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THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING IN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF IN ZIMBABWE

A thesis submitted to the School of Education, Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

By

Martin Musengi

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the conditions for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2014

ABSTRACT

The study sought to explore what hearing teachers know and believe about teaching deaf pupils in the three residential schools for the deaf in Zimbabwe. This was done in order to understand the meaning these teachers attach to the experience of teaching deaf learners. The study therefore highlighted how the teachers define deafness, how they perceive deaf children's ability to learn as well as what and how these pupils should be taught. This was done so as to explore the teachers' beliefs and convictions which underlie their everyday practice therefore uncovering the meaning they attach to teaching. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions: What is the meaning of teaching for hearing adults who teach deaf children in residential schools for the deaf in Zimbabwe? What do hearing teachers believe about deaf pupils' ability to learn? What do hearing teachers know about teaching deaf learners in separate residential institutions? How do hearing teachers' knowledge and beliefs relate to their experience of teaching deaf children? The study was premised on the notion that how the teachers experience teaching also informs and reinforces their beliefs and knowledge which in turn inform the teachers' experiences. Exploring this reciprocal relationship has the potential to give vital insights into initial specialist teacher-education and continuing professional development in deaf education.

A combined qualitative design informed by phenomenology and anthropology was used to collect and analyse data for the study. First, documents that inform teacher-education and other documents regulating education and disability issues in Zimbabwe were collected and analysed, largely in order to determine the context of the experience of teaching deaf pupils. Second, I provided and analysed data on my own experiences as a teacher of deaf pupils in an autoethnography. Recollection of autoethnographic data was chiefly aided by interactive introspection with other teachers of deaf pupils and the reading of critiques that were written by my superiors about my lessons at that time. Third, a focus group of up to six specialist teachers and another of the same number of non-specialist teachers discussed deaf education at each of the three residential schools. Finally, twelve teachers and the principals of the three special schools were individually interviewed. Altogether the study had fifty participants.

The study found that many teachers had hearing attitudes towards deafness. These attitudes reflected beliefs about the superiority of hearing and speaking and this informed teachers' beliefs that deaf children were deficient learners with language and experiential deficits which required

remedial, therapeutic and vocational teaching. Zimbabwean Sign Language was also believed to be a deficient system of communication which teachers learned informally from their deaf pupils and which needed to be improved in order for it to become more useful for academic purposes. Challenges in deaf education were largely attributed to the learners' deficiencies and unreasonable policies in deaf education. Even though specialist and non-specialist teachers tended to have similar perceptions, the non-specialists were more introspective and they more openly acknowledged their personal deficiencies as teachers. The non-specialist teachers also raised more subject-specific challenges of teaching deaf learners. It was concluded that specialist training might be de-sensitising teachers so that they were less aware of the virtues of introspection and the need for imparting academic content, rather than dwelling on perceived deficiencies. From the teachers' accounts of their experiences, four core narratives were constructed: the heroic, martyr, surrogate parent and handicapped helper. In each type of story the meaning of teaching deaf learners is experienced in an essentially different manner. It is recommended that in order to improve the experience of teaching, it is important to critically reflect on the kinds of stories teachers are living by, and how these stories are sustained in classrooms, schools, teacher-education and in society generally. This study concludes by making other related recommendations which may improve the experience of teaching in the residential schools for the deaf in Zimbabwe.

Keywords

Deaf education, Zimbabwe, teaching, deficiency, pathological, cultural, normal.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own original work. It has not been submitted for degree purposes to any other university.



Martin Musengi

21 July 2014

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the goodness and love that will surely follow me all the days of my life as I dwell in the house of the Lord forever; for Jehovah has prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies, has anointed my head with oil – my cup overflows! (After Psalm 23, verses 5-6).

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I am primarily indebted to teachers and principals at the three residential schools for the deaf who spared their time to allow me to interview them.

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Last but definitely not least, Glory be to God for giving me life and good health without which I would not have managed to reach this point.

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PREFACE

My father, who was a farmer, had always wanted to be a teacher. Time and again he explained to me why he had not fulfilled his ambition. Harvest time always reminded him of his unfulfilled dream. I remember his looking wistfully at the tonnes of harvested maize and telling me the same story of how, when he had been judged the best candidate in the teacher entrance test in the late 1940s, his poor stepfather had not been able to provide the bag of maize required as tuition fees to enable him to train at the nearby missionary teachers' college. Influenced by his experience, I thought teaching was a glamorous profession. My beliefs were reinforced by seeing the well groomed, articulate teachers who had taught me from an early age. Many of them seemed to be having great fun, endlessly amusing us in class. To think they were paid a handsome salary for enjoying themselves! It was not surprising that about forty years after my father's unsuccessful attempt at becoming a teacher, I fulfilled his lost ambition by entering the very same teachers' college at the same mission. It was at this mission that I first met deaf people.

