Continuities Across Schooling Transition: A Case of Classroom Practices Among Teachers in Venda, South Africa

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Abstract
The paper examines the institutional practices of classroom teaching and learning in the context of rapid socio-political changes. These changes place new demands on the teachers’ and pupils’ classroom practices.

The paper begins by examining the classroom practices of a Grade Six lesson, which although offered during the post-1994 era, is overtly located in the past, apartheid schooling and makes no attempt at incorporating the new ideas about teaching and learning in the new curriculum framework. The paper also examines the modes of classroom practice in Grade One and considers how these reveal the post-1994 instances of the evolving practices of schooling and classroom instruction. However, simultaneous with the evolving practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning are the past forms of schooling and classroom teaching and learning that continue to be instantiated within the presently evolving practices of schooling.

Therefore, while the modes of teaching and learning employed by these teachers, inspired by the new curriculum framework, seem to meet the objectives of OBE, in reality these modes fail to effect deep learning on the part of learners. As a result, the modes of classroom teaching and learning that continue to dominate present schooling in Venda, South Africa, is concrete: emphasising, not deep learning that formal schooling should be inculcating, but the everyday, spontaneous, knowledge and mode of learning.

The paper concludes by suggesting a model of classroom practice that is oriented towards inculcating deep learning that transforms pupils’ everyday, familiar knowledge and modes of learning into new understanding and new modes of learning. This proposition is illustrated by the discussion of the teaching and learning of concepts in the Grade One lesson.
INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a new system of schooling that was established after the 1994 political transformation to a democratic dispensation. Before 1994, South African schooling was divided into several subsystems along racial and ethnic-linguistic lines, with unequal provision of resources by the state. There were schools for Black people, schools for Whites, Coloureds, and Indians separately. Schools for Black children were further divided into ten different administration authorities of the nine homelands and an office responsible for the administration of the political affairs of Black people outside the homelands, mainly in the urban centres (Hartshorne, 1992; Behr, 1988).

The schooling system in South Africa was one of the most segregated and unequal institutions within the South African society. There were different standards for the provision of education applied to the different racial groups, with Black education receiving lowest attention and provision of resources (Hartshorne, 1992). This resulted in problems of poor schooling and low standards of teaching and learning, the legacies of which continue to be felt throughout the country.

The adoption of the South African Schools Act in 1997 was followed by the development of a new curriculum framework—the Outcomes Based Education (OBE), alternatively referred to as Curriculum 2005. Curriculum 2005 is based on the principles of the Outcomes-Based Education model that applies generally to the entire South African education and training system (Chisholm et al. 2000). Outcomes Based Education is a broad approach for all education in South Africa, applied in all schools, colleges and universities (Department of Education: National Curriculum Statement, Grade R – 9, Parents’ Guide (n.d. a. & b.). This new curriculum framework was introduced against the background of the segregated schooling history and poor quality provision of the pre-1994 apartheid schooling system.

The new curriculum framework of the post 1994 democratic dispensation emphasised progressive educational values such as learner centeredness and critical thinking. These values were not emphasised in the pre-1994 schooling dispensation. Consistent with the authoritarian practices of the apartheid political system, the pre-1994 schooling dispensation emphasised the transmission and rote memorisation methods of teaching and learning and encouraged uncritical adherence and heavy dependence of state sanctioned and ideologically loaded textbooks (Hartshorne, 1992). The new, post-1994 curriculum framework encouraged critical thinking and questioning attitudes. These values were consistent with the new constitution and contradicted the values of the previous, apartheid schooling. They were also inconsistent with

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2 The division of South African people, by the apartheid regime, based on these categories is problematic but continue- unfortunately- to have resonance today.
the cultural practices such as those involving respect for adults, not speaking up to adults and not contradicting them openly in public. The principle of respect manifesting as an instance of African cultural practice during formal school learning was observed among South African learners by Matusov, Smiths, Candela and Lilu (2007); Macdonald (2005) and Craig and Miller, 1984).

The continuation of instances of the cultural practices within the classroom teaching and learning environment may be viewed as a result of the adaptation of schooling practices to fit into the practices of the local culture and a way of resolving the contradictions that, historically, characterised formal schooling. Formal schooling in Venda coincided, historically, with missionary and colonial advancement. There were contradictions of cultures between the western and indigenous systems from the beginning. In the 1920s, for example, missionaries sought to compel Venda youth to attend school against their will and against the will of their parents. This was met with resistance, as much of what was taught in school was perceived to be in conflict with the values and practices of the indigenous culture (Mathivha, 2001—personal communication; Ralushai, 06.09.2000—personal communication; Rammbofheni, 02.09.2000—personal communication; Nemudzivhadi, 1987).

