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How teachers of English in South African schools recognise their change agency

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The South African Council for Educators' Code of Professional Ethics requires teachers to help learners develop values consistent with the fundamental rights contained in the Constitution of South Africa. To engage with such rights, teachers need to have the agency to develop such values, and this article explores how teachers of English in South African schools recognise (or fail to recognise) their change agency. Using a qualitative, interpretivist approach with narrative inquiry, twenty-two teacher-researchers were tasked with listening to the stories of teachers of English in order to answer the research question: do teachers consider themselves to be agents of change in their English classrooms? While the findings indicate that some teachers fail to enact agency, other teachers, despite claiming otherwise, do serve as agents of change in their classrooms. By respecting who learners are and enabling a democratic environment, teachers are able to engage with possibilities for change despite challenges. By having a clear vision of who they are as teachers, they are able to use interventions to improve the conditions for learning and make a difference to the lives of their learners.

Keywords: change agency; democracy; empowerment; teachers of English

Introduction

Drawing on Foucault's (1992) idea that all knowledges and actions are culturally and historically relative, teachers as change agents need to be known and understood in the contexts within which they work. The South African schooling context is known to be challenging in many ways (Bloch, 2009), is often described as dysfunctional, and calls for changes are common (Kumar, 2010). A key concern is that the school system appears to be locked into a structure that is controlled by the capacity and performance of its teachers (Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), 2011). Yet, as Calderhead argues, "if educational reform is to be effectively managed, the roles of teachers need to be recognised and incorporated into the reform process" (2001:797). In this article, I will focus on the role of the teacher as change agent to establish if it is recognised by teachers and if so, how it shapes their capacity and performance. In particular, I will explore how teachers of English in South African schools recognise (or fail to recognise) their change agency.

While the article focuses specifically on South African teachers, many studies from around the world (Ali, 2011; Hattie, 2004; Yu & Ortlieb, 2009) indicate that teachers will serve as agents of change when they recognise the importance of the role, embrace it voluntarily, and take ownership of their decisions. While additional funding, improved infrastructure, and increased physical resources may assist in improving education (Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Masino & Niño-Zarazúa, 2016; Van der Berg, 2011), these interventions may make a difference when implemented together with the empowerment of the teacher. When an emerging economy, such as South Africa, with its struggles in overcoming inherited legacies and its challenges in addressing socio-economic obstacles, cannot meet the educational demands of the country (Blessinger & Anchan, 2015), the focus needs to turn to the teacher. While Bloch (2009) acknowledges the faults or omissions of government in handling the problems in South African education, he points out that the teacher is obliged to deal with the crisis.

A key concern of teachers in South Africa today, over twenty years after the demise of apartheid, is the implementation of the post-apartheid curriculum (Soudien, 2010). While the curriculum aims to redress the legacy of apartheid, it favours privilege and entrenches inequity against black and indigent learners (Soudien, 2010). Teachers also lack material resources to traverse a complex, overloaded curriculum that works best with small classes, rather than the large numbers found in most South African classrooms, of which the majority are working-class learners (Hugo, 2010).

The situation is compounded by the large numbers of learners who are malnourished and in poor health (Bhana, Morrell, Epstein & Moletsane, 2006). Beset by poverty, orphan-hood and violence, sometimes the only place where learners get any refuge is at school. However, teachers are not trained to deal with the complex demands made on them there (Bhana et al., 2006). These challenges are further exacerbated by the choice of most South African schools to use English as the medium of teaching and learning (Hugo, 2010). It thus becomes clear that the South African school system is locked into a structure that is controlled by the capacity and performance of its teachers (CDE, 2011).

For this reason, South African teachers may need to work in a system that lacks funding, infrastructure and physical resources, and may need to work with a demanding curriculum that is not context-friendly. While it is imperative to advocate for appropriate funding, infrastructure and resources, and it is crucial to challenge inequalities in all forms, it is equally important to empower teachers to recognise their change agency, especially in the absence of the former. It is in this light that this article explores how teachers of English in South African schools recognise (or fail to recognise) their change agency.

The study was implemented by a group of twenty-two qualified, practicing teachers of English studying towards an Honours degree in Education. Using narrative inquiry, each teacher-researcher was tasked with listening to the stories of teachers of English at the school at which they taught. Their aim was to answer the research question: do teachers consider themselves as agents of change in their English classrooms? They were thus talking to their colleagues to ascertain the agency (or lack thereof) that teachers of English claim to have.

