

Real-Life Experiences during Teaching and Learning: Three South African Teachers' Narratives

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teachers' real-life experiences, during teaching and learning, in three aspects of their lives, namely as school learners, as tertiary students and as teachers, influenced their current educational practices. Transformative learning, which is based on psychoanalytic and critical social theories, was used as a theoretical framework for this study. Of particular interest was to discover how, and to what extent, teachers' learning experiences had affected their assumptions, via which they interpret and attempt to understand their current teaching environment. Using purposeful sampling, three practicing teachers' narratives were selected, based on their unique richness and depth, as well as their diversity and dissimilarities of contexts. The participants were enrolled for a postgraduate teaching qualification, while having between 10 and 38 years of teaching experience. Their narratives revealed that, as teachers, they had vastly different experiences but, despite these differences, they were all able to make some substantive mind-shifts to embrace a more inclusive world-view. Gaining insight into the real-life experiences of student teachers should assist higher education institutions in improving the course design for their teaching. If lecturers appreciate and acknowledge where their student teachers come from, they should be better equipped to purposefully guide them on their journey through the teaching profession.

Keywords: Narrative, transformational learning, learning experiences, teachers, learners, change

1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers in the field of education have shown growing interest in utilising narratives to listen to the voices of teachers and hearing their stories. Geijsel and Meijers (2005:424) confirm this when they state that, through storytelling, teachers engage in narrative "theorising". Teachers may thus further discover and shape their professional identity, resulting in an experience of opportunity for learning and growth, coupled with positive emotion. Gade (2011) has found that teachers' narratives have the potential to positively influence their praxis. In their study, Lindsay, Kell, Quелlette and Westall (2010) used the narratives of three students and a nurse-teacher to reflect on identity and knowledge construction. Fritz and Smit (2008) found that explaining and exploring how teachers construct meaning by writing narratives about their professional lives and how they forge their identity, add an epistemological understanding to how educational change manifests in South African schools.

Change, according to Mezirow (1991), takes place via critical reflection. Becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions is the key to transforming one's taken-for-granted frame of reference – an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change. Brown, Morehead and Smith (2008) point out that reflections and critical discussions that scaffold new understanding for the knowledge teachers must possess in today's classroom, will ultimately help future teachers to develop the foundation for a personally meaningful professional identity, which will continue to grow throughout a teacher's career.

Although research on teachers' narratives exists (Moss, Springer & Dehr, 2008; Smit, Fritz & Mabalane, 2009) no research could be found of teachers reflecting on their teaching and learning experiences as learners in schools; as

students in higher education institutions; and as teachers. The objective of this research was therefore to explore how teachers' true-life experiences of teaching and learning in three aspects of their lives, namely as school learners; as tertiary students; and as teachers; influence their current educational practices. Gaining insight into these experiences could assist teaching staff in higher education institutions in improving the course design for their teaching. This article will proceed by briefly discussing theoretical perspectives underpinning this research. This will be followed by the methodology for the narratives, as well as the findings related to the three aspects of participants' lives as learners, students and teachers. The article ends with conclusions and implications for teacher education.

Theoretical Perspectives

We found the transformative learning theory most appropriate as a theoretical framework, in which reflection on experience and, more in particular, critical reflection, take centre stage.

The study of transformational or transformative learning, which is based on psychoanalytic and critical social theories, could be defined as learning that induces more far-reaching change in the learner than do other kinds of learning. Learning experiences that shape the learner and have a significant impact or paradigm shift, and which affect the learner's subsequent experiences, are especially pertinent (Clark, 1993). Transformational learning, emerging from the work by Jack Mezirow (1978, 1991, 1997), is further described as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference" (Mezirow 1997:5). The latter could be regarded as the collective of assumptions through which we interpret and understand the world we live in. Numerous authors (Cranton, 1994; Preece, 2004; Taylor, 2007 & Cooper, 2009) to name but a few, reported on various aspects of transformational learning. The role of the teacher and the role of the student emerged as the most important factors contributing to transformational learning in adult students. Because these factors will serve as a framework for the discussions on the empirical research, they will be discussed briefly.

