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Teachers’ work: The tacit pedagogy of expert teachers in rural Malawi

Author: Christopher High
Institution: Linnaeus University
Address: Växjö, Sweden
Email: chris.high@lnu.se

Author: Alison Buckler
Institution: Open University
Address: Milton Keynes, UK
Email: alison.buckler@open.ac.uk
Abstract

The status of school teachers in much of rural Sub-Saharan Africa has a dual nature across many different countries. At the local level they are influential social actors; respectable people who are expected to provide a positive role model to their pupils and the wider local community. Within national civil service hierarchies, they are often treated as not very important; sometimes paid intermittently and frequently problematized as lacking in the capacity to deliver on ambitious education-led national development strategies.

In this paper we report on the results of a pilot study in rural Malawi, which sought to investigate the tacit knowledge and pedagogical skills of primary school teachers using participatory visual methods. A three week participatory video exercise with teachers from two schools provided the opportunity for a combination of participatory action research, participant-observation, semi-structured and photo-elicited interviews, and group reflection. The resulting data was analysed to understand how different methods and analytical techniques could combine to surface and valorise the teachers' knowledge.

Rather than a lack of skills and capacity, the data instead showed the extensive range of skills and personal characteristics involved in the teachers' practice. For example, cognitive mapping on a subset of the data showed that the concept of active learning operationalised independently at two schools was (i) consistent, (ii) informed sophisticated practice, and (iii) was richer than the more limited concept embedded in much external expert knowledge about teaching. The pilot suggests that a deeper understanding of rural teachers' tacit expertise could support improved education policies in Malawi and elsewhere.

Keywords
Teachers, rural schools, Malawi, participatory research, pedagogy

Introduction

At the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, the international community pledged to develop education systems which were more participatory and more responsive to local needs and interests by 2015 (UNESCO 2000). Such calls for participatory engagement with what Nemes (2014) terms the local heuristic systems have become commonplace within global governance since at least the UN’s 1992 Agenda 21 and indeed has much deeper roots within sustainable development (Satterthwaite, 2006) and the shifting notions of expertise that Fischer (2009) traces to early postwar period. However there is also growing concern that participatory rhetoric masks a new form of tyranny (Cooke & Kothari, 2002; Gaynor, 2014; Hickey & Mohan, 2004) or that at the least that there are substantial pathologies and risks in the way that the notion of working in a participatory way is carried out in practice.

In the case of education, studies from across the world consistently show that teachers rarely feel actively involved in or have a sense of ownership over policies and practices (Buckler 2015; UNESCO
2013/4a). Teachers are (belatedly) recognised as being central to the learning experiences and outcomes of children – particularly so in the ‘no child left behind’ narrative (Moon 2013). Yet the institutions, frameworks and contexts within which most teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa develop and practice as professionals reportedly limit rather than promote teacher voice, agency and input (Akyeampong et al 2012; Fertig 2012).

This paper reports on the findings from a methodological pilot, working with a group of teachers employed in rural schools in Malawi. The study sought to investigate the tacit knowledge and pedagogical skills of rural teachers using participatory video methodology; by which we mean the process of making films with people instead of about them (High, Singh, Petheram, & Nemes, 2012). This allows a style of co-investigation in which foregrounds participants’ own collective sense making of their experience, and on the way produces a fertile ground for encounters between participants’ and researchers’ understandings of the world. These multiple layers of interpretation can help to bring participants’ voices closer to policy making processes in ways that are experienced as authentic. The idea was to explore the opportunities inherent in this approach for incorporating implicit understandings of teaching practice in research and ultimately exploring the consequences for policy and practice relating to education in developing countries.

The project was carried out in partnership between researchers at the Open University in the UK, a UK-based social enterprise media company (Catcher Media) and a national Malawian NGO, DAPP Malawi, which runs four colleges of education in Malawi and are committed to creating ‘a different kind of teacher’; educators who are agents of change in rural communities with the vision and ability to improve learning and development outcomes, and to address social justice within their communities. A group of 6 teachers from two primary schools were engaged with the pilot that was based just outside Blantyre in Malawi. The group consisted of teachers who had graduated from both DAPP colleges and the mainstream, government-run college system.

In this paper we focus on one aspect of the data that arose from the project, teachers’ understanding of pedagogy. In particular we examine the notion of ‘active learning’, an important concept in the ongoing work to support and improve teaching practice in Malawi and elsewhere (Ginsburg, 2010; Mizrachi, Padilla, & Susuwele-Banda, 2010; Mtika & Gates, 2010). Active learning is a synonym for participatory or child-centred learning, and is used as a shorthand to indicate a pedagogic approach that encourages student discussion and sense-making, as well as practices such as TALULAR (Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources). Active learning is used as a lens to interrogate the relationship between teachers’ embedded knowledge and how it relates to global discourses on education and pedagogy.

