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Transformative Autonomy: Mixed Notes from Teachers to Higher Education

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Abstract

Transformative autonomy is 'the form of autonomy in which school role players, such as teachers, have the urge to be involved with fellow role players in education development initiatives towards social transformation which contributes to democracy' (Nel 2014: 790). This theoretical construct was formulated to narrow the gap between teaching practice and societal concerns since it recognizes that teachers do have a certain degree of autonomy over their professional practice but also a responsibility towards the evolving South African democracy. In an effort to test the veracity of transformative autonomy as a theoretical construct data was gathered from three sets of participants: twenty-six postgraduate students, thirteen rural primary school teachers and thirty-one conference delegates. Some key findings are that participants generally acknowledged their control over curriculum aspects and some degree of control over matters of discipline. A curious finding is the appearance of discipline as an aspect over which some participants felt they have control and other participants felt they had no control. These findings, and others, are discussed in the context of transformative autonomy. One of the main conclusions is that these participants display an intuitive understanding of their autonomy as teachers but that they still do not have a clear idea of how to link their expertise to societal transformation. It is lastly concluded that the issue of autonomy has epistemological implications insofar as the condition of knowledge production, reproduction and dissemination is concerned, all of which impact on teachers' intellectual integrity. Higher education, therefore, is alerted to its responsibility in teacher training.

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Résumé

L'autonomie transformatrice est « la forme d'autonomie dans laquelle les acteurs de l'école, tels que les enseignants, éprouvent l'envie de s'impliquer avec d'autres acteurs dans les initiatives de développement de l'éducation en vue de réaliser la transformation sociale qui contribue à la démocratie » (Nel 2014: 790). Ce construit théorique a été formulé pour réduire l'écart entre la pratique de l'enseignement et les préoccupations sociétales, car il reconnaît que les enseignants disposent d'un certain degré d'autonomie sur leur pratique professionnelle, mais aussi une responsabilité vis-à-vis de la démocratie sud-africaine en pleine évolution. En vue de vérifier la véracité de l'autonomie transformatrice en tant que construit théorique, des données ont été recueillies auprès de trois groupes de participants: vingt-six étudiants de troisième cycle, treize enseignants du primaire en milieu rural et trente-et-un délégués de conférence Quelques résultats clés indiquent que les participants ont généralement reconnu avoir la maîtrise des aspects du programme d'enseignement et un certain niveau de maitrise des questions de discipline. Une observation curieuse est le fait que la discipline soit apparue comme un aspect jugé maitrisé par certains participants et non maitrisé par d'autres. Ces résultats, ainsi que d'autres, sont examinés dans le contexte de l'autonomie transformatrice. L'une des principales conclusions est que ces participants affichent une compréhension intuitive de leur autonomie en tant qu'enseignants, mais qu'ils n'ont pas encore une idée claire de la façon de lier leur expertise à la transformation sociétale. Enfin il conclut que la question de l'autonomie a des implications épistémologiques en ce qui concerne l'état de production, de reproduction et de diffusion des connaissances, qui ont toutes des effets sur l'intégrité intellectuelle des enseignants. Par conséquent, l'enseignement supérieur est alerté sur sa responsabilité dans la formation des enseignants.

Introduction

Following the well-publicized academic conflict experienced by the respected scholar, Professor Mahmood Mamdani, at the University of Cape Town in the late 1990s, Kamola (2011: 162) concludes that 'Mamdani's political engagement at UCT speaks to a continued faith that the post-apartheid university can continue to serve as a site of social and political revival, resistance and redistribution'. If education faculties of post-apartheid South African universities take heed of this conclusion, then their programmes should do more than just equip student teachers with the technical skills of their chosen school subjects. In South Africa education reforms have become commonplace (Republic of South Africa 2011: i) as reform and review efforts in 1997, 2000, 2002, 2009 and 2011 attest. A danger always lurks in such reform efforts as policy draft-

ers and implementers might be tempted by 'technical rationality' (Tabulawa 2013: 156) that emphasizes teachers' mastery of the techniques and contents of teaching to the detriment of the social purpose of education. In this context I advocate that the training of teachers by universities should inculcate transformative autonomy as one of the values that graduates should leave the university with. In that way the university in South Africa can still play the role that the Mamdani affair highlighted, as argued by Kamola (2011: 162).

