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2017

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27169

Botha, Deborah Joan (2017) The practices of a group of ‘out-standing’ early reading teachers working in Johannesburg government schools, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/27169>

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The practices of a group of 'out-standing' early reading teachers working in Johannesburg government schools

Deborah Joan Botha

Abstract

This work explores the teaching practices of a small number of experienced early reading teachers who are considered 'out-standing' in that they 'stand out' in their individual schools as teachers who consistently produce children who are able to read at grade level.

Twelve teachers, from different socio-cultural and socio-linguistic backgrounds, who teach in Johannesburg government schools, situated in different socio-economic areas, are the participants in the case study. Through in-depth teacher interviews and conversations, the teachers' own descriptions of their reading programmes and pedagogies were recorded and analysed. Bourdieu's theory of practice, [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice' (Maton, 2014, p.51) is used to consider the relational alignment between field, habitus and capital which underpins each teacher's practice, to provide insights into the origins and evolution of these practices.

The main finding is that all twelve teachers implement 'balanced' reading programmes with the explicit teaching of decoding skills being foregrounded. However it is the systematic and compassionate way in which the programmes are delivered, rather than the programme itself, which makes the teachers stand out. This is underpinned by the teachers' habitus shown in their linguistic, organisational, time-management, and planning skills, together with child-centered dispositions.

Significant differences between the teacher's practices are revealed, particularly regarding the core instructional strategies for teaching reading, but also in relation to differentiation, homework practices and supervised reading practice, and despite the common terminology of the national curriculum being used. The differences in practice are aligned to the different socio-cultural and socio-historic backgrounds of the teachers, and their exposure to the historical field. The practices are also associated with the differently resourced and positioned schools in which they teach, which constitute different microfields. Because these are all

effective reading teachers, this study shows how good teaching practices can be enacted in a variety of ways, in different contexts.

Individually, each teacher has acquired different forms of symbolic capital which makes them out-standing. This has enabled them to adapt to the transforming field in South Africa. Where teachers qualified and worked in the historically more privileged sectors, unchanged reproductions of historic practices are common, while the teachers from the historically dominated sector have all significantly changed their practice. Greater levels of adaptation were thus required from the teachers who acquired the least capital in the historical field. New capital had been acquired after 1994, through teaching in different types of schools, literacy interventions, and through personal agency.

The recommendations, based on this study, are that further support is provided to early reading teachers in the form of reading resources, upskilling opportunities, particularly regarding the use of the Language of Teaching and Learning, the implementation differentiated practice and the implementation of homework practices. It is also suggested that aspects of the curriculum be reviewed.