The historical practices of schooling and culture, and the contradictions that these involved, continue to be instantiated in today’s practices of classroom teaching and learning. This is revealed when two different sets of practices come into contact with each other in a situation where one does not foster a systematic transformation of the other. For example, formal school learning vis a vis culturally embedded, informal learning on the one hand, and the pre-1994, apartheid schooling system vis a vis the new post-apartheid schooling system on the other hand. When the different practices subsumed by these knowledge systems, respectively, come into contact in the classroom, a conflicting situation arises, requiring one to transform the other.

Examples of such contradictory situations arising from cultural interactions in the context of classroom teaching and learning were observed in South Africa by Matusov, et al. (2007); Macdonald (2005a; 2005b) and Craig and Miller (1984). Matusov et al. (2007) observed the cultural practices of a Sotho-speaking learner in a township school and his Afrikaans-speaking teacher who insisted, against the learner’s resistance, that the learner look up to her face and make eye contact when they communicate with each other. The teacher interpreted the learner’s behaviour, from the perspective of her culture, as showing disrespect while the learner interpreted his behaviour, from the perspective of his Sotho culture, as behaving perfectly appropriately and showing respect to the teacher by not looking her up in the eyes. The breakdown in communication and hence in teaching and learning relations was therefore a consequent of the contact between two contradictory cultural practices.
Macdonald (2005a; 2005b) reports about the teaching and learning relations in Black township schools where the practices of indigenous African culture accounted for how the mediational processes in this situation differed from those that pertained to their White counterparts. For example, the dominance of oral culture, the authoritarian approaches that required submissive attention to the teacher and rote memory-based learning mode, were instances of the indigenous cultural practices that may had evolved into classroom practices. While these modes may be related to the indigenous cultural practices, they should also be viewed as characteristic of missionary and apartheid schooling systems respectively. (see Muthivhi, 2008).

Craig and Miller (1984) conducted a study with Zulu mothers to determine the mediational patterns that characterised their interactions with their children. Craig and Miller (1984) argued that the results of the study could be interpreted in two ways. That is, the interactional patterns of the mothers could be regarded as deficient if the focus was on what they were not doing. Alternatively, the mediational patterns the mothers used, rather than seen as deficient, could be interpreted as rational, given the manner in which the mothers construed the goal of the task as the specific placement of particular pieces in their correct position (Craig and Miller, 1984: p. 20). According to Craig and Miller, the township, Zulu mothers appeared to be teaching their children to do the task “with them” while their American counterparts in Wertsch’s study from which Craig and Miller’s study was modelled (Wertsch, 1980 in Craig and Miller, 1984), appeared to be teaching children to do the task “without them” (Ibid. p.20).

These studies suggest what seems to constitute central issues in understanding the contradictions involved between classroom teaching and learning and the cultural practices. The mediational patterns and modes of classroom teaching and learning may differ depending on the specific form of schooling and the cultural traditions in which formal schooling takes place.

This paper examines the classroom practices of teaching and learning in the context of post-1994 social and political changes and the new educational innovations that emanated from these changes, such as the Outcomes Based Education curriculum. The study was conducted during the early period of implementation of the OBE curriculum, that is, during 1997 to 2000. This was before OBE was revised, leading to the subsequent modifications and elaborations contained in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (Chisholm, et al., 2000; Department of Education, 2004). The period in which the observations of the lessons described below were conducted comprises an important epoch in the history of South African schooling. During this period, the past, apartheid practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning on the one hand, and the emerging practices of classroom teaching and learning inspired by the Outcomes Based Education curriculum, on the other hand, could be observed.

