
Using narrative inquiry to explore school transformation: a principal's tale

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Abstract

The paper is based on a research study in progress at the University of Fort Hare, School of Postgraduate Studies in Education. I use narrative inquiry to increase understanding of the meaning of school transformation and the processes and principles involved in turning schools round in a radical way. The study investigates a sample of best practice schools that participated in the Eastern Cape Department of Education's (ECDOE) Imbewu School Transformation Programme. They are all in extremely deprived rural or township contexts. It uses the narratives of principals to understand their perceptions of what happened in their schools during and after the intervention. The paper focuses on one primary school principal, and reflections on the narrative draw out principles and processes that have led to transformation. Based on these reflections the paper concludes by linking them to existing theories from post colonial African philosophy, social theory and educational theory. The aim of the paper is to increase understanding of whole school transformation in a specific context. I recognise that research in other contexts may lead to different understandings.

There are different ways of doing educational research and there is an increasingly rich source of South African writing about the challenges facing large scale curriculum and governance changes. Studies by Taylor and Vinjevold (1999) focus on attaining the important goal of improved learner performance but present arguments that seem to reject the more reflective research offered in Lewin, Samuel and Sayed's (2003) studies from the Multi-site Teacher Education Research Project (MUSTER). The research study on which this paper is based is closer to the latter (although it focuses on principals not teachers). It uses a qualitative interpretive approach to understanding school transformation in very deprived contexts. It suggests that before we can attempt to improve teacher and learner performance, it is important to listen to the voices of remarkable people who have transformed both themselves and their schools' learning environments as a preliminary step to attaining the goal of improved performance. The study is situated in a research paradigm that is discussed in more detail later in the paper. Since the context of the schools in the study is so crucial to understanding the transformation, the first part of the paper describes the educational landscape and the intervention programme, Imbewu, which the schools experienced.

Contextual background

The challenges of transforming schools in the Eastern Cape are by now well known. The last decade has seen the education system in one of the poorest provinces in South Africa reeling under the almost impossible tasks facing the provincial government and people. Systemic and structural changes involved in bringing together two homeland administrations with the various departments for segregated racial groups that existed in the old Republic has, in itself, been a logistical nightmare. Added to this, the task of implementing a new national curriculum, C2005, in schools that were totally unprepared for the onslaught of new ideas and teaching approaches meant that the first decade of educational change in the province has been one of sometimes overwhelming demands.

Social and educational transformation in the Eastern Cape is taking place in a context of deep rural poverty, high unemployment in rural and urban areas, an increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS affecting all members of the educational community, and the concomitant social problems of crime, alcoholism, child and women abuse and a spirit of depression and dejection.

The schools, like the ones in this study, are largely severely deprived and operating with inadequate infrastructure, resources and teaching staff. In the 1990s, the principals and teaching staff in the schools were largely unprepared for their role in transforming the old schools into the new, progressive centres of independent learning that outcomes based education envisages. Over the last decade strenuous efforts have been made to upgrade and update both managers and teachers but the fact remains that teachers were ill equipped to deal with the old system let alone the new.

In the 1990s, schools and their surrounding communities were also alienated from one another in a way that rendered school life almost untenable at times. Parents did not see themselves as responsible for the school that provided education for their children. School was often seen as 'government' and government, pre-1994, was apartheid. Principals were sometimes seen as collaborators of government and district officials as instruments of government. To move from this dysfunctional and sometimes violently antagonistic relationship to one of school and community working together was difficult to conceive in the last decade.

Whilst all of this is true as a general picture, there have been slow but important changes in the education scene over the last ten years. Teachers are attending upgrading programmes run by the Department and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Principals are receiving management training. There are extraordinary examples, as will be seen in this study, of schools and

individuals working together to turn a school around. The provincial department is running school building programmes to improve some of the worst schools in the province. More schools now have computers and a supply of textbooks arriving each year. However, the progress is slow and unfortunately it is probably still true to say that the majority of schools in the province are struggling with dysfunctional structures and systems (ECDOE, 2005).

