.
Consequently, the projected voices in
the study seem to perpetuate the very
phenomenon under criticism.
Although the standards this paper
applies to the review are most
appropriate for doctoral writing, the
issues raised have implications for
making valid arguments in research
reports, and for reporting on small
aspects of large-scale studies.*

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Multicultural education particularly in
the Euro-American contexts has
received much attention in the
literature, as well as issues regarding
inclusive/exclusive schooling
processes and its attendant challenges
(Anderson & Collins, 1995; Banks &
Banks, 1993; Hilliard, 1992).
Societies which have many distinct
cultural groups, usually as a result of
immigration are often described as
multicultural. Multiculturalism
emphasizes the unique characteristics
of different cultures, especially as they
relate to one another in receiving
nations and as a policy welcomes
these differences, seeing them as
transformative and potentially

enriching of the host culture. However, the term is problematic, multi-faceted and can too often become 'a code word, invoked in order to divert attention from the imperial legacy of racism and social injustice and the ways in which new racist formations are being produced'. (MacLaren, 1994:196, cited by Pryor, 2001).

This has led in recent years to studies which question how best to research these issues; of particular relevance to this discussion being a new paradigm proposed by Corbett (1999) and Peters (1995) as cited in Nind, Benjamin, Sheehy, Collins and Hall (2002), which emphasises philosophical rather than sociological or psychological approaches to researching inclusive education.

In Africa and specifically in Ghana however, multiculturalism does not feature prominently as a discourse. In Ghana, difference in terms of ethnicity, class, religion or gender in schooling processes are usually less obvious than in Northern educational settings where the term multicultural is applied. Debates about differences tend to be centred on ethnicity, religion and gender.

Ethnicity is characterised by a human population whose members identify with each other, usually based on a presumed common genealogy or ancestry (Smith, 1987). Ethnic groups are usually united by common cultural, behavioural, linguistic or religious practices. Much of the literature focuses on issues regarding unequal (socio-economic, ethnic, gender) educational access and participation (see Shabaya & Konadu-Agyemang, 2004), gender equity and access to schooling (Assie-Lumumba, 2000; Dei, 2004) and the problem with declining quality standards in the global campaign to expand access to basic and higher education (World Bank, 2000; Banya, 2001). However, with regard to power relations and processes that accentuate social differences in schools generally and higher education particularly, very few studies have been conducted. One that is relevant to this discussion investigated the impact of gendered school experiences in some basic schools in Ghana (Dunne et al., 2003).

This makes George J. Sefa Dei's (2005) study of 'Social difference and politics of schooling in Ghana' all the more interesting. Dei's study examines differences in ethnicity, gender, religion, language and class in four public universities in Ghana. In his paper, he links up the relational aspects of difference with knowledge production, identity development and representation in the context of schooling in Ghana. He then argues that ethnic, gender, religious, language and class difference are manifest in the social relations of schooling. The paper is interesting to me as a female former undergraduate student at one of the universities in the study, and also coming from a disadvantaged (social) class and belonging to one of the relevant ethnic groups the study addresses. It is professionally relevant to me as a lecturer at one of the universities in his study. It is therefore desirable to reflect on my practice with regard to difference and diversity.

By his use of an anti-colonial discursive framework, it is the author's aim to interrogate the configurations of power that are embedded in ideas, cultures and histories of knowledge production and use, and thus allow learners to engage schools critically in order to identify and challenge schooling processes that are suggestive of sustenance and subversion of colonial relations. This paper will look at how the author does this through his methodological framework and what knowledge that generates.

This review starts with a summary of the article, followed by a critical review of the methodology and methods the author employed in his study in relation to the issues he sought to interrogate. Areas of critique include his methodological framework and how that helps him to arrive at the findings, the issues he discusses based on his data and the conclusions he draws. The paper will then end with a conclusion on the review.

Summary of the Article
Dei's article begins by setting out its theoretical and substantive assumptions. Starting with the claim that colonial relations of domination and imposition underlie conventional school practices, he asserts that certain dominant ethnic, gender, linguistic,

religious and cultural identities are produced and because of the spaces they are allowed to operate, they tend to be privileged. The author's evidence is that colonialism and colonial education denied a huge segment of the population access to education on the basis of race, gender and socio-economic status (Assie-Lumumba, 2000), since the siting of schools, and objectives for certain school types favoured some ethnic groups, gender types and social classes (Forster, 1965).