The mission, Morgenster in Chief Mugabe's area, housed not only the teachers' college where I was training, but also one of the pioneer schools for the deaf in Zimbabwe. As youthful teacher trainees in the mid-1980s we would try to communicate with the deaf pupils at the school through mime, gestures and writing. We had noticed that some of them were talented artists and loved asking them to help us with any of our assignments which required illustrations. We did not attempt any further communication with them as it was rumoured that they were aggressive, short-tempered and unpredictable. Some of them were as old as we were, and confrontations could have gone either way. We largely left them alone. After all our focus at the mission was to be trained as teachers of children who could hear.

I realised early in my teacher training that behind the surface glamour, there was rather a large amount lot of sheer drudgery in preparing to present interesting lessons. I had to come up with reasonable objectives and all the relevant activities and illustrations necessary, to achieve them as well as trying to find concrete media which would help the learners to understand varied concepts. My adolescent ideas on teaching as a glamorous career, evaporated. I began, rather self-consciously, to follow the rather rigid lesson structures typical of teaching in the eighties. The spontaneity and fun of teaching vanished once I stopped being a pupil and assumed the teacher's role. I became less self-conscious with practice and was able to deliver some very good lessons. It was no wonder then that I graduated with distinction from the training college.

I was deployed to a rural primary school after my initial training and within the first year had risen to the position of acting deputy principal. As deputy principal, I attended a government-organised workshop on Special Education where the principal of the school for the deaf previously mentioned gave a mesmerising presentation on deaf education. He explained the process of hearing and how, when the ear did not function properly many things could become problematic for the deaf person socially and educationally. He concluded by lamenting that the deaf children at his school were performing very poorly because regular trained teachers shunned the school. I was touched and hooked. I returned to my school and resigned in order to take up the challenges at the school for the deaf.

It did not take me long to realise that I had probably bitten off more than I could chew. I simply could not communicate with the learners. I had to go through induction training and was also attached to an experienced teacher. He taught me such basics as facing the class each time I spoke to them, ensuring I was at their eye-level so they could lip-read and so on. I learned some signing from the deaf pupils as well as observing my mentor communicate with deaf pupils out of class. The signing was handy in my class however these signs were inadequate, and my communication with the class remained weak. It was not surprising then that the deaf children's performance was very bad and I became quite frustrated, after all I had reason to consider myself a very good teacher.

To improve my teaching skills I underwent further teacher training, this time focussing solely on the education of deaf learners. I trained first at the only college in Zimbabwe for teachers of children with special needs at the time: United College of Education. When the University of Zimbabwe started offering similar degree programmes, I trained there. I felt quite learned after having studied a lot about the anatomy of the ear, physiology of hearing, physics of sound and communication methods for teaching the deaf. This affected my approach to teaching: I now ensured that my pupils used their hearing aids more consistently, and I emphasised such activities as lip reading, auditory and speech training in my lessons. My lessons got even worse, if that were possible. Deaf pupils appeared to be more confused and bored. I myself was confused and bored. My teaching slowed down significantly as I became more rigid and self-conscious just as I had been in my early days in teacher training at the mission college. To aggravate matters, I was now considered as one of the more knowledgeable 'old hands' who was supposed to give the newcomers induction training.

One can only imagine my heightened confusion and trepidation when in this state of uncertainty I had now been promoted to teach other teachers how to teach deaf learners. I began asking myself whether other teachers of deaf children had had similar experiences to me or was I alone in my sense of impotence and despair. I wondered whether unravelling our experiences would not only illuminate what actually happened in the special schools for the deaf but also indicate ways of improving the status quo. What did teachers of these deaf children experience on a day to day basis? What kept them going? Based on these and other related questions, I embarked on this research journey without a sure and certain destination. The purpose was clear: to understand hearing teachers' experience of teaching deaf pupils in residential schools in a better manner. This dissertation is a study of the hearing teachers in all three of the boarding special schools established to cater exclusively for deaf children in Zimbabwe. The study is premised on the belief that the low levels of academic achievement evident in the specials schools were, at least partially because of a dearth of systematic information on the teaching of deaf children from the teachers' point of view. Such information would illuminate the nature of the interaction in classrooms and schools for the deaf. Reilly and Reilly (2005) contrasted the dearth of information in deaf education with the ways regular education has benefitted from more than three decades of research on classroom life with focus on teachers, students and curriculum. This journey cannot claim to have all the answers, but it is a beginning on which more research could be based in an effort in an effort to improve the experience of teaching and ultimately the education of deaf children in Zimbabwe.