The research study on which this paper is based looks at a primary school intervention programme that operates in partnership with the ECDOE. In order to understand the role it plays in school transformation, it is necessary to tell a little of the story of the programme, originally known as the Imbewu Project.

The intervention programme: ECDOE/Imbewu School Transformation Programme (STP)

The Imbewu Project started to operate in the ECDOE in October 1997 under a joint management team comprising ECDOE, Project Team Co-ordinator, Joint Education Trust (JET), Crown Agents UK, and a local NGO, ITEC. It is relevant to this study that I was a member of the Imbewu team of technical assistants that worked with department colleagues in planning, designing and implementing what became known as the STP. For that reason I did not attempt to evaluate the programme, but I am interested in trying to understand what participating schools felt happened to them during and after the intervention.

Imbewu Project is funded by a partnership agreement between the ECDOE and the British Government Department for International Development (DfID). Part of the Project plan was a training programme for up to 500 of the most disadvantaged primary schools in the province. It started in 100 primary schools and spread to 524 by 2000. The programme funding was approved for a further number of years under new management (a Netherlands based organisation, Arcadis) in Phase 2. About 1 500 primary and secondary schools have now gone through the training. It is in the process of being integrated into the ECDOE's plans for training in schools, and the Imbewu office will close in 2007.

The original Project training programme plan was based on a conventional framework of School Management and School Governing Body training plus INSET for Foundation Phase, and Language, Mathematics and Science teachers up to Grade 9. However, in the first six months of the project in 1997 and 1998, a fundamental change was made to the training programme

framework. The project team dispersed to the four corners of the province to visit the schools and to meet district education officials, school staff and community members. We all returned with the same view. It was not advisable to start management and INSET training in many of the schools. We found schools and communities totally alienated from one another with little contact between teachers and parents. In some districts there was a level of violence that was dangerous. Many schools were regularly vandalised by the community. Infrastructure and resources were generally abysmally lacking. Teachers were demotivated and demoralised and were facing a new national curriculum that involved radical changes in planning and teaching.

It was out of this troubled and demoralised context, an insidious blend of the ravages of apartheid and poverty, that the seeds of a different kind of programme were sown. We came to call the project Imbewu, the word for 'seed' in isiXhosa. We saw it initially as the seed of education. From the context we worked in it became, I think, the seed of transformation.

Imbewu modules are full of metaphors. Out of the recognition that something had to be done prior to the conventional training programme, came the second agricultural metaphor; we had to 'till the soil' to prepare it for the seed. A series of modules was developed that were meant to till the soil – the introductory modules of the STP. They were reordered and revised in the ensuing period but remain essentially the same in approach and principles.

If I have any assumptions about the way transformation happens, they arise from the impact that the introductory modules can have on individuals and schools. It is my strong intuition that the principles, concepts and approaches in these modules encourage empowerment, the growth of self-belief, and a new determination to do something about the schools that is part of a transformed individual and school. This intuition was supported by years of anecdotal evidence which led me to the narrative technique used in this study.

The introductory modules (ECDOE 1998/1999; 2002/2005) focus around:

- An event – a Vision Crafting event, a school and community celebration.
- A concept – Whole School Development, to which is also linked the two modules related to planning, School Development Support (SDS) and In School Professional Development (ISPD).
- An approach – Practice Based Inquiry (PBI) (which is no longer a module in Phase 2, but is embedded in all the introductory modules).

There is also a module on Managing Change in Education that acts as an umbrella for the others.

The modules were presented at workshops in district clusters of school and community representatives, consisting of the principal, teacher change agents and SGB/community representatives. The Vision Crafting event was carried out at individual schools after the workshop.

Underlying principles in the School Transformation Programme

A number of important principles are deeply embedded in the introductory modules, starting from the initial Vision Crafting module and event. These appear to be instruments of empowerment of individuals and schools, as will be seen in the narrative that follows.

In the Vision Crafting workshop and event, the participants become aware of the collective wisdom of individuals in the school and community, and begin to respect it as a powerful tool for development. The community and its values become an integral part of the school and help to build it. The development of a new 'spirit' in the school and the promotion of the principle of love are crucial in the transformation process. An important principle of Vision Crafting is the nurturing of that spirit in individuals and schools, and this study has evidence that in some schools this spirit has been sustained.