The practices of classroom teaching and learning are considered against the
background of their past socio-cultural and institutional practices from which they evolved. This approach was informed by Vygotsky’s Socio-cultural and Activity Theory framework. In this theoretical framework, the practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning are considered from the perspective of how they change, and simultaneously reproduce, the past practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning. That is, teachers and pupils are viewed, from this framework, as agents who embody the history and culture of their society, reproducing this history at the same time that they change it in the course of their activity.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Vygotsky (1981:163) proposes what he terms the “general genetic law of cultural development”. According to this law, by which cultural development of human psychological processes can be understood, any psychological function such as conceptual understanding, learning modes, memory functions, language development, etc., has its origin in social relations. That is, the content and methods of society and the relations among its members are important for understanding psychological processes of the individuals within that society. The content and methods of society are transmitted to its members during social relations, such as those involved during formal schooling. These methods and content of social relations or societal activities are acquired by members of a specific society through *internalisation*, a process that involves the transformation of social, inter-human processes to individual, intrapsychological processes. Hence, Vygotsky has argued to the effect that:

> Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category [...]. Social relations, or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships (Vygotsky, 1981: 163).

Vygotsky (1981) argues that human cultural processes are concretised during social relations. Therefore, what is social is also cultural in the sense that the relation between people is mediated through signs, or cultural tools, that are themselves products of human history and human culture. That is, the historical development of societies defines their cultural traditions. That is:

> [...] The word “social” when applied to our subject has great significance. Above all, in the widest sense of the word, it means that everything that is cultural is social. Culture is the product of social life and human social activity. That is why just by raising the question of the cultural development of behaviour we are directly introducing the social plane of development (Vygotsky, 1981: p.164).

Cultural development of human behaviour occurs within the social plane of human development because the practices of society take shape in the course of its historical development. History explains the differences in the practices
and traditions of societies and introduces the element of culture within societal processes. These differences are manifest in social processes such as child rearing, schooling, youth socialisation practices, etc.

The present study examines the current practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning and their consequences on pupils’ learning and development. The institutional practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning are considered against the background of their society in the history of its development. For instance, the institutional practices of the present, post-apartheid South African schooling, encapsulated in OBE curriculum, necessitate changes in teachers’ and pupils’ existing practices, acquired during the past, apartheid schooling and curriculum practices. These changes in schooling and classroom teaching and learning are eventually internalised or transformed into teachers’ and pupils’ evolving modes of practice and teaching and learning performance. For example, teachers are officially expected, in the new curriculum framework, to organise their practices of teaching and their pupils’ learning on the basis of the new concepts and principles such as ‘learner-centeredness’ and ‘teacher as facilitator’ rather than ‘transmitter of knowledge’, subsumed by the previous, apartheid curriculum framework. However, the new context of schooling exists—for the majority of teachers in South Africa, as an intertwining of the past, apartheid practices and the new post-apartheid practices inspired by the transformational ideals in the Outcomes Based Education curriculum statement.

The Foundation Phase classes, Grade One to Grade Three had, for example, already been implementing the OBE curriculum framework at the time the study was conducted. These grades were therefore expected to reveal a different mode of practice to that which would be found in the grades above this level where teachers had not as yet been officially required to integrate the new curriculum in their teaching practice. However, for the Grade Four to Grade Seven teachers who had not yet began implementing the new curriculum, nor yet required to do so, the context of school and classroom practice was expected to be fundamentally different. The Grade Four to Grade Seven lessons were expected to manifest the forms of teaching and learning that characterised the practices of the past, apartheid schooling and classroom teaching and learning. The Grade One to Three lessons were however expected to manifest the concepts and principles of the new OBE curriculum framework that these grades had already began implementing, even when they reproduce instances of the past practices of the apartheid and missionary schooling and the society’s cultural traditions.

Formal schooling in Venda and South Africa, during the post-1994 political transformation in South Africa, represented two distinct institutional contexts. That is, one context constituted the past, apartheid schooling whose vestiges continued to be reproduced in the ‘her and now’ of schooling and classroom practice while the other context represented the new, post apartheid schooling seeking to transform the legacy of the past schooling and society
through new policies such as the OBE curriculum. These two contexts of schooling and society continue to influence and shape each other into the future of South African schooling. An analysis of these interrelations aims to uncover the modes and the nature of societal and schooling transformation in the specific cultural context of its manifestation. Such an analysis should assist in the quest to find solutions for the problems of classroom teaching and learning and their psychological consequences in the context of rapid socio-cultural and institutional changes in Venda in particular and South Africa in general.