The study was underpinned by the South African Council for Educators' Code of Professional Ethics (SACE, 2017), which requires teachers to help learners develop values consistent with the fundamental rights contained in the Constitution of South Africa. The study worked off the premise that teachers with agency could make a difference to their learners, both in and beyond the classroom context.

Literature Review

Agents of change

In light of the research question being addressed in this article, it is important to understand concepts such as 'agency' and 'agents of change'. For the purposes of this study, 'agency' is conceptualised as people's ability, competence and power to "critically shape their responses to problematic situations" (Biesta & Tedder, 2006:11). People may effect more or less agency at different times, and in different places (Biesta & Tedder, 2006), and the enactment of agency is therefore determined by experiences, events and contexts in which people find themselves. The capacity and potential for agency emerges and changes as people interact with different environments, as they encounter experiences, and as their material and social worlds change (Archer, 2000).

Priestley, Edwards, Priestley and Miller (2012) found that agents of change are reflexive and creative and are committed to pursuing and embracing possibilities for change even in the face of obstacles. The study being discussed for this article aimed to understand the participants' recognition of their change agency (or lack thereof), as well as the various obstacles in their teaching environments, if any.

Kritsonis (2005) identifies the stages at which change occurs. The first is pre-contemplation where there is no acknowledgement of the need to change. Contemplation is the second stage where the potential change agent thinks about change. During the third stage, preparation, the change agent is ready to change and looks for support to solve problems. The fourth stage is the action stage where the change agent has to cope with introducing change activities and implementing behaviour changes. The final stage is maintenance

where the change agent uses actions to establish new behaviours and reinforce the change.

Teachers as agents of change

In the classroom, effective agents of change have a moral purpose, democratic principles and a clear vision of why they are teachers. They are committed to improving and making a difference to their own lives, and to those of their learners and colleagues, through interventions, if necessary (Harada & Hughes-Hassell, 2007; Lunenburg, 2010). In my study, these considerations, and others, were considered when analysing participants' narratives.

In their studies, researchers too, have considered participants' histories and biographies (Zeichner, 2005), the socio-cultural impact and pedagogies of their former schools (Anstey & Bull, 2006) as well as their view of schooling (Zeichner, 2005). We entered the study with an understanding that participants might come in strongly influenced by a twelve-year apprentice of observation that they have imbibed from their time at school as learners, and could understand teaching to be the imitation of their colleagues and past teachers, as espoused by Lortie (1975) and McPherson (2000). In addition, Tatto (1998) notes that schools' organisation and culture, the social, economic and political forces around them, and the media and various socialisation processes have a profound impact on teaching. In my study, teachers' educational and socio-economic histories were considered to understand if they shaped practices and philosophies.

While many teachers start their careers wanting to make a difference to the lives of their learners, they feel a "sense of inconsequentiality" as they move through their careers and face difficulties surrounding teaching, values, vulnerabilities, social pressures and personal issues (Farber & Wechsler, 1991:36). Yet, the capacity and performance of teachers is shaped by teachers' "attitudes, values, and beliefs about students, about teaching and about themselves" (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000:193). When stakeholders look to improve education and make a difference in schools, they invariably focus on finding funds and physical resources. While such factors do alleviate some difficulties, they do not consider the teacher as being crucial to solving problems, and this article contends that empowering teachers to recognise their change agency might assist in alleviating some of these difficulties.

Teachers, in various contexts, successfully serve as agents of change, despite the challenges facing them. In the poverty-stricken area of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, for example, education is characterised by poor results, rote-learning, memorisation, a punitive atmosphere and examinations riddled with corruption (Ali, 2011), characteristics

often associated with some sectors of South African education (Bloch, 2009). Ali, who studied four teachers who were considered to be good at what they do and who had a sustained commitment to their personal improvement, found that teachers' roles as change agents extended to the classroom, school and community. Undertaking a qualitative case study, Ali found that teachers identified as change agents moved away from rote learning, memorisation and textbook transmission. Instead, they encouraged learners to engage actively in interactive lessons, and noted that the work ethic and environment in a school are largely determined by the teachers, not by management or resources. Ali also found that all four teachers were involved in small-scale community work that involved emancipatory activities aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty in their communities.

