

The Resistance Mode of Learning: The Potential for Resistance to New Policy Initiatives to Facilitate Teacher Learning

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ABSTRACT Creating unison between teacher learning and teacher practice remains a challenge in education. The literature suggests that despite innumerable attempts to foster teacher learning among educator professionals, the application of such learning activities to classroom practices remains yet an ideal. This article explores how learning about assessment fosters teacher learning, and how this learning filters through into the context of the classroom, where application thereof finds expression through the assessment practices that teachers employ. The expansive terrain of teacher learning has created a sense that simply teaching educators about key concepts and crucial terms in assessment, or 'assessment literacy' as it is termed, is far from adequate since there are various forces that influence and shape teacher learning. The current article explores the potential for teacher learning through resisting and challenging new policy initiatives - and in the case of the demarcated study, challenging the new forms of assessment. This study set out to explore how three primary school educators learn about assessment as they embark on a journey of learning about the new assessment practices advocated by the Revised National Curriculum Statement framework. The study utilised a case study design, where document analysis, interviews and observation were the instruments used. The article reveals that teachers are not merely passive recipients and implementers of policy. Further, in offering resistance to new policy initiatives, teachers engage in activities that enhance their learning.

INTRODUCTION

Barnett (1999, 2002) justifies the sentiments that learning to learn and learning to teach are interconnected, by suggesting that being conscious of one's ability to teach raises one's understanding of one's ability to learn. In light of this, the pivotal role that continuous professional development plays in the effective growth of teaching staff, as well as in enabling the successful application of new educational initiatives being formed within the context of a knowledge-based society, cannot be underplayed (Craft 2000; Fullan 2001; Hargreaves 1999). Moreover, the expectation that teachers need to expand their knowledge base to increase their competency in their new role functions (as outlined in the Norms and Standards for Educators (Department of Education (DoE) 2000), presents an urgent case for teachers to renew their current knowledge. The Norms and Standards for Educators (DoE 2000) clearly spell out seven expected and critical roles of educators, those of being: a learning mediator; interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials, leader, administrator and manager; scholar, researcher

and lifelong learner; having a community, citizenship and pastoral role; assessor; and being a learning area/subject/discipline/phase specialist.

Coupled with these so-called 'new roles', the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE 2002a) advocates new assessment practices that teachers are expected to implement, implying that teachers need to acquire proficiency in the assessment of learners. Amid the rapid and dramatic changes within the context of the educational environment and the accompanying demands being placed on teachers, it becomes critical that educators redefine their roles accordingly. This shift in context has brought with it changes in student expectations, where traditional assessment practices are no longer adequate. This has necessitated that teachers develop themselves in two crucial areas, these being obtaining knowledge of assessment and acquiring proficiency in assessment. In short, this amounts to acquiring assessment literacy (Mathews 2007).

The apparent newness of assessment within the NCS framework (DoE 2002a) emanates from the fact that the emphasis is on promoting as-

assessment as part of the learning process, rather than assessing learning as a one-shot, isolated task performed at the end of a learning activity, as was traditionally done. Having said this, the NCS (DoE 2002b) does not completely brush off traditional means of assessment as being of no educational value. In fact, the NCS encourages the use of both formative and summative means of assessment, recognising the merits of each (DoE 2002b). In keeping with the principles of assessment for learning, the NCS promotes the use of continuous assessment, which is designed to support the growth and development of learners (DoE 2002b). Further, the use of a vast kaleidoscope of assessment forms, to assess learners in a variety of different contexts and to suit different purposes, is advocated within the NCS framework (DoE 2002a).

While the discussion suggests that there is an apparent newness in the way in which assessment is conceptualised within the NCS framework, it also reflects a sense that a complete disregard for the assessment practices of the past is inconceivable. The apparent contradiction in these sentiments gives rise to the thinking that the so-called novel ways in which assessment is conceptualised within the NCS framework rests more on how assessment is used within the classroom context to promote learning. Moreover, with the introduction of the recent Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), a single concise policy document which replaces the current subject and learning area statements, learning programmes and subject assessment guidelines (DoE 2011), CAPS is expected to be implemented from 2012 in the junior years of schooling and then infiltrate into the other phases of learning in 2013 and 2014.

