CHAPTER 7

THE CHALLENGES OF CURRICULUM CHANGE: DILEMMAS AND CONCLUSIONS

It [OBE] is empowering us….We can check on the quality of work. This time we are able to strive for quality teaching and learning….Our real work is now improvement and understanding new ways of teaching and enjoying the company of teachers. We are actually empowered on a daily basis and have developed more interest in our work, to be creative in our own class, we develop more interest in teaching and learning….I like OBE because it allows learners to think. (Focus Group Interview Number 2, Letjatji School, WK, 12 May 1998)

I am very much interested in OBE. I feel happy when I see the children learn….I feel very happy. Learners are free to participate and I like that. In the past they were afraid and not free to say what they were thinking. You can come in [my classroom] and see the skills I have taught my learners. I feel I have achieved something. (Focus Group Interview Number 2, Mashamba School, SM3, 27 May 1998)

Why were the teachers in this study so sure that what they had learnt from the project helped them to improve teaching and learning in their schools? And why did I become increasingly doubtful about the accuracy of the teachers’ beliefs? These questions pose the central dilemma that I encountered as I tried to understand the challenges that a particular group of teachers faced as they implemented outcomes-based education in their classrooms. The ever-growing mismatch between my perceptions of what was happening in the project and the teachers’ perceptions proved to be an ongoing tension in this thesis and one that has taken me several years to come to terms with. The teachers’ perceptions about their successes and the manner in which they believed that their learners benefitted, were not just confined to the teacher leaders quoted from above, but were also expressed by many other teachers in the six schools. For example:

I enjoy it [OBE]. One of the parents said that their children tell them that they enjoy school. They [learners] can talk in the street – they are quite different. (Focus Group Interview Number 2, Baropodi School, ZM, 13 May 1998)
OBE is a success because the children are benefiting (Focus Group Interview Number 1, Khomisani School, SN2, 3 August 1998)

In OBE lessons, we teach our learners to be independent, creative, responsible (Focus Group Interview Number 2, Letjatji School, JM1, 12 May 1998).

OBE has widened my scope of creativity and initiative and independent thinking....I enjoy teaching now, I move around [the classroom] and hear them [learners] share ideas. It is so exciting!  (Focus Group Interview Number 1, Mashamba School, AM, 27 May 1998)

OBE is good for learners because they feel free to ask anything from the teacher....OBE is good because it helps the learners learn different ways of doing things, skills.  (Focus Group Interview Number 2, Mutshetshe School, MN, 4 August 1998)

Another aspect which motivates me is lesson presentation. You see, it is not like before, even though I still do most of the talking, I know that I am trying to build the children to be more talkative in my lessons.  (Focus Group Interview Number 2, Nwaxinyamani School, MM1, 28 May 1998)

Shulman (2000) suggests that one of the most pressing dilemmas facing teachers is the “illusionary understanding” (p. 131) of the learners in their classrooms. This research faced a similar dilemma in that somehow the interactions between the teachers and the project created an illusion that teaching and learning had improved in the six schools. I became caught up in this illusion through listening to the positive picture that the teachers painted about curriculum change in their schools. It was with a great deal of naive excitement and eagerness that I went to observe lessons in the six schools, lessons that I was so sure would be of solid intellectual quality. I remember feeling confused after watching several lessons and wondering why the teachers would consider the project a success, given this practice. In this final chapter I reflect on this dilemma, draw conclusions about the extent to which teacher learning transformed teaching practice in the project, and provide pointers to further research that could extend the debates raised in this thesis. I also indicate where I believe this thesis has made a contribution to knowledge in the areas of qualitative research, curriculum change and teacher learning.
As a context for teacher learning, the President's Schools Project was made up of elements common to any learning environment. For example, there were teachers, learners, a curriculum to be followed, and a given time frame during which certain achievements had to be realised. The project’s curriculum field workers, myself included, were the teachers in this learning context; the Intermediate Phase teachers in the six schools were the learners; the teacher development programmes of in-service and school-support activities were the curriculum that was to be followed; and the successful implementation of OBE in the President’s Schools was the achievement to be realised within a three-year time period. I had certain expectations of what and how the teachers would learn from the professional development activities that were used in this project. I wanted the teachers to learn about OBE through seeing a similar curriculum being successfully taught at Sacred Heart College, and I expected that this learning would take place during the in-service programme. I also wanted the teachers to be in a position where they could implement what they learnt about OBE successfully in their own schools, and this learning I expected would take place during the school-based support programme.