A caring attitude towards one another is more fully developed in the Whole School Development (WSD) and School Development Support (SDS) modules; the concept of a whole person and a whole institution leads to more thinking about what is required for personal, professional and institutional development (the SDS and ISPD modules). The principle of ongoing professional development is strongly emphasized. The belief that people develop themselves is stressed throughout the programme (Nyerere, 1973).

An important aspect of the entire programme is the use of Practice Based Inquiry, an action research approach to training. In Phase 1 participants made an action plan at the end of each workshop. This was shared with colleagues, implemented and evaluated. The team reported back at the beginning of the next workshop. This leads to teamwork, sharing of knowledge, and an internalised planning process. It is intended to build confidence and self esteem as people realise that they can develop themselves and their schools through their own efforts.

The critical outcomes of the STP reflect the same confidence and skills building emphasis. They are close to the critical outcomes of OBE and develop practitioners who are competent:

- Critical inquirers
- Creative thinkers
- Communicators
- Team workers
- Responsible professionals
- Change agents

(ECDOE Vision Crafting Module 1998, p.4)

The research study: exploring transformation in good practice Imbewu schools

Five years after the end of Imbewu Phase 1, in 2004, I began a research study in Imbewu good practice schools while working at the University of Fort Hare. The study is ongoing and is discussed in more detail in Lawrence and Moyo (2006).

Since my objective was not to evaluate but to listen to people's perceptions in order to understand the transformation process, I chose to use narrative inquiry as my research technique. The study is particularly influenced by writers such as Mishler (1986) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000).

The study therefore uses a subjectivist approach based on a view that people perceive life and experiences in very different ways, and I am concerned to get 'inside people' to understand their perceptions. In this study I am interested in understanding the concept and processes of transformation. Although I recognise the theoretical principles embedded in the training programme, it is my assumption that any theoretical framework will emerge from the study of the schools' experiences. They will be confirmed by practice within a specific context.

I recognise that this study also has synergies with critical theory (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). I have been totally involved in the area of research as a facilitator of transformation. I am driven by beliefs in equity and justice, poverty alleviation and even the apparently inaccessible levelling of the playing fields. It is not possible for me to present myself as neutral or 'politically innocent' (*ibid.*, p.28). I recognise a kindred spirit in Griffiths (1998, p.3), who starts her book on social justice research with the lines, "This is a book about using research for working towards justice, fairness and equity in education".

The crucial influence, however, has come from Clandinin and Connelly (2000). In exploring narrative inquiry, I found a number of key issues in

Clandinin and Connelly. Firstly, they indicate the breadth of sources of data in this form of inquiry, e.g. oral history, stories, photographs, interviews, journals, autobiographies, letters, conversations, and documents; many of these have been used in my study, sometimes almost accidentally as a principal would offer me documents while I recorded the story.

The authors see narrative inquiry as a way of *understanding experience*, which is exactly what I am trying to do; they refer to the purpose of narrative inquiry as providing a “set of understandings by analysing stories” (p.55). This focus on understanding leads to a further characteristic of inquiry, i.e. the collaboration between the researcher and participants over time, in a place and in social interaction. This has been a learning experience for the people in this study, and I am still in the process of eliciting my participants’ responses to the narratives I have developed from their interviews. Those responses are a key to understanding, researching and changing perceptions.

Clandinin refers to searching and researching taking place in a three-dimensional space in which inquirers search, i.e. you move backwards and forwards in time (from past to present and often back to past). You also move inward and outward, i.e. you move into the feelings about events and outward to locate these in the social context in which they happen. I have done this in the study clearly involving my own feelings and responses, but also trying to distance myself and look at the school and its social context as part of analysis. This means that the work of a narrative inquirer is always *work in progress* with different response communities that reflect and alter the work.

The inquirers are not ‘above’ and ‘objective’. They enter the world with their own understanding and they live their own story, as I have done, remembering the story of myself as part of the Imbewu programme and of myself now as a researcher. Inevitably my story is reflected in my perceptions of the principals; we, participants and researcher are in ‘the midst’; we all become part of the history.