In light of the reform efforts pertaining to assessment within the new assessment framework, the level of the complexities associated with assessment within the NCS and CAPS framework compels teachers to pay attention to assessment, due to the different and (in certain cases) new ways of assessment that educators are forced to understand and implement. Further, as Papastamatis et al. (2009) assert, the complexity of the teaching profession makes the transition from training to practice rather difficult. By implication, the intricacies associated with translating teacher learning into practice are no simple task. It therefore becomes imperative to understand why South African teachers are not

conceptualising assessment in ways that are consistent with current educational policies. The current article sets out to do this by exploring how teachers learn, through exploring how they learn about assessment.

Literature Review

Teacher learning, aside from being the area of focus of the study, formed the theoretical framework that informed the study. Teacher learning is indeed a broad-based and multi-faceted scholarship, which is shaped and informed by a multitude of factors. Consequently teacher learning draws its philosophy from a variety of different schools, suggesting that the various themes and issues that present themselves within the scholarship are far from simplistic. It therefore becomes imperative that the literature surrounding the topic be explored.

Teacher learning can be considered as a process of increasing participation in the practice of teaching, and through this participation a process of becoming knowledgeable in and about teaching (Adler 2000). Darling-Hammond (2006) adds that a professional teacher is one who learns from teaching rather than one who has finished learning how to teach, suggesting that teacher learning is an ongoing activity.

While the merits of teacher learning are acknowledged, the purpose, nature and outcomes of teacher learning are not always desirable, as indicated by Bredeson (2003) and Scribner (2003), who suggest that learning is sometimes sought to cope with external demands and not necessarily to expand the content expertise of teachers. This alludes to the fact that although teachers engage in learning activities related to their teaching practice, there seems to be a low indicator of knowledge gain by teachers through these activities.

Traditionally the focus of teacher learning initiatives was based on general teaching methods and on strengthening subject knowledge, and a belief that teachers with more subject knowledge teach better - irrespective of teaching practice in place or how teachers come to know this knowledge - dominated much of the discourses surrounding teacher learning (Parker and Adler 2005). There has been inadequate emphasis on underpinning conceptual knowledge that needs to be taught (Taylor and Vinjevo 1999). Consequently, questions pertain-

ing to teacher knowledge, the relationship between knowledge and practice in teaching, and the kind of knowledge that teachers need for practice, have arisen (Parker and Adler 2005).

The shift in emphasis from what teachers do, to what they know, what their sources of knowledge are, and how those sources influence their work in classrooms, has spurred a rethink of the way teacher learning has traditionally been viewed (Lewis 2002). Teaching and learning are now both viewed as processes in which participants deeply engage with ideas in order to create meaning (Wenger 1998; Biggs 1999). Yet despite this thinking, various studies point to the severe lack of training on assessment practices that teachers receive (Black and William 2004; Cizek and Fitzgerald 1996). These studies reveal that teachers, including those who had been teaching for several years, were still lacking in their assessment practices (Cizek and Fitzgerald 1996). These studies point to two essential inadequacies: firstly, teachers have limited opportunities to attain learning and competence in assessment; and secondly, even experienced teachers need their knowledge base of assessment to be renewed. Moreover, Vandeyar and Killen (2007) have found that recent educational policy changes have not necessarily resulted in major changes at classroom level, since some educators still apply the same pedagogical practices they used a decade ago.

It therefore becomes critical to understand why teachers are not conceptualising assessment in ways that are compatible with the relevant assessment policies. This study attempted to explore how teachers learn about assessment, as they embark on their own journey of learning.

THE STUDY

Research Questions and Scope of Study

The study set out to explore teacher learning through the lens of teacher assessment practices in the intermediate phase of schooling. The critical research question that guided the study was 'How do teachers learn about assessment?'

Due to the expansive and multifaceted nature of teacher learning, this critical question was further subdivided into four sub-questions that assisted in exploring the topic in a more focused and detailed manner through the lens of assessment: (a) What do teachers know about

learner assessment?; (b) How do teachers acquire knowledge on learner assessment?; (c) How do teachers explain their practice of learner assessment?; and (d) Why do teachers offer the explanations they do for the assessment choices they make?