The practices and classroom teaching and learning and their psychological consequences are conceived of in terms of as comprising human social activity. The analysis of such activity takes consideration of its developmental origin in social relations to its transformation into an individual internal psychological plane. The notion of activity enables a conception of social and psychological actions as interrelated and as inextricably interwoven into a complex system of relations that presuppose and predetermine each other. Cole, Engestrom and Vasquez (1997), drawing from Leontiev’s theory (1978; 1982), describe activity as collective and systemic events that have a complex mediational structure and a system that produces events and actions that evolve over lengthy periods of socio-historical time (1997: 233). Activities, according to this view, are represented as involving a system of human societal activities as much as they involve a system of psychological activities.

For instance, the actions of the teacher and her pupils in the context of the classroom are not viewed in isolation of the related actions of the community that influence both teachers and pupils; and those of their society that equally influence the teachers’ and pupils’ actions through the values and norms that the curriculum embodies. The present conception of human activity as involving the actions of the child in relation to his/her society and community fundamentally suggests a complex system that is not easily reducible to either the individual learner or society (or institutional setting) in which the individual learns and develops. Therefore, the present paper examines the practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning, as inherently connected to the past societal practices of the apartheid schooling and society that preceded it—even as these practices evolve in the new educational context provided by the new, post-apartheid political and curriculum dispensation, promising new learning and development for today’s students.

**METHODOLOGY**

Classroom observations focused on the practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning. The researcher sat at the back of class and observed the teaching and learning activities as they unfold. The researcher only participated minimally in the activities, when invited to do so by the teacher or pupils. For example, the researcher would respond to the question about work being covered in class when the teacher invites participation. Pupils
would, occasionally, approach the researcher and ask for assistance with completing their written tasks or for clarification of an issue they find difficult to understand. This, incidentally, allowed the researcher to gain deeper understanding of the instructional problems and difficulties that are often encountered during classroom teaching and learning.

The observation was conducted over a period of six weeks, spread over four years. Four grades, Grade One, Grade Two, Grade Three, Grade Four, Grade Five, Grade Six and Grade Seven were visited twice or thrice within the two weeks visit in a given year. The data, which involved detailed accounts of the content of the lessons and general classroom interactions, was recorded in the notebooks during the observations.

The observation was informed by educational ethnographic methods, especially as outlined by Spindler and Hammond (2000). According to their view, educational ethnographic observation is participant. Participant observational processes, for the present study, involved the researcher participating in the activities in so far as it becomes necessary for him to do so, or if, as it was often the case, he is requested by pupils or teachers to participate in their classroom teaching and learning activities.

The analysis of data was conducted in terms of whether the practices of teaching and learning followed the traditional, rote memorisation mode that was characteristic of the apartheid schooling or whether they followed the changes envisioned in the post-apartheid, Outcomes Based Education curriculum framework. That is, the practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning that the lessons represent are analysed in terms of their location in and instantiation of the specific socio-cultural and institutional context of schooling. The socio-cultural and institutional contexts of schooling comprise of the past, apartheid forms of schooling and classroom teaching and learning on the one hand and the forms of schooling and classroom teaching and learning of the post-apartheid, OBE schooling and curriculum dispensation on the other hand. Therefore, the lessons presented below represent the practices, either of the past, apartheid schooling and classroom teaching and learning or the practices of the new, post-apartheid schooling and classroom teaching and learning inspired by the new, Outcomes Based Education curriculum framework.

The analysis, therefore, emphasises the view that teachers and pupils are participants and agents whose actions are not entirely separate from their past history of schooling and society. Teachers and pupils are viewed as agents that embody the past practices of their schooling and society, simultaneously reproducing these practices at the same time that they transform them. This is a view that emphasises the historical-developmental nature of the phenomena—where the history of individuals is constituted within the history of their society and their schooling, and the practices of classroom teaching and learning (compare with Vygotsky, 1987; 1978; Arievich and van der Veer, 2004; Luria, 1971).
Two lesson excerpts from large body of data gathered during the study are discussed in the present paper. The discussion of classroom teaching and learning below is based specifically on a Grade Six and a Grade One lesson respectively. Outcomes Based Education curriculum had not as yet been phased in at the Grade Six level of schooling but it had, for the past three years, been implemented in Grade One.

**Classroom Teaching and Learning**

Classroom observation reveals that the Grade One teachers made more explicit use of the conceptual tools that the new, post 1994 curriculum provides, to organize teaching and learning. For example, these teachers made more deliberate use of group-based methods of teaching and learning and attempted to relate school knowledge with their pupils’ prior knowledge and experiences.