The sample of schools

Having decided to use narrative inquiry as my research methodology, I planned a research study of 10 primary, combined, and secondary schools in the ex-Ciskei and ex-Transkei. They all participated in either Phase 1 or Phase 2 of the Imbewu programme. They are situated in the following areas:

- Two primary schools in Peddie (one is rural, the other close to the centre of Peddie);

- One combined school in Kenton;
- Two primary schools in Rhini, Grahamstown;
- Two combined schools in Mthatha (one rural the other in a township in Mthatha);
- One primary school and one combined school in Libode (one in a fairly rural area, the other in Libode village);
- One secondary school in Uitenhage.

The schools were selected with the assistance of the Imbewu district co-ordinators, once I had obtained permission to research the programme from the ECDOE and the Imbewu office. As I was not aiming to evaluate but rather to understand ‘transformation’, I asked the co-ordinators to select schools that were known to have responded positively to the programme and to have brought about radical changes in relation to school ethos and culture, relations with the community and sound management.

Data collection

In carrying out this research, I have visited all the schools once or twice and kept field notes of my impressions of the schools. I have also taken photographs, and collected files with histories that the schools have given me. I have recorded interviews with the principals and transcribed these; they are the foundation of my research study.

For the interview, I did not prepare any questions other than “tell me a bit about your life before you became principal of this school” and “tell me the story of Imbewu at your school”. But the interviews always became a conversation as I became increasingly involved and used my knowledge of the programme to ask other unprepared questions. The interview thus follows the approach recommended in Mishler (1986) as a means for allowing the participant the freedom of expression that a more structured interview may lack.

Data analysis

From these field texts, I have started to write the stories of individual schools. They have become what Clandinin (2000) describes as ‘interim’ texts, between field texts and the final research text. I have shown the transcriptions plus some description and interpretation to some of the principals; their responses will also become part of the study.

Once I had the interim texts I explored what Clandinin and Connelly (p.67) describe as “backing and forthing” that is, moving from the present into remembering the past, comparing the physical space of the schools, and reflecting on any personal feelings and involvement that might be influencing selective memory and perceptions. I am writing a text on each of the 10 schools individually, but as I do so I realise that I can also pull them together in what Craig (2003) calls ‘story constellations’. I also see a way of developing ‘story constellations’ by combining different schools that illustrate a particular characteristic, e.g. schools that are good examples of working together with communities.

In telling the story, the principals all refer to the training programme as Imbewu as this is how they were introduced to it. They have all been offered anonymity but they all requested that their voice be ‘named’ and their school be recognised. I accepted this as part of a study that recognises the social justice research framework and the right of people to be heard in the way that they wish. The names below are therefore the actual names of the principals and schools.

I have selected one story for this paper as it seemed a strong illustration of the extent to which a principal acknowledges both institutional and individual transformation as a result of the programme. It illustrates an experience that has led the individuals to see education as being concerned with the whole child.

A story of whole school development at Archie Mbolekwa Primary School, Rhini: told by Mr Zola Mothlabane, Principal

Context of the school

The setting for this story of transformation is one that would defy the strongest will to bring about change. Rhini is a sprawling stretch of informal settlements and larger more permanent buildings along the road into Grahamstown from King Williams Town and Fort Beaufort. The area has all the features of socio-economic deprivation described at the start of the paper. It is facing an increasingly higher incidence of HIV/AIDS.

I visited Mr Zola Mothlabane at Archie Mbolekwa Primary School for the first time in May 2005. The school is on a dusty track road wandering into fairly barren land, and at first appears a little bleak. However, immediately you enter the school courtyard, the atmosphere changes. It is immaculately maintained and there is an energy that is almost tangible. Teachers and principal give you a friendly welcome and learners are in their

classes working. People are busy; they also seem happy. Zola Mothlabane has been the principal since 1987 and worked at the school for several years before that. He is quiet but as he tells the story of his school his eyes begin to shine and his enthusiasm increases; he is passionate about what has happened and I let him flow on like water bubbling over a rock.