1.1 The role of the teacher

Mezirow (1997) argues that, to facilitate transformational learning, teachers must assist students to become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions. Taylor (1998) believes that, in recent years, too much emphasis has been placed on the teacher, at the expense of the student. He emphasises the fact that learners share the responsibility of constructing and creating both the environment for, and the process of transformational learning. Mezirow (1997) argues that teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to effectively participate in discourse. Daloz (1999) appropriately uses the metaphor of transformation as a journey in which the teacher serves as a gatekeeper, as well as a guide for students on such journey.

1.2 The role of the student

Via a combination of reflection and discourse, students are enabled to make shifts in their world-view, which result in a more inclusive world-view; and therefore the role of the student is seen as extremely important in transformational learning. For Mezirow (1997), one of the benefits of transformational learning is the development of greater autonomy as a person, which is a defining condition of adulthood. The teacher becomes a facilitator when the goal of learning for students is to construct knowledge about themselves, about others, as well as about social norms. As a result, students play an important role in the learning environment and process (Cranton 2006). Students need to become critical of their own assumptions in order to transform their unquestioned frame of reference. Students are actively involved in the objective reframing of their frames of reference when they critically reflect on their assumptions, as well as on the assumptions of others.

Transformative learning pertaining to teaching occurs when teachers critically examine their practice and develop alternative perspectives of understanding their practice (Cranton, 1996). It is essential for this to become the actual role of training. Taking this into consideration, the role of training is to assist students in bringing awareness to their habit of minds regarding their teaching practice (Cranton & King, 2003). When this happens, students critically examine the assumptions that underlie their practice, as well as the consequences of their assumptions, and they develop alternative perspectives on their practice (Cranton, 1996). In the next section, the narrative approach as a research design is discussed, followed by a description of the narrative experiences of the three teachers, which resulted in the analysis of the narratives of meaning.

Narrative Approach

From a constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), this study used a narrative research approach in which teachers were asked to provide stories about their lives. This information was then retold or restored by the researchers into a narrative chronology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The data was collected from the narrative assignments of one postgraduate teaching course, focussing on curriculum theory and practice. All the students were also practicing teachers who, at the time, were studying part-time at an open distance university. Students were assigned a task to write a narrative in which they had to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences as learners at school; as students at a higher education institution; and as practicing teachers. The assignments of all 208 students were read.

In analysing the data, we followed the theoretical steps as described by Dey (1993). We first read the three narratives and identified codes and categorised data. Then we developed themes by making connections between these categories. The main theme of *change* that was identified, led us to an exploration of relevant theories and we resultantly identified the transformational learning theory as a lens through which to interpret the narratives. We cross-evaluated the themes related to the role of the teacher and those related to the role of the student. This enabled us to explore how teachers' true-life experiences of teaching and learning during their lives as learners at school; as students; and as teachers; influenced their current educational practices.

To ensure reliability, the processes pertaining to the research design were reported upon in detail – namely how data was collected and analysed, and how the effectiveness of the narratives used in the article was evaluated. Lastly, we adhered to consistency by ensuring that the findings were, in fact, the results of the student teachers' experiences and not our own preferences. As authors, we repeatedly reread the narratives and discussed our interpretations. The students granted us permission to use their narratives for research purposes and they were informed that their written assignments would be treated as "anonymous", so as to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were therefore used in this article to protect the participants' identities.

1.3 Narrative of experiences

The narratives of the three teachers used in this article were purposefully sampled, distinctively in terms of their unique richness and depth, as well as in terms of their diversity and dissimilarities of contexts (Teddlie & Yu 2007). One narrative came from a teacher in a township in the Western Cape, one from a rural part of North West and one from an urban part of KwaZulu-Natal – all three of them being South African provinces. Two of the narratives were from female teachers and one from a male teacher and they had between 10 and 38 years of teaching experience. What follows are summaries of the narratives of the three teachers.

