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Life Orientation: lessons on leadership qualities and voting in grade three classes in South Africa

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Abstract

The focus of this study was lessons on leadership qualities and voting in grade three classes in four Eastern Cape schools. Frame factor theory and theory of pedagogical devices were used. The study employed text analysis, classroom observation in four 3rd grade classes and interviews with 14 third grade teachers as sources of data. The results of the study indicated there were differences among teachers when it came to understanding and interpreting the theme. The teachers interviewed have general qualifications but lacked training to teach this theme. Between the schools there were differences in manpower, material and financial resources. There were similar teaching procedures although there were differences in teachers' approaches. Learners' understanding was influenced by family background. In general, teachers dominated and controlled the whole procedure by proposing candidates and vote counters. Findings from this study could be relevant for teachers and other school personnel for their future commitment to teaching democracy by practising it.

Keywords: Classroom, democracy, differences, leadership qualities, learners, life orientation, participation, South Africa, teachers, voting

Introduction

Life Orientation education was one of eight learning areas in the South African comprehensive school curriculum, Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) of 2002. It was taught at all levels from Reception year (Grade R) to Grade 9. In Curriculum and Assessment Policy Documents (CAPS), which were introduced in 2011, it is noted that Life Orientation will not be given as a subject in the Foundation Phase.

Life Orientation has four intended outcomes (goals): health promotion, social development, personal development, physical development and movement. Among the four, I decided to choose as my research focus the social development outcome of Life Orientation in the Foundation Phase, specifically in Grade 3. In Grade 3, the social development aspect of Life Orientation has five different assessment standards (themes) dealing with: leadership qualities and voting; the national anthem; the role of acceptance, giving, forgiving and sharing; stories of female and

male role models; and diet, clothing and decoration in a variety of religions in the country.

The learners I observed were between eight and ten years old in four grade 3 classes. I chose these groups of learners to try to understand what democratic bases were being laid down for future generations. I wanted to gain an insight into themes recommended for discussion by the curriculum and how teachers presented them to their learners in these age groups.

I preferred leadership qualities and voting because in relatively functioning democracies, there is a basic similarity; the people decide who will lead them. The form of democracy might be different, but the final goal is to elect leaders who represent the people who vote for them.

This theme will also provide an understanding of what schools are doing to groom democratic citizens. Education shapes the individual as well as the young generation that will take responsibility for the future. The school is a “miniature community” where the child “learns through direct living” (Dewey, 1899/1990:18). It provides society with qualified citizens who will take responsibility for material production and reproduction of the social and cultural life of society (Durkheim, 1938/1977; Dewey, 1916/2007).

Norms and values of a society are reproduced and transmitted to the next generation through education. While reproducing norms and values considered by society as progressive, valuable and relevant, education could consider leaving out those that are considered harmful. Beyond reproduction and change, introduction of new ideas and thoughts suitable for tackling a society’s problems and its future development should be among the major tasks of contemporary educational systems.

The main question of this study is: How do teachers understand, interpret and facilitate the teaching of leadership qualities and voting? To be able to answer the main question, I asked some additional questions. These include: What are the qualifications required to teach Life Orientation? What resources are available to teach the social development aspects of Life Orientation? What are the differences in teaching activities in different school contexts and how do learners understand the theme of leadership qualities and voting?

Theoretical Framework

The frame system, with its components goal, frame and formal rule systems (Lundgren, 1979), is used when studying the school organisation. With the help of the theory of pedagogical devices, I reflected generally on curriculum production, contextualising and reproduction (Bernstein, 2000). Bernstein's distribution, contextualising and evaluation concepts were also used. His concepts of frame and classification as well as regulative and instructional discourses were used to understand the classroom context.

The Frame Factors Theory

Lundgren discusses two arenas of curriculum development, the formulation arena and the realization arena (Lundgren, 1983; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). Between the two arenas there is the transforming and mediating arena (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000). These are similar to Bernstein's production, recontextualization and reproduction concepts (Bernstein, 2000; Singh, 2002), with some differences between the transforming and mediating arena and recontextualisation.

