The interplay between race and class, especially due to the legacy of apartheid, has long been acknowledged.
Class over race: new barriers to social inclusion

The new year got off to an explosive start when racist comments posted by Penny Sparrow and others on Facebook were widely circulated on both social and mainstream media, with the ensuing wide-ranging responses in both public and private spaces. This incident has again brought to the forefront unresolved questions relating to race, racism and race relations in South Africa – Kate Surmon, Andrea Juan and Vijay Reddy

In South Africa, approximately 24% of the population have active social media accounts, with 13 million Facebook users. The availability of social media and ease of access to news reports has enabled the emphasis on racism and division to escalate, exposing the public to certain rhetoric which influences the mood of the country.

Reporters and active commentators on social media form a distinct group which may not be representative of the attitudes of the general South African public. This has prompted us to examine the attitudes of the South African public in the light of the results from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), a nationally representative household survey administered annually to track societal values over time.

We focused specifically on the views around inclusion in schools of children of different races and socioeconomic groups. To gain insight into attitudes towards racial and class inclusion respondents to SASAS were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following two questions:

1. Should children of different races be educated together?
2. Should children of the economically well-off and the poor be educated together?

The interplay between race and class, especially due to the legacy of apartheid, has long been acknowledged; we thus expected that the attitudes toward race and class inclusion would mirror each other. It was also important to investigate whether and how attitudes have changed over time. The trend findings from 2003 to 2014 in relation to the two questions are represented in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

One of the most interesting findings is that there has been a positive change in attitudes towards racial integration in
There has been a positive change in attitudes towards racial integration in schools over time.

...schools over time, but that the attitudes towards class integration have been less positive and have not improved during this period.

In 2003, 85% of South Africans agreed that children of different races should be educated together, and by 2014 this figure had risen to 91%. A considerably lower percentage of the population were in support of integration based on class, with 77% of the sample agreeing that children of the economically well-off and the poor should be educated together.

By examining the responses of specific groups we are better able to unpack the results. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the responses of different groups to the above two questions.

When looking at educational achievement it is particularly striking that those with a higher level of education are less supportive of inclusion based on race and class than those with a lower education level, as highly educated people would be expected to exhibit more liberal attitudes.

Furthermore, in terms of age groups, the older respondents have less inclusive attitudes than the younger age groups. When considering living standards - a proxy for socio-economic status - those in the ‘high’ group exhibit the lowest percentage of agreement. It is also interesting to note that both those in the ‘low’, as well as the ‘high’ living standard groups express a lower level of support for class integration.

Attitudes to racial integration

Of particular interest are the responses of the different population groups. Figure 2 shows that the positive...
Attitudes of white and coloured participants have increased dramatically from 53% to 71% and 77% to 95% respectively from 2003 to 2014. Although the percentages for black and Indian/Asian groups have increased slightly, their attitudes have remained comparatively stable. The white group, at 71% in 2014, remains the group with the least inclusive attitude.

Attitudes to class integration
Regarding the attitudes towards educating children from different socioeconomic backgrounds together (Figure 3), the black and white groups have remained fairly stable at approximately 80% and 64% respectively, while the percentage of Indian/Asian people has slightly declined from 80% in 2003 to 80% in 2014. The percentage for the coloured population has increased substantially from 64% in 2003 to 80% in 2014. It is noteworthy that white respondents were the least supportive of social inclusion in schools based on socioeconomic status.

Explaining the differences in responses
It was somewhat surprising that the responses to the two questions did not mirror each other as expected. Due to the lack of qualitative data, we propose three possible explanations to stimulate debate around this finding.

Political correctness
Racism and race relations have received considerable attention since 1994. Since the inception of democracy in 1994 people have been aware of being ‘politically correct’ and needing to display non-racist attitudes so as to avoid the ‘racist’ label. People may therefore respond positively to the question of racial inclusion in schools, not because they genuinely hold this view, but rather because it is the socially desirable answer. The argument then could be that the question on class inclusion reveals more truthful attitudinal responses as it is easier to answer questions based on assets rather than human characteristics.

People like to preserve things as they are, and therefore tend to defend or rationalise existing social and economic arrangements.

Changing social identity
Over the years, class divisions have become more marked and income inequality has increased both within and between racial groups. Therefore, a possible explanation may be that people are not basing their social identity on race, but rather on class. According to Social Identity Theory, these groups are important sources of pride and self-esteem, and give us a sense of belonging. People thus attempt to preserve their group identity by ensuring division based on class lines. This allows categorisation into ‘them’ and ‘us’, and provides justification for segregation based on class.

Maintaining the status quo
Another theory that could explain the finding is Systems Justification, which states that people like to preserve things as they are, and therefore tend to defend or rationalise existing social and economic arrangements. From this perspective, the findings may reflect the belief that the system, which endorses class inequality, is justified.

Going forward, the issue of social integration based on class, and the difference between the attitudes toward racial and class integration should be interrogated. The goal should be to better understand these public attitudes so that we can begin to effect change and aim to increase support for social integration in schools and expel perceived class divisions.

Furthermore, findings such as these that reflect somewhat positive trends in attitudes toward racial inclusion can be used to raise the country’s morale, especially at a time when issues around race are seen to be causing divisions among South Africans.

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