Essentially, my expectations were focused on classroom practice and the extent to which the project enabled teachers to deliver OBE lessons of intellectual quality to their learners. The early conclusions I drew about the project in general, and about teachers’ lessons in particular, were coloured by these expectations and would have remained superficial had I not embarked on this research and analysed both the project’s and the teachers’ practices more rigorously from within a particular qualitative paradigm. The manner in which the data was first collected for this thesis, and then analysed, produced a richness in the account that would have been hard to secure through other research methods and procedures. For example, the focus group interviews were structured and then conducted in such a way that they encouraged the teachers to participate in detailed and extensive reflective conversations with me. The lesson observation process did not just involve a list of categories to be checked, but was set up in such a way that it provided opportunities for me to record, as
naturally as possible, the kinds of interactions that took place inside classrooms between teachers and learners. The data were analysed through a conceptual framework based on Fairclough’s (1991) model of language as social practice. This helped me to understand the many complex and intricate layers involved in working with teachers, their learning and curriculum change in rural schools.

During the analytical processes that the data was taken through, it became apparent that the teachers had experienced huge professional growth during the project; growth that manifested itself through the manner in which they appropriated elements of the teacher development programmes that resonated in some way with their practice and with their needs at that time. Chapters Four and Five showed the creative manner in which the teachers took up the notion of collaboration and illustrated how the teachers’ energies became focused on transforming their dominant practice of isolation into an innovative collaborative practice. This transformation, in bringing the teachers together in ways they had not experienced before the project began, suggests that while the teachers did learn about practice from the project, what they learnt was unpredictable, and that it impacted more successfully on their practices outside their classrooms than it did on their instructional practices inside their classrooms.

Even though the project’s impact on classroom practice was both surprising and open to debate, it did reveal much valuable information about teaching and learning in South African rural schools since the implementation of OBE. This thesis gave both voice and shape to the practice that emerged out of the intersection of a sophisticated curriculum policy like OBE and rural teachers’ past pedagogical experiences, and it also gave these teachers due credit for forging that new practice together. This emergent instructional form was named, ‘knowledge as practice’, in this thesis and while it appeared deceptively simple, in reality it was always complex and permeated by many intriguing contradictions. These complexities and contradictions were made explicit in Chapter Six, which then consolidated them into an analytical tool that was used to typify this group of teachers’ knowledge as practice. Further research needs
to be done to determine the extent to which this tool could be used to help these and other teachers learn more about teaching with a view to improvement.

Three interrelated research issues are yet to be considered: Firstly, how could the analytical tool developed in this thesis be used to help teacher collaborative groups establish a more reflective discourse that could extend the cognitive resources (or members’ resources as Fairclough calls them) available to them? Secondly, could this reflective discourse help teachers identify the dilemmas of their classroom practice and develop mental frameworks wherein they could construct their own personal philosophies of practice? And, would this put the teachers in a position where they could articulate these constructs with a view to improving instructional practices? Thirdly, could the tool be used to extend the teachers’ repertoire of question and answer strategies so that they could make shifts in the pedagogical control, establish and maintain socially supportive climates in their classrooms, and yet still create meaningful learning contexts? And, could the tool be used to help teachers develop learning activities that give due attention to the form and substance, the authority and responsibility, and the concrete and abstract in terms of content knowledge? These questions provide researchers who are interested in understanding what happens inside traditional rural South African schools with many fascinating opportunities for further study.

What I learnt about teacher learning and curriculum change in rural schools during the project could not have been found in books alone as this kind of understanding was only possible through consistent and intensive immersion in the classrooms of the President’s Schools. The rigorous interactions that took place between me, the teachers and the data helped to develop a better understanding of the context of teaching and learning in rural schools; it also helped me to question some of the ‘taken-for-granted’ assumptions that are often made about teacher development and curriculum interventions. In particular, this research showed the complexities involved in assuming that teacher collaboration in participatory communities would be a successful strategy for curriculum change in these schools. It demonstrated that while the teachers welcomed the opportunity to engage in discussions with each other about their
instructional practices, these discussions did not lead to the anticipated improvements in the classroom. In fact, the teaching observed was more reminiscent of the teachers’ past pedagogical practices than it was of transformational OBE. The nuances involved in teacher learning and teaching practice in an in-service context were also explored in this thesis, which concluded that teacher learning is unpredictable and that it relies heavily on the uneven, and often unexpected, capacity and will of the teachers involved. This thesis has also shown that teachers can ‘see’ and ‘understand’ without necessarily being able to ‘do’. These are important issues for teacher developers working in rural South African schools to understand and to acknowledge in order for them to offer effective learning opportunities for teachers. In-service teacher educators in South Africa still need to find creative and meaningful ways to build on teachers’ understanding of practice in such a way that they are in a better position to deliver lessons of sound intellectual quality to their learners.

All of the issues raised here and the questions as yet unanswered present researchers working in rural schools with not only interesting and absorbing challenges, but also with the opportunity to make a difference in the learning experiences of a vast number of South African children.