The implementation of the change in educational systems can be explained in terms of Lundgren's goal, frame and formal rule systems (Lundgren, 1979). These systems are summarized as follows:

The goal system includes the concrete consequences of a specific curriculum i.e. the syllabus, recommendations for teaching, teaching materials, textbooks, etc.

The frame system includes everything that constrains the teaching process that is determined outside teaching. This can include physical equipment such as rooms, organisational arrangements such as size of school and class, ability grouping, time available for teaching, etc.

The formal rule system includes regulations of a legislative nature concerning the duties of the teacher such as marking systems and rules concerning the employment of teachers, such as the required number of lessons per week, and demands on competency (ibid. 40-41).

Lundgren links the above three systems with three "main concepts" relevant in the implementation of education policy: the goal system with curriculum, the frame system with administrative apparatus and the formal rule system with judicial apparatus (ibid).

If we start with the goal system, in South African schools there were assessment standards, guidelines for teaching and teaching materials. These materials included textbooks for teaching leadership qualities and voting. As regards the frame system, there are different types of physical appearances of schools, and the qualities and sizes of their classrooms varied considerably. Time allocations for different programmes were stated in policy documents (RNCS, 2002) but the actual time used varied from school to school. Demands for formal qualifications and a code of conduct for teachers are parts of the formal rule system in the implementation process. The determination of working hours and the guidelines provided for assessment are also parts of this system.

The Pedagogical Devices

Bernstein refers to what he calls the distributive and evaluative rules. He then also discusses production and reproduction fields. In both rules and fields, recontextualisation is used between the policy and the implementation levels (Bernstein, 2000).

According to Bernstein, the rules have the following functions:

First, the function of the distributive rules is to regulate the relationships between power, social groups, forms of consciousness and practice. Distributive rules specialise forms of knowledge, forms of consciousness and forms of practice to social groups. Distributive rules distribute forms of consciousness through distributing different forms of knowledge.

Second, recontextualising rules regulate the formation of specific pedagogical discourse.

Third, evaluative rules constitute any pedagogical practice. Any specific pedagogical practice is there for one purpose: to transmit criteria. Pedagogical practice is, in fact, the level that produces a ruler for consciousness... (Bernstein, 2000:28). He present fields as follows:

...Originally I distinguish between three fields, each with their own rules of access, regulation, privilege and specialised interests: a field of production where new knowledge was constructed; a field of reproduction where pedagogic practice in school occurred; a field, in between, called the recontextualising field. Activity in this field consisted of appropriating discourses

from the field of production and transforming them into pedagogic discourse... (ibid. 113).

The evaluative rules mainly focus on acquisition of the pedagogical practices. The evaluative rules are concerned with what counts as valid regulative and instructional discourses.

Bernstein discusses rules of social order, which he calls regulative discourse. He says that it "...refers to the forms that hierarchical relations take in the pedagogic relations and to expectations about conduct, character and manner...". The other order he mentions is discursive order, which he calls an instructional discourse. He says it "...refers to selection, sequence, pacing and criteria of the knowledge...". According to him, among the two discourses, regulative discourse is the dominant one (Bernstein, 2000, 13).

The reproducers in the school systems, the teachers, control the acquirers (learners). In the classrooms it is clear there are different rules and regulations to be followed to facilitate the teaching programme and also teachers determine the content and sequence of knowledge to be transmitted. More emphasis is placed on the rules and regulations to be followed; it is the regulative discourse (RD) that dominates the instructional discourse (ID).

Various problems are related to the strict regulative discourses. The teaching and learning process needs a relaxed environment. In one article, Morais notes that "Bernstein repeatedly argued that successful learning depends to a great extent on the weak framing of pacing-that is, on conditions where children have some control over the time of their acquisition..." (Morais, 2002:560). In addition to allowing control over a part of their time, successful learning also requires the interest and motivation of learners.

