

Using teacher stories to reveal quality educational practice: An Eastern Cape experience

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Abstract

The University of Fort Hare Distance Education Project set out to improve qualifications of primary teachers in rural and township schools in the Eastern Cape of the Republic of South Africa. At the culmination of an 11-year AUSAid collaboration between the University of Fort Hare and University of South Australia a research project to reveal quality educational practice was undertaken. Using oral histories as the methodology, teacher stories were gathered through a sequence of interviews and classroom observations. This collection of oral histories constitutes the basis for the paper. Its research focus has been the science and mathematics practices of eight teachers who typify the many hundreds who participated in the project. This paper explores the use of oral history as a methodology for documenting quality educational practice.

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1. Introduction

This paper describes how oral history was utilized to reveal quality educational practice in the Eastern Cape Province as teachers participated in a teacher education program, the Fort Hare Distance Education Project (DEP).

After describing the key elements of the DEP and details of the research project, the paper provides a typical example of one teacher's oral history. The teachers' stories were constructed through a series of interviews and classroom observations taken over a 1-month period. The stories told by the teachers

were validated by the classroom observations. What the teachers talked about was reflected in their practice. Whilst each story was unique, some common threads emerged. These have been described in the analysis of eight histories. After a description of how oral history as a method of research has revealed educational practice in this context the paper closes with a final reflection.

Planning for the DEP began in 1994 with a partnership between the University of Fort Hare (UFH, Republic of South Africa) and the University of South Australia (UniSA) exploring ways by which they might contribute to South Africa's vision of becoming a free and democratic society. The DEP set out to improve the qualifications of primary teachers in the Eastern Cape Province of

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South Africa through participation in a 4-year Bachelor of Primary Education, focusing on science, mathematics, literacy and technology curriculum.

The stories revealing quality education practices of a representative group of teachers who completed the DEP are the basis for this paper. Oral history was the method used to capture the essence of these teachers' transformation. Collecting and publishing the oral histories hinged on the collaborative efforts of three groups of people. Most important were eight selected teachers whose professional lives were the focus of the stories. Secondly, DEP project staff played a crucial role and comprised the South African author of this paper and three colleagues. The South Australian authors who had the time to undertake the classroom observations and analyze the teacher stories made up the final group.

2. The key elements of the Distance Education Project

This section of the paper discusses the purpose, education theoretical framework, structure of the DEP and the role of the authors in the DEP and in the research.

2.1. Purpose of the distance education project

The DEP was developed to update the qualifications of under-qualified primary teachers in rural and township schools within the Eastern Cape, Republic of South Africa. The legacy of apartheid resulted in reduced opportunities for many South African teachers (Stuart, 1999). As Todd and Mason (2006, p. 223) state, "The post-Apartheid government inherited a largely dysfunctional education system that reflected and perpetuated the vast inequalities that characterised whole sectors of South African Society". This project set out to redress the imbalance and to take education in the Eastern Cape (currently the most impoverished province in the country) out of the gutter, and from traditional "chalk and talk" pedagogy to one that embraced student-centered learning (Dembele and Lefoka, 2007). The term "gutter education" was the popular rhetoric amongst the student activists who struggled to resist the pernicious effects of an education system that was blatantly anti-educational.

This project evolved from the initial vision, initiative, energy and commitment of Moore

(2006), who steered a process where the UFH in partnership with the UniSA completed a feasibility study in 1995 and AUSAid funding was approved in 1998. Wright (2006) talks about reliable long-term budget support that results in sustainable practices. External support from the University of South Australia was sustained for well over a decade and was seen as a bridge that supported teacher professional development in the Eastern Cape. The bridge lasted the whole journey until the demand for primary teachers' improved professional qualifications was satisfied.

Teachers (called teacher-learners in the DEP) enrolled in a Bachelor of Primary Education degree course and spent 4 years part-time, alongside their duties as full-time teachers, participating in a range of activities from those with a classroom focus to those with a whole-school and school community focus.

2.2. Educational theoretical framework

The DEP was upfront about its focus on learner-centered and constructivist approaches to teaching and learning and teacher development which was considered current "exemplary practice" (Cobern, 1996; Faire and Cosgrove, 1988; Richardson, 1997; Skamp, 2004). Moving from traditional methodology to a learner-centered and constructivist approach to learning and teaching in teacher education is challenging and not easy to replicate in rural and township schools (Fataar, 2007; Leu, 2004; Richardson, 1997). What Rogan (2007) would argue is that one approach to implementation of innovation does not suit all, and to maximize outcomes professional support needs to be developed locally. This research project set out to collect positive teacher stories of change and document classrooms where quality learning developed as a result of participating in the DEP (Dembele and Oviawe 2007; Fataar, 2007; Leu, 2004). The DEP set out to focus on the "how" of desired educational change in one location rather than the "what", which is what many large-scale programs in developing countries do. Verspoor quoted in Rogan (1997) reports that "large-scale programmes tend to emphasize adoption rather than implementation" (p. 98).

Leu (2004) has described quality learning as active learning, use of higher-order thinking skills, learning that is student-centered and constructivist-based, all which were features of the DEP. Dembele

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