He further argues that post-colonial schooling still perpetuates domination and imposition by negating or suppressing differences among learners. According to him, although there are discourses of 'national culture', 'nationhood' and 'communities', colonial relations are masked beneath those, and there is the tendency to privilege unity over difference and thereby suppress differences overtly or covertly. Dei shows the different perspectives of post-colonial theories about difference in the literature to make the claim that embedded in all those discourses is the idea of diversity in the acclaimed national unity, and the danger or possibility of (the excluded) resisting, displacing and rupturing the dominance of the 'taken for granted' knowledge (of the privileged).

Bringing this discussion to schooling relations, Dei refers to the school as a community of differences where diverse bodies in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, religion and language are represented. He sides with Young's (1990) criticism of the progressive politics of North American contexts as representing the whole rather than the sum of the parts, and ending up excluding persons from the community implicitly or explicitly. For him, this has relevance to his study of anti-colonial politics, particularly in the Ghanaian context. He puts this forward by outlining the series of educational reforms Ghana has undertaken that have not addressed the problem of differential allocation of, and access to resources. He also points to the fact that the educational reforms have never targeted questions of difference and their implications for schooling. Here, the issue of differential allocation of resources to schools shifts the discussion from the whole school as a community where diverse bodies are represented and

difference accentuated, to the nation as a community where certain groups are not catered for in terms of allocation of educational resources.

Ideas of marginalisation, exclusion/inclusion and minority treatment in school contexts are brought to the fore in his discussion on difference. The author embarks on his empirical study on the assumption that difference and its relational aspects are manifest in both schooling relations and knowledge production. His aim is to give voice to local subjects to articulate their understandings of the social relations of schooling (and probably demonstrate the truth of his assumptions) and to be able to question and challenge tendencies (schooling processes) that seem to perpetuate colonial relations.

To do this, the author employed the qualitative methodological approach, making use of individual interviews and focus group discussions. This was framed in such a way as to give voice to the local subjects; allowing them to construct their subjectivities and to tell their stories about understanding and responding to difference and diversity. Dei's paper reports on the second phase [2001 - 2002] of a three-year longitudinal research project, which was conducted from the year 2000 to 2003. Four state-owned Ghanaian universities: three located in the south and one in the middle zone were chosen for the study. In all, thirty-seven students and five university lecturers were interviewed, making forty-two individual in-depth interviews. Four focus group discussions were also conducted.

The study concluded among other things that local subjects' views on schooling and difference are limited and reflect the complexities, contentions and contestations around the relational aspects of difference the study set out to examine. This is exemplified in some of the findings below:

- there is both the affirmation and denial of ethnic difference and diversity with respect to schooling experiences;
- social class in the context of schooling impacts on students psychologically rather than physically;
- there is under-representation of female

teachers in HE, and this is linked with hierarchy of knowledge and knowing that is rooted in sexist thought;

- gender identity is linked with knowledge production;
- there is social prestige and cultural capital in speaking certain languages, and a sense of superiority that certain dominant linguistic group members have of themselves.

The author recommends that difference be affirmed in order to value contributions of all segments of the school population. Recognising that power relations structure interactions in schools, he recommends that educators acknowledge that all subjects are knowledge producers and consequently, attempt to create an inclusive environment that ensures that every learner is able to uphold a discursive and interpretative space for their knowing.

Critique of the Methodology

The author demonstrates good knowledge of appropriate concepts and theories for his study. His epistemological and ontological position is clearly defined. He also mentions that his use of qualitative research methodology was helpful to uncover how the aspects of difference affect student interactions and their ability to engage in the local school system. However, he neither describes in full his methodological design nor its fit with the phenomenon he interrogates. He says further that he used individual interviews with students and lecturers and focus group discussion, but does not report on the ethnographic observations he made. The discussion that follows reviews his methodological framework and its fit with what he investigates.

Sampling

Bryman (2004) makes a distinction between two types of longitudinal designs: the panel and the cohort studies. With the panel study, 'a sample, often a randomly selected national one, is the focus of data collection on at least two (and often more) occasions'. With the cohort study however, there is either an entire or random selection of a cohort as the focus of data collection. Bryman's description of a cohort in this design is one whose members

share certain similar characteristic(s).