In general terms, to explain how subjects are handled by teachers and the relationship between teachers and learners, Bernstein has developed pedagogical codes. These codes are divided into Classification and Framing. Classification, divides power into collection code and integrated code. Framing, divides level of control, into strong and weak forms (Bernstein, 1971, 1990, 2000). As indicated earlier, weak classification, integrated learning codes and weak framing contribute to better learning (Bernstein, 2000).

Methodology

In this study, an ethnographic approach was used. The study used participant observations, field notes, digital audio recordings of lessons, photographing of classrooms, schools and the surrounding areas and interviews. In addition to the methods mentioned, policy documents, dissertations and journal articles related to the topic of the study were collected from different sources. Informal conversations with principals, teachers, learners and other knowledgeable persons were recorded in the form of reflective field notes completed after leaving the schools.

To be able to keep records of what I observed, I used an observation scheme. The observation scheme was divided into four major themes: content, pedagogy, the role of educators and of learners. I also made notes of some events in the class in order to, later on, elaborate them better and write them down.

I decided to record whole lessons using a digital voice recorder. In one of the schools, the teacher used the learners' mother tongue, IsiXhosa. She explained to me what the topic of the day was about before she started. At the end of every lesson, she gave me a short summary in English of the day's lesson.

To be able to recall the school environment and some of the specific activities of learners and teachers, I took pictures in the classrooms. The photographs were taken to visually record teaching materials on classroom walls, furniture in the classroom, and the classroom and school atmosphere. The pictures were used when analysing classrooms and school settings. They were also used for comparison of the material resources available in different classrooms and schools.

In the four schools visited, in two of them there were four grade three classes each and in the other two schools there were three grade three classes each with their own female teacher. All grade three 14 teachers were interviewed. The interview questions were divided into five main parts dealing with general questions, contents of the Social Development outcomes, the teaching methods, the assessment procedures and working relations between different actors.

During my fieldwork, I closely examined textbooks used by different teachers to instruct learners. I read relevant textbooks to find out more about their contents. School laws, policy documents, curriculum materials, guidelines, and other diverse materials were collected from different officials as well as from websites on the Internet. These documents were used for further understanding and analysis in the study.

In general, the use of these documents and different research instruments to approach the same phenomena from various angles was important. It is possible to argue that triangulation provides better information than the use of a single method (Bryman, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

The study took into consideration the three major population groupings, Black, White and Coloured. One more category, South Africans with an Asian background could have been included but this group (Indian/Asian) was less visible in the province where I conducted the study.

The four schools included in the study were: A) township school with Black learners, B) a Coloured school, C) a mixed school, and D) a dominantly White school. In each of the schools, one third grade teacher was observed.

Schools are not isolated islands; rather, they are reflections of the society in which they are located. These four South African schools with their varying personal, financial and material resources reflect the different communities from where the learners come. School D where most learners come from relatively high income families and communities was much better off in terms of number and quality of staff, finance and its physical facilities.

Access to the Schools

I was in South Africa during three separate periods between September 2007 and April 2009. The purpose of the visits was to collect policy documents, interview teachers and observe lessons in classrooms. A preliminary survey in the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape provinces of South Africa was undertaken in 2007. In 2008, I conducted a pilot study in three schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan area. 2008 to 2009, I conducted for six months my main study in four schools, observed lessons, completed observation guides, took field notes and interviewed teachers in the same area.

To gain access to the schools, I identified them based on the different categories of schools and decided on the number of schools to visit based on time and financial resources at my disposal. In the next step, I sent letters to the school principals to explain my intention to undertake research on Life Orientation, the methods I wanted to use and my commitment to ethical principles. Finally, when the four schools principals agreed to my study, I approached the District Department of Education, which was the authority that gives permission to conduct research in

schools. Through these processes, I accessed the four schools covered by this study.

Ethical Considerations

My study plan was presented to an ethical committee at a collaborating university and approved before I started doing my research. In addition to approval by the ethical committee, the District Department of Education and the schools' principals were informed and agreed to my request. The teachers, who were interviewed and observed, consented to participating in the study.

I commenced my work with an understanding of my responsibility for protecting participants and respecting their right to "privacy", "respect" and "self-determination" (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). In addition to this, I was aware in the later stages of my work that a researcher assumes an "interpretative authority" (ibid.), which can limit the authority of participants.