The Grade Six teachers, on the contrary, taught in the same way in which they did during the previous schooling system and did not make explicit attempts to align their teaching to the prescriptions of the new curriculum framework. These teachers seemed to believe that they were under no obligation to make some teaching adjustments to fit in with the new curriculum requirements because they were not as yet officially required to make such adjustments to their teaching.

As a result, the two lesson situations represent two different educational scenarios and pedagogical regimes. The first lesson situation, involving the Grade Six Geography lesson, constitutes a pedagogical setting of the past, apartheid classrooms where the teacher was the centre of classroom teaching and learning activity, deriving his or her authority from the textbook and syllabus content. Teachers under the apartheid education system were poorly trained and, as a result, driven into virtual dependency on state sanctioned textbooks for subject matter knowledge. Learning, in turn, had little to do with genuine understanding and personal mastery of knowledge by pupils than with the passive, rote-based acquisition of facts and procedures for acting correctly.

The second, Grade One lesson situation, reveals the changing practices of classroom teaching and learning necessitated by the new, post 1994, OBE curriculum policy. In this Grade One Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills lesson, which took an integrated approach to knowledge, the teacher deliberately used curriculum principles to organise her instructional activities. The principles of OBE; to do with learner-centred teaching, active participation by learners during lessons, knowledge integration across different disciplinary areas and making connections between school knowledge and learners’ prior knowledge and experiences (Department of Education, 1996), were employed to structure the activities of classroom teaching and learning.

**Grade Six Geography lesson: An old approach**
In the Grade Six Geography lesson below, presented through the medium of English, the teacher reads out excerpts from the textbook and translates them into TshiVenda for her pupils. The teacher does not explain concepts such as “population growth”, “economic production”, “raw materials” and “finished products”. Instead, the teacher presents knowledge as discreet bodies of information and makes not attempt to relate ideas and concepts to each other. Meaning was not clarified and the connections among the different concepts were never addressed.

The teacher begins the lesson by asking a question—tapping on the pupils’ previous learning on this topic that requires a genuine engagement with the task. However, the teacher changes the question immediately, before pupils volunteer answers, for no apparent reason:

Teacher: What do you understand by the term, mining? When I say mine, I am using the same word. [...] Which country are we referring to... Which country are we reading about?

A pupil responds to this question by reading out the answer from the textbook.

Pupil. Egypt.

The teacher proceeds to the next question, without making a remark about this answer.

Teacher. What is the capital city of Egypt?

Pupils raise their hands to be nominated, but the teacher immediately changes the question before nominating a pupil to answer, without offering an explanation for the change:

Teacher. What is the capital city of South Africa?

Pupils raise their hands again and the teacher nominates one pupil:

Pupil. Pretoria.

At this point, the teacher goes back to the earlier question that he had skipped:

Teacher. What is the capital city of Egypt?

Pupils raise their hands again and the teacher nominates another pupil to answer:

Pupil. Cairo.

The teacher proceeds, again without commenting on the answer the pupil has just offered:

Teacher. Who is the president of South Africa?

Pupils raise their hands, and the teacher nominates one more pupil:

Pupil. Thabo Mbeki.

The lesson continues in this way but, this time around with some apparently confused question that invoked a redundant response from the only learner who offered to respond:

Teacher. What do you call a person who is president in Egypt?

One pupil, whose hand is raised, is nominated:

Pupil. President.
Again the teacher proceeds without commenting on this answer, but indicating by the satisfaction on his face that followed the response that the given answer was correct.

After the questions and answers above, the teacher reads out more text from a section in the textbook as pupils look on and pay attention to the reading and the subsequent explanations, by which the teacher interrupts his reading of the extracts from the textbook. The teacher translates the text, which he reads out in English, into Tshivenda and offers the explanations mostly in Tshivenda:

Teacher. Now we have got a very short paragraph here [...] Some of you will say this is gas [...] by gas we mean petroleum. [...] Now this gas is very horrible [...]. [In Tshivenda] “God has really provided [...] God is good. After he has made the earth he then hid this gas under the ground so that we humans could use it at the appropriate time.

The teacher reads again from another section of the text and explains further in Tshivenda:

Teacher. Now the iron ore is the iron which has not been purified [...] It is still raw and impure.

The teacher reads again and continues to explain—in a manner of translating the English text into TshiVenda:

Teacher. Ok, We are now having phosphates for making fertilisers. Fertilisers are made from raw materials and we call them finished products? Turn to page ninety now. Have you found Alexandria?”

