

Grade 10 and 11 First Additional English rural teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching in Acornhoek schools, Mpumalanga Province

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By

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of a larger research project titled *Conditions of teaching and learning that facilitate and/or constrain learning English in rural high schools*. The focus of the research project explores the conditions of teaching and learning English, and the contextual factors that facilitate and/or constrains learners' motivation and participation in learning, in five rural high schools in Bushbuckridge area. The current study focused on how grade 10 and 11 First Additional English rural teachers' conceptualise learning and teaching in Acornhoek schools, part of Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga Province. Given the focus of the study the literature review detailed issues with development of rural education, teachers' conceptions of learning, teachers' conceptions of teaching, English as a First Additional language (EFAL) in South Africa and the spectrum of current pedagogical practices. The literature review highlighted significant gaps that are important for the this study such as a lack of research in Africa and South Africa focusing on teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching, particularly in rural schools. Furthermore the corpus of research conducted on conceptions focused on tertiary students' conceptions of learning, there is limited research in schools, with teachers and learners, especially teachers' pedagogical practices in relation to the conceptions. In addition the development of rural education and research in South Africa continue to be under-development, with most research perceiving rurality as a deficit paradigm.

Thus in order to address the literature gaps mentioned above the study engaged with six grade 10 and 11 rural teachers from Acornhoek, Mpumalanga Province. The sampling strategy was purposive, as only grades 10 and 11 EFAL teachers were the selected to participate in the study. In order to address the research questions and sub research questions, a qualitative research approach was used as it focuses on understanding socially and historically constructed meanings about experienced phenomena. Through the use of phenomenological methodology teachers' meanings and beliefs about learning and teaching were interrogated and problematized. In order to interrogate and problematize teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching two

data collection methods were used namely: semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews and non-participatory observations.

The semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews were used to address the following research questions:

1. What are grade 10 and 11 English First Additional Language teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching?
2. What shapes teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching?

The following research question was addressed by use the non-participatory observations:

3. How do teachers' conceptions influence teaching approaches, if at all, during English poetry and short story lessons?

In order to answer the above questions critical discourse analysis was used, to engage with participants' responses from their individual face-to-face interviews. Critical discourse analysis assisted with ensuring in depth engagement with participants' narrations, without taking any words for granted because meaning might be hidden in the selection of words. Thus critical discourse analysis enabled the critical identification of particular words used by the participants in order to gain insight to the underlying influences that shape rural teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching in poetry and short stories lessons. As a result this involved an intense data analysis process, which incorporated the non-participatory classroom observations as well as the conceptual frameworks discussed from Bernstein, Alexander, and Scott and Mortimer.

Some of the major findings suggest that teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching are complex and complicated particularly if contextual issues are considered, as possible influential factors that shape teachers' conceptions. The findings indicated that rural teachers' conceptions of learning should be understood from early school learning to current teaching profession. The dominant conceptions of learning from early school and current teaching profession suggest memorisation, mimicking, and acquisition of information and little conceptions shows learning for transformation and change as a person. Various factors were identified to influences the conceptions such

as policy, lack of resources and overcrowded classrooms. In addition, findings on teachers' conceptions of teaching explicated the dynamics teachers face between ideas they hold about teaching and how they teach. The study indicated that some teachers mentioned 'banking' model of teaching that suggested teacher centred conception of teaching, which linked with some of the conceptions of learning. Most conceptions were about spoon-feeding, telling/giving learners information, and coordinating learning which link with conceptions of learning that promote surface learning.

Other conceptions promoted transformation, unlocking minds, and life-learning, to show that teaching is not only about giving information but also ensure that the information changes the way learners make sense of the social issues in relation to the world. It was noted that teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching seemed to have influenced how teachers teach poetry and short stories lessons, because irrespective of conceptualising teaching and learning in transformational and enlightenment but teachers used a unidirectional teaching approach. This teaching approach that all teachers used suggest 'normality' with using this way of teaching poetry and short stories, especially if the nature of poetry and short stories are taken into consideration. Without critiquing teachers' pedagogical approaches, of concern is that all observed teachers, irrespective of different schools, used similar teaching approach which was shaped by curriculum policy expectations, teachers' perceptions of learners, and the nature of the socio-cultural and economical context. Owing to some of the complexities mentioned above, further research on teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching, particularly in rural schools is needed, because embedded in teachers' conceptions lies their lived experiences and ideas about learning and teaching in rural school. Therefore if effective interventions are to be considered partnering with teachers and/or learners in rural schools to understand their conceptions, need to be seriously taken into account. The purpose is not to research *with* teachers rather than *for* teachers to enhance existing knowledge in partnership, rather imposing knowledge.