1.3.1 Xoliswa's narrative

Xoliswa, who has been teaching for 21 years, teaches Mathematics and Computer Science at a township school in the Western Cape. She believes that the legacy of apartheid still plays a role in black South African schools. She attributes this to the inequalities from the past in the distribution of resources, skills, as well as funding and training, all of which impacted negatively on the type of education provided in black African schools. From primary to high school, the schools she attended did not have libraries and the learners seldom read books. The teachers tended to summarise learning content on the chalk-board and learners had to copy the information. This information was also used for tests and examinations which, in a sense, she believes made the learners very lazy.

Rote learning was prominent when she was a learner. Questions were asked from textbooks, from the Bible, as well as from poetry books and they had to present it exactly as it was written in the original source – often without understanding the content. Sometimes, at school, they were expected to complete tasks in groups, but she didn't regard herself as a team-player and completed the majority of tasks on her own. After school, Xoliswa attended a technikon to study education. Her major subjects were Mathematics, Typing and Computer Appreciation, and Accounting. Her Mathematics lecturer, who also introduced Xoliswa to outcomes-based education, taught the students to solve problems on their own – either individually or in groups. By now she was more comfortable to participate in a group context. Sometimes they had to present their solutions to problems in front of the class which, she has admitted, gave her a lot of confidence. Xoliswa enjoyed her teaching practice and felt that the skills she had gained at the technikon greatly assisted her. It was during this time that she realised that learners were very different from the learners when she had been attending school. She was disappointed in their lack of enthusiasm, cognisance and discipline.

When Xoliswa started teaching, she implemented the same teaching methods that the Mathematics lecturer had used at technikon. She reported that she was using adequate teaching methods, because she was well trained. She is also familiar with the subject content, which is something she feels that many teachers lack. She stated: "For some teachers the content is difficult to comprehend" and "If teachers are not well-equipped to deal with the new curriculum, the problems will persist, which will reflect in the failure rate of learners and the high rate of sick leave and stress of teachers". She felt that the national Department of Education still needed to do a lot more to ensure that the current curriculum was effectively applied.

1.3.2 *Lerato's narrative*

Lerato has been a teacher for 38 years. She started her life as a learner in a rural school in what is currently referred to as North West. Learners of different ages were in the same class. An 11-year-old boy, for instance, attended their Grade 1 class with her and this was not at all strange. She was using an A4-size slate to write down words or do sums on. All her school work was done on this slate, which had to be cleaned with a cloth at the end of each day. The teacher would, most of the time, look at the slates and make corrections where necessary. The teacher motivated Lerato by praising her when she did well in her Mental Arithmetic – a subject she was good at. Teaching methods were teacher-centred and, most of the time, the teacher would stand in front of the class teaching and asking questions, while the learners would sit passively in rows and answer questions. Sometimes they had to copy information from the chalk-board.

In Grade 3 they used exercise books and pencils for the first time. In Grade 6, for the first time she was taught by a male teacher who, she still remembers, loved music. In Grade 7 they had different teachers teaching different subjects and she experienced the subjects as being very complex. She struggled with English because, as she stated: "Most of my subjects were taught in my home language (Setswana) until Grade 8". Corporal punishment was used for disciplinary purposes. If learners gave the wrong answers for Arithmetic, they would be whipped on the buttocks. She also would not have dared to tell her parents that she got whipped at school, otherwise they would have spanked her as well, without even asking any further questions.

Lerato studied teaching at a teachers' college, where the teaching and learning methods were very different to those she had been used to when attending school. They had lots of discussions in class, which she appreciated, because they were allowed to express themselves freely and share ideas. When Lerato started teaching, she realised that she had a passion for teaching. She learned a lot from her colleagues. At first she was very nervous and scared that she would not be able to cope – partially due to the fact that she taught big classes with more than 50 learners per class. However, to her surprise, everything went well and she still had fond memories of her first days of teaching. Although she realised that her teaching style at the time was very different from the style she had been used to as a learner, she admitted that, sometimes, she still preferred the old drill method or practising things like sentence structures. At the time of the research, Lerato was teaching at a school for learners with special educational needs. She felt that she had the patience to work with learners with disabilities, as well as with their parents.