In pursuance of the argument for transformative autonomy by teachers I pose the broad theoretical idea of critical community psychology in education as the overarching framework through which my interest in education is studied. The concept of transformative autonomy is then unpacked. An empirical backdrop is offered against which I tested the existence of transformative autonomy in teachers' professional practice. Analyses and discussion are offered on some aspects of the empirical work. I conclude with the implications that the inculcation of transformative autonomy has for higher education, teacher education in particular.

Theoretical Orientation

In recognizing the general critique against orthodox psychology of neglecting the role of context in its understanding of psychological problems (Nelson and Evans 2014: 159; Rappaport 2000: 107), as an academic psychologist in education I choose to align myself with the ideals of critical community psychology. With the overt theoretical positioning of community psychology since its formation as an avenue for the seeking of social justice (Rappaport 2000: 107), this choice was easy because education in South Africa is committed in legislation to the eradication of the inequalities of the apartheid past, i.e. striving towards a more socially just dispensation through education (Republic of South Africa 1996a: 4; Republic of South Africa 1996b: 3). The tested ideals and values of critical community psychology include: care and compassion (Ferreira, Ebersöhn and Odendaal 2010: S108); appreciation for socio-political understandings of mental health (Thompson 2007: 75); working in a psycho-politically valid manner in research and action towards change (Morsillo and Prilleltensky 2007: 726, 738). In all of these ideals and values it is clear that critical community psychology always keeps a focus on societal improvement which counters practices that can be regarded as racist, xenophobic, sexist, culturally bigoted or classist.

Accepting that education is about much more than the simple transfer of skills for the advancement of economic opportunities for the holder of such skills (Vally and Motala 2014: 43–44), logic then dictates that several societal pressures add to the psychology that can develop in the educational enterprise. These pressures include politics, economics, demographics and

culture, systemic and institutional arrangements (Angelique and Kyle 2002: 36; Motala and Vally 2014: 16; Seedat and Lazarus 2014: 275). The *Monterey Declaration of Critical Community Psychology* therefore rightfully urges community psychologists to, amongst other principles, commit 'to work actively to transform social, cultural and institutional arrangements that foster social injustice' (Angelique and Kyle 2002: 36). A critical community psychology in education recognizes these societal pressures and works towards a deep understanding and transformation for the greater good (Kagan et al. 2011: 64–66).

Basic education in South Africa mostly happens in public schools, with a minority of learners in private education and home schooling. I focus on public education and the community psychology at play in such settings, as I regard the public school as a community. The concept of community refers to the grouping of people for different reasons such as the need to study them as a unit or for the purposes of policy formulation but in psychological terms it denotes the human space within which identities are negotiated, conferred or developed (Kagan et al. 2011: 71). The public school community is a complex space beset by many challenges of a social nature.

Some, if not most, of these challenges find teachers ill-equipped to deal with them. In South Africa many studies attest to this mismatch of teachers' skills to the challenges. One of the challenges for which formal training does not equip teachers is the need to promote relational well-being in school communities (Wagner 2014: 119). Another challenge is in the area of sexuality education where it was found that mothers for instance need guidance and support on how to broach the subject of sexuality with their adolescent daughters (Twaibane 2011: 75). With regards to the competencies needed to adapt to curriculum changes and subject teaching, it is instructive to note that teachers do acknowledge inadequacies in their pre- and in-service training leading to uncertainty, e.g. in Natural Science (Maema 2011: 92). In order to remove parents' perception that the school is 'the main barrier to their involvement' (Mashau 2011: 181) teachers need to do more to bridge that perceived gap. With child-headed households a reality in many school communities, teachers, again, face a challenge of how to support such learners meaningfully (Nhlapo 2014: 76). By no means do these challenges constitute a finite list but they serve to illustrate the different areas in which the teacher is expected to function beyond the technical tasks of teaching.