Fullan (1993), in his Canadian study, observed that teachers who are agents of change develop strategies to accomplish goals that lead to the growth of their learners. Their strategies are underpinned by four requirements: personal vision building, inquiry, mastery and collaboration, requirements considered when analysing the findings of my study. While Fullan (1993:10) stressed the importance of content and pedagogical knowledge, he noted, "the teacher of the future must actively improve the conditions for learning in his or her immediate learning environments." Thus, teachers as change agents are urged not just to uplift the classroom and its learners, but also to teach learners how to use their skills to respond effectively to conditions surrounding the classroom. Yu and Ortlieb (2009) take the process further in their findings, noting that teachers as change agents are able to reflect on and interrogate their experiences and the theories to which they subscribe.

What the studies cited above indicate is that teachers may recognise themselves as change agents when they identify the role, embrace it voluntarily, and take ownership of their decisions to make a difference to their learners' lives, both in and out of the classroom. These studies shaped the analyses of these findings and served as guidelines in the conclusions drawn from their analysis.

Methods

The study, which used narrative inquiry, was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach. The interpretive paradigm allowed for the understanding of participants' experiences through the meanings that they gave to such experiences (Creswell, 2009), and the qualitative approach necessitated the teacher-researchers having close, direct contact with the participants during the narrative inquiry (Patton, 2002). Narrative inquiry works on the idea that we make sense of our experiences through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and we construct

and re-construct our experiences and ourselves whilst making sense of them. Narrative inquiry recognises that there is no single dominant reality, and that a number of different realities are constructed in participants' minds through social interactions.

To carry out the study, twenty-two teachers of English (teacher-researchers) were asked to glean narrative stories from colleagues (participants), who taught English at their schools. The narrative inquiry undertaken was part of an exercise in engaging with narrative inquiry during an Honours module. The theme underpinning the module was 'teachers and change agency', and the teacher-researchers had interrogated this theme and narrative inquiry during their engagement with the module, as well as prior to embarking on the research.

Narrative inquiry acknowledges that researcher could influence data that is generated. For this reason, the teacher-researchers are described to understand their biographies, which add to the layers that shape the research process. The teacher-participants had either an undergraduate Education degree, or an Arts degree with a postgraduate diploma in education, and they taught English as a home language or as a first additional language (South African terminology for 'second language'). The fact that the teacher-researchers had degrees pointed to the fact that they were possibly more highly qualified than many of their colleagues as many South African teachers are unqualified or under-qualified (CDE, 2011). This fact needs to be acknowledged when understanding the power dynamics that might emerge between researchers and participants. Of the teacher-researchers, there were 14 females and eight males, and 12 taught at high schools and 10 at primary schools. As per the teacher-researchers' categorisations of their schools, seven teacher-researchers taught at rural schools, two taught at semi-rural schools, 12 taught at urban, working-class schools, and one taught at an urban, well-resourced school. Racially, 11 categorised themselves as African, eight as Indian, two as coloured, and one as white. South Africa's racialised past has shaped the educational landscape significantly and was noted within a study on change agency.

The narratives gleaned from the participants need to be read with the understanding that the values and perspectives of the teacher-researchers could have influenced them. The teacher-researchers did not enter the research process objectively but worked with the participants, their colleagues, in the research process using their (teacher-researchers') own very specific understandings and perceptions of teaching and learning.

All teacher-researchers taking the module consented to doing the research (an alternate task was available should any of them have chosen not

to get involved). The teacher-researchers were asked to identify and recruit, adhering to all rules of ethics and consent, a teacher of English to interview. No other participant requirements were imposed on them.

The convenience sample of participants (chosen because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the teacher-researchers) included 18 female and four male teachers, reflecting the gendered nature of teaching in South Africa (Crouch, 2003). Understanding South Africa's racialised past, it was important to note the racial demographics of 11 African participants, eight Indian participants, two coloured participants and one white participant. Twelve participants were from high schools and ten from primary schools. Their teaching experiences ranged from one to 32 years. Thirteen participants had teachers' diplomas, six had university degrees and teachers' diplomas, one had an Honours degree, and one had a Master's degree. One participant did not have a tertiary qualification but was working towards a degree.

It was interesting to note that of the 22 participants interviewed, 20 were considered "good" teachers of English by the teacher-researchers, who were the participants' colleagues. At no time in the planning of the research were teacher-researchers asked to interview "good" teachers, nor did they indicate that they would interview participants whom they considered "good", and we had not had any discussion on what makes a teacher "good". On completion of the research, reasons for teacher-researchers' choice of "good" teachers became apparent. Comments such as, "*we all know about the useless teachers; I wanted to choose someone I know is good*"; "*I tried asking a colleague. He said he was too busy. I know he's just lazy*"; and "*I decided to ask a teacher that the children loved*" emerged. What is important is that the teacher-researchers had decided, without discussion or collaboration, to choose teachers they considered "good", possibly revealing a need to explore positive models of teaching or to highlight that to which they possibly aspire, or to move away from perceived negative narratives about teachers.