To ensure the anonymity of the schools, I used acronyms and later on numbers. I subsequently ended up giving them pseudonyms. In this article, for further anonymity, the schools are referred to alphabetically as A, B, C and D.

Findings

According to the curriculum for Life Orientation, lessons on leadership qualities and voting were supposed to focus on "leadership qualities in the school context" and "school voting". The lessons in 3rd grade in this study, however, dealt with general leadership qualities instead of "leadership qualities in the school context" and voting in the classroom context instead of "school voting".

Based on their socio-economic background, their view of democracy, their training, their work experiences and the school realities (Fataar, 2007), different teachers understood, interpreted and facilitated the teaching of Life Orientation differently.

In the day to day practice when they face problems to understand the theme, teachers turn to colleagues teaching in the same grade, in the same school or in other schools for help. The following comment from a teacher in school D confirms this situation.

If I have a problem to understand a component of it, we talk a lot about it in our school, we have a grade meeting. There are six or seven schools that meet

together. The different schools get together and discuss the problems they are having and on what they are doing on this course.

Some teachers in the schools mentioned they would turn to heads of different sections in their schools. Other teachers mentioned the possibility of consulting experts from the local department of education.

Teachers Qualifications

In teacher training programmes, teachers were trained to work at different levels. Those who attended the courses for the Foundation Phase were expected to use an integrated curriculum because the course covers all Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills programmes. It was possible for them to take more courses in one specialization programme, for example, Life Skills.

The teachers interviewed were qualified teachers at different levels and with different lengths and quality of training. Most of them were trained during apartheid; thus their formal education did not include courses concerning the new learning areas, including Life Orientation, introduced in post-apartheid South Africa. To be able to teach Life Orientation, they had been given a brief training.

A teacher from school A says, “..the department of education called us for a week for a workshop...” and she continued, “In my training at the teachers college, we did a subject similar to Life Orientation”. Also teachers from the other schools mentioned that Life Orientation reminded them of the civic courses they took as part of their teachers training program during apartheid.

Resources Available in the Schools

There were clear differences between the schools as regards manpower and material and financial resources. The well-resourced schools had additional resources in the form of cooperating and concerned parents, organised in Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA). They also had qualified and well-motivated teachers.

The resources available to these schools reflected the socio-economic status of the learners' parents. Learners from higher income families attended schools in well-planned buildings with a good organisation and high quality services. Some of the children in my study came from townships, attended schools with drab cement buildings and poor services of every kind.

There were different frame systems for different schools. The schools had different materials, financial and organisational resources. The school buildings, the classrooms, the fees charged by the schools, the obligatory and voluntary organisations, etc. varied.

Teaching in different School Contexts

Planning, teaching and assessment processes involved similar procedures in all the schools. Even if the general resources varied from school to school, material resources used for teaching Life Orientation in general and leadership qualities and voting in particular were not very different across the four schools. The teachers with abundant resources were able to present the theme in various ways. A teacher from school D says, "We have a lot. We use internet and a lot of resource books on Life Orientation". In the better off schools they used books when preparing their lessons and in some cases read aloud to the class a text that explained the theme. The lessons show major differences based on the teacher's approach and the learners' level of understanding.

The specific leadership qualities that were emphasised varied to some extent from class to class. The levels the discussions covered were also different. In some classes, the discussion started with the family and went the whole way up to the national level. In others, the topic started with the school or the nation.

The number of representatives of the learners elected varied from class to class. In two classes, there were two leaders each, while the other two classes elected one leader each. In one of the classes, in addition to one leader for the whole class, five group leaders were also elected. The titles of the class leaders varied from class to class. They were referred to as class leader, class president, class captain, monitor and assistant monitor.

A teacher interviewed from school D explained her view on teaching about leadership qualities as follows:

...I think I will ask the children to go home and look for the leaders that they like, they admire and their families admire. I ask them to talk to their parents and bring information to the class about persons they admire. Even family members or leaders they follow and look up to and we will talk about these leaders in the classroom.