1.3.3 *Rashid's narrative*

Rashid is teaching language at an urban school in KwaZulu-Natal and he has been a teacher for 10 years. He recalled sitting in very neat rows in class, listening to the teacher in his early days of schooling. Mathematics lessons started off with the oral testing of multiplication tables. Thereafter, they would recite the multiplication tables, using the drill method. Rote learning was evident and there was little room for actual understanding. After school, Rashid had attended a teachers' college and stated that this had been a good experience, because the lecturers were brilliant and showed them how theory was put into practice. He did his practical teaching at the school he had attended as a learner, and regarded this as a good decision. He had a good mentor teacher. Rashid also obtained a distinction in Teaching Practice in his final year, and felt that this was mostly owing to this teacher's mentoring.

One of the most important things Rashid learned at college, was that each learner learned in a different way and, therefore, the teacher has to use different teaching styles to accommodate these individual differences. In his final year at college, outcomes-based education was introduced, as it was going to be implemented in schools the following year. He reported that being a full-time teacher was challenging, especially because they started with a whole new approach to teaching and learning. He soon realised that he had to use a variety of teaching and learning styles, as well as different assessment methods to accommodate the different learners. Sometimes he had to deviate from the learning area guidelines to cater for the different abilities of his learners. As a result of this, his lesson plans became very detailed.

More concrete activities sometimes had to be incorporated for the weaker learners. He incorporated cooperative learning, which he believed resulted in learners with higher self-esteem, better social skills, fewer stereotyping of other races and better comprehension skills. Rashid felt that he was able to develop and apply the current curriculum dynamically and creatively. According to Rashid, discipline was the most difficult and unpleasant part of his job and, according to him, of any teacher's job – especially because he was teaching a class of 50 second-language learners. What worked well for him was positive reinforcement, such as awarding merits and giving praise. Rashid believed that teaching should be learner-centred, but that learners needed good guidance from teachers to, for instance, listen to teachers' questions and suggest ways in which they, as learners, could discover the answers for themselves. In his view, learners should be guided to be responsible for their own learning.

Narratives for meaning

The narratives of the teachers in this article attached different meanings to their educational journeys. They approached the changes associated with their journeys as learners and as teachers as an extension of their own past. These findings are in agreement with Mezirow's view (1997), when he points out that the process of effective change takes place in our frame of reference (structures of assumptions) through which we understand our experience – a concept that could be regarded as the focal point of transformative learning theory. Therefore, the findings of this article relate to the role of the teacher, as well as the role of the student in transformative learning.

1.4 The role of the teacher

The role of the teacher in transformative learning in this context refers to the roles that the three student teachers' teachers played in their lives. From the narratives it is clear that teachers played a significant role in the professional lives of Xoliswa, Lerato and Rashid. The most important role, however, relates to support from the teacher. Taylor (1998) states in this regard that one role of the teacher in transformational learning is to establish an environment that is characterised by trust and care, and to facilitate sensitive relationships among participants.

In this regard, Xoliswa mentioned that, although they did not have libraries at school to assist them with information, the teacher had prepared notes for them to assist them. She reflects by stating that it assisted them a lot but, at the same time made some of them very lazy to discover things for themselves and the teacher therefore actually promoted rote learning. When referring to rote learning and the "enforcement" thereof, she states:

"I remember at Middle School we would have morning classes, where the teacher would enforce rote learning – i.e. we would stand against the wall with our textbooks in our hands. The teacher would ask questions and we were expected to give the answer as it was written in the book, otherwise we would face punishment."

Xoliswa, Rashid and Lerato all mention that, in school, they were mostly sitting passively while the teacher did all the talking from the front of the class. Lerato was, for the first time, taught by a male teacher in Grade 6, and he taught her a love of music. She also recalls how her teacher in primary school motivated her by calling her to the front of the class to recite a rhyme. She further states:

"When I got 10 out of 10 for Mental Arithmetic, I would wave my slate so that my class-mates would see. In Grade 3, my name was called during Assembly to recite the 2X table. The principal and other teachers would greet me and other pupils would be clapping their hands."

