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Title: The development of context-relevant teaching tools using local and indigenous knowledge: Reflections of a sociologist, a sociolinguist and a feminist scholar.

Abstract

Schooling in South Africa is structured according to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) for Grades R to 9 and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Grades 10 to 12. The National Curriculum outlines the skills and abilities that learners should achieve in order to exhibit the prescribed outcomes for each Learning Area and grade, but it does not prescribe the subject content or tools to be used to teach these skills and abilities. This paper reflects on the journey of three researchers involved in a study that aims to develop context-relevant teaching tools using indigenous and local knowledges in collaboration with local teachers and community members, to be utilised in seven schools, in Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape. In the South African context indigenous knowledge (IK) refers to a body of knowledge embedded in African philosophical thinking and social practices that have evolved over the years. Zazu (2008) argues that the role and value of indigenous knowledge systems in enhancing and contextualizing education was recognized as early as 1978. Furthermore, according to the NCS, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) have been proposed for inclusion in the curriculum (Department of Education, 2002).

Contextualising IKS within South Africa's schooling system

Following South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, there have been a number of changes to the schooling system in an attempt to overcome the legacy of apartheid. These changes were introduced to improve access, equity and quality (Chisholm, 2004). Currently school learners in South Africa learn in the context of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RCNS) for Grades R to 9, which was published in 2002, and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Grades 10 to 12, published in 2003. The RNCS and NCS prescribe what learners should know and be able to do, while the Assessment Standards for each grade describe the minimum level, depth, and breadth of what should be learned in each learning area (Gardner, 2008). The National Curriculum has been designed this way to ensure that it is flexible and has the ability to be adapted to local conditions and needs. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) expects these curricula to be interpreted and implemented differently in diverse contexts. Although this is the case, schools in so-called "rural" areas are still unable to take advantage of the opportunities created by the National Curriculum due to the limited resources availed to them. Given South Africa's political past the terms rural and urban have a complicated history. In this paper the term rural is taken to mean a geographic area that is located outside a city or town, while the term urban area denotes a geographical area constituting a city or town.

In the South African context much of the school curricula is based on the popular conception of schooling established by the "hegemonic norm" (Western model) of schooling as set by the more privileged and affluent schools in urban areas. Images of these schools provide what have been deemed "common sense" notions of schooling in South Africa, promoting values and ways of knowing and learning that differ from those that learners in a rural context observe at home and in local communities. Recent studies have drawn attention to how classroom teaching styles and the way in which knowledge is organised determine the atmosphere of the school and how learners think about class and status. In the South African context IKS constitutes part of a challenge to "Western" thinking and conceptualisation. Advocates of IKS maintain that its study has profound educational and ethical relevance. This recognition led to a number of studies being conducted within southern Africa (Emeagwali, 2003; Mokhele, 2012; Zazu, 2008). However, much of this research did not translate into practical curriculum processes leaving educational processes de-contextualized.

This paper reflects on the journey of three South African researchers involved in a three year study that aims to develop teaching and learning tools in collaboration with local teachers and community members to be used in seven rural schools. Entitled "Promoting and learning from Cofimvaba community's indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) to benefit school curriculum", this study is located in Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape Province. The Eastern Cape Province, and in particular the Cofimvaba community, is predominantly rural and is characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment as a result of critical skills shortage, small scale subsistence farming, the reliance on indigenous plants, food insecurity and diseases such as HIV&AIDS. Furthermore, the Eastern Cape was the province with the poorest performance in the 2011 final senior secondary results with the five poorest performing districts all being in the Eastern Cape.

The Journey thus far

The study was conceived by the principal investigator. The other two team members joined separately once implementation had already begun, thus the journey to developing the teaching and learning materials began at different times for each of the team members putting together this reflection paper. The principal investigator is a seasoned researcher, while the remaining two members of the research team are researcher trainees. For the team members who joined the study after it was conceived not being involved in the initial project planning has been challenging. While efforts have been made to make each member of the team feel like they have a vital role in the project, not being involved in the initial planning ultimately meant that the team had to execute the vision of the principal investigator.

We have however adopted a policy of reflecting on every activity we embark on, by critically reviewing what has gone past and pose critical questions in order to improve on future activities. This outlook is in line with the feminist research approach to research wherein researchers periodically assess their activities as well as

engagements with the people with whom they work. Hence we have had such self-reflexive sessions within the research team, as well as with the teachers.

The schools and teachers invited to participate in the project were initially excited about the concept. They intimated that they found that the core objectives of the project were close to their hearts as they relate to the manner in which they were raised and that IKS and its relevance was evident in many households within the community. Much of the excitement about the project also came from the fact that it sought to link the school and home environment. The integration of local and indigenous knowledge meant that even parents with low levels of schooling could be involved in their children's education. The teachers themselves reflected on a number of occasions that they would like to use more context-specific and relevant examples, methods and tools in the classroom. An Example of such a reflection that all three of the researchers found relevant was teaching about a beach scene when many of the learners had not seen one before.