Given the apartheid past and the training that some teachers received during that era, it stands to reason that even at the epistemic level, South African teachers face another challenge. This challenge is the imprisonment of thought by the racial pattern of resource distribution, including knowledge production, which entrenched white supremacy as the hegemon (Ouédraogo and Bouda

2011: 19). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 264) laments the blockage this state of affairs created regarding the creativity in knowledge production and dissemination. In order to overcome this and the other kinds of challenges, the South African teacher needs a wider array of skill and demeanour.

Under the apartheid system, as in other forms of coloniality, the notion of teacher power was dreaded as it was viewed as 'the undesirable beginning of some dangerous subversion' (Ouédraogo and Bouda 2011: 20). Close government control over teachers' activities was the order of the day, leading to a corps of teachers to whom the exercise of autonomy was an alien concept; a situation experienced as similar even in current day South African education as the Department of Basic Education retains its power by dictating the outcomes to be reached explicitly (Palmer and De Klerk 2012: 74).

For a critical community psychology to develop in South African public schools, all these challenges faced by South African teachers need to be considered. I suggest that an alternative conceptualization of teacher autonomy is one area in which research can be done to determine kernels of solutions.

Transformative Autonomy

This article builds on my published work (Nel 2014) in which I introduce the concept 'transformative autonomy'. In short, transformative autonomy is exercised when teachers and other school role players fulfil their professional duties not just in technical compliance with policy but as a contribution to positive social transformation (Nel 2014: 790). This social transformation is the same kind that is advocated by critical community psychology, namely towards a society less burdened by unequal systemic arrangements that advantages some at the same time as disadvantaging others. Transformative autonomy, then, has an overt liberatory political focus.

This form of autonomy I pose as an alternative to the notion of teacher autonomy in which teachers disallow external influence and scrutiny, with a resultant danger of stagnation in professional development (Jansen 2004: 64). With reference to education reform efforts in Botswana, but which, I argue, could also apply to South Africa, Tabulawa (2013: 154) concludes that too strong a focus on compliance with skills-building and assessment in education results in weakened teacher autonomy. The difference between the transformative autonomy that I advocate and the weakened forms described by Jansen (2004: 64) and Tabulawa (2013: 154) is that transformative autonomy explicitly links education to societal transformation, i.e. it is a political project of critical cultural consciousness through which a 'critical professional community' (Bristol 2010: 180) plays its part in the improvement of the society for whom it educates.

As is apparent in these descriptions above it can also be suggested that autonomy consists of a continuum. I am fully aware of the critique against classifying and essentializing complex matters into a simple linear form such as a continuum, as is illustrated by Fox and Sandler (2003: 469) with reference to concepts in Political Science or by Pedwell (2007: 45, 48) in Gender Studies. Still, due to the relative novelty of the concept of transformative autonomy I risk suggesting a continuum of autonomy in the knowledge that further development of the concept will lead to more complex depictions. On the conservative end I would place the weaker forms of autonomy. Those forms of autonomy, it can be argued, are strongly influenced by governmentality, i.e. where government has a strong influence, covert and overt, on how people argue for and justify certain choices or where government supplies solutions to problems (Lemke 2007: 44). A different form of weak autonomy is where the rejection of external scrutiny to the detriment of professional growth is postured as radical. Following the logic in the preceding paragraphs transformative autonomy would count among the stronger forms of autonomy at the progressive end of the continuum.

Precarious as this suggestion of a continuum might be, it offers me an analytical tool to investigate what autonomy looks like empirically in education.

Empirical Backdrop

As part of my continued exploration of critical community psychology in education I ventured into the second foray of my work on transformative autonomy after posing the concept first (Nel 2014). The *aim* of the current work then was to explore the extent to which teachers' own expressions about autonomy match the ideal of transformative autonomy as posed earlier in the theoretical orientation. This work is necessarily qualitative in nature because the participants' written expressions are employed as data (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 25) to understand their social world and I am the instrument of data gathering as well as interpretation (Terre Blanche, Kelly and Durrheim 2012: 274, 276).