The constraints of this paper have led me to analyse the narrative and categorise significant transformational issues using parts of the text to highlight issues rather than presenting the entire narrative.

Recognising that the school and individuals are transformed

Zola began his story with a memory of the school as it was in 1998, before the intervention. Comparing this with two later comments about the school and his staff clarifies his perception that a fundamental change has occurred.

Before Imbewu really we were a rigid traditional school. There were no things that you would witness now. We were just an ordinary school you know, functioning properly but with no initiatives in terms of improving the school and. . . we were just banking on the Department to come to our aid. Nothing was happening on our own. . . we were that type of a school.

Later in his narrative, he talks about the changed spirit of the school after the Imbewu programme. His pride in the school is obvious as he talks about its reputation in the area.

You know if you are new in this town and you ask where can I take my child to. . . then everyone will say. . . (whispers) take your child to Archie Mbolekwa. . .

I asked him why this reputation had grown.

Well I would say. . . looking at the teachers. . . we got motivated teachers – my educators can't be beaten. . . they don't look at the principal. . . even if I go for a course, I know that work will be done. . . they don't work for me. . . they got a responsibility to educate the black child. . . that is important to them. . . and without these children there wont be any work. . . so there is a culture here that we must work. . . you know I am the principal and I am still young and we are all of this age. . . all of us have a lot of energy.

I am not suggesting that the study has proved that teaching and learning has improved in the school. I am noting the principal's changed perception of his school and the pride he feels in this change. There is a strong sense of motivation in himself and respect for his teachers. This was reinforced when I walked around the school and observed the interactions between principal and

staff. I note also the pride that they are working responsibly for the education of black children.

Zola Mothlabane speaks passionately of the transformation that has occurred at Archie Mbolekwa.

. . . Man, before Imbewu we were not like we are right now. Imbewu motivated us. . . it came with words of initiate, initiate. . . what are the other words. . . that of putting yourself in another person's position. . . all this vocabulary came with Imbewu. . . it motivated us. . .

Most of his narrative goes on to explain how this happened and gives concrete signs of radical change in the school.

Vision Crafting opened the door

Tracing the process of transformation at the school brought a humorous description of their experience of Vision Crafting. He admits laughingly that they were not sure about this event and only went into it because it was funded! He also remembers that not all the staff supported it. However, his description moves into an enthusiastic and clear account of what happened; the school understood what the event was supposed to include and achieve. The headings in bold italics indicate essential principles of Vision Crafting events.

Coming together and sharing our history and cultures

I can even recall we managed to get those who had choirs. . . we were going to have activities on that day. . . our speakers . . . we managed to get them. . . even the parents. . . the turn out was good. . . in fact we are blessed in this school. The parents are very supportive. I can remember there were two or three educators who were not part of this. One of them was sitting just behind the toilets there in his car. . . but we ran the programme in such a way that it was very interesting. . . We started with the history of the school. . . you know fortunately Mr T (the previous principal) had left something in writing . . . at least there was a lot I knew about the school. . . I remember the chairperson of our SGB. . . he also had to do something.

Sharing dreams about a better school

Then we came to that part where we had to divide the parents to go to the classrooms so that they could go there and DREAM. . . I cannot remember how many groups there were. . . but there were leaders for each group. . . parents had an opportunity of dreaming. . . we supplied them with chalk. . . they were writing on the board and then transferred to a chart. . . they had to give themselves names. . . and then they had to have a scribe and reporter. . . they had to come back . . . and they had a song so that when they were called they sang their song. . . and then come and present.

Celebrating achievements together

Then fortunately people were served because we had got that funding to prepare for them. . . it was just a nice thing! (his smile and the enthusiasm in his voice indicated a happy memory of the day).

Beginning the process of planning to realise our dreams

Then it was left to the SGB and the teachers to look at those dreams. . . to try and prioritise them and see which ones we could tackle and what was going to be difficult. . . ja. . . it started then.