In contrast to Xoliswa and Lerato, who both stated that rote learning and corporal punishment by their teachers were evident, Rashid was able to critically reflect on similar issues:

"Thus we got bored of the same way of teaching by the teacher, which was on the chalk-board, while we had to listen to the teacher. I further feel that disciplining learners with caning and scolding is not a sufficient way, as learners get traumatised in school."

Both Lerato and Rashid felt that their teacher training was good. While Rashid stated that his lecturers at the College of Education where he studied were "brilliant", Lerato had the following to say:

"My teacher training was one of the best and as much as I did not contribute too much at that stage, I value the methods and theories they have taught me."

Cranton (1994) emphasises the importance of the teacher as a role model while, for Taylor (1998), the role of the teacher in assisting students to connect the rational and affective aspects of their experience in the process of critical reflection, is of utmost importance. In this regard, Rashid reflected on the role that his mentor had played while he had been doing teaching practice and attributed part of his success as a teacher to the role his mentor had played:

"Doing practice teaching at the primary school that I attended when I was a learner was a good decision. In my opinion, I was attached to the most brilliant teacher during that time. Everything that I learned about teaching from a practical side could be credited to him. We got along well. In my final year at college I obtained a distinction in Teaching Practice. I always felt that a part of this achievement was due to the fact that I had an excellent mentor teacher. This is an achievement that I will never forget – and it has also made me into the confident teacher that I am today."

Daloz (1986) recognised that transformation and growth could be a risky and frightening journey into the unknown, as students are challenged to let go of old conceptualisations of the self and the world. In this journey, the role of the teacher is crucial. In this regard, Rashid displays his transformational learning during this, when he states:

"My teacher training was invaluable to me, as it helped pave the way to full-time teaching. Having spent time learning from a good mentor, I'd gained some knowledge on how to deal with problems that newly qualified teachers face – such as discipline, dealing with parents, assessment, etc. I was placed in a situation of teaching 50 learners – in one class – with varying abilities and from different race groups. I've learnt how to manage my time and also to teach different groups, using varying methods, depending on the ability of the group. Having been placed in a difficult class during teacher training, has only made every learning situation thereafter seem easier."

Related to this assertion, a change was demonstrated, not only with regard to the emotional wellbeing, but also pertaining to the personal growth and development of a teacher. These findings indicate that an unexamined life on the part of a teacher, according to Howard (2006:127), is a danger to every student. The next section constitutes a discussion of the concept of transformational learning with regard to a student's experience with learning, which changes or alters a fundamental perspective or frame of reference (Mezirow, 2003).

1.5 The role of the student

In the context of the current study, the term, "student", refers to participants as both learners in school and as students in a higher education institution. Xoliswa, in realising that she has never been a good team-player, states:

"Our teachers would put us into groups in classes to do certain tasks, but I was not a team member, as I preferred to do my work on my own. As a result, I would sit quietly in a group and just do my own analysis of whatever we were given and just hand over to the group to present."

Along the way, Xoliswa was taught the right things and gained the necessary knowledge and skill at the technikon she attended. She states:

"Our Mathematics lecturer introduced us to the outcomes-based education method of teaching. He would sometimes introduce a topic to us and then allow us to solve the problem without his assistance and, if we struggled, he would then assist to solve it and explain ... This helped build confidence in us, as we gained the necessary skills."

In Xoliswa's case, an example of transformational learning is reflected when she discovered meaning in her experiences as a student teacher at the technikon in ways that changed not only her view, but how she adapted it to her teaching environment as well. In this case, "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow 1996:162). At the core of the transformative learning theory, is what Elias (1997:3) calls the process of "perspective transformation", comprising three dimensions, namely: psychological (changes in the understanding of the self); convictional (a revision of belief systems); and behavioural (changes in lifestyle). This transformation of perspectives is evident in all three narratives.