Participants

In the data gathering exercises taking place on separate dates throughout 2014, I offered three separate, unrelated sets of participants the opportunity to write their thoughts about autonomy. In the case of the first two groups the concept of autonomy was equated with a broad notion of control regarding aspects related to the tasks of a teacher. This choice was made so as not to unnecessarily complicate matters for the participants. The third group of participants had to respond to the term 'transformative autonomy' directly since they benefitted from a conference presentation in which I used the term.

The first group of participants consisted of twenty-six postgraduate students; twenty-five female and one male, all of whom were in-service teachers; hereafter called 'the students'. The students were asked to write down the aspects they think they have control over in their position as teachers. This data was gathered in English from ten older African black students, and in Afrikaans from sixteen young white students, as the class consisted of students studying in either one of the two languages in accordance with their university language policy. For clarity it should be noted here that the apartheid system classified black people (those who did not overtly benefit from the racially segregated system) into African, mixed-race and Indian. These terms will be used not as an endorsement of the racist notion of difference but for the sake of context description.

A second group of participants was made up of thirteen, mostly older, mixed-race, Afrikaans-speaking teachers; nine female and four male, from one rural, primary township school hosting children from a mixed-race, poor community; this group will henceforth be named 'the rural teachers'. The rural teachers were also asked to write down the aspects they thought they had control over as teachers and, additionally, those aspects they reckoned they had no control over. This data was gathered in Afrikaans, the participants' home language.

The third group of participants comprised of thirty-one, mostly older, mixed-race, Afrikaans-speaking primary school teachers; sixteen female and fifteen male, who were delegates at a teachers' conference where I presented a paper on transformative autonomy; this group will be referred to as 'the conference delegates'. The conference delegates were asked to write down their opinions about the concept of transformative autonomy as presented. This set of data was also gathered in Afrikaans, the participants' home language.

All three groups of participants agreed to the ethical principle of voluntary participation in an anonymous fashion. Therefore the data was gathered in a trusted relationship of honest, voluntarily responses tendered to me in my different power roles as lecturer, researcher and conference presenter (Mertens 2014: 521). The thematic analysis as strategy to condense and categorize data (Maxwell and Chmiel 2014: 26) then also rests on the assumption that participants produced trustworthy data.

Main Findings Thematically Represented

The following themes arose from the different data sets. The twenty-six students indicated the following areas over which they think they have control in their tasks as teachers, in descending order of number of responses per theme: 1. curriculum aspects related to the task of teaching and learning; 2. learners'

discipline; 3. students' own attitudes towards teaching and learning; 4. learners' attitudes towards teaching and learning; 5. students' own professional conduct; and, to a lesser extent, community-related aspects such as parental involvement and home circumstances. A breakdown of the students' responses revealed a strong spread of responses regarding the first three themes, curriculum, learner discipline and own attitude, amongst the sixteen white, Afrikaans-using students. The ten African black English-using students' responses were mainly found in the first theme, curriculum.

The thirteen mixed-race, Afrikaans-speaking rural teachers' responses about aspects over which they thought they have control coalesced around the following main themes in descending order of number of responses per theme: 1. curriculum matters; 2. learner discipline; 3. sports coaching; 4. cooperation with colleagues. The first theme regarding curriculum matters was found in an overwhelming majority of responses. Other themes that also came up but with very few response numbers include: professionalism, relationships with learners, networking with role players outside of education, parental engagement.

The thirteen rural teachers furthermore provided responses regarding aspects over which they thought they have no control under the following themes in descending order of number of responses per theme: 1. parental involvement; 2. home and socio-economic conditions; 3. learner discipline and absenteeism. The following themes surfaced but with very low numbers of responses: district office of education, inclusive education implementation, resources for practical subjects, time lost to sport, school readiness, curriculum formulation.

The thirty-one mixed-race, Afrikaans-speaking conference delegates grappled with the concept of transformative autonomy and overwhelmingly displayed an understanding of the concept's main tenets of societal responsibility and control over professional conduct.

In the next subsection I discuss the implications of some of these findings.

Discussion

It can safely be speculated, in summary, that the three sets of participants have an intuitive understanding of autonomy. The students and the rural teachers' concept of autonomy cannot yet be termed transformative autonomy because they gave an over-concentration of responses concerning the professional duties of being a teacher and too few intuitive indicators of their awareness of societal transformation inherent in transformative autonomy. Again, it can safely be speculated that conference delegates were able to display the link between education and its role in societal transformation because they received a full conference presentation which unpacked transformative autonomy.