All the principals in the study talk about Vision Crafting in the same way. Affectionate memories of people coming together; sharing dreams for the first time; feeling they all were part of the school. Principals as far apart as Libode, Peddie and Grahamstown use very similar words to describe the experience and its impact. For all of them it was an event that led to something significant happening in their schools and communities.

The community and the school plan together for Whole School Development

One of the most important functions of Vision Crafting is the bringing together of school and community. Remembering the context of school and community alienation, this was an essential but difficult outcome to achieve in some violence torn districts.

The school and community at Archie Mbolekwa did not simply come together. They began to plan for whole school improvement. And the coming together also improved relationships between the staff and parents. Zola lists a whole range of extremely concrete developmental projects that led to a safer school environment and involved the community as a whole.

*You know we did not know that the parents had a vision about their school. . . because the things they mentioned there were things we also did not think of and we didn't think the parents knew about those things, especially the things they wanted in their school. . . the tuck shop. . . paint the school. . . you know that type of thing. I think a lot of things came out . . . that we implemented you know . . . **we are just now a different school** (I observed the tuck shop and condition of the buildings later in my visit).*

Developing a more caring school environment

The first step was to build a proper office for the administrator so that she and the principal did not have to share an office. The original office was divided in two. The school then moved into much bigger projects that have centred on the improvement of health among learners and teachers. We were in fact carrying out the interview in one of the most impressive Health Rooms that I have seen in a school. The main focus is on HIV/AIDS education, prevention, counselling and support.

You know before we were an Imbewu school, we would not have a health centre like this one. . . and when we have. . . some of our learners are losing their parents because of HIV and AIDS. . . now they sit here with them. . . (two comfortable sofas) and there is an educator who has been trained. . . she's a counsellor. . . she has been trained. . . now if there is a learner who is crying because they have lost a parent. . . (voice becoming comforting) they can come and sit here. . . we bought these you know. . . Imbewu opened our minds I can assure you. Yes there's a lot of education here . . . they must know everything about health. . . can you see that (gestures to AIDS posters) in the past we wouldn't have things like those . . . but the learners must know this is affecting their lives.

The focus on health has also led to skills development for both teachers and learners, as the school has joined the child to child care programme, which encourages learners to care for one another and to recognise peer needs for support with food, hygiene and possible signs of illness.

There are two educators who have been trained. . . they are in charge. . . there is another interesting programme we are having from this centre which is child to child. . . where learners educate other learners you know. . . about health. . . for example if there is a learner here who is sick. . . the educators will get it from the learners. . . there are class reps in each classroom looking at the health needs of other learners. We planned this ourselves; our learners go to workshops. . . they are in charge of this child to child.

The strong focus on providing support for children affected by HIV/AIDS is seen also in the development plans for nutrition organised by the school and community. He showed me an impressive garden, unusual in a township school, as evidenced in his proud laugh when he told me.

We got a garden. . . laughs. . . when we harvest we cook for the children. . . you know this area is poverty stricken so that garden is helping us. . . we were helped by the Mthathi project. . . which initiates gardens. . . they stay for three years, now we take the initiative again. . .

Now we have a system here. . . they call it trench gardening. . . you know we are on a rocky place. . . but you will be amazed to see the harvest we are getting. . . only last week we are harvesting beans. . . the plots there are. . . you dig out everything up to your knee level and then you put in cabbage leaves, grass, papers, cardboard then put back the soil and plant.

The vegetables are used to cook meals in the new kitchen which has also been built and furnished by development planning efforts with the School Governing Body and funds raised through a search for donors in Grahamstown.

He continued a long and impressive list of what the school had planned and achieved. What is significant about them is that the developments cover the welfare of all the school community. They have, for instance, approached Rhodes University for old computers which are now in the staffroom and teachers are being trained in computer literacy.

They have also painted the classrooms to improve the atmosphere for learners and teachers.

. . . because of our initiatives we got a whole drum of paint from Dulux in P.E. . . . they delivered it here. . .

And the cement floors of the classroom have been resurfaced.