Thus, the data from the narrative research was largely based on the perceptions and experiences of twenty participants who were considered effective by their peers. The two other participants who were chosen represent views quite different from the majority, but could represent a group of teachers in many schools, and thus, their views have been considered.

The teacher-researchers requested that the participants use oral narratives to answer the question: 'do you consider yourself an agent of change in your English classroom?', and this question served as a starting point for the participants to tell their stories. Participants' initial

responses served as the stimuli for follow-up questions. Such questions included, but were not restricted to, tell me about an incident that explains your answer; what kinds of teachers would be considered change agents; was there a significant event that could explain your answer; was there someone who played a significant role in your story of agency, among others. In other words, teachers were asked to tell stories that illustrated their change agency, or lack thereof. The teacher-researchers were also asked to prepare, in advance, possible what, when, where, who, how and why questions, should they require them. The teacher-researchers were reminded to allow the participants to express their stories through their own telling (Polkinghorne, 2007) and to serve as good listeners to the voices of the participants, and all narratives were audio-recorded. All interviews were then transcribed before analysis.

Initially, teacher-researchers provided textual analyses of the transcriptions, looking for answers to the research question. Thereafter, they embarked on explanatory analyses by searching for patterns and themes, while locating the findings within the contexts in which the participants worked. These initial findings were shared with the participants for corroboration and expansion. Thereafter, the teacher-researchers presented their findings to the Honours class and members of the class, and I interrogated the analyses of the narratives. After extensive initial co-analyses, the class and I worked out a system of codes to identify themes for analysis. Thereafter, I used the themes to code and analyse the whole collection of narratives, which the teacher-researchers verified. The themes that emerged from the multiple perspectives of the participants (Johnson & Christensen, 2007) are presented in the discussion of findings below. Thus, while only one method of data generation is presented, there was investigator triangulation where a number of investigators (teacher-researchers and I) worked with the same data and teacher-researchers' feedback to the interpretations enhanced triangulation (Durrheim, 2009).

In the various stages of analyses, the teacher-researchers understood that participants make meaning of their lives according to the narratives available to them, that circumstances cause stories to be adjusted, that current events emerge from past events and look to future outcomes, and that personal and community narratives work hand in hand (Duff & Bell, 2002). It was also important to acknowledge that who the teacher participants are and what they know about teaching and learning are socially constructed out of their experiences, and the classrooms from which they come (Johnson & Christensen, 2007), and reflect the multiple realities of their personal and professional lives.

One obvious limitation emerged from the study. While positionality of the teacher-research-

ers was discussed prior to the research, it had not been adequately engaged with in terms of this particular study. Thus, teacher-researchers' positionality had the potential for shaping how participants provided narratives. The narrative inquiry process failed to consider the relationships and potential power dynamics that could have shaped responses. The other limitation was the choice of participants. The teacher-researchers recruitment of participants that they considered "good teachers of English" is not necessarily a representative sample of participants.

Discussion

The narrative research with the participants was preceded by the questions: How would you define a change agent in the classroom? Do you consider yourself a change agent in your English classroom? The most common definitions of a change agent included eight participants who used the word "mind-set" in their responses with one noting that an agent of change was "able to change learners' mind-sets positively." Two others noted that agents of change were able "to influence learners and gain their respect" and could "change the way learners judge things." Participants recognised an agent of change as someone who was "an authority who could devise tactics to bring about change", who "challenged learners to bring about change in their lives", "enabled progress in the learner, the classroom and the school", "transformed learners by giving them more information", "made learners critical thinkers" and helped learners to "think out of the box". Overall, participants' conceptions of a change agent concur with those of Priestley et al. (2012), who refer to teachers who embrace the possibilities for change.

However, three participants reflected positions of domination by recognising teachers' change agency to include teachers who could "show learners how to understand something in a particular way", "change children's habits of thought and action", and "indoctrinate learners with morals to put right the evils of society." Such comments indicate that these participants equate change agency with reinforcing hegemonic practices and maintaining established practices. Bourdieu (1977) notes that teachers often model and use values, performance expectations, actions and manners to preserve the interests of those in power.

