South African teachers learning to become writers and writing teachers: A study of generative learning

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' writerly identities mediated students' learning.
- Teachers' written texts mediated students' writing.
- Teachers developed additive views of students, enhancing their confidence and agency.
- Generative model of professional development supported teacher identities.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

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In this qualitative case study, we examine South African teachers' generative learning after participating in a professional development project focused on writing and describe how the teachers enacted writing instruction in their classrooms six months after the project. Building on generative change theories, we explored how teachers used free writing to become metacognitive of their writerly identities and create time and space for their students to do the same. The teachers shifted in their beliefs and understanding of different writing discourses and the importance of using themselves and culturally relevant texts to mediate their students' writing.

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1. Introduction

Before the end of apartheid in South Africa and the advent of democracy in 1994, the South African education system deprived Black African students from obtaining a quality education. Not only was different curriculum taught in poor, urban Black schools, but students lacked the proper instructional support to effectively read and write in their mother tongue. The quality of teacher education and student learning was drastically inconsistent. Since 1997, the National South African Department of Education prioritized professional development as one solution to mend educational inequities. Over the years, several professional development studies aimed at supporting South African teachers working in historically disadvantaged communities with multilingual students have shown positive effects on teacher change, teachers' instructional

effectiveness, and student learning (Ball, 2009; Sailors, Hoffman, & Matthee, 2007). Most of these studies have examined reading instruction (e.g. Sailors et al., 2007). Of these projects, few have focused on writing instruction across grade levels and none have identified substantial shifts in teachers' learning and writing instruction (Gains & Graham, 2012; Hendricks, 2013).

The current literature on writing instruction in South Africa highlights that many teachers feel unprepared to teach writing and rarely receive professional development focused on effective writing instruction (Taylor, Draper, Muller, & Sithole, 2012) much like teachers in the U.S. and abroad (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gaitas & Martins, 2015; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Seban, 2008). When teachers do receive professional development on effective writing they struggle with enacting new practices in their classrooms — perpetuating the status quo (e.g. Hendricks, 2013; Mendelowitz & Davis, 2011). Given the historical inequities created by apartheid where Black teachers have had limited professional development and children in Black schools and communities have had less agency over their learning, more research focused on improving students' writing abilities and professional development for teachers in schools serving the poorest communities is much needed.

In this article, we examine South African teachers' generative learning after attending a professional development institute focused on writing instruction and describe how the teachers enacted writing instruction in their classrooms four months after the project. Generative learning is a process in which teachers continue to improve their teaching by building on previous knowledge, experiences, and students' needs (Ball, 2009). A process of generative learning is best supported when teachers participate in a model of professional development that encourages inquiry, writing, dialog, questioning, collaboration, and teacher mentoring (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010; Luneta, 2012) over an extended period of time.

2. Literature review

Professional development is ultimately about teachers learning how to learn and transforming their knowledge into practice for the benefit of improving students' learning (Avalos, 2011). Research in England, Namibia, The Netherlands, and places in the U.S.A (e.g. Avalos, 2011; Arends & Phurutse, 2009; James & McCormick, 2009; Korthagen, 2010;O'Sullivan, 2001) confirm the importance of providing high quality, sustained professional development to improve teacher learning and student learning outcomes. Professional development approaches that are collaborative, learner-centered, and provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their practice are more meaningful to teachers (Avalos, 2011). A review of 97 studies from the U.S., Canada, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Israel, Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (2007) concluded that a variety of conditions were necessary to advance teacher learning. These conditions include: a) extended time for teachers to develop, absorb, discuss, and practice new knowledge; b) safe spaces to explore new materials and challenge previous beliefs and practices; and c) collaboratively engage in pedagogy that requires teachers to learn in ways that reflect how to teach their students. Such professional development models acknowledge the importance of teachers' identities, caring relationships, and communities of practice to teachers' learning (Flint, Zisook, & Fisher, 2011).

Yet, in many countries, the most common professional development approaches focus on transmitting pre-defined knowledge in one-time sessions reflecting local policy initiatives and shifting priorities (Day & Sachs, 2004; Schwille, Dembélé, & Schubert, 2007). The isolated nature of these models encourages teachers

to passively receive information from identified experts then implement new approaches unquestioningly (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999). In South Africa, professional development workshops are typically one-time sessions offered by the Department of Education (DoE), teacher unions, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) involved in education, and Not for Profit Organizations (NPOs) (Steyn 2008). Such sponsored workshops consist of reading through policy documents, assessing standards, and asking teachers to evaluate students' writing exams rather than the application of effective pedagogy (Ono & Ferreira, 2010). These approaches provide no evaluation of teacher learning or classroom impact (Hendricks, 2013; Mendelowitz & Davis, 2011). The research literature is replete with studies around the world that suggest (e.g. Ball & Cohen, 1999; Desimone, Smith, & Frisvold, 2007; Opfer & Pedder, 2011) when professional development is brief, fragmented, and isolated from real classroom situations it influences the degree to which teachers are wiling to alter their teaching instruction.

2.1. National Writing Project

The National Writing Project, a professional development network based in the U.S. with international sites in Malta and Norway, has spent the last forty years providing sustained professional development on writing instruction to teachers in grades Pre-K through 16 and has served as a research hub for studying teachers' learning and students' writing performance (http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/about.csp). NWP modeled professional development provides extended time for teachers to write, read, discuss, reflect and analyze the principles that underlie effective writing instruction with other teachers in a supportive learning community (Lieberman & Wood, 2002). Teachers participate in demonstration lessons provided by scholars and fellow teachers and are encouraged to continue their learning by attending follow-up workshops and writing retreats. Much of the research on NWP modeled professional development focuses on teachers' identity shifts (McKinney & Giorgis, 2009), instructional transformations (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Fox, 2000; Whitney, 2008), the importance of professional networks, and teacher leadership development (Lieberman & Wood, 2002). All of the current research on NWP professional development and teacher learning has occurred in the U.S. And even though NWP has collaborated with South African educators since 2005, there are no documented studies on the impact of a NWP modeled professional development on South African teachers' learning and writing instruction (See http://www.blogtalkradio.com/nwp_radio/2013/07/25/a-conversation-with-colleagues-from-south-africa). In this article, we report on a NWP modeled professional development project facilitated in South Africa by a South African retired university faculty, a South African high school teacher, and a U.S. writing project director. The project described in this study lasted for one week, where teachers and directors spent five nights and five days in a retreat house writing, sharing and teaching.

3. Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to explore South African teachers' generative learning and classroom instruction after participating in an NWP modeled professional development institute on writing instruction. Specifically, we wanted to document whether and/or how writing instruction was enacted in teachers' classrooms. We asked the following questions: What do teachers learn after participating in a professional development institute on writing instruction? How does a sustained professional development on writing instruction shape teachers' generative learning and