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at a co-educational urban primary school in the Durban North region in KwaZulu-Natal. Through purposive sampling, three Natural Science teachers participated in the study. The rationale for this selection and categorisation was that the study was demarcated within the intermediate phase of schooling, which constitutes Grades 4 - 6. Consequently, one educator from each grade formed the participants. Purposive sampling was achieved through network sampling (participant referral), as advocated by McMillan and Schumacher (2001), where each respondent or group was suggested by the previous group or individual. The study focus provided the criteria for selection of the case study school and included, by means of an established network of teachers for identification, a primary school where teacher professional development in assessment had been completed and where teachers were engaged with new forms of assessment practices as prescribed by the assessment policies for schools.

In addition, by using three as opposed to one educator, it was envisaged that the themes that emerged from individual interview sessions would allow for a comparative inter-case analysis, although this was not primarily a comparative study. The intention was to maximise the utility of the data to its full potential and to provide every opportunity to exploit the research context for context-rich information that may reside in more than one person experiencing the same kinds of activities (receiving training and implementing a new assessment process in a school across the three grades of the intermediate phase of schooling).

METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative within a case study design. Teacher learning is a multifaceted area, and since a case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of

multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon under study (Yin 2009), it would provide an avenue to explore these various facets. The theoretical framework employed in this study examined the various issues surrounding the scholarship of teacher learning and therefore necessitated an in-depth understanding of these issues. A case study would facilitate this process.

In addition, multi-method strategies were used to collect data. Documents (learning reference materials, teacher lesson plans, samples of assessment activities, teacher records and reports on assessments), as well as policy documents pertaining to assessment, namely *The National Protocol on Recording and Reporting* (DoE 2005) and *Assessment Policy Guidelines in Natural Science for The Intermediate Phase* (DoE 2002), were corroborated with interviews and observations to increase the trustworthiness of the research. After a detailed study of the policy documents on assessment, the questions for the pre-observation interviews were formulated. This was accomplished in conjunction with the preliminary literature consulted on assessment and teacher learning. Consequently the use of documents as a data source helped to shape, clarify and refine the questions for the pre-observation interviews. The issues brought to the fore and the questions that arose as a result of interacting with the documents mentioned above also helped to shape the kinds of questions that would guide the observation of lessons.

In addition, pre-observation interviews were conducted upon entering the field to explore the participants' understanding of assessment and to ascertain how they had acquired this knowledge. Observations were used to complement and obtain perspective on the data generated in the pre-observation interview sessions. This afforded me the opportunity to sit in on the Natural Science lessons, where the researcher was able to extrapolate a variety of information, including but not limited to the kinds of assessment that were used, the ways in which these assessment forms were used, as well as the kinds of assessment that were not used. Moreover, observation set the scene for discussion in post-observation interview sessions, where participants would be allowed to offer explanations as to why they employed the assessment practices observed and noted.

In addition, post-observation interview sessions afforded the opportunity for in-depth analysis of insights brought to the fore during the observation of lessons. These also enabled clarification of interpretation of what had been observed in the classroom, as well as of insights gleaned from the documents. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

The theoretical perspective that informed the study was an interpretivist one, where the study sought to explore how teachers learn, through the eyes and insights of the three participants in the study. Working within an interpretivist paradigm necessitated that attention be directed to the trustworthiness and authenticity of the study. An interactive and iterative approach to data collection and analysis was employed. The researcher's position and perspectives as well as the researcher's biographical details, teaching experience and background and areas of interest were presented at the very outset in an attempt to address any prejudice that might have jeopardised the authenticity of the study. The researcher also kept written notes on my reflections during the course of the study. These were constantly revisited, amended and modified as new insights were revealed, and as the researcher began to interact with the data and ascribe meaning to what was emerging. The researcher also commented on how the researcher's own interpretations of data began to evolve during the course of the study, and this was done throughout. Such measures also helped enhance the trustworthiness of the study.