In addition, two participants equated change agency in teachers with "innovative teaching strategies" and "interactive lessons." While such teachers might be effective teachers, they are not necessarily agents of change.

While most participants were able to identify some characteristics of a change agent in the classroom, the majority believed that they were not doing enough to be labelled 'change agents.' Of the

22 teachers interviewed, only four indicated that they considered themselves change agents in their classrooms and 18 said that they did not. It is possible that they did not openly acknowledge their change agency in the classroom, and their reticence could point to their understandings of the significance of the label. It is likely that the participants recognised that being a change agent required commitment and active implementation of change strategies. Therefore, publically acknowledging such a role, especially to a colleague, would be done with great consideration.

Yet, many of the participants' narratives indicated that they were making a difference in their English classrooms in general and to their learners' lives in particular. Thus, despite teachers not openly acknowledging their change agency, their abilities to effect change are evident in their narratives, a discussion of which follows thematically.

Respect for Learners in Supportive, Democratic Environments

The participants' narratives reflected effective change agents with a moral purpose, democratic principles and a clear vision of why they are teachers, as espoused by Harada and Hughes-Hassell (2007) and Lunenburg (2010). Two sub-themes emerged within this theme.

The first relates to the need for teachers to acknowledge and respect who their learners are in a democratic ethos. A participant noted that her lessons were not well received by learners, and decided to do something about it. On asking learners about their responses to studying English, she found that they wanted to talk about their challenging lives. She found that many learners were over-burdened with chores, one or both parents were absent, parents did not or could not help with homework, learners were responsible for caring for younger siblings, parents' diseases affected them, and they were unsupervised for long periods after school. The participant decided to acknowledge the challenges presented and focused on issues such as race, culture, values, love, loyalty, respect for family members, compassion, human rights, dignity, and responsibility when teaching aspects of English.

She talked about sensitive issues that emerged from the stories they read, and gave them a framework from which to start understanding literature. This gave learners confidence, and she was able to see an improvement in their marks and a renewed enthusiasm and maturity in their attitudes. She realised that she needed to know who her learners were and respond to their needs.

A second participant stressed the need for a happy, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. He used jokes as icebreakers and spent time chatting to learners about their lives. He felt that informal

conversations encouraged them to use the language and they felt that he listened to them, their concerns and their responses to the issues in the literature. He used spoken and written praise so that they were motivated to do better. He believed that the respect and trust in the class, coupled with motivation and praise, helped to foster learners' love for learning English. Bartolomé (2009) emphasises the importance of well-selected teaching strategies, but warns that merely reproducing such strategies without understanding who the learners are and what they bring with them will not necessarily achieve successful learning, nor make a difference to the lives of learners.

A third participant, who revealed that she considered herself an agent of change, indicated that she used a variety of texts, including media texts *"to take learners into a democracy."* She noted, *"I use the Constitution and the literary texts to teach values such as non-racism, non-sexism, ubuntu, tolerance, respect and empathy."* Her views echoed those of Henning (1993), who recognised the power of literature to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity. The participant noted that parents did not prepare their children for a *"multiracial, multicultural society"*, and thus teachers had to become agents of change, who taught learners the values needed for transformation.

The participant noted that her learners did not come with a culture of reading or being read to, and thus she had to provide a variety of texts that reflected the diversity of South Africa and the world. Besides novels, short stories and poetry, she also used cartoons, photographs, praise poetry, myths and legends in their reading repertoire. She integrated history, the arts, language, media and literature to open discussions about caring for and respecting other people and *"not just other people, themselves too. Respecting themselves is most important."* Takolander's (2009) study, too, was able to show that engaging with literature provided opportunities for empowerment and social responsibility. The participant noted that she aimed to create a classroom atmosphere where learners respected each other, and she encouraged cooperation, interaction and integration. However, she made it clear, *"Nothing is forced. I always provide choices and they decide. I want an open atmosphere where I respect them and they respect me. And it's working. They love English and I love teaching it."* The participant's choices in the classroom reflect those of hooks (2009), who advocates that teachers provide time and space for learners' views, and acknowledge and respect who learners are. These three teachers thus acknowledged that schools are expressions of the wider organisation of society (Giroux, 2009) and classrooms needed to reflect such. What sets these participants apart from the studies in the literature

is their enactment of agency using literary texts in the English classroom.