Looking at the racial patterns that were evident in the themes, namely that white participants had a more extensive range of themes in their responses than mixed-race and African participants, my speculation leads me to different contexts of teaching. I therefore suggest that the context of under-resourced schools and adequately resourced schools may have played a role in the immediate concerns that were uppermost in participants' thoughts. The black participants (African and mixed-race) are all teaching in under-resourced schools and the white participants teach in adequately resourced schools. Apart from the context of teaching it might just be possible that the different basic training regimes for the teachers may have differed in quality given the general age differential between black and white participants. As was the case under the racially segregated system of apartheid the most resources were allocated to whites and, in staggered measure, there were fewer resources for mixed-race people and even less for African blacks. This state of affairs had an impact on the quality of education provision for the different racial groups with whites receiving the best education and training, and blacks the least so. It then stands to reason that the basic training of teachers had an impact on the kind of education teachers are capable of delivering.

The argument, based on the empirical evidence of differences in distribution of responses by white and black participants, is then ventured that a combination of differences in basic training and current resourcing accounts for white participants' varied responses and black participants' singular response. Deepening the argument, I also suggest that the more difficult teaching conditions for black participants lead them to preserve their power position in favour of a teacher-focused notion of pedagogy which probably makes it easier for them to function professionally, and perhaps, culturally. The spectre of Fundamental Pedagogics is raised by this argument.

This form of pedagogy, which was taught as a philosophy of education at all colleges of education during apartheid (Robinson, Vergnani and Sayed 2002: 5), is criticized for then being responsible for confirming the prevailing racial-political order in South Africa (Higgs 1999: 122) and for creating a corps of docile teachers who did not learn to question authority (Kumar 2010: 8). The majority of black teachers in my study are of an age which makes them eligible for having studied Fundamental Pedagogics. Their strict focus on curriculum matters to the neglect of societal factors can possibly be ascribed to the kind of pedagogy which emphasizes teacher-controlled curriculum delivery.

Closer inspection of the curious finding from the rural teachers concerning learner discipline, described by them as both under control and not under control, can lead to an interpretation that the epistemological condition needs interrogation. Millei (2005: 129) argues that a discourse of control is at play

when conservative teachers speak about discipline. I connect this logic to my finding in the following manner. Where teachers regard knowledge as evolving and hardly fixed in content, the matter of discipline and control is not uppermost in their mind. However, where knowledge is regarded as received and fixed, the need for discipline and control grows. The finding of the rural teachers' and the black students' overly strong focus on curriculum as an area of control gives rise to my interpretation that guarded control over knowledge provides such teachers/guardians with a strong sense of professional control. Such an underdeveloped sense of the power-knowledge nexus leads me then to suggest that compliance-driven knowledge production and reproduction (as expected by policy) are weakening autonomy because such autonomy is too steeped in governmentality with the concomitant effect of easy frustration with discipline problems.

Conclusion

In conclusion I suggest that transformative autonomy should be about more than a posture of being in professional control. Transformative autonomy also has the condition of knowledge production, reproduction and dissemination in mind. If the knowledge work of teachers is done in the service of societal improvement, i.e. as a political project, it strengthens autonomy because of the explicit transformative aims. Under such an understanding of knowledge discipline, problems are regarded as a disruption of discursive arrangements that are in tension with the transformative aims of the epistemological labour. Weak forms of autonomy therefore aim to restore order according to rules.

These rules are not interrogated as expressions of discourses; therefore hegemonic discourses of control are not challenged (Millei 2005: 138). Weak autonomy, therefore, does not advance societal development.

With transformative autonomy the teacher can maintain an 'intellectual integrity' (Holligan 1999: 148) under which new forms of discursive arrangements become possible; power relations are troubled, positively so, and anti-governmentality challenges are brought to lazy compliance, complacency and destructive posturing. The task for South African higher education in the preparation of teachers is to inculcate this stronger form of autonomy: transformative autonomy.

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