We decided that. . . it was really from Imbewu. . . because of one of the programmes we were doing in one of the modules which said. . . we must identify something we must do. . . there must be people who are accountable (these are important ideas from Practice Based Inquiry and the planning guide in School Development Support) so we embarked on this resurfacing. . . we called back all the old students (the whole community was asked to contribute and assist, which they did).

Finally, the dream of so many schools in the province, their concerted efforts have led to the provision of water in the school and the installation of flush toilets.

What has all of this got to do with education? Anyone who has worked in the average rural or township school in the Eastern Cape would understand the connection. The horribly familiar sight of children learning in classrooms that are unsafe because of broken ceilings or rough floor surfaces, with walls that are unpainted or without any teaching aids has been eradicated by the passion for development at Archie Mbolekwa. Struggling to make a school more attractive, safer and learner centred in this context requires energy and creativity of a special kind.

What has this to do with the Imbewu intervention? Mr Mothlabane is passionate in his conviction that it has everything to do with it. He even attends workshops in the district for Phase 2 schools to act as a mentor, encouraging new schools to experiment with the ideas of the programme because they had worked for him.

What we got from Imbewu was. . . we got this idea you know. . . that there is no I in a team. . . umm. . . and its in everybody to be wise. . . I might have forgotten some of the things. . . but there was a lot we had to learn (becoming more and more enthusiastic) . . . the idea that transformation begins with me. . . you know. . . I am a change agent. . . all of this we learnt from Imbewu.

I went round the school and saw all the things mentioned above. I also saw their efforts to build a science laboratory in one classroom. The positive spirit and culture of the school was evident. All the teachers that I greeted were friendly, lively and told me they were transformed. I did not use the word myself; it came from them. Relationships with the principal seemed good.

Each classroom has teaching aids, including learners' work, on the walls. This was almost unheard of in rural and township schools when we started work in the '90s. The Principal looked at me after the class visits and said. . . *"You see we are a Model C school"* (referring to previously white schools) and laughed with pride. I felt he was better than that. The effort of achieving all of this in one of the poorest urban areas in the province, surrounded by high levels of unemployment, is what makes his story so moving and so remarkable.

Other schools in the study echo the new willingness to take initiatives. A principal in rural Libode contacted the Japanese government office (in Tokyo!) to persuade their School Building Programme to add her school to the list. Another school in Rhini has an HIV/AIDS and health support system that educationalists from all over the country came to investigate. A secondary school in Uitenhage uses Practice Based Inquiry to plan matriculation improvement, and networks effectively with HEIs and NGOs nationally to improve their science teaching. They all claim that Imbewu spurred them into this self belief and into an ongoing process of self- and institutional development.

Reflecting on practice: linking the lessons learnt to a theoretical framework

This paper is written at a time when the study is still very much work in progress. However, following the example of Paolo Freire (1972), it is possible to take the evolving understandings of transformation and of the processes used in the intervention, and to reflect on them in the light of existing theories relevant to the study, thus informing both the theory and the practice. These theories are multi-disciplinary and it is only possible here to refer briefly to what I see as links between this study and Post Colonial African philosophy, social theory and education. Before looking at the underlying epistemology of the study, however, I have also gained insights from the practice of doing narrative inquiry.

Narrative is a way of knowing (Bruner, 1986)

The study provides strong evidence of the value of narrative as a research methodology providing knowledge that complements positivist studies but is different from them. The principals' narratives in this study are exemplars of how to turn dysfunctional and demotivated schools around, thus offering validity to the principles and processes that they describe (Mishler, 1990). The fact that the schools are five years beyond the intervention strengthens a cautious claim for sustainability. I see this as an essential step towards improving teacher and learner performance in the future.

A strong message from the intervention and from reflections on the practice is that schools are transformed by individuals who are transformed.

Who are these remarkable individuals? What is it that drives Zola Motlabane and others to seek excellence for themselves and their learners in the midst of deprivation? The search for answers to this question covers numerous sources across disciplines. The participants have all emerged from the apartheid period. The work of Freire (1972) leads to an analysis that is both educational and political, looking at the impact of colonialism on the oppressed. African literature also provides creative illustrations of the pain and damage done to the soul and self esteem of individuals throughout the continent; this is seen particularly vividly in the writing of Achebe, Soyinka and Ngugi. There are important synergies with the work of Post Colonial African studies focusing on developing new identities in the post colonial period (e.g. Eze, 1997) and the research being done into 'identities' by South African academics (e.g.