Repeated responses from other participants indicated that teachers could become agents of change if they were *"prepared"*, *"loving"*, *"caring"*, *"sensitive"*, *"passionate"*, *"respectful"* and *"knowledgeable."* Such teachers listened actively to learners and created, as a participant put it, *"a democratic atmosphere in the classroom where democratic habits and democratic processes are nurtured."* While some of these constructs may imply a pedagogy of care, it is possible that the moral purpose of change agents, espoused by Harada and Hughes-Hassell (2007) keeps them close to the needs of their learners.

The second sub-theme focuses on using interventions to make a difference. A participant disclosed her concerns about teaching literature in the English classroom. She shared: *"my learners don't like old literature, they want modern stories and yet they love fables and legends with morals. I decided that together with my learners we have to take ownership of the literature and we explore literature in a way that benefits them."* This participant was reflecting her recognition that she had to work with learners' preferences if she was to succeed in her classes. She also revealed her willingness to use democratic principles (Harada & Hughes-Hassell, 2007), and to encourage the democratic participation of her learners.

A second participant spoke about focusing her English lessons on human rights, as they appeared in the texts she was teaching. *"How will they ever grow if they don't know how to negotiate their rights and with it their responsibilities?"* she asked. This participant shared a personal vision, a requirement of change agency that she built with her learners (Fullan, 1993).

Empowering Learners, Empowering Teachers

The participants' narratives also reflected a commitment to making a difference to the lives of their learners, thus empowering them (Harada & Hughes-Hassell, 2007; Lunenburg, 2010). It became evident that the participants' attempts at empowerment of their learners, led to their own empowerment as well. As Ayers (2004) notes, those who strive for change anticipate not only begetting change, but also being changed themselves.

A participant understood her role when she remarked, *"to me, teaching English means engaging learners in various social worlds through different genres of literature"*, emphasising Savvidou's (2004) findings that the teaching of literary texts could enable learners to broaden their understanding of different worlds. She went on to note that she actively designed her lessons to *"prepare learners for the outside world"*, reflecting a clear vision for why she was a teacher (Harada &

Hughes-Hassell, 2007), and how she was making a difference to the lives of her learners. She did this by enabling them to learn from the experiences of others, to help in language development, which could assist in social interactions, and to afford them the opportunity to learn about the norms and customs of different societies to foster respect for and acceptance of different peoples. By understanding and fulfilling her personal vision, she was empowering herself.

A participant teaching in an impoverished area with multiple socio-economic problems noted that she just wanted to inspire, and thus empower, her learners to read. She shared that she told her class of eighty learners that reading was “*one way out of their problems*.” She read stories, poetry and plays to them, accessed stories that learners could relate to, and helped learners relate to stories that were beyond their understanding. She also reminded learners that poetry was an essential part of their rich African culture, and featured in African ceremonies. She encouraged performance of plays and stories being studied, because “*learners enjoyed them*.”

Interestingly, this participant noted that all her own English teacher at her high school did was “*read and read. We could sleep or even walk out and he wouldn't know*.” She decided that she was never going to repeat that method. The impact of this participant's educational biography played a part in her identity as a teacher (Zeichner, 2005). However, this participant went against Lortie's (1975) apprenticeship of observation (which indicates that teachers teach as they were taught) by identifying a teacher who represented everything she did not want to become. She took ownership of her biography and shaped it to make a difference to her learners' biographies. She encapsulated her thoughts with, “*Black people do not read. We need to break that culture. I want to do justice in my classroom*.” She thus declared her intention not to replicate what she recognised as a cycle of injustice. This teacher embodied part of Fullan's (1993) conception of a change agent, as she had a clear idea of personal vision building, one requirement of a change agent. She shared her personal vision with her learners as a way to make a difference to their lives.

In their quests to empower learners, other participants focused on critical thinking when analysing texts. A participant noted, “*texts open doors. I encourage them to discuss topics that might be controversial or embarrassing. I want them to think critically, to relate to things, to identify with characters. So I say, what would you have done in that situation? I want them to challenge me*.” As Savvidou's (2004) study found, this participant, too, had understood that critical engagement with texts provided opportunities for learners to respond to issues, characters and events

that presented themselves in the texts. However, this participant was also asking her learners to challenge her, and thus opening herself to the unknown, to enable learners' voice and agency.

