

Preface

The research problematic that has informed the design of the present study has a long history in my scholarly quest to understand and make sense of the problems and challenges that continue to pervade our schooling system, specifically involving the problems of poor schooling and poor classroom performance.

After completing my teaching qualification at the University of Venda in 1990, I was, as would be expected, greatly motivated to contribute to the transformation of schooling in my country, to change in a small but positive way through my teaching, what the apartheid political system in South Africa had denied our people.

With the anticipation of pending political transformation that was just about to happen, many in our generation considered ourselves more privileged than the older generation of teachers within our Black communities because we were among the first generation of teachers who had the privilege of training at university. This was a rare phenomenon in Venda before the 1990s, as most teachers were trained at government teacher training colleges whose status was increasingly becoming doubtful within the Black communities.

However, the motivation and the anticipation to contribute new ideas to our transforming schooling system was soon to be short lived when, during the first and second years of my teaching, things did not seem to go the way I had anticipated. My teaching contribution did not seem to make much difference, as pupils' performance did not improve in any significant way. In spite of my students—in the remote rural areas where I began my teaching, trying very hard, the good results just did not come through.

I tried some of the more progressive instructional methods that I learnt during my teacher training years at university, such as group-based and inquiry-based teaching-learning methods. I was especially able to try these methods with my smaller group of about eight Grade 12 History class. It was a different matter when it came to the lower grades. With the overcrowded classrooms of between fifty to seventy pupils to one teacher per class (and, occasionally, up to a hundred pupils in class) teaching at these level tended to be transmission and rote-retention based. However, in both situations, good classroom performance continued to be illusive and difficult to achieve.

Faced with these difficulties, I intuitively came to the conclusion that something was amiss, not just with us teachers and pupils, but with the system as in its entirety. It was at this point that I made a conscious decision to further my studies in the field of education, as a way of trying to unravel to myself, what could possibly be done right to address the perennial problem of poor school performance.

My long journey in the quest for understanding the real problems pervading our schooling system began at Wits University in Johannesburg. Here I enrolled for an honours degree, my fifth year of full-time study in the field of education. It was at this point that I came across a psychology course—not the kind of the Educational Psychology that I did during my undergraduate studies in Venda, where I once asked my lecturer why she referred to children whose parents worked away from home and those who are brought up by grandparents in extended family setup (then a common phenomenon in Venda) as “neglected” and she answered that they were, in psychological terms, neglected because they were not growing up with their biological parents. Much of the psychological terminologies we used to describe people in this course seemed to me to be

irrelevant for application to the traditional, yet transforming, African social setting that Venda was.

In the “new” psychology course that I was introduced to, there was an interesting task with drawings of familiar objects that could be grouped in two alternative ways. This was given as a basis for the course assignment. This task, based on Luria’s (1976) study, required a discussion of the different patterns of thinking and object classification modes that could result from the forms of peoples’ learning experiences and participation in productive activity in specific socioeconomic settings. For the first time, psychology seemed to recognize different socio-cultural settings and the associated differences in the forms of thinking and problem solving that these could generate.

This was my first introduction to the Vygotskian Socio-Cultural Psychology. The idea that modes of thinking and concepts are acquired in the course of human social and cultural activity became attractive to me from the very beginning. This idea provided me with the basic conceptual tools—albeit rudimentary at that stage, to think further about the relationship between context, schooling and their cognitive and developmental consequences. I envisaged, from this early years of my graduate study, the possibility for extending this proposition to the problems of teaching and learning that were characteristic of the Black communities’ educational system in South Africa.

The beginning of this prolonged period of systematic investigation of the problem of schooling began with a small-scale study of the thinking and problem-solving processes of secondary school pupils in rural Tsonga-speaking northeastern Mhala district in South Africa, in 1995—based on Luria’s (1976) groundbreaking central Asian research expeditions (Muthivhi, 1995). In this, comparative study of the two neighboring schools with differential experiences of the effects of the 1980s political disruptions of schooling in South Africa, the school most affected

by the disruptive political activities and learner activism performed poorly in the experimental tasks and tended to emphasize the concrete, spontaneous forms of thinking and problem solving.

However, what remained intriguing was that both groups of the subjects from the two schools tended to introduce, in their responses to the tasks questions, a third category not explicitly accounted for in Luria's (1976) analysis. The subject would, for example, use what seemed to be an abstract-linguistic but functionally oriented category that employs the linguistically based concept of animals in a differentiated form—that is classifying “wild” animals separately from the “domestic” animals. The subjects resisted classifying “animals” together under a single category and used classification categories derived from XiTsonga to solve the task problems. These results, for me, suggested possibilities of new theoretical insights arising from further investigation of the effects of the particularities of pupils' cultural contexts on thought processes and problem-solving strategies. The research problematic that the above study, of the relationship between peoples' schooling in their cultural context and their cognitive developmental processes, posited provided the basis of the design of the present study with Venda children.

To address its research question, the present study engages the following structure of presentation: Chapter 1 presents a discussion of the historical setting of the institution of schooling in Venda, South Africa. This chapter considers the socio-cultural and historical conditions of the institutional practices of schooling as a context for understanding psychological development and functioning. The chapter contends that to understand the present practices of schooling and classroom teaching and learning and their consequent psychological processes, one needs to understand how these practices have been shaped by the specific history of the schooling and society in which the practices take place.

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework that informs the present study. The chapter proceeds from the assumption that psychological processes do not arise in isolation of the socio-cultural context of their manifestation. The concept of the zone of proximal development is proposed as an analytic tool for the organisation of effective classroom teaching and learning and curriculum development, to address the problems of schooling that continue to persist in the present South African schooling.

Chapter 3 discusses the Experimental Tasks, adapted to the present study to assess the development and functioning of concepts and modes of thinking and problem solving by pupils. The experimental tasks reveal the importance of the socio-cultural context of learning and cognitive development, which comprises of the pupils' schooling and out-of-school, everyday, learning and developmental situations and suggest that this context needs to be taken into account in planning and organising schooling and classroom teaching and learning activities.

Chapter Four describes classroom observations and reports on the results of these observations. The chapter provides a theoretically informed analysis of schooling and classroom teaching and learning and concludes that the prevailing modes of classroom practice in Venda reveal instances of the evolving historical practices of schooling and classroom instruction. In these, present practices, the past forms of schooling and classroom teaching and learning continue to be reproduced, at the same time that they are transformed.

Chapter Five provides a synthesis of the overall study and a theoretically informed discussion of the findings. This chapter concludes; extending the prevailing socio-cultural theoretical formulation that even the socio-cultural contexts characterized by strong ruptures—such as in South Africa—continue

some vestiges of the past practices that affect pupils' learning and cognitive development. As a result, the chapter proposes the application of the theoretical concept of the Zone of Proximal Development to address the present problems of schooling and classroom teaching and learning.