Soudien in Lewin, Samuel and Sayed, 2003). At Fort Hare, Duku (2006) and Mtose and Durrheim (2005) are researching critical issues of identity among parents and learners. Another principal, like Mr Mothlabane, spoke with a conscious pride of 'black schools and communities moving forward, moving forward' (Unpublished transcript).

In the area of social theory, the study provides interesting data relevant to the debate around the role of structure and agency in the work of Giddens who holds the view that 'structure' i.e. social structures, institutions and systems "do not exist independently of the reasons, motivations and reflexive behaviour of actual people" (Layder, 1994, p.140).

It is possible that this paper illustrates the interdependence rather than the separation of structure and agency. It provides data from practice for the work of Moyo (2005) on the relationship between agency and structure in South Africa. Interestingly, the Imbewu Project team changed the name of workshop participants from 'key teachers' to 'change agents', people who would work as a team to bring about individual and institutional transformation.

There is a new spirit in the school and in the community; this spirit has to be nurtured as it is the base for transformation.

The Vision Crafting module (1998/9/2002/5) speaks openly of 'spirit'. It is left to the participants to define what that spirit is, according to culture and belief. However, from all the narratives in the study so far, there is a strong emphasis on a spiritual base. People talk about being 'born again' in relation to the school and to teaching, and many speak openly of a faith-based life. Mphahlele (2004) and Biko (2004), both critical of institutional religion, agree that spirituality is a powerful force in African culture both traditional and modern.

Transformation seems to depend on the strengthening and/or birth of profound values and attitudes that lead to changes in the way people perceive themselves and relate to others. These motivate people to develop themselves and the school.

This principle needs to be explored more closely in relation to spiritual, psychological and educational theory. However there are interesting synergies with Farrer (2000) describing a project designed by Neil Hawkes leading to a 'quiet revolution' in schools as a result of encouraging positive values in learners, teachers and parents. And Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins (1999) dedicate their book on developing inquiring schools and achieving students in the following significantly 'subjective' way:

To Love. When you write about school improvement, you come to
Realise that no matter how good we get technically, it is love that
Makes the school improvement world go round (Joyce *et al.*, 1999).

In the context of the Eastern Cape, it is significant that the principle of growing closer together has led to a more loving and caring relationship not only in the school, but also between the school and the community in some of the best practice Imbewu schools.

The use of planning skills and processes dominates the narrative. Parents and school staff identify problems, prioritise and implement development plans together.

This is another principle of transformation seen in all of the narratives, and Archie Mbolekwa is a strong illustration of Whole School Development planning. Planning is, of course, a major component in action research; practice based inquiry being the action research model for the intervention. As the study unfolds, it will be important to link the narrative outcomes to the recognised value of action research in teacher professional development. This has long been cited in the work of Kemmis and McTaggart (e.g.1988), Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead (e.g. 1996) and more indirectly in the evolving meanings of educational change presented over the years by Michael Fullan (e.g.1992).

Searching and researching: the ongoing journey of understanding transformation in schools

This is not a paper for impatient politicians who want the matriculation results to improve with immediate effect. The paper hardly touches on the improvement of learner performance. This is not because I do not consider that important. Indeed it is the ultimate outcome that all educationalists are striving for. However, I believe that this improvement can only happen if we look carefully at what a 'school' actually is in the context of the Eastern Cape, and try to improve it as a centre for learning and teaching. This entails a concrete programme of both practical and physical improvements, as well as a more subtle programme that is strongly value-based leading to profoundly altered attitudes and relationships of the people that run schools and those who send their children to them. This kind of transformation leads to professional development that springs from the hearts of the principals and teachers and builds schools that are an inspiration to visit, even in deprived contexts. Mr Zola Mothlabane of Archie Mbolekwa Primary School has a lot to teach us, as do many other unknown educators in this province.

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