Member checks, as advocated by Patton (2002), were used to verify and confirm interpretations of what the participants were saying in interview sessions as a way of enhancing the credibility of the study. Follow-up interviews also helped afford participants the opportunity to verify, affirm and elaborate upon what they were trying to say, and ensured that their perspectives were portrayed accurately. Interview transcripts, notes, memos, field-notes, samples of lesson plans and assessment activities and other forms of evidence pertaining to the study were methodically arranged and filed for safe-keeping. Further, the original audio-tape recordings of interviews and detailed records of personal notes on steps taken during the different stages of the research process, as well as the reasoning behind taking such measures, were also stored safely. Notes on the researcher's personal re-

flections as the researcher began to interact with the data and ascribe meaning to what was coming through were also maintained. These notes were constantly revisited and reviewed as new insights began to emerge.

In an attempt to effectively address ethical issues associated with the study, written permission to conduct it was obtained from the DoE and the Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In addition, the principal agreed (in writing) to the study taking place at the school in question. Further, permission from the select participants was obtained via them signing consent forms agreeing to participate. From the very outset participants were informed of the intended outcomes of the research process, the process by which the data would be collected, and how the research would be used. In addition, participants were made aware of the fact that they took part in the study voluntarily, and were free to withdraw at any time should they wish to do so. The study only commenced once written permission from all relevant parties was obtained. Use of pseudonyms for both the school under study and the participants helped to ensure anonymity, and in this way maintain the confidentiality of identities of the research site and the participants.

Data Analysis and Presentation

The study utilised a combination of grounded and *a priori* approaches to the analysis of the data. Emergent themes from the literature surrounding assessment and teacher learning formed the basis of designing the research instruments, and helped identify the themes for analysis. In addition, the emergent trends evident from the data collected also helped to shape and identify the themes for analysis. In addition, conclusions and theories were drawn around the area of teacher learning, as well as from the themes that emerged from the data. This was in addition to the supporting literature on teacher learning and assessment.

By referring to the interview transcripts, observation field-notes, lesson plans and assessment activities, the researcher began comparing how educators claimed they assessed learners with what was actually observed by way of their assessment practices. The researcher also compared and contrasted observations and analysis of interview transcripts with the lesson plans

of teachers, as well as with samples of assessment activities. In doing so, notes were made of any similarities or conversely any inconsistencies and contradictions observed. The researcher proceeded to plot emerging insights in a comparative frame, where emerging issues were plotted side by side with evidence from the data generated. This assisted in identifying themes and issues to be pursued in the interviews to follow, and where possible relationships between the various categories identified could be explored further by probing the participants.

The process of analysing the data obtained from the post-observation interviews was similar to that of analysing that collected from the pre-observation interviews, with the added benefit of comparing and contrasting data obtained from the earlier interviews, observation sessions and analysis of documents. As a deeper level of analysis was broached, it was envisaged that breaking down the data into themes, sub-themes and categories and then attempting to creatively bring these together again in perhaps a different and new way would reveal different perspectives and insights on teacher learning. In the analysis of data an analytical framework was employed that constituted a combination of two approaches to data analysis.

Data were presented as narrative stories constructed from the semi-structured interviews to explore the meanings that participants ascribed to their experiences of learning about learner assessment. Content analysis was employed in the analysing of data, where the focus was on how meaning was constructed, through an understanding of the context in which meaning was created, as well as through an acknowledgement of the role of the researcher in the study. In addition, by paying attention to both the text and context, this study also employed discourse analysis to analyse the data and generate the themes that guided presentation of the data. Through an analysis and interpretation of the interview transcripts, observation field notes and assessment planning documents, ideological facts and beliefs were presented to create identities for the participants. A deeper analysis was then embarked upon and this entailed looking at what angle or point of view was being presented. In other words, framing the details into a coherent whole by looking at teacher learning in context helped to construct the narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The ensuing discussion focuses on five critical themes that emerged during the data analysis process. Each theme is analysed in light of the research findings alongside the literature that pervades the scholarship of teacher learning. The discussion below serves to explore the implications of the findings of this study for teacher learning.

Tensions Created by New Policy Initiatives

With the advocacy of the NCS (DoE 2002), educators were expected to comply with the expectation of integrating assessment into the process of teaching and learning. This meant that assessment would now form a critical component of the teaching and learning process. A move from summative assessment towards formative means of assessment was what the new assessment policy set out to achieve. This necessitated employment of both formal and informal means of assessment as a tool to facilitate learning, where various new way to assess student learning would be used. Adherence to these expectations implied that the participants familiarised themselves with the new ways of assessing, thereafter implementing them in their teaching. The departmental expectations outlined above exerted a pervasive influence on teachers acquiring knowledge about and competence in assessment.

