

Using cultural capital as a resource for negotiating participation in a teacher community of practice: a case study

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Continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives for teachers in South Africa take on various forms, ranging from formalised, structured, credit-bearing certification programmes to informal, relatively unstructured, situated learning programmes. While many formal programmes can claim success by measuring throughput rates, there is still much to learn about how and why teachers participate in CPD programmes in the way they do. In fact, CPD planners seldom take into consideration teacher biographies and the socio-economic contexts within which teachers work.

This article examines the influence of biography and context on the nature of participation and learning in a teacher community of practice. It uses data from the Teaching Economic and Management Sciences (TEMS) teacher development programme and focuses on the experiences of a novice EMS teacher as he engages with the challenge of curriculum development. Drawing on the work of Wenger (1998), Bourdieu (1992) and Yosso (2005), it is argued that cultural capital has a significant influence on a teacher's ability to negotiate participation in a community of practice. This interpretative case study draws on tenets of symbolic interactionist ethnography (Woods, 1996) to guide the research process.

Keywords: continuing professional development, social capital, cultural capital, linguistic capital, community of practice

Introduction

Day and Sachs (2004:29) contend that "... CPD [continuing professional development] is becoming understood to have a range of forms, locations and practices appropriate to its many purposes". While they note this optimistic view of a new understanding of the purposes and forms of CPD, they assert that internationally there still is a substantial dearth of understanding with regard to outcomes of teacher professional development as it occurs in its various forms, and that CPD "is alive, but not thriving" (Day & Sachs, 2004:29).

This is particularly the case in a South African context that is struggling to deal with the legacy of a fragmented and inequitable apartheid education, characterised by teacher professional development that is diverse in terms of its service providers, contexts and clients — and as such presents unique challenges. Jita and Ndlanane (2009) argue that alternative approaches to teacher professional development, such as teacher clusters, are beginning to emerge as powerful vehicles for teacher professional development in South Africa. They argue that this type of configuration provides opportunities for teachers to interact with one another and to develop relationships of trust and respect.

This article draws on data generated from a larger study that had as its focus the examination of teacher learning in a community of practice. The study focused on a group of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) teacher learners in primary schools who, out of need, had constituted a support group to make sense of and develop the new EMS curriculum for learners in Grades 4 to 7. This was an ill-defined group of teachers who were socio-economically, ethnically and academically diverse, and who taught in starkly contrasting contexts.

The thread that appeared to bind these teachers was the novel challenge they experienced in having to teach EMS, a learning area in which they had had no formal training. As teacher educator, economic

education specialist and researcher, I undertook to work with this group of teachers, and subsequently launched the Teaching Economic and Management Sciences (TEMS) teacher development project. Wenger's (1988) social practice theory of learning informed the way in which the TEMS teacher development project was set up as well as the way the data were analysed. The TEMS project was based on the assumption that stimulating participation in a community of practice would enhance teacher learning.

The TEMS community as the empirical field

The TEMS community constituted a constantly changing group of EMS teachers. Invitations to the TEMS workshop sessions were sent to 19 schools in the Pinetown-Mariannhill region and emphasised that attendance was voluntary — an important principle of a community of practice. Eleven teachers initially committed themselves to the research project as research participants, and received a formal letter outlining ethical issues related to their participation. The actual number of TEMS research participants, however, eventually constituted a core group of seven teachers (four cited work pressures and personal reasons for withdrawal from the project). Four other teachers were regular attendees at workshop sessions but elected not to be part of the research project as research participants. Six teachers attended alternate sessions — they came from schools that had a policy of alternating their representatives.

The arrival of new teachers was a feature of every session — as was the non-appearance of previous attendees. Three teachers made a regular habit of arriving for a session, signing the register, waiting for 15 minutes, then quietly exiting the venue. This kind of erratic attendance was acceptable, as Wenger (1988) reminds us that the existence of a community of practice does not depend on fixed membership.

Participants in this community of teacher learners fitted into several categories and assumed various roles within the communities of practice, such as a coordinator, who organised events and linked community members; a core group of active participants who assumed leadership roles; an active group of frequent but not regular participants; peripheral participants, members who occasionally took part, and 'lurkers' who made little or no contribution, but appeared to learn from observation (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

A comprehensive explication of the nature of teacher learning for the group as a whole and a rigorous engagement with and critique of Wenger's social practice theory of learning in a community of practice has been documented elsewhere (see Graven, 2004; Graven & Lerman, 2003; Maistry, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c). This article engages with the data set of a single teacher who, despite having endured personal adversity and strife, was able to successfully negotiate participation in the programme. It attempts to employ the concept of "capital" as espoused by Bourdieu (1992) and Yosso (2005) to analyse the participation of the selected teacher.