Pupils turn their books to page ninety and respond to the teacher’s question in chorus:

Pupils. Yes.

Without saying anything further about Alexandria, the teacher instructs pupils, again, to turn to page ninety-four:

Teacher. Turn to page ninety-four again. Many poor farmers have left their farms for the cities [...] Now Egypt is the second most populated country in Africa after Nigeria. We are number hundred, am I right?

There is no offer for an answer to this question from the pupils and the teacher abandons it without saying anything more in a way of clarification, but proceeds to read further, explaining and asking more questions for the pupils to answer.

The lesson activities above demonstrate that the teacher fails to provide his pupils with the conceptual connections that underlie the content of the lesson. For example, the underlying connections among concepts such as, population growth, urbanization, economic production, raw materials, etc., are not clarified. In other words, it is not clear how the population of Egypt, its economy and the natural resources at its disposal explain the present organisation of society and the prevailing economic situation of that country. Meanwhile, terminologies that could be difficult for pupils to understand, such as ‘phosphates’ ‘iron ore’ ‘purification’, are also never clarified. The approach to teaching suggests that the teacher considers pupils’ receptive learning,
irrespective of whether this is accompanied by meaningful understanding, as the goal of the lesson activity.

Pupils’ conceptual understanding in the lesson is further constrained by the textbook’s mode of representation of knowledge, which foregrounds content transmission than concept clarification and explication of the underlying conceptual relations. The lesson never attempts to develop a meaningful understanding of, for example, the relationship between the societies and economies of Egypt on the one hand, and South Africa on the other hand. That is, rather than presenting content as unrelated factual material that only needs to be assimilated into pupils’ memory, the teacher could have problematized the content and engaged his pupils in activities that foster meaningful and activity-based understanding of the lesson content. While the practices of classroom teaching and learning represented in this lesson excerpt illustrate the modes of teaching and learning of the past, apartheid schooling, the practices of classroom teaching and learning in Grade One reveal the nature of transformation that the new, post-apartheid schooling and curriculum context has made possible.

**Grade One lesson: A new approach**

The excerpt from the Grade One lesson below illustrates the changing practices of classroom teaching and learning in South Africa, from a traditional, teacher-centered and rote reception method of teaching and learning to learner-centered, activity-based and collaborative-interactive mode of classroom teaching and learning. However, simultaneous with the changes in the organisation of classroom activities of teaching and learning is the reproduction of the past practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning. This situation results from the continued lack of confidence with the subject matter content by teachers. Coupled with this is the curriculum policy’s inability to correct the problem of the lack of mastery of subject matter knowledge on the part of the teachers and to foster mastery of appropriate methods for the mediation of this knowledge.

The Grade One lesson below was conducted through the medium of Tshivenda and covered Numeracy, Literacy and Life Skills as a single, integrated Learning Area, in line with Outcomes Based Education curriculum. Grade One is the first year of schooling for the majority of learners in South Africa, except for the few fortunate learners whose parents could afford to enrol them for the “unofficial” ‘pre-school’ Grade RR and Grade R reception year classes. The official age at which children are enrolled for Grade One is six years old. Teaching for the first four years of formal schooling in most public schools in Venda was conducted through the medium of Tshivenda. This changes by senior primary school, Grade Five, where English, an additional language for both teachers and pupils in this area, becomes the official medium of instruction.
Although this was an “integrated” Numeracy, Literacy and Life Skills lesson, as per the curriculum policy, the focus of the lesson was on learning word sounds and their characterisation, as well as learning the formal structure of a sentence. That is, pupils learned how to form words that sounded different using different consonants and how words combine into sentences. Pupils also learned how to write sentences correctly, leaving correct word spacing and placing capital letters in the correct places.

The Grade One lesson excerpt discussed below began with the teacher listing the different consonants that begin with “tsh”. The teacher asks pupils to give words that begin with each of the following words, “tshi”, “tshe” “tsha”, “tshu” and “tsho”. The first part of the lesson involved pupils correcting the teacher, in chorus, because the teacher had omitted to write the dot at the correct place for the consonant with “i”. The teacher took about ten minutes in this part of the lesson. Pupils listed the following words below, with the teacher writing them on the board:


The teacher asks pupils if they can tell her why she begins some of the words with capital letters. Pupils raise their hands and the teacher nominates one pupil, who answers:

Pupil. Because names begin with capital letters.

