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Teachers' literate habitus

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Abstract

This case study explores the literate habitus of a group of 22 Foundation Phase (Grades 1-3) teachers from Limpopo Province. They were qualified, mature, practising teachers from rural areas in South Africa who left their homes, families and teaching posts to upgrade their qualifications by completing a four-year Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree at an urban university, the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg. This intervention was unique in that it removed practising teachers from familiar fields and placed them in others for an extended period of time.

In post-Apartheid South Africa there have been many teacher-training interventions which have attempted to improve classroom practice and learner performance in literacy. Despite this, South African learners continue to perform badly on national and international systemic evaluations. Classroom practice in many schools, particularly in rural areas, remains unchanged. The primary question that guides this study is that perhaps the literate habitus of teachers, which is ingrained, preconscious and embedded, produces dispositions and values that affect the way they experience, know, value and use literacy and that this is reproduced in their learners. This study attempts to understand the literate habitus of a particular group of teacher-students and to consider whether it was possible for this to shift or change over the four years of their studies. It examines how, if shifts in literate habitus did occur, what contributed to these and how these shifts affected the participants' professional teaching practices.

The case study was located within the understanding that literacy and literacy practices are always socially situated. Bourdieu's (1977; 1984; 1988; 1990; 1991) key concepts of habitus, capital and field were used to examine the literate habitus of the research participants. The assumption underpinning this study was that how the participants spoke and wrote about literacy and how they enacted literacy reflected their literate habitus. Using reflective journals, focus groups and reports from those who observed the participants teaching, it traced the teacher-students' journeys across four years to examine the effects on literate habitus of their being in new fields.

The study's findings confirmed the importance of fields in structuring habitus. The findings of this study suggested that a change in field was necessary for effecting a change in the literate habitus of the participants, because change denaturalised what had been accepted as a norm in literacy and literacy teaching. This change also revealed alternative ways of valuing and enacting literacy. The agency necessary to take the opportunities offered by new fields and thus to become aware of the possibilities inherent in new practices, was related to the participants' perception of the amount of symbolic capital they would accrue in the process. This perception was controlled by their habitus in a circular relationship.

This study argues that it was difficult to shift a deeply-entrenched literate habitus but that it was not impossible. The findings suggested that there were a number of factors

that enabled change in the participants' literate habitus. Firstly, it required attentiveness to the discontinuities between their embedded practices and new possibilities in the practices to which they were exposed in new fields. Meta-awareness enabled change and this was facilitated by reflection and the interrogation of both old and new literacy practices. Secondly, there needed to be a desire to change and this required time and opportunities for repeated enactments so that new ways of practicing literacy became embedded. The extent to which the participants recognised their own agency in opening up possibilities for change was essential. The findings of this study suggested that social capital was also important in bringing about change. The support from peers and the relationship with a mentor, such as a supervising teacher on teaching experience, played an essential role in bringing about change. This social capital came from how the participants were positioned in the field and this gave them the necessary power, agency and voice to transform their literate habitus.

The significance of this study is located in the implications it has for future teacher-training interventions. This study has shown that experienced literacy teachers navigate a complex journey in changing their literate habitus. The study also revealed that there is no easy route to helping teachers whose literate habitus is firmly-established to learn new professional and personal literacy practices. Recommendations for further research include examining the sustainability of the shifts in literate habitus that had been enabled by this four-year intervention.

Keywords: *Foundation Phase; teachers' literate habitus; field, capital, literacy practices; rural; teacher-education; teacher-change; embodiment; Bourdieu.*