Another participant noted, “*I don't know if I'm an agent of change, but I know I want my learners to develop thinking skills so that they can reason and look at their surroundings in a thoughtful way*.” She wanted to use her lessons “*to inculcate core values such as generosity, love, selflessness, peace and tolerance*.” She explained that many of her learners came from traumatised backgrounds, where abuse of varying kinds was common. Many of the learners were termed “*difficult*” or “*disruptive*.” She said, “*I make an effort to listen to them – totally. They have life experiences that need to be heard*.” Her most important concern was her classroom. “*I want the classroom to be filled with trust and warmth. They miss this in many areas of their lives. I needed to say, this is where you are safe*.” When dealing with literary texts, she tended to use a feminist perspective, and explored the roles of men and women in the texts. She clarified her stance by saying, “*I use the texts to give them self-confidence, self-worth and self-esteem as men and women who can respect themselves and can challenge what is wrong. I am passionate about teaching. They are like my children*.” This participant fulfilled all of Fullan's (1993) requirements for a change agent. Fullan noted that a change agent developed strategies to accomplish goals that led to the growth of learners. Personal vision building, inquiry, mastery and collaboration underpinned such strategies, where the teacher actively improved the conditions for learning in the learning environment.

This participant, who had indicated a lack of certainty regarding her status as an agent of change, was shaped by both environmental (her learners' backgrounds) and personal (her need to make a difference to their lives) factors. As Kritsonis (2005) notes, this teacher as an agent of change tried to convince her learners of their capacity to change and the values implicit in the change. By empowering her learners, she was finding ways to connect with them and engage them in her lessons. She was thus investing in her own empowerment as she improved the conditions for learning.

The teachers presented thus far indicate that they wanted to and did embrace possibilities for change in their learners, despite obstacles. However, not all teachers felt the same way.

Challenges of Teaching; Obstacles to Change

Two participants indicated that they were not change agents in their classrooms, and they revealed their difficulties in effecting change. Both participants revealed that they did “*not like teaching*,” and did “*not like reading*” and indicated that their learners were often “*bored*”, and “*dread-*

ed the English lesson.” As both participants did not enjoy teaching, it is possible that they were unable to motivate and encourage their learners in the classroom. Further, the participants revealed that the learners in their classes did badly in English. While actual reasons for learners’ poor performance in English were not elicited, these might be because learners “dreaded the English class” and were “bored”, as indicated by the participants. In addition, both participants noted that they taught as they were taught in school, a finding that is backed up by many studies all over the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Griffiths, 2000). The participants thus enacted the socio-cultural impact and pedagogies of their former schools (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

The two participants identified “rote learning” and “memorising,” as teaching strategies while acknowledging, “I know those are not good” and “there’s no other way.” One participant summarised her frustrations thus, “there is not much I can do here because of overcrowding. I can’t have discussions and questions and answers.” While the participant acknowledged that her lessons were “not interesting” and learners “hated” them, she also noted, “I don’t have the energy to improve learners’ performance since I have a heavy-duty load.” This participant’s response focuses on legitimate concerns of South African teachers, namely overcrowding and high workloads (Hugo, 2010). Of concern was the finding that, despite knowing that lessons were despised by learners and were boring, the participant believed that she could not make changes. It seemed like the participant could not recognise the possibilities for change in the face of challenges (Priestley et al., 2012).

This participant requested a follow-up interview from the teacher-researcher and at the second interview, the participant indicated that she had thought about her responses and knew that she had to change. This was a very positive indicator of the need for change. She even stated that she wanted support in the form of a “mentor” to guide her, and indicated that she was keen to study further. When pushed for a commitment, however, she emphasised that she would not study at that point, as she was “too stressed.”

The second participant initially blamed her learners for her uninspiring lessons (“they don’t listen”; “they are not interested”). She noted, “I just talk and they just sit and listen” and “they think English is free time.” She later listed a range of what she termed “boring activities” such as “reading, summaries, repeating” that she used, and acknowledged that she was to blame for her learners being unresponsive in her classes and for receiving poor marks in tests and examinations. This participant appeared to use what Freire (1970) called banking education, where the teacher deposits information into learners as a one-way

process. She noted that she made her learners “read aloud, and they just laugh when anyone makes a mistake.” At her interview, she was able to identify innovative, creative ways of teaching English, but said that she had not yet tried them. For a teacher to serve as an agent of change, s/he has to first have mastery of skills and be effective and engaged in the classroom (Fullan, 1993). This participant had not achieved such mastery, perhaps because of her deep frustrations surrounding her job. This idea may be extended to change agency, where teachers may have knowledge about change and making a difference, but do not or cannot implement such changes.