Though Dei does not say which of these designs he employs in his study, from his claim to have made a random sampling (page 232, paragraph 2) of students in four state-owned universities (that being the similar characteristic), presumably, he used the cohort study design. It is apparent that these were in fact opportunistic samples. For example, by indicating the use of four focus groups in four universities, the assumption is that, there was one group in each university. However, the author tells us that ' focus group discussions were then carried out on school compounds and in homes' (p. 232, 2nd paragraph) and then he reports on only one focus group discussion which he conducted with students from the University of Cape Coast and the University of Science and Technology, almost two hundred kilometres apart. Yet, the implications of this are not reflected on.

In the interviews, he uses only two voices in his presentation of both social class and language, and one for religion. His discussion on ethnicity presents the voices of four participants with two belonging to the major ethnic group, one with a mixed ethnicity while that of the fourth is unknown. By not using a very broad sample of voices, Dei seems to be guilty of doing what he condemns in his paper.

Data Collection Processes

Since this article reports on the second phase of the three-year research project, the researcher should have indicated what the purpose of each phase was, which of the research questions were to be addressed in each phase, and possibly, how each of the questions was to be answered. One other feature of the cohort study in a longitudinal design is the number of times data is collected from the group. The author fails to indicate how many times he engaged with his participants in both the focus group discussions and interviews, the time lapse, for what reasons and what changes were observed between the first and subsequent engagements. There is no indication of his validating the data he obtained in both the interviews and focus group discussions.

Distinctions have been made between two types of focus group: the group interview in which several people discuss a number of topics, and the focused interview in which the members are selected based on their involvement or experience in a particular situation (Merton et al., 1956, cited in Bryman, 2004), and are asked about that involvement/ experience in a relatively unstructured way. Each of these has implications for the way it should be conducted. Yet, in the single reported case of focus group discussion, the reader has no description of how it was done.

In the conduct of focus group meetings and individual interviews, it is important to know what kind of arrangements were made to secure easy access to a neutral environment, assure privacy and ensure that the phenomenon he was investigating was not being perpetuated. The apparent use of opportunistic sampling method makes it all the more important to understand how these processes were carried out. The reader has no description of the circumstances under which the data were obtained from the interviews and the focus groups. For example,

how were the interviews conducted, where and how long did each 'in-depth' interview take? What was peculiar to the type of interview he employed and what advantage did he expect to gain over other methods? What questions were asked and how were the questions framed to elicit the kind of responses expected? Were participants' verbal and non-verbal reactions to the sensitive and contentious issues (ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.) observed? How was the data recorded and analysed?

One also wonders why the author chose to combine focus groups and individual interviews in one piece of research. One possible reason could be that after a focus group discussion, individual interviews may be conducted 'with the idea of clarifying and deepening the data obtained through the group discussion' (Ressel et al., 2002, pp. 24). However, the author does not give the reasons or the chronological processes used. Since these and many other methodological issues were not well thought out and explained, the author appears to have filtered the data to his advantage and bias in his paper.

How ' Schooling Experiences' is Explored

In his commentary, the author talks about the education system of Ghana as a whole, and writes as if he was asking the students about the whole of their schooling (retrospectively) but in fact when he refers to the data he only uses examples from their university life. He fails to limit the meaning of the term 'schooling' to higher education, so it is not clear whether he is interrogating difference as they were lived out at all levels of schooling in Ghana or at the higher education level only.

In Ghana, the term 'schooling experience' may apply to different levels of education such as primary, junior secondary or senior secondary as well as tertiary institutions, all of which Dei's participants had experienced. He comments on issues relating to primary and secondary schooling in his literature review (pp.229-230): the series of educational reforms presented highlight changes and challenges at the pre-university level. Again, in his presentation of the data on class difference (p. 237), he makes a case about the rise in education cost in post-primary education and gives the example of incidental fees in secondary schools. Also, his presentation of the tensions concerning which local language to use as the medium of instruction has implications for basic education (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2003).

Discussion of difference in university education should of necessity incorporate different levels and programmes, administrators and lecturers, but the author fails to acknowledge this. He fails to recognise that even social relations of undergraduate students are not likely to be the same as those of graduate students, and between students and lecturers in different programmes, and therefore the need to explain in his work which levels and programmes his participants were taken from. Moreover, by excluding the other players (lecturers and administrators) from his data collection and presentation, the author leaves out a depth of knowledge, which could have enriched his discussion on social/power relations and knowledge production in the schooling processes. As it is, there was insufficient data to address some of the research questions.