Participants felt a considerable amount of pressure in keeping abreast of curriculum reform initiatives.

Changes in curriculum are too rapid to keep pace with, forcing us teachers to change everything we have learnt and knew about assessment and learning. You have to read the assessment documents and make sense of what is expected. Then you have to try out these different assessment forms with your learners. It may not be possible to use all new forms of assessment with your class, but start with the ones you feel most comfortable with. [Teacher A]

Well, for one, if you look at the NCS documents there is such a variety of assessment techniques. Moreover, there are far too many assessment standards for a given year. Even if we do combine assessment standards, we don't cover all that is expected. It's difficult at times, but I do the best I can. [Teacher B]

Learning informed by policy can precipitate a variety of chain reactions. It can force teachers into a situation where they merely do the necessary to fulfil policy obligations. In an effort to comply with policy regulations, educators A and B embarked on a process of acquainting themselves with DoE requirements regarding assessment for promotional purposes. Furthermore, they tried to incorporate as many of the new assessment forms as possible in their teaching. In this way their learning served the purpose of succumbing to external demands. Alternatively, external initiators of learning could trigger an attitude of non-compliance, where the opposite effect is created. Teacher C appeared to be less bound by policy requirements, and actively resisted the adoption of new assessment initiatives. Furthermore, he firmly held onto assessment practices that were still rooted in the past, continuously defending his stance:

These guys don't know what they are doing. Every few years, they come out with something new. That idea doesn't work, so they scrap it and try something else, and this pattern continues. Moreover, documents have too much content to comprehend. These are also too prescriptive. Going through these is very frustrating and annoying. Principals often insist that teachers must work with the subject policy documents as inspectors will come and check. What are they going to check? When subject advisors visit school they give their own suggestions and they are gone. They can't force you to do things. I cross-question them, debate with them or throw back comments and suggestions of my own. This typically results in them justifying their expectations, by saying that these were coming from National level. Shortly thereafter they leave hurriedly, never to return. It's like that. I proved that here in this office on more than one occasion. Thereafter, we as teachers have to do damage control, as a result of the aftermath of these so called 'brilliant changes' being instituted. We are constantly being used as guinea-pigs to try out new ideas that don't pan out the way policy implementers had intended it to. We are caught in a vicious web. Quite frankly, I am tired of succumbing to such nonsense. [Teacher C]

While policy initiatives may serve to initiate learning, as alluded to above, policies by themselves don't impart new knowledge but rather provide the platform for teachers to pursue ad-

ditional learning and transform that learning into new practice (Elmore 1997). In the case of the located study, the new policy initiatives served to trigger a process of learning among the participants as they began to engage with policy documents to make meaning of the new assessment forms being advocated.

Value of Workshops as a Stimulus for Learning

The three participants in the study had received training in assessment at a once-off two-hour session (a single workshop) delivered at the local district teacher's centre. This workshop was conducted by facilitators who were educators from different schools, that were called upon by the DoE to cascade the information pertaining to assessment. The areas of content that were covered at these training workshops, included: what is meant by assessment?; the purpose of assessment; assessment in the GET (General Education and Training) band (Grades R-9); assessment planning documents; assessment strategies; formal and informal assessment; and keeping assessment records.

Subsequently follow-up workshops were conducted, where teachers were called to learning area workshops dependant on the learning areas they taught. Once again these were hosted by the DoE, but this time it was the subject advisor for that specific learning area who conducted the training. Each learning area workshop was of one day's duration. Aspects covered at the Natural Science training workshops included the following:

- Unpacking the assessment standards for Natural Science;
- Core knowledge to be covered in Natural Science;
- Recording assessment;
- Types of assessment used in Natural Science;
- Requirements for progression;
- Designing assessment activities;
- A suggested learning programme and work schedule;
- Moderation of assessment tasks; and
- Formation of Cluster Committees.