Reflecting on change, Xoliswa states:

"There is definitely a difference in the way I was taught, the way I was trained and the way I am teaching my own learners. My experience moved from being a learner, who learned by rote learning, where asking for clarity from, and putting questions to your teacher was not encouraged, to a system of learning where my lecturer taught us the importance of critical thinking and the value of group work. And this is how I teach today."

Lerato reflects on the value of her narrative by stating:

"Education is the key to success – whether you are young or old. I have realised again how important it is to know your history. A person must surely record her stages of life. Changes, development and growth are important in our lives. Institutions must be well-informed to accommodate this knowledge of learners."

Students are involved in objective reframing of their frames of reference when they critically reflect on their assumptions, as well as on the assumptions of others. According to Mezirow (2000:19), our frames of reference undergo transformation as we critically reflect on our underlying assumptions and "taken-for-granted beliefs". This transformation is evident in Rashid's reflection:

"Looking back at my experiences from a school learner to a full-time teacher, I can clearly see the changes in teaching and learning. As a school learner, the teacher would teach, using the chalk-board, and I learnt by memorising all the facts that were taught and then presenting these facts in the exams. As I reached college, things began to change – especially in the latter years with the introduction of OBE [outcomes-based education]. From a teacher-centred approach, there was a move to a learner-centred one. When I started teaching full-time, it was the start of the implementation of OBE and the phasing out of traditional teaching. Learners were now responsible for their own learning, with the teacher as facilitator. Learners learnt by doing group work, projects, role-plays, etc. I believe this is how learners should be taught and this is why I use these methods."

"With the modern method of teaching, there is a classroom, which is created by the teacher and accepted by the learners. In the OBE pedagogy, learners work collaboratively, posing questions, arriving at, and formulating conjectures and discussing the validity of solutions."

Although Rashid is positive about his growth and changed beliefs in teaching and learning, he is also realistic about specific realities, when he states the following:

"I feel that we must also be realistic about what a curriculum can and cannot achieve. Inequality and poverty still plague the educational experience of too many families and their children. The curriculum is and will be differently interpreted and enacted in diverse contexts."

According to Mezirow (1997), effective learning does not follow from a positive experience – but rather from effective reflection. By reflecting on change, Rashid states:

"What I have learned from this assignment is that teaching and learning has changed over the years. Teachers must deal with a wide range of learner abilities and challenges: Different languages, different home situations and different abilities and disabilities. They must adapt instruction and assessment to learners needs. Teachers must be active participants in the process of curriculum development. Successful design, dissemination, implementation and evaluation depend on the final analysis of teachers and therefore they must be at the heart of the process."

Conclusion

Through their narratives, teachers critically reflected on their beliefs and practices, which enabled them to learn and grow from this experience. The literature indicated that, applying narratives to education is more than just story-telling. The stories provided a holistic approach to teaching and learning and reported on the various learning experiences of teachers. Teachers were able to examine their practice and develop alternative perspectives on their understanding of their practice. Change took place through critical reflection and becoming critically reflective of teachers' own assumptions, and this is the key to transforming one's "taken-for-granted" frame of reference – an indispensable dimension of learning for adapting to change. Most simply put, via the narrative-learning process, learners' own life stories of true-life experiences were recognised and honoured. Life stories in a learning environment are like water in a vessel – they will spread and fill all available space. When the learning environment creates space for the telling of, and

reflection on life stories, they pour out from learners and teachers alike in a narrative tide that uplifts all participants – or at least gets everyone's feet wet.

We must acknowledge that much of our formal educational system does not create that space – or even allow for that space – but instead puts energy into maintaining walls between the content and the person who is to learn such content. But when our stories are honoured and listened to, we are able to bring them into the learning experience, resulting in making deep and authentic mental connections with new knowledge. Gaining insight into true-life experiences of student teachers, should assist higher education institutions in improving the course design for their teaching. If we, as lecturers, appreciate and acknowledge where our student teachers come from, we should be better able to purposefully guide them on their journey through the teaching profession.

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