The teacher agrees with the answer and expresses appreciation:

Teacher. Did you hear what she said? She says, because names begin with capital letters. I really did not realise that she could give the correct answer. Let us proceed.

The lesson continued. One pupil gives the name “tshinoni”[bird]. The teacher asks class why the word “tshinoni” does not begin with a capital letter. Pupils raise hands, offering to be nominated. The teacher nominates a pupil who answers:

Pupil. Because “tshinoni”[bird] is not a name.

The teacher agrees with the answer and continues to ask pupils more questions.

After that the names, as represented above, have all been given, the teacher asks pupils to tell her the number of sounds that each of the words on the board has. The teacher reads out each word from the board and asks pupils to say how many sounds it has:

Teacher. Let's divide the sounds now, "Tshinakaho”. How many sounds are there?"

Few pupils raise their hands. The teacher nominates three pupils, one after the other, with each pupil giving an incorrect answer to the question. The fourth pupil responds:

Pupil. There are four sounds.

The teacher agrees and repeats the answer to the whole class before proceeding to the next question.
The teacher says another word out to pupils and writes it down on the blackboard:
Teacher. Tshiilo.
Several pupils raise their hands. The teacher again nominates five pupils, one after the other, each of these pupils giving incorrect answers. The sixth pupil gives the correct answer:
  Pupil. Two.
The teacher repeats this answer aloud. After this the teacher asks a question:
  Teacher. Why do we say that the word "Tshiilo" has two sounds?
Several pupils raise their hands. The teacher nominates a pupil to answer:
  Pupil. Because "li” and "lo” are the same.
The teacher repeats this answer to the whole class and proceeds with the questions:
  Teacher. tshinoni?
The teacher says this word at the same time that she is pointing at the word on the blackboard. Several pupils raise their hands to be nominated. The teacher nominates a pupil by calling his name. The nominated pupil answers:
  Pupil. Four.
The teacher keeps quiet, not saying anything in response to the pupil’s answer. The other pupils realize that the answer might not be correct and begin to raise their hands, competing for the teacher’s attention. The teacher nominates several pupils—one after the other, with no one able to provide the correct answer. Some of the pupils nominated guessed that there are four sounds in the word, repeating the same error committed by the first pupil. Seven pupils are nominated one after the other, giving incorrect answers. In the end, pupils are divided between those who say there are two sounds and those who say there are three sounds in the word, "tshinoni". Pupils begin to chant out their answers, others saying two while some say three.

Eventually, the teacher instructs pupils to decide which of the two answers was correct by casting their votes:
  Teacher. Let's raise our hands and vote.
Pupils raise their hands and the teacher counts the number of hands raised for each of the two answers:
  Teacher. Those who say there are two sound patterns are in the majority, which means that there are two sounds.

While the teacher in this excerpt differed from the Grade Six teacher above to the extent she engages her pupils in active learning and in relating pupils’ learning to their out-of-school, social experiences, the teacher was also limited in that she made fundamental errors with regard to fostering her pupils’ concept learning.

For example, the teacher agreed to the pupils’ answer that the words on the blackboard begin with capital letters because they were “names”[^3]. The

[^3]: There are no distinct terminologies in TshiVenda, as it is formally taught in school, for “name” on
teacher does not elaborate on the concept of noun, nor clarify her pupils that some nouns do not begin with a capital letter. Further, the teacher does not elaborate on the conceptual differences between “noun” and “name” and, as a result, pupils never attained a deeper understanding of the concept of “noun”. Meanwhile, pupils confused the concept of “noun” with their everyday concept of “name”. All the nouns that were written on the board were the names of people and all, except for “tshinoni”, began with capital letters. The teacher’s approach emphasises an empirical method with regard to knowledge acquisition. This method or cognitive procedure is not capable of transforming pupils’ everyday forms of learning and knowledge into formal, scientific form of knowledge. For example, pupils’ concept of “name”, acquired during everyday, spontaneous situations, is not transformed into a more abstract, scientific concept such as “noun”.