Ethical Issues

The author claims he conducted 45 in-depth interviews (37 with students, 5 with lecturers) and accessed students through the Dean of students, college and university lecturers, student leaders and peers. There is uncertainty regarding participants' consent in the research process, since the author states that he had access to them through the school authorities. Were they not coerced into the study, and would they not present what the authorities would want to hear?

Many other ethical issues can be raised. One has to do with male domination (three males and one female) in the discussion of female under-representation in higher education (p. 239). Why were these four students chosen? Was it because they shared certain socio-demographic features? What level/programmes were they enrolled in? Probably, this was done advertently for its fit with the issues under discussion. If that was the case, what were the group dynamics employed to ensure frankness and openness?

One wonders whether the only female in the group was not overshadowed as is common with male dominated discussions. Also, the researcher himself is a man. Given this, how was he able to obtain information about female marginalization or how much space females are given in schooling processes? Here again, the author's conduct and presentation of the only one focus group discussion appears to portray him as perpetuating the very phenomenon he speaks against.

How about the other relational aspects of difference the author is investigating? Were these represented in the group? Having acknowledged that ethnicity is a contestable and contentious issue (Dei, 2004), it would have been interesting to 'see' how this would come to play in the focus group discussion, if this method had been explored fully. It would be interesting to know how the issues under discussion informed his recruitment of participants and how observations made of their non-verbal gestures would/would not have exemplified how they viewed and lived with ethnic, religious, linguistic and gender difference.

There is also the question of the identity the author brings to the data collection exercise. Being a Ghanaian, he belongs to one of the ethnic groups, speaks one of the languages, and identifies with some religious group(s). By his name, I tend to think that he belongs to one of the ethnic minority groups and perhaps, speaks one of the minority languages. If the participants can also give a good guess at his identity, how does he think they perceive him and how is he able to negotiate entry and acceptance? How does he assure trustworthiness, given the sensitive nature of some of the issues (about lecturers' interaction with students on grounds of ethnicity, gender, etc.)? The absence of reflexivity in exploring his own identity and its impact on the research affects our acceptance of the issues he interrogates.

It is also important to know what role(s) the research assistants played in the exercise and how the issues highlighted above were addressed. Particularly noteworthy is the role(s) the outsiders (graduate students from the University of Toronto) played and how the ethical issues were catered for. This is important because they are foreign both to the issues in question and in colour.

The use of Data and the Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

One important thing to note with Dei's article is that the author's findings are generalised to theory rather than his population (Mitchell, 1983). The finding that 'hierarchy of knowledge and knowing is rooted in sexist thought' (p.238, 2nd paragraph), is based on the anti-colonial discursive framework that he employs in his study and is not demonstrated by his data. The framework interrogates the configurations of power that are embedded in ideas, cultures and histories of knowledge production (p. 234, 2nd paragraph). The author collected a large data set but only uses a small amount of it. This is not really justified and its status of either being divergent or typical with respect to the rest of the data is not discussed. By this, he seems to confirm the evidence 'that people tend to overweight facts they believe in or depend on, to ignore or forget confirming instances far more easily than disconfirming, by looking at part of the data, not all of them' (Nisbet and Ross, 1980, cited in

Bell, 2005). His failure to declare his intentions with the use of the rest of the data affects some of the things he claims to have found and its acceptability.

He fails to explain why he reported only on interviews with students and not the ones he conducted with the five lecturers. This is acceptable if he intended to focus only on students' views rather than covering so much just because he had data on many respondents. What were the advantages he thought he would reap over other methods like the observation and questionnaires for that matter? Did he inadvertently miss out the lecturers' interviews? By playing back the voices of only students and not those of the lecturers, the author was trying to observe social relations through the eyes of the student-participants. One tends to question how credible students' voice would be especially regarding power relations and educators' social relations with students.

The reader has to contend with the few extracts (six interviewees) the author uses to discuss five of the relational aspects of difference he explores. This situation seriously affects his interpretation of the issues he uses the data to substantiate. In his presentation of data on ethnicity, for example, though he finds and concludes that there is both affirmation and denial of difference and diversity by using only four participants as has been hinted earlier, perhaps the voice of the minority would have made some difference. Since the author seems to be interrogating how the minority are marginalized, one would have thought that the experiences of some of the minority groups he mentions on page 235, paragraph 2 would be heard in the interviews.