Interestingly, the second participant also asked to meet with the teacher-researcher a week later, and explained that she realised how she was failing her learners. She said, “I try not to teach in that boring way anymore”, which was a positive sign that there was the possibility for change in her teaching strategies, but not necessarily in her progress towards change agency. Perhaps one should precede the other.

However, it appeared that the two participants needed to correct the perceptions of the teacher-researchers, their colleagues. Teachers meet their colleagues on a daily basis and it is possible that projecting an acceptable image is important. The fact that both participants recognised their failings indicates their abilities to reflect on their practices. An additional important point to recognise is that the teacher-researchers’ questions had prompted introspection and reflection, and thus was a possible means by which all teachers could reflect on their teaching practices. In order to effect change, change agents have to have the knowledge and skills to create improvements (Miller, 2002), and it is possible that reflection on practice has initiated this process with these two participants. As Kritsonis (2005) points out, the contemplation about changing behaviour is necessary for the preparation for change.

Conclusion

Thus, while most participants in the present study understood the terms ‘agent of change’ and ‘change agency’, they refrained from claiming the label for themselves. Yet, their narratives revealed that most participants in the study acknowledged and respected their learners and aimed for a democratic classroom environment. They emphasised the need to focus on values and to allow learners the time and space to share their views. Various interventions were being implemented to cater to the specific needs of learners so that learners could function effectively in the outside world. While these participants were endeavouring to empower their learners, they also had to invest in themselves in order to achieve their aims. In addition, the

importance of reading and critical engagement with texts was highlighted.

However, not all participants reflected ideas of agency. Two participants explained that they taught as they were taught, subscribed to a system of banking education (Freire, 1970) and, by their own admission, produced poor results. However, with introspection and reflection, both teachers expressed the need to change their teaching strategies, but indicated no intention to aim for change agency. A peculiarity of the research process, which saw teacher-researchers choose teachers considered to be effective, might indicate that these two teachers might be more representative of teachers than the study indicates.

Nevertheless, the study indicates that many of the participants enacted the conception of change agency, as espoused by Priestley et al. (2012), in their recognition of the possibilities for change in the face of challenges. As change agents, they demonstrated a moral purpose in their commitment to positive improvements through interventions, and had clear ideas about why they were teachers (Harada & Hughes-Hassell, 2007). In addition, they understood how their own educational biographies influenced their teaching philosophies (Zeichner, 2005). Further, they enacted at least some of Fullan's (1993) requirements for change agency, namely personal vision building, inquiry and mastery of skills. Importantly, they enacted these requirements within an English classroom and mainly using literary texts. This sets them apart from all the other studies cited.

This study revealed gaps in these South African teachers' enactment of agency in their classrooms. Unlike studies in the literature (Ali, 2011; Fullan, 1993), this study found that the participants failed to mention their community involvement and their collaboration with others in their work environments. This does not mean that those two issues do not exist; it just reveals that the participants did not consider them important enough or appropriate to mention in their narratives. However, if they indeed do not exist, then relevant stakeholders could try to enable teachers' awareness and acceptance of how to collaborate in the school environment and how community involvement could make a difference in their professional (and personal) lives.

Stakeholders such as the Department of Education (DoE), policy-makers, the South African Council for Educators (SACE), teacher-educators, and all persons involved in the school environment should be encouraged to see themselves as agents of change. This may be done through professional development workshops or short courses run by teacher unions, the DoE and SACE, whose Code of Professional Ethics (SACE, 2017) obligates teachers to help learners develop values consistent with the fundamental rights contained in the Con-

stitution of South Africa. It is also incumbent on teacher education programmes to engage actively and explicitly with issues surrounding the role of the teacher as a change agent. One of the conclusions of the South African Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2008) indicates that most discourse on transformation disregards the obligation to aid students' understanding of and role in the challenges of South Africa's socio-political context. In the South African education context, teacher education needs to assist students to identify the challenges of the education system and empower them to recognise their roles in confronting the challenges. Teacher education has the capacity and responsibility to produce teachers who can promote development and growth in their students, because of and despite the many problems that plague students and the societies in which they live. Teacher educators have to recognise the realities that students face and design courses with learning outcomes that are transformative and engaging, so as to empower them to become skilled, effective teachers who are agents of change.

From 1994 onwards, educational change in South Africa has focused on transforming an apartheid curriculum. This study contends that change is now overdue on all fronts, and it is the teacher who may be able to serve as a catalyst for change.

Note

- i. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.

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