The content of the initial training workshops was informed by policy guidelines and highly structured initially through presentation of associated concepts and definitions, where the

sessions were more a case of sitting and listening on the part of participants. The participants felt that the principles of the new assessment forms, along with departmental initiatives to inspire teachers to implement these, did not necessarily equip teachers with the skills to apply these aspects to the classroom context:

We were called to workshops, where the different forms of assessment were explained. They gave us documents at these workshops to read and understand for ourselves, but all in all, it's our own thing. We have to find out for ourselves what is suitable for our own situation. We have to be selective and sift out things for ourselves and take it from there. Although we go and we listen, the workshops are not so beneficial because most of the things we do know. [Teacher A]

The problem with current workshops, run by the department, is that facilitators just want to run through them. There are no practical activities to keep teachers gripped. Also, these workshops are often run by people who never taught a day in their life. They are not aware of the practical realities of the classroom. They are merely concerned with following policy. [Teacher B]

With the exception of the two training sessions on assessment that the department offered, assessments are not covered at workshops. Yet, assessment is now like this gospel, 'magical word' in education. We are constantly reminded that assessment is part of the learning process. Despite this, department officials and subject advisors don't even touch on assessment at workshops. Other aspects such as drawing up learning programmes, work-schedules, lesson plans and activities are covered, instead. [Teacher C]

While the participants were clearly preoccupied with levelling criticisms against the training workshops, the value of the implicit learning acquired through such forums should not be sidelined. Aside from serving as a stimulus for learning, the workshops presented opportunities for learning. This became evident when the participants began to engage with the new assessment forms, through their engagement with policy documents and collaborative interaction with colleagues at the sessions. In this sense, the formal learning acquired through the participants' engagement with policy documents and their participation in the training workshops

could be viewed as a springboard for making learning relevant to situations, experiences and outcomes. This could be achieved by adapting the formal learning through changes made in the assessment process, as is evident in the ensuing discussions. In this way, training workshops sowed the seeds for participants to advance their own learning. While the learning acquired through their participation in training workshops was not recognised nor acknowledged by them, the participants had in fact acquired learning.

Learning Intuitively from Experience

The participants in the study were seasoned educators, each with more than a decade of teaching experience. Moreover, intuition from experience tended to guide their individual learning, as the sentiments below illustrate:

The language in new assessment policy documents seems like Greek. If you are not a teacher experienced in that subject, you are going to get cooked. I have tried to sit down and translate this Greek to English. When NCS was first introduced, I spent the first six months going through the fancy documents to understand them. Then I put these away and taught according to what I know works well. My approach to incorporating the new assessment principles in my teaching has been to start with translating policy documents into terms and concepts that were easily identifiable with those that I had previously used in my teaching. [Teacher C]

While Teacher C alluded to the complex nature of learning about the new assessment forms, the fact that he did try to interpret what was being conveyed in policy documents suggests that the ability to derive meaning through translating them into familiar terms was within the capability of an experienced teacher. Through interacting with policy documents in this way he was extending his knowledge by making meaningful links with the new and old ways of assessing learners. This would suggest that Teacher C was in fact developing deep knowledge about issues pertaining to assessment. Deep learning aims to gain understanding in substantial and more meaningful ways, thereby allowing for more creative ways of applying this learning to the classroom context, and in this way modifying practice and underlying values (McKay and Kember 1997). Through the inte-

gration of new knowledge with pre-existing knowledge, deep learning embraces an enquiring and analytical approach to information and interpretations (Meyer 2000).

In addition, the thinking that experts tend to have a less difficult time accessing and using their knowledge by virtue of their intuition (National Research Council 2000) is evident in Teacher B's sentiments:

We as teachers know our subject matter and we know our learners. We use this knowledge of our learners and subject matter, along with our discretion, as well as the information that we are given in policy implementation guidelines, to draw up our own assessments accordingly.

Teacher B was in a position to use a combination of her subject knowledge, experiential knowledge and content knowledge of assessment to design her own assessment activities. Her assertion that she used her discretion to align assessment tasks to suit the calibre of her learners, while simultaneously attempting to fulfil policy requirements, suggests that she was in a position to organise her subject knowledge as well as her knowledge of assessment, and to access concepts and skills needed to implement the new assessment forms, suggesting that she was in fact developing her expertise in assessment.