A brief overview of the literature

The many reasons teachers often find formal professional development disappointing include the fact that teachers are positioned as clients needing "fixing", rather than as owners and managers of programmes that supposedly aim to support their learning (Clark, 2001; Sayed, 2004). Clark (2001) notes that many teacher professional development initiatives are often superficial, short-term and insufficiently sensitive to complex local conditions. He accordingly maintains that teachers must become agents of their own and each other's learning, and that teachers' perspectives on their work should be carefully considered: "A conversation group, in the best of circumstances, becomes a social context for doing the work of reflective practice" (Clark, 2001:180).

In evaluating the usefulness of a socio-cultural approach for analysing teachers' responses to the professional learning of standards-based reform policies in the United States through a case study of six elementary teachers, Gallucci (2003) asserts that communities of practice are sites for teacher learning and mediators of teachers' responses to institutional reform. Characteristics of such communities of practice influence the degree to which teachers work out negotiated and thoughtful responses to policy demands. These findings confirm the value of teacher learning communities as sites for teacher learning.

There appears to be no universal definition of a professional learning community (Hord, 1997). Although little evidence exists of the impact of CPD on policy and practice, teacher development programmes continue to be introduced throughout the world (Bolam & McMahon, 2004). While the notion of teachers collaborating to improve practice is not new, the study of collaborative processes engaged in by teachers and other professionals has recently attracted the interest of researchers. Much more research is needed to determine the potential of communities of practice for learning systematically (Wideman & Owston, 2003).

Learning in general, and teacher learning in particular, can have different meanings depending on one's conceptual perspective (Spillane, 2000). While research scholars and policy makers have cast their work primarily in terms of learners, little attention has been paid to teachers and how they learn new ways of teaching (Putman & Borko, 2000). In recent years there has been a proliferation of research on schools as learning communities, in which learning by teachers is connected to school improvement (see DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Reyes, Scribner & Paredes-Scribner, 1999; Smylie & Hart, 1999; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999). Drawing on the work of Hutchins, Lave, Pea, Resnick and Vygotsky, Spillane (2000:3) provide the following description of the situative perspective on learning:

The situative perspective regards individuals as inseparable from their communities and environments. This perspective views knowledge as distributed in the social, material, and cultural artefacts of the environment. Knowing is the ability of individuals to participate in the practices of the community. Learning involves developing practices and abilities valued in specific communities and situations.

This view is supported by Putman and Borko (2000:5), who posit that learning is situated in particular physical and social contexts. How learning takes place, and the situation in which it takes place, becomes an essential part of what is learned. Situative perspectives focus on interactive systems that include individuals as participants interacting with each other and with materials, as opposed to traditional cognitive perspectives that focus on the individual as the basic unit of analysis (Greeno, 1997; Wenger, 1998).

It is important to recognise that the situative perspective entails a fundamental redefinition of learning and knowing (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Putman & Borko, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). This perspective attempts to recast the relationship between what people know and the settings in which they know. The contexts in which people learn, and in which they are assessed, are inextricable parts of their knowledge. "From the teacher's perspective, one of the peculiarities of the workplace is that learning aimed at deepening knowledge of the subject matters of instruction must be done outside of the school, during so-called free time ..." (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001:947).

Engaging an analytical approach for situating teachers' practices within schools and districts by working with a group of teachers in an urban school district, Cobb, McClain, de Silva Lamberg and Dean (2003) assert that such an approach is useful in that it allows for valuable feedback that could guide and inform ongoing collaboration with teachers and administrators. Their approach focuses on the functions of teaching and delineates the communities of practice whose members contribute to the accomplishment of these functions. They argue that teaching is an activity that is distributed across a configuration of communities of practice within a school or district. It becomes evident that teacher learning communities have much potential as vehicles for teacher learning. In South Africa, however, we are still plagued by the absence of substantive racial integration across society and in South African schools in particular (Carter, Caruthers & Foster, 2009; Naidoo, 2010). So, while teacher learning communities offer spaces for teacher professional development, substantive racial integration remains largely an elusive goal in South Africa.

Research methodology

As stated above, this study set out to explore teachers' learning in a community of practice, and sought to understand how issues of context and biography influenced their learning and participation in a teacher development programme. In order to obtain deep insights into these issues, a qualitative case study was deemed most appropriate. This interpretive study adopted the tenets of symbolic inter-actionist ethnography (Woods, 1996) to inform and guide the research endeavour.