The research team includes a sociolinguist, industrial sociologist and a feminist scholar, with varied research experience. This dynamic has added an interesting 'flair' and 'flavour' to our varied journeys. Each member of the team brought with them their particular way of conducting research, and attempting to merge all these experiences together has led to some interesting moments. This has also been one of our biggest strengths enabling us to offer a more nuanced analysis of and response to our research activities. While the team has varied educational backgrounds and each member is passionate about the project, one of our biggest challenges is not being equipped with the ever-changing education "jargon". This has led to miscommunications at times, when we have communicated with teachers using terminology that we understand, but the teachers do not and vice versa.

The people of Cofimvaba are primarily first language isiXhosa speakers, while among the three of researchers there are no first language isiXhosa speakers, though one of us is a fluent isiXhosa speaker, and the other able to make herself understood. This has been unsettling for the teachers and community members we work with. The schools and teachers assumed that a project that is attempting to integrate IKS into school curricula would use an indigenous language as the language of communication. In response to this challenge, we have brought on board a young researcher from Walter Sisulu University who specialises in isiXhosa to collaborate on the project.

The language issue has also had an impact on the research team. One of the team members does not speak an Nguni language. The team member felt out of her depth in a way that she had not done before. Reflecting on the language barrier she states:

> When travelling overseas, being unable to speak a local language does not bother me, but this is my country. The participants were very patient with my extremely rudimentary isiXhosa phrases and I

believe some of them found my attempts rather amusing. It was enormously frustrating to be unable to engage directly with participants and discussions at times given the language barrier. It gave me a deeper, personal understanding of how the hegemony of English in South Africa excludes people on so many levels. My training as a sociolinguist gave me an understanding on an academic level of the importance of language in social cohesion and participation in various structures of life. My experiences in Cofimvaba gave me real insight into how it feels.

In this first year, in an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, we have worked with over forty teachers from seven schools in the Nciba Circuit in Cofimvaba, without putting limitations on who could and could not participate in the project. This meant that we would have to develop teaching and learning materials for 8 learning areas (subjects) for twelve grades (Grade R-12). In the first year of the study, as the academic year drew to a close we realised that we may have been too ambitious in wanting to include everyone. In response to this challenge, we planned to work with one learning area in the foundation phase in the first two terms of year 2, and the intermediate phase in the second two terms. We believe that scaling down the focus of the study will contribute towards responding to some of the concerns expressed by the teachers.

We realised that although the teachers were excited about being involved in the project, they were fearful that the provincial education system, i.e. the Eastern Cape Department of Education and its officials, might find their involvement an add-on responsibility set to take them away from their teaching duties. Attempts were made to allay their fears in this regard; by pointing out that the project was in line with what they have to do in the classroom. We believe that this perception contributed towards many teachers opting to drop out of the project. Even with those that have stuck with the project, we have found that we have to constantly assure them that the project concept is in actual fact 'a requirement' that they should be carrying out in the classroom. Although the project is at its initial stages, we find this kind of 'cautious' regard towards the project an impediment towards robustly instilling the concept within the classroom and the school curriculum.

Following the introduction of the project the research team has held three workshops from July 2012 to October 2012. The workshops took the form, for the most part, of a dialogue between the participants and the research team and between the participants themselves. The conversations were important in bringing to the fore the opinions of the participants themselves on their understanding of IKS, and the value it could add to their teaching. The discussions also gave us, as the research team, a deeper understanding of the teachers' needs and how best to engage with them to work together to meet these needs.

This first year has also involved working with members of the Cofimvaba community as field researchers. Before the field researchers could embark on field work we held a two day training. The field researchers were very engaged in the training; we worked well as a team and developed solid plans for data collection. Following the field work the field researchers returned work of varied levels in quality and quality. One of the field researchers returned remarkable work to us. She took photographs of her interviewees and wrote

extensive notes on each theme. The other two field researchers did what they could, but did not deliver at the same standard, with one field worker returning work weeks after it was due.

Conclusion

Although the study is in its first year, we believe that the path we have walked thus far can provide useful lessons for researchers and scholars involved in educational interventions, particularly in rural contexts. As we have been implementing the project, we have adopted a dynamic approach to planning and activities allowing the project to adapt to the context and our learnings from it. However, we realise that this has been confusing and frustrating for the participants at times. In retrospect, one of our most significant learnings as a research team is that it would have been beneficial to have the academic calendar in mind when planning activities as well as a firmer framework for the project goals and activities that could remain flexible. With these lessons in mind, we look forward to year 2 and continuing to work with the teachers and community members of Cofimvaba who are inspirational in their passion for and dedication to education.

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