The fact that the participants engaged in reflecting on their experiences, in line with the potential for transferability of their existing knowledge about assessment through their own learning, suggests that deep learning was ensuing (Hay 2007; McAllister et al. 1997). Such a scenario would bear testimony to the notion that expertise lies in the ability to construct and reconstruct professional knowledge to address a personal quest and the challenges of teaching in different contexts (Kelly 2006). In their search for personal meaning and understanding, the participants began to develop a holistic perspective of learner assessment by drawing on their personal experience to make sense of new ideas and experiences (McAlister et al. 1997).

Adaptive Learning: Using Knowledge from Practice (Situated Learning)

The data suggest the teachers need to be inspired to continue with their learning. Such inspiration emanates from the visible, positive

results of implementing new innovations. This was evident in the case of Teacher B, when she continued to use group work as an assessment strategy and saw that it was working in the context of her modifying it to suit the practical realities she faced:

Many of the methods spoken about in the assessment policy documents cannot be used in our classrooms. We have large class sizes. We have children with language barriers. We are actually teaching in an inclusive education system, where we have to cater for learners with special educational needs. So the very flowery methods that we have read about, or have been told about, cannot be used as is in our classrooms.

Take the assessment of group work, for example. Our classes are far too big for teachers to use group work as an assessment strategy. When I have tried group work in class, I found that learners were far too noisy. Further, it became difficult for me to walk around and assess all learners due to the large number of learners to assess in a given time slot. Realising that group work, as I was using it, was not working, I carefully thought about how I could adjust the way I was using this assessment strategy to effectively curb the problems I was experiencing. In addition, I spoke to my colleagues from other schools and listened to how they used group work in their classrooms. After reflecting on their experiences and thinking about my previous experiences of group work, I managed to come up with an idea as to how I could incorporate group work as an assessment strategy in my teaching.

Now, when I use group work in class, I break up the one big assessment task into smaller or mini-tasks, which I carry over into a series of lessons, extending over a period of time depending on the nature of the task. In each individual session I focus on a particular mini-task, which then becomes more manageable to assess. Also, I assess only two or three groups at a time and follow through the remaining groups in the next lesson.

In this way, rather than excluding group work altogether, I have come up with a way, through reflecting on the problems I previously encountered, and through my interactions with my colleagues, to modify the use of group work as an assessment strategy to suit the practical realities that I am confronted with. In this

sense, I have adapted how I assess to suit my circumstances.

The complexities associated with the contextual realities that Teacher B was confronted with compelled her to seek measures to adapt assessment principles advocated in policy guidelines to suit her own unique set of circumstances. The benefits of taking the contextual factors into consideration are emphasised by Ellis (2007), when he contends that having an overview of pedagogical context knowledge affords teachers the opportunity to look around the knowledge arena, to look inward for reflection, and to look outward for other sources of knowledge and criticism. This was evident when Teacher B embarked on an exercise of self-reflection with regard to the way she was using group work as an assessment strategy. Following on from this she sought the assistance of colleagues from other schools, which helped to modify her assessment practices.

It was through learning by doing (actually assessing in the context of the classroom) that the participants actually acquired a significant proportion of their learning. By reflecting on their experiences of trying and testing the new ways of assessing in the classroom, they were in a better position to modify their assessment practices to suit the practical realities they were confronted with. In this way contextual factors exerted a significant influence on the ways in which participants assessed their learners in the context of the classroom, providing the rationale for teachers to embark on adaptive learning.

Learning Through Networking: Intensity and Depth of Learning Conversations

The participants in the study stressed the significance of informal learning conversations with their colleagues in contributing to their learning experiences:

After setting an assessment task, especially a test that I deem suitable for my learners, I would ask a colleague from staff to look over the task and offer his or her input, with regards to whether or not the task would be appropriate for the learners that it was targeted at. I would listen to the suggestions offered and take these into consideration before I actually carried out this assessment task in class. Such suggestions would often include the comments on the format of the test and the levels of question-

ing. I would review the comments from my colleagues and re-examine my assessment task in line with these comments. Often, I would even modify my assessment task to incorporate the suggestions of my colleagues. [Teacher A]