In the episode where the teacher asks pupils to determine the number of sound patterns in each word on the blackboard, the teacher fails to explain to pupils the criteria for determining such patterns. It is clear from the performance of the pupils on this task that they were not clear about the basis for determining the different sound patterns. As a result, pupils’ responses were dominated by guesswork, with no attempt by the teacher to make the activities meaningful by explaining the rules for determining the sounds. Even where pupils gave correct answers to the questions, the teacher does not bother to check if they understood the principles or ask pupils to elaborate and clarify on their responses. Again, the approach was dominated by a procedure for knowledge acquisition that emphasises concrete, empirical and experiential mode of learning than the theoretical, rule-based scientific method or epistemological procedure. The epistemological procedure or relational system of knowledge that the teacher emphasises is not appropriate for the mediation of formal, scientific and theoretical knowledge because it emphasises concrete, trial and error method rather than the rules that govern phenomena, as well as the connections that underlie objects under consideration.

Lastly, although the action of the teacher—towards the end of the Grade One lesson excerpt, to lead pupils into a decision of what the correct answer was through voting may be consistent with the principle of making connections with pupils’ social reality and “life-skills” development, this action does not foster effective concept learning and development. The teacher’s method is not congruent with the scientific, theoretical, epistemological procedure or school-specific form of learning because it does not generate effective cognitive strategies and more powerful cognitive procedures and conceptual understanding, on the part of the pupils, on which to build their future learning and concept acquisition in the course of their schooling.

one the hand and “noun” on the other. The word “dzina”—“name”, is used with reference both to “name” and “noun”.

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The emphasis in the Grade One lesson was on getting pupils to say the correct answers in response to the teacher's questions, and not on getting pupils to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the rules and principles underlying subject matter knowledge. The everyday, spontaneous, approach that the lesson employed fails to mediate formal, theoretical forms of knowledge and its associated cognitive procedures. To overcome this limitation, the teacher needs to be aware of the fundamental distinction between the everyday, spontaneous knowledge and learning on the one hand, and the formal, scientific forms of knowledge and its associated epistemological procedures on the other hand. Meanwhile, the teacher would need to apply this distinction in her instructional practice. Through her practice, the teacher needs to regulate the relations between the spontaneous and the scientific knowledge and concepts, guiding pupils towards the acquisition of scientific and theoretical concepts and methods. Through scientific knowledge and concepts, pupils should be able to transform their existing everyday, spontaneous concepts and learning modes and acquire new methods for understanding and analysing their life-world.

**CONCLUSION**

The current paper has examined the institutional practices of classroom teaching and learning in Venda, South Africa in the context of rapid socio-political and curriculum changes. The socio-political changes, and the associated changes in schooling, as well as the introduction of the new, OBE, curriculum framework in South Africa, has placed new demands on teachers’ and pupils’ practices.

The lesson excerpts, discussed above, illustrate the historically evolving practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning, situated in the changing socio-political context of South Africa. The cultural traditions of teaching and learning in Venda, the traditions of missionary schooling and the past practices of apartheid schooling are instantiated in the present post-apartheid practices of schooling. The past practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning are reproduced in the present practices, at the same time that they are transformed through the teachers’ use of the concepts and principles of OBE curriculum.

While the instructional strategies employed by the Grade Six teacher derived from the past, apartheid, schooling system, the Grade One teacher’s practices were based on the principles of the post 1994, Outcomes Based Education curriculum framework. However, both of these practices failed to effect deep learning on the part of learners. The Grade Six classroom practices fostered rote and memory-based forms of learning, failing to generate deep learning and meaningful understanding of the general rules and principles of explanation. On the contrary, the Grade One practices emphasised learner-centeredness and connections between subject matter knowledge and pupils’ experiences in their life worlds. As a result, the concepts and principles of OBE curriculum were used to organise classroom teaching and learning and
served as conceptual tools for transforming practices that derived from the past, apartheid schooling. However, the goals of OBE curriculum to transform the past practices of classroom teaching and learning were unintentionally offset by the lack of substantive engagement with subject matter concepts and the lack of adequate mediation of the appropriate cognitive methods for the acquisition of forma, scientific and theoretical forms of knowledge.

The dominant mode of classroom teaching and learning that continues to pervade schooling in Venda, South Africa today is concrete and empirical, failing to inculcate on the part of pupils deep, conceptual learning. The new, OBE, approach such as group-based collaborative approaches and engaging learners in ‘active’ learning processes did not produce substantive learning and acquisition of concepts. Instead, these practices; when not accompanied by appropriate elaboration of why particular answers (and practices) were correct; became insufficient for creating the relational systems of knowledge that was consistent with formal schooling.

REFERENCES