In the classes I observed, the teachers engaged in direct teaching and had a dominating leadership role. The teachers guided the whole procedure from preparation to implementation. I listened to a teacher in school B giving instruction to her learners.

I will write three names on the board, two girls and one boy and then you write the names on the white piece of paper I am going to give you. After you write the names, based on the leadership qualities we talked about you put a cross (X) in front of the one you want to have as a leader of the class.

Teachers decided on candidates and vote counters. They were always initiators of discussions and leaders of the whole activity. Even if the teachers asked questions and the learners participated, the questions asked usually led to predetermined or known answers. There was no encouragement of learners to be critical and creative thinkers.

Learners Understanding of the Theme

The level of attention given to learners was not the same across the four classes. Their level of understanding and how much the teacher encouraged them determined the learners' participation.

Learners appeared to be more attentive at schools C and D, the two better-off schools. Few learners raised questions or suggested new ideas although many of them replied to questions asked by their teacher.

The teacher in school D in one of the lessons asks her learners, "Why do we vote?" and one of the learners replied, "to change the world" and another one said, "When we vote if a good person gets elected, it gives rights to the people". The teacher continued to ask, "What kind of people are we looking for when we vote?" and a learner raised his hand and replied, "Some with good leadership. A person with responsibility."

As we can see from the episodes, learners at school D, were being prepared for further education and leadership positions in society in the future. They were being prepared to be "stars". The school was involved in their overall development. The focus was on their physical, mental, behavioural and emotional development.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the study show there are variations in teachers' understanding, interpretation and implementation of the curriculum and the theme leadership qualities and voting. In the schools covered by this study, there was insufficient training in teaching the theme. There were also differences in resources, teaching activities and pupils' understanding in the classes visited.

There is a formal rule system established by the South African government. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) determines the general qualifications in the education system while the South African Council of Educators (SACE) determines what qualifications are required for a person to work as a teacher.

The government stipulates what should be done and who should do it. The agencies established by law legislates regulations on how the work should be done, implements some of them and delegates others to other organisations. The South African Council of Educators (SACE), in addition to determining teachers' qualifications, also draws up codes of conduct for teachers and is authorized to enforce and supervise their proper implementation.

Teachers' education was reformed from a jungle of low quality institutions taking care of teachers' education during apartheid which was segregated, teacher focused and inspired by fundamental pedagogics to a limited number of higher education institutions (Harber, 2001). Instead it has become more integrated, learner-focused and interactive pedagogics (ibid).

The teachers in the classes I observed had a general training as teachers but not specifically in Life Orientation. Continuous training for teachers to improve their knowledge of the theme is needed (Ferguson & Roux, 2003; Rooth, 2005). Through continuous training and the exchange of ideas with other teachers, they can develop deeper knowledge of the theme and improve their teaching methods. Effective use of time set aside for the exchange of ideas among colleagues in schools would also benefit teachers teaching this theme.

Dewey's (1916/2007) reference to school as a "miniature community" could be applied to the realities in the schools the study covered. In these schools, the wide gap between different groups in society could be easily observed. The uniform pupils wore, the classroom furniture, teaching materials on the classroom walls, the school

buildings, the school compounds and the neighbourhoods give an impression of resource differences.

One situation I encountered, which showed the division between the learners, was the school lunch in school C. The learners from higher-income families brought food from home or money to buy food from a shop in the school compound. The learners from the poor homes had to queue to get food from the school kitchen. While the teacher was emphasising equality in her lessons, this reality outside the classroom showed the opposite.

With the exception of school A, the least privileged school, strong regulative and instructional discourses (Bernstein, 2000) were prevalent. The regulative discourse at the most privileged school was enforced by a well-organised mechanism of control and rewards. At the other two schools, regulations were enforced by means of rewards (sweets) and direct sanctions (isolating learners from the whole group).

Explanations, reading texts and question-and-answer sessions were used in teaching leadership qualities and voting in all the schools. Group discussion as a teaching method was used minimally (Blignaut, 2007). After going through the theme and informing the learners about the procedures of an election, the teachers usually moved directly to the election process.