Initially, three semi-structured interviews were scheduled with participating teachers over the 16-month duration of the project: an initial interview, a mid-term review and a final interview. My close interaction with teachers over this period, however, resulted in much valuable data being constructed through informal conversations and interaction with teachers. This obviated the need for a mid-term interview. Detailed field notes were written throughout the project. Two classroom observations were conducted with each participating teacher. As a qualitative, interpretative researcher I maintained a reflective journal in which I carefully documented critical incidents and reflections as the project progressed.

A data set of *one* participant was used to develop the argument in this article. In the section that follows, I extract and present key aspects of this data set for analysis and review.

Ben's story: A narrative vignette

Ben is an isiZulu-speaking African teacher in his mid-forties. He has taught at eight different schools during his teaching career. Ben described his childhood as a happy experience. Although the man who had raised him was not his biological father, he had taken good care of him. Ben appeared grateful for what his guardians had provided for him, given the poor conditions under which they lived. He had been moved to several schools during his school career because his guardians had moved house several times.

Ben had a disrupted academic career. He had to repeat a year, having had to restart his senior secondary schooling with a new set of subjects because he struggled to pass the subjects initially chosen. Without having finished matric (Grade 12), he was admitted to a teachers' college, where he spent two years. Ben then joined the teaching profession and studied privately to obtain a matric certificate. He proceeded to study towards a Senior Teaching Certificate, but this was interrupted because he had a severe stroke. He was forced to abandon his studies at that point. (Ben was still undergoing medical treatment at the time of this research study.)

After seven years, he obtained his Senior Teaching Certificate and taught for 17 years before leaving teaching to pursue business interests. He returned to teaching after three years, as he had been unsuccessful in his business endeavours. His status at his school was that of a temporary teacher, and he was determined to be reinstated as a permanent educator. He was always seen to be keen to please his principal and always addressed him with respect and humility. He presented himself as an enthusiastic person who was keen to develop himself. The following extract from my journal (30 July 2003) reflects some of the difficulties Ben experienced:

Over the months that I had come to know Ben, I learned that he was employed in a temporary capacity. He was one of the many teachers who had not been receiving regular monthly salary payments from the State. At one point, Ben had not been paid for a period of five months. It was a particularly difficult time for him since his family had to rely entirely on his wife's income, and assistance from other extended family members. I was amazed that during this period of time, Ben's enthusiasm and optimism never waned. He was always regular at school, very actively involved in leading the establishment of the school library, training the school choir and overseeing school functions. Later in the week, Ben would be the master of ceremonies at a joint schools' function at which the Mayor of Durban was the guest of honour. Ben appeared to be a very obliging person, always careful to appear congenial and enthusiastic, especially in the presence of the principal. His tenure at the school was not secure and depended on how strongly the principal motivated for him to remain there.

Ben's current school, Pecan Primary, had previously been controlled by the then Department of Education and Training (DET) administration. The school was located in a semi-rural setting just outside the Greater Durban area. High razor-wire fencing surrounded the school.

Using Wenger's (1998) framework to analyse teacher learning

The focus of Wenger's (1998) theory of learning is on 'learning as participation'; that is, being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these

communities. He posits the following ‘deeply interconnected and mutually defining’ elements of a social theory of learning:

- Meaning: A way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- Practice: A way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
- Community: A way of talking about social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognisable as competence.
- Identity: A way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities (1998:5).

In applying Wenger’s (1998) framework to analyse teacher learning in the TEMS community of practice, it was noted that teacher learning had occurred for all participants - but to varying degrees. With regard to Ben, despite the somewhat daunting and discouraging picture presented above (see vignette), he had engaged in active participation and had experienced change in all four of Wenger’s (1998) categories of learning. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to address this aspect of the research findings. Elsewhere (see Maistry, 2008a; 2008b; 2008c), I provide a full description and analysis of the workings of the TEMS teacher development programme and a detailed critical analysis of Wenger’s (1998) framework and its application to *all* the participating teachers in the TEMS project. Attention is also drawn to the limitations of Wenger’s (1998) work.

