

SUE SOUTHWOOD AND JAAP KUIPER

CHAPTER 1 A JOURNEY TOWARDS COLLABORATION

Abstract. This chapter presents a narrative of ‘snapshots’ taken from a socio-cultural study conducted with a group of mathematics teachers from an Eastern Cape primary school in South Africa. Conversations focusing on the teachers’ personal experiences of education are placed against the backdrop of the national socio-political transformation taking place in South Africa. Emphasis is placed on the centrality of the teachers’ voice, giving expression to their individual experiences, their feelings and their beliefs. The study highlights dimensions of a ‘journey’—a journey that could be seen as one not dissimilar to that which the society itself is undergoing, one that resonates with the bigger picture. Indeed—in a parallel to the national move towards openness—the conversations with the teachers reveal a movement from a ‘closed’ atmosphere of constrained co-operation, towards a more ‘open’ one of freer collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

The first section of the chapter, *the study*, locates the research in the South African context, briefly describes the specific site of the case study and orientates the work, methodologically in the interpretative paradigm of ethnography and theoretically within a socio-constructive discourse of voice. The following section briefly outlines *the project* on which the study was based and the third section presents dimensions of *the journey* interpreted from conversations with the teachers. The final section of the chapter reflects on the picture presented and highlights important issues for consideration.

THE STUDY

Location

South Africa is going through a crucial process of searching for a new socio-political identity. This involves the transformation of many aspects of national life, with education being one of the most fundamental. In the case of the educational transformation process, there is, of necessity, a focus on the more overt legacies of Apartheid such as lack of equity in pupil access, finance and curriculum. However, a much neglected, yet essential aspect is the professional development of the teacher. With the current implementation of a radical curriculum reform—Curriculum 2005 based on the principles of Outcomes Based Education [OBE]—the necessity for effective and sustainable strategies for professional development is paramount.

It will require sustainable strategies to hasten the transformation of social, institutional and pedagogical relationships necessary for such learning to occur. (COTEP, 1997, 9)

Despite this plea, the practice of supporting teachers in becoming “Curriculum 2005 teachers” has been one of running once-off workshops, which are considered to be inadequate for engendering the fundamental professional development required (Kuiper & Van Harmelen, 1996). The premise of the research on which this chapter is based is that the necessary ‘sustainability’ may be achieved, in part, through the development of collaborative, mutually supportive ‘structures’ of professional development within institutions. Together with improved external support, such a ‘strategy’ may help to make the ‘transformation’ less of an ideal and more of a reality.

It was the belief in such a ‘strategy’ that led to the development of a professional development programme focusing on mutual peer support in mathematics education—the Mutual Support Project [MSP]. This project was aimed at encouraging collegial support among a group of mathematics teachers through the sharing and discussion of teaching ideas and approaches. It was through listening to teachers’ voices and hearing stories of their experience, that a picture emerged and an understanding was gained.

If significant changes are to occur, attempts must be made to understand the experiences of teachers and the contexts in which they work. ... It is important to understand the experiences and hear the voices. (Constas, 1997, 715, 684)

The twelve teachers involved in the study are all from St Ann’s, a Catholic primary school situated in what used to be referred to as the ‘coloured’ area of a small town in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. (During the Apartheid era people were classified as *black*, *coloured*, *indian* or *white*.) All the teachers are from the surrounding Afrikaans speaking community—a community described in the words of the teachers as ‘a very poor community’ characterised by sub-economic housing, alcoholism, ill health, neglect and abuse. The study has been in progress for a period of two years.

Orientation

The research, on which this chapter is based, may be located within the post positivist ‘qualitative’ paradigm. Evolving in the methodological milieu of *naturalistic* inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the research can be described as ethnographic in design. As in Elizabeth Henning’s (1993) research, it became clear that in order to reveal the ‘reality’, including the unexpected, the research needed to be based on ethnographic principles (Hammersley & Aitkinson, 1983).

Ethnography ... is an inquiry process carried out by human beings and guided by a point of view that derives from experience in the research setting. (Wolcott, 1988, 191)

The research may be described as socio-cultural in its approach (Cobb, 1994, Stoker, 1993), recognising the connection between thought and context, including the social, cultural and institutional setting. It ‘relates the person-acting-in-a-setting to the overarching influence of the culture’ (Stoker, 1993, 193). Emphasis is placed on the dialectical process of meaning building; the intersubjectivity of persons acting in a

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socio-cultural situation. The influence of the social, cultural, historical and institutional settings on the life experience of the individual teachers is seen as central to this process.

As Lemmer (1992) points out, such an “investigation of social reality”, is “in essence a study of the product of human minds and thus cannot be separated from the thoughts, values and sentiments of the investigator” (p. 292). Human experience is “value and context bound”. As such, the study is regarded as “interpretative”, whereby “the social reality is understood within its context” (p. 292). The individual is regarded as “situated within cultures and social situations such that it makes no sense to speak of the individual or of knowledge unless seen through context or activity” (Sierpinska & Lerman, 1996, 846).

The study is also biographical in nature; “an approach to inquiry that effectively grasps and represents what one might call the *teachers’ voice*” (Butt & Raymond, 1987, 70). Narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) is employed to capture stories of the teachers’ experiences. Recorded conversations with the teachers are used in building biographies—“a story of a life or part thereof” (Butt & Raymond, 1987, 62).

Conversation allows the opening of possibilities and expands the horizons of knowing when ideas and stories are shared providing simultaneous connections between people and idea. (Olsen, 1997, 21)

Voice is regarded as social not individual as it is ‘socially constructed’. The authors do not claim to be ‘giving’ the teachers a voice on an epistemological, socio-political or methodological level. Within a socially constructed view of voice, voices do not belong to individuals and therefore cannot be sought out in that way. Rather, it is acknowledged that “voices exist in and as a social medium” and it is recognised that what is heard is “a function of who they are as individuals within the social community” (Freeman, 1996, 748). The teachers’ words are not regarded merely as individual expressions, but rather as “statements of connection” to and within the wider social systems in which the individual participates.

An emergent process of systematic patterning (Miles & Huberman, 1984) has been used to analyse the conversations: the mapping of patterns and linkage of concepts indicating possible tendencies (Henning, 1993). In keeping with the dialogic nature of the research, a cyclical process of feedback is employed to ensure ‘valid’ representation of the data.

The outside world ... is related to the inside world of the participants and the complexities of situations, processes and action and interaction ... are revealed. (Lemmer, 1992, 294)

The tendencies identified in this study reveal a range of dimensions of what is interpreted here as *a journey towards collaboration*.

THE PROJECT

The teachers involved in the study had all participated in the *Mutual Support Project* (MSP). This project focused on mathematics education and was developed to help