In some of the classes, learners only discussed the good qualities of leaders and this did not stimulate learners to see both their good and bad qualities. In addition, when teachers, instead of facilitating the election process, totally controlled it by choosing the candidates and vote counters and so on, learners could perceive their rights as being very limited. In one class, learners were told to accept all the directives coming from the elected leader. The teacher told them: "You cannot come and say Oh! Mamma! Lisa did this! Lisa did that!", and she said to the elected girl: "You are in charge of all the groups!". In this case, learners might well believe that they were electing their masters instead of representatives to speak for them.

It was obvious that the learners learned something about leadership qualities and voting. But there were differences between pupils coming from middle class families and from poor townships. Pupils with middle class parents have access to different information and knowledge via mass media and other sources and that makes it easier for them to understand what is taught in school. If we follow Bernstein's (1971, 2000) thinking on the role of school in reproducing middle class values, the pupils coming from the middle class have access to school codes

(“elaborated codes”) while those coming from low income poor families (exposed only to “restricted codes”) struggle to understand subjects taught in schools.

Returning to the classroom reality, if pupils had been allowed to be more actively involved in preparing materials such as the voting cards and ballot box, in freely discussing the theme and in nominating all their candidates, they would probably have acquired more knowledge, skills and experiences from the lessons. Teachers could be more open in their lessons. Instead of just focusing on transmission (Blignaut, 2007; Rooth, 2007), they could provide more space for discussion and learner involvement. Even in the practice of electing classroom leaders, they could create opportunities for high levels of learner participation. They could allow learners to choose their candidates as well as becoming vote counters after the election. They could demonstrate full transparency by counting the votes in front of the learners. Relaxing control or weak framing (Bernstein, 2000; Morais, 2002) could have allowed for better participation and better learning.

Candidates could be encouraged to develop their own ideas for improvements in the classroom and in the school. While one candidate stands for one idea, another could have a very different perspective. They could plan efforts to attract votes. The teacher could help learners understand that having different ideas and struggling for their ideas to be accepted and implemented does not mean that people must consider one another to be enemies. Learners need to learn to tolerate, appreciate and celebrate others.

Teachers are responsible for evaluating their actions and attitudes and improving them. They must always be mindful of the fact that their words and behaviour serve as models of “right thinking” and are part of their professionalism. When dealing with this theme, they need to believe in model democratic processes by using a true facilitator role to enable better understanding through participation and encourage learners to reflect.

A teacher teaching about democracy and acting undemocratically is not helpful for either the teacher or the learners. Principals are also responsible for acting democratically towards their staff. The principals, the teachers and the entire school community are responsible for creating a democratic school environment that facilitates democratic socialisation of future citizens. Particularly in the teaching of such a theme, the role of teachers with democratic views and democratic practices is vital.

There is a need for further research in this area. Comparative studies are needed to examine differences in teaching themes with democratic contents by teachers trained during and after apartheid. This research could include investigating the level of participation of learners in classrooms led by these different categories of teachers. It would also be helpful to investigate the understanding of learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. A study could also be made to show the effects of different types of school leadership on the teaching of these themes.

Conclusion

The schools focused very much on control and authoritative administration. In the classrooms, there was strong teacher dominance. Teachers tended to give strict orders and learners just followed without questioning.

In general, having a progressive curriculum, guidelines and textbooks promoting democratic values is not enough. The progressive and constructive ideas in these documents need to be practised. To do this, there is a need to prioritize democratic working traditions in schools. Further training in democratic working procedures, regular meetings where each teacher can reflect on what she/he thinks and how she/he is working to create a democratic working environment could contribute to improvement. There is also a need for a forum where learners are supported in reflecting on how they see democratic processes working in their classrooms and schools. Inspection programmes to examine how schools carry out their assignments and responsibilities related to socialising democratic citizens should be considered.

Education for democracy should not be based solely on theoretical knowledge transmission. The schools, the teachers and other professional and service personnel working with young learners should teach democracy by practising it.

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