At this school, I meet unofficially with teachers to discuss ideas on assessing learners. Teachers come to me for advice all the time. Sometimes they come to my office for assistance. However, most of the time, we have informal chats in the corridors and in the staff room. If I am unsure of something, I contact my colleagues from other schools. I frequently have telephonic conversations with colleagues from other schools. Talking about problems that we may be experiencing and asking for help where it is needed is an important part of growth. We are able to have such discussions with our colleagues as we all speak the same language within the teaching group. [Teacher C]

The discussion above suggests that learning through networking provides a meaningful avenue to advance teacher learning. Engaging in discussions relating to their assessment practices with their peers proved effective in generating meaningful learning among the participants, despite the predominantly informal manner in which these conversations took place. To this end, Day (1999) highlights the advantage that informal mechanisms have over more formal ones, as the former are more in synch with the goals of teachers. Teacher C's sentiment "We all speak the same language, within the teaching group" bears testimony to this. In addition, even casual encounters that result in discussions of teaching practice can help develop competence among educators, hence meaningful learning can be facilitated (Borko 2004). Through engaging with the ideas and the innovations and experiences of others, teachers begin to explore ways of improving their teaching and supporting one another as they work to change their practice (Moll 2003). This was evident in the case of Teacher A, when she admitted she took the input from her colleagues into consideration before carrying out her assessment tasks in class.

The notion of shared learning within the context of networking implies a deeper level of engagement that involves more than merely acquiring new information and extracting this when required (Colucci-Gray and Fraser 2008). Moreover, it involves effective dialogue that leads to shared understanding, where the platform for

working collaboratively to solve problems and find workable solutions to common issues and concerns can be established (Palmer 1998). Through networking with her colleagues, Teacher A found that they had experienced similar challenges regarding implementation of the new assessment strategies. Through exchanging ideas about their various assessment practices, the educators within the group were able to gain one another's support in order to incorporate the new assessment strategies in their respective classrooms. Through their experience, participants were involved in creating learning opportunities and designing learning experiences to suit their own individual circumstances, suggesting that the sharing of thoughts, ideas, strategies and knowledge within networks provides for a deeper level of engagement that reinforces and promotes learning. This is in congruence with the thinking that learning networks provide an opportunity for members to create as well as receive knowledge (Lieberman 2000).

Networking for learning, as alluded to in the data presented above, reveals a space outside of the content of learning. By this I mean that teachers do not necessarily learn from others in the network by sharing their experiences, thoughts and insights, but that the context of networking provides a platform to learn. The platform in this instance refers to attributes that promote learning, which include confidence building, affirmation by and from others, esteem and modelling. The idea here is that learning is not 'out there' and that one must receive learning - rather the idea is that learning is internal, complex, and can happen as a result of a confluence of thought processes stimulated by reflections on, for example, networking with others.

CONCLUSION

While policy serves to initiate learning, policy alone cannot ensure that learning will transpire or that knowledge gained from the interaction with policy will be translated into practice within the classroom context. In this regard, it is argued that the teaching methods and approaches advocated by official knowledge forms have proved inadequate in terms of their application to teachers' practical contexts. The current paper demonstrates that while new policy initiatives may have been delayed or even thwarted by resistance, the potential for learning to be

enriched through such resistance is enormous. A plethora of learning opportunities emerge though such resistance, creating the platform for additional learning to ensue.

Through reflecting on experience and their own intuition, teachers are in a position to derive meaning that becomes context-specific as they modify and adapt their teaching and assessment practices to suit daily practical realities. This is in synch with the thinking that teachers' needs can only be addressed through their own understanding in practice or local knowledge, suggesting that teachers themselves are creators of professional knowledge. Through networking and engaging in learning conversations with their peers, teachers can advance their own learning, as was the case with the participants in this study.

If we consider the conception of teacher development as a process of negotiation between educational theories, teachers' own authentic (local) understanding and authentic (local) practice, it becomes quite clear that teachers' reactions to change and acquiring new learning are instrumental in facilitating the learning process itself. In the case of the current article, the strong resistance offered to the new policy initiatives on assessment served as a catalyst for acquiring learning about assessment among teachers.

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