For the purposes of this article Ben’s case has been singled out for analysis, since he represented a participant that despite a troubled background and difficult working conditions, appeared to be an aspiring individual who moved from being a peripheral member of the TEMS community to becoming an integral and core member of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

In the discussion that follows, I extend the analysis beyond simply identifying that learning occurred in terms of Wenger’s (1998) elements of learning, and proceed to engage Bourdieu’s (1992) theory of social practice and Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural capital to analyse Ben’s participation and learning in the TEMS community. While Wenger’s theory provided a useful conceptual framework to analyse teacher learning, it is somewhat benign in its ability to explain *why* Ben was able to participate and engage in the TEMS community.

An analysis of Ben’s participation

In extracts from interviews with Ben before and after the TEMS project, we see that Ben’s perception of his competence changed significantly. Extract from initial interview:

Ben: Ja, I’m new at this. I’m just an old teacher who got into OBE [outcomes-based education] just now. And I think as I go on, the studies of EMS, I will just try to cope because I think it is a good subject ... OBE is different with us. I don’t know whether we belong to the old school of thought. I don’t know, it seems different with us. Really we need a lot of workshops ...

It was clear that while Ben regarded EMS as a “good subject”, he was very unsure about how to proceed with curriculum development in EMS. Ben went on to mention that he knew very little about the EMS learning area and how to teach EMS. He had not read the policy document and therefore knew nothing of the nature and scope of the learning area or the outcomes applicable to EMS.

In the final interview, Ben explained what changed for him:

MM: How would you compare your current knowledge of EMS to your knowledge at the beginning of the year, has there been any difference?

Ben: A lot of difference, a lot of difference, because you know at first I took this learning area, knowing nothing, but since I’ve attended these workshops, a lot of knowledge, I’ve gained a lot of knowledge. I know most of the things now.

MM: Do you use the materials developed at the workshops in your teaching?

Ben: Yes I do, yes I do. Especially the ones that we made there. The graphs and the information on imports and exports were very much useful. They were very impressive, very informative.

In response to whether his classroom practice had changed, Ben had the following to say:

Ben: Ja, as I said earlier, when I took this learning area, I knew nothing about it, but as time goes, I became unfolded, I'm now teaching freely, meaning that the documents that we work with are helpful in giving us knowledge, so there is a lot of change I can say. I'm feeling more confident now.

Here Ben referred to his changed “knowledge” of EMS from knowing “nothing” to feeling “more confident” and “teaching freely”.

In the next extract, Ben referred to the “market days” that he had organised at his school and the interest it had aroused among pupils:

MM: Can you describe the EMS activities that you've been involved in at your school?

Ben: Yes, a lot, a lot. We came here from the first workshop, we, we know we practised marketing. We had three market days and we made a lot of money. There's three monies, three market days and the kids were so impressed, they bought our items and we made money.

And we have now gardens from this project, that's why we sell spinach; we sell carrots and all that. The children are learning entrepreneurial skills. And we want to involve them. Now we want to involve more classes in market days, but the time is always a problem. The time is very short.

Here Ben had created an interest in the EMS learning area through the market days. In the above extracts from Ben's final interview, Ben asserted that his knowledge of EMS had changed, laying claim to there being “a lot of difference”.

What, then, was the system of dispositions that Ben possessed that allowed him to develop the kind of habitus (Bourdieu, 1992) for survival and success in the TEMS programme in response to the conditions and contexts that he experienced? The social arena or field (Bourdieu, 1992) in which Ben found himself was structured in terms of power relations within which he had to manoeuvre and struggle in his pursuit of desirable resources. It was clear that Ben appeared to be at the mercy of his principal. His tenure at his school was uncertain and depended on his principal's perception of him. Ben had returned to the teaching profession after a failed business venture. He had not secured a permanent position at the school and had weak affiliations to established networks of teachers.

Ben was in an unenviable position in that in order to retain a post at his school he had to accept any teaching subject that was thrust upon him. Yet, he projected an image of commitment and dedication to the school by involving himself in numerous school activities that would enhance his reputation at the school. Ben received little real support from his principal, who appeared to take no personal interest in Ben's development. Ben's motivation for learning and membership of the TEMS community stemmed from his need to make himself valuable as an EMS teacher in his school. Drawing on his knowledge, skills and disposition - that is, his embodied capital, a constituent of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1992) — Ben was able to negotiate and transcend his vulnerable position.

Bourdieu (1992) suggests that an individual's ability to participate is influenced by the economic, cultural and social capital that he or she possesses. Economic capital refers to the material goods and resources that an individual may possess, while social capital constitutes the sum of actual or virtual resources that accrue to an individual as a result of having a network of relationships. While Ben may have been short on economic capital, he certainly was not lacking in terms of social and cultural capital. In fact, in an attempt to steer away from a deficit lens by asserting that some individuals are culturally rich and others are culturally poor, Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth has currency.