Similar trends could be observed with his presentation of the students' voices on social class and religion as mentioned earlier. Only two students are heard on the issue of class: one being a medical student and the other, a psychologist. It is important to note that in Ghana, there is social prestige associated with the choice and access to certain courses like medicine at the university level, whereas teaching and its related courses (psychology) are for members of average/low social classes. Can the voices of only these

two students explain the effect of class on social relations, and do they present enough substance to show how this group is marginalized in the schooling processes? What do we make of the voice of one participant about religious discrimination? What is his religious affiliation? Can we accept these voices as the case(s) of four state-owned universities, Ghana or that of the participant(s)?

Bryman (2004, pp. 46) presents a case study as an intensive examination of a case or a setting. He adds that the researcher's aim is to provide an in-depth elucidation of the case. It is not clear which particular case(s) Dei is investigating. Though he claims he conducted a longitudinal case study, he does not portray a good understanding of this in his writing. None of his cases (Ghana, universities or six participants) is given in-depth elucidation.

Knowledge production as a concept was also very important to the author's study of social relations. His perspective on the relationship of difference with knowledge production is that the presence of different bodies and ethnicities mean multiple knowledge and experience by which learners will be enriched (Dei, 2004). It is not clear what type of knowledge the author was advocating. Was it indigenous African knowledge or cultural knowledge with respect to ethnicity? Whose knowledge was he referring to? His discussion on 'embodied knowledge' (p. 242) presented by various identities brings in many subjects to the concept of knowledge production. Moreover, his interrogation of the local contexts and conditions that affect African schooling (p. 234, 3rd line) and how schools seek out and integrate Africa-centred resources in classroom instructional, curricular, pedagogical and communicative practices (p. 231, 2nd paragraph) does not correspond with his data on difference and knowledge production.

His recommendation that educators should acknowledge that all subjects are knowledge producers and consequently, create an inclusive environment that ensures that every learner is able to uphold a discursive and interpretative space for their knowing implies a finding of exclusion in schooling processes. That is why educators are being called

upon, yet he did not ask educators' views; if he did, he did not report it.

Lastly, I must admit that I find his claim that 'tensions in recognising differences are not something endemic to Ghanaian society (p. 242, 3rd paragraph)' to be potentially contentious. In his study on ethnic and gender difference in Ghana, the author himself contends that there are tensions in affirming/uncovering ethnicity (Dei, 2004). It should be noted that the Ewe and Northerner ethnic communities that he cites as minority groups (pg 235, 2nd paragraph) in Ghana, are known to be the hottest spots for ethnic and religious conflicts (Linde & Naylor, 1999).

Overall, it must be said that the structure of the reportage of the data, findings, conclusions and recommendations lacks systematic order, which makes the key points difficult to sift. Given the urgency the issues presented in the article demand for the entire Ghanaian education system, these aspects should be clearly demarcated for quick and easy reading and action.

Conclusions

Dei's study explores what Ghanaian students think about difference and social relations in schooling processes. He finds that the relational aspects of difference he explores are manifest in the social relations of schooling, though he does not show which pedagogical processes accentuate this.

Multiculturalism and inclusive/exclusive schooling processes are not well understood issues in the Ghanaian education system, so this article provides insightful information to policy makers, implementers and practitioners of education delivery. The author demonstrates good knowledge of appropriate concepts and theories for his study. However, his economical reportage of the conduct of the interviews and the absence of his ethnographic observations leave a big chunk of information, which is unaccounted for. There is therefore a need for ethnographic observation to identify which schooling processes serve to exclude the minority from sites of knowledge and how to deal with difference in schools. Allan (1999, cited in Melanie et al., 2002)

illustrates that pupils are not just subject to exclusionary and inclusionary processes; they are active agents in these processes. It should be interesting to find what the situation will be in Ghanaian schooling. Similarly, 'Schools as Gendered Institutions: the Impact on Retention and Achievement' (Dunne et al., 2003) should provide useful information for higher education.

The absence of a detailed description of the research methodology, the methods and the design seriously affected the data collection procedure and the data obtained, and contributed to portray the author as perpetuating what he condemned. It was also expected that his approach would enable him to explore in-depth the phenomenon under investigation, but the data does not provide this depth of knowledge. Obviously, Dei wrote for an intellectual community, but he forgot about the educationists whom the findings, conclusions and recommendations referenced. Though the issues are relevant to the Ghanaian education system, the report lacks the required simplicity and logical order it deserves.

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