Yosso (2005) argues that an individual's cultural capital is a function of that individual's community cultural capital and that community cultural capital is shaped by various other forms of capital, including linguistic capital, resistant capital, aspirational capital, familial capital and navigational capital. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to develop resilience, that is, to maintain hopes and dreams even

in the face of real or perceived barriers. In Ben's case (see vignette), we see that despite having failed in business and having to return to school to work under onerous conditions, he did not despair. He continued to aspire to prove his worth in an attempt to be reinstated as a permanent member of the teaching personnel at his school.

Ben's resilience can be traced back to his early days as a school pupil and his training to become a teacher. He was determined to obtain a matric certificate and appeared to seize opportunities for development when they presented themselves. Ben's involvement in and commitment to the TEMS programme was indeed admirable. Despite not having received a regular salary cheque, he continued to maintain regular attendance at school and the TEMS programme. During the period when Ben's economic capital (Bourdieu, 1992) was at an all-time low, he was able to access what Yosso (2005) describes as familial capital, knowledge that develops a broader understanding of kinship and a sense of community history, memory and support. He was able to rely on the support of his immediate and extended family to carry him through the difficult period.

Ben's value and contribution to the TEMS community was particularly evident when he put his well-developed linguistic skills to use. His linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005), a product of his intellectual and social skills, attained through communication experiences in multiple languages, enabled him to move, manoeuvre and mediate the complex workings of the diverse TEMS community. Ben facilitated and stimulated discussion in the TEMS sessions by regularly moving between English and isiZulu and offering or suggesting isiZulu translations or equivalents of new economic concepts introduced in the TEMS programme.

Yosso's (2005) notion of navigational capital refers to an individual's skills of manoeuvring through hostile social institutions, to reflect and refine navigational skills and to exercise agency within institutional constraints. While Ben's official status was that of 'temporary unprotected teacher' (one whose term of employment was uncertain), he refused to be saddled with this label and actively sought ways of integrating into the life of the school, by being actively involved in establishing the school library and engaging fully with the cultural activities of the school. Even in the context of working under a manipulative and authoritarian principal, Ben developed what Yosso (2005) refers to as resistant capital, capital that is grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination. This refers to knowledge acquired through oppositional behaviour that challenges inequality and teaches individuals to value themselves within structures of inequality.

While Ben may not have been openly confrontational with his principal, he adopted a positive and spirited demeanour that did not go unnoticed. Of significance was that Ben always maintained a sense of personal pride and dignity which was very evident, even in his interaction with other participants in the TEMS programme.

Perhaps the most significant manifestation of how Ben accessed and applied his resistant capital occurred during the discussion of historic social and economic inequality as a content topic in TEMS programme. Ben, having been an anti-apartheid activist as a student and teacher, often offered useful insights into how the economic legacy of apartheid could be integrated into the teaching of EMS. This proved to be a valuable learning experience for many teachers in the TEMS programme who may not have had this kind of life experience. Here Ben was able to explore with the TEMS grouping the notion of pedagogies of reconciliation (Keet, Zinn & Porteus, 2009). This was a particularly powerful interaction, since historically apartheid structures did not allow for teachers to attend and participate in inter-racial teacher development programmes.

Jansen (2009) draws our attention to the need to develop post-conflict pedagogies, in a manner that would facilitate genuine interaction among participants in the pedagogical initiative. So, while Ben may not have been as economically powerful as his counterparts in the TEMS programme, he was certainly powerful in terms of his lived experience and his ability to see the pedagogical potential of its application. In a context where all participating teachers were struggling to manage the diversity that existed in their own classrooms, Ben's contributions to the learning of the group and his willingness to engage with issues that the group had struggled with were recognised and acknowledged by his peers. As the TEMS

programme progressed, Ben's interactions with the group intensified so much that he shifted from being a peripheral member to becoming a core member of the TEMS community.

Concluding comments

This article draws attention to the complex and challenging contexts that teachers have to traverse in order to do the work they do. It suggests that in the face of despair and adversity, individual teachers can exercise individual initiative and agency to transcend the constraints that they encounter. It argues that teachers have various forms of capital that they constantly draw on to negotiate the different facets of their lives as teachers. CPD initiatives in South Africa can certainly benefit from the richness of experience that teachers bring to the programmes, if they are sufficiently alert and sensitive to the clientele they service (Ferreira & Janks, 2009).

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