Background

Since the institutionalisation of free basic education in 1994, national policy in Malawi places basic education at the heart of development strategy, conceiving education as one of the essential priority areas to support sustainable development (MFDIP, 2011) a “...catalyst for socio-economic development and industrial growth” (MEST, 2008). A focus on teachers is emphasised in the post-2015 development agenda which explicitly acknowledges the link between quality teaching and poverty reduction (HLP 2014; World Bank 2011). Yet Malawi has one of the world’s most dramatic
teacher shortages representing 2 percent of the global figure. This has led to enormous class sizes, especially in the early years of primary school: on average there is one teacher for every class of 130 Class one pupils. Large class sizes are a contributing factor in the country’s low literacy levels: after four years in school 70 percent of pupils remain illiterate. After six years in school, 30 percent of pupils remain illiterate. Despite Government attempts to increase the number of teachers (for example working with USAID to develop a distance learning teacher qualification and working with DAPP Malawi to build and support alternative college programmes), teacher growth remains at 1 percent per year. To achieve the targets of Universal Primary Education, Malawi would need five consecutive years of 15 percent growth in the teaching profession (UNESCO 2013/4b).

The difficulties are sharpest in the case of rural schools, which are often invisible in large-scale national statistics. UNESCO’s ISCED questionnaires, for example, which provide the information for their Institute of Statistics database, do not distinguish between rural and urban data, and where rural teaching is considered in the wider academic, policy and practitioner literature there is a tendency to assume that ‘rural’ is synonymous with deprivation and negative experiences. In much teacher education policy and curricula, the ‘rural’ is depicted as a homogenous place to be endured, not enjoyed; there is little to suggest that rural schools might be positive sites of learning for pupils or positive sites of professional fulfilment for teachers (Buckler 2011; 2015). Secondly, rural teachers are often caught between local and national perceptions of their work; at the local level they are often highly valued and respected members of communities. At the national level they are either held to unattainable standards as moral, behavioural and scholarly exemplars, or repeatedly held up for failing to meet these standards, lacking commitment to the profession and, therefore, commitment to national goals (Buckler 2015). On top of that, the ‘empirical convenience’ (Buckler 2015:24) of relying what is easy to measure works to perpetuate the negative discourse around rural schools. While there is much to be found in the literature about rural teaching environments, there is very little written about teachers’ perceptions of how these environments impact on their teaching and learning (Buckler 2011).

The suggestion that rural areas present exacerbated and additional challenges rendering rural schools undesirable for teachers is reproduced at policy level: in Malawi and Zambia forced deployment to rural and remote schools has been used to discipline teachers found guilty of malpractice (VSO, 2006). In many countries a period of rural teaching experience is a condition of funded training or a probationary process which must be passed in order to apply for teaching jobs elsewhere (Kaunde, 2008). Many countries offer a hardship allowance for teachers working in rural schools. In Malawi this can increase a newly qualified teacher’s salary by a quarter. But with salaries crippling low to start with (in 2008 a teacher in Malawi earned $4 per day) even with the allowance, teachers struggle to pay bills and support families (UNESCO 2013/4b).

Despite rapid urbanisation in Sub-Saharan Africa, well over half of the region’s population still live in rural areas (World Bank 2016). Malawi is one of the most rural countries in the region, with only 10 percent of people living in towns and cities. In Malawi, most teachers will teach in a rural school for most of their career. The result is that rural schools in particular require more teachers who have the skills not only to teach, but proactively mitigate rural development challenges which logistically and cognitively work against children meeting desired learning outcomes. Some organisations – working internationally across the region (e.g. Bridge Academies) - have promoted a ‘teacher-proof’ approach based on pedagogically fixed activities which enable ‘even the minimally trained teacher to do a reasonable job’ in any given context (Alexander 2015:254). Others, such as DAPP, place teacher
agency, social justice and context (particularly the rural context) at the centre of the programme. DAPP is committed to creating ‘another kind of teacher’, a generation of highly skilled educators who are trained to become agents of change in rural communities. For example, a recent study found that 80 percent of DAPP graduates had gained experience in providing remedial support to students compared to 14 percent of graduates from the Government system (UNESCO 2013/4b).

Theoretical framework

In this research we were interested in the social context in which teaching (and learning) happen, as revealed by Wenger’s (1998) work on communities of practice. The core of his work is on the way that the social context of practice shapes identity and the understandings and skill activities of individuals within that identity. However Wenger is also interested in the relationships between communities of practice; which links to Bredo’s constructivist focus on the individual-society duality (Bredo 1999). While there is much to be found in the literature about rural teaching environments, there is very little written about teachers’ perceptions of how these environments impact on their teaching and learning (Buckler 2011). The empirical and theoretical framework within which we situate this project therefore helps to address the much-neglected gap between literature on international education systems, the pedagogy, environment, learning cultures and language use which are embedded in these systems and the learning outcomes (intended and actual, for children and teachers) resulting from participation in them (Alexander 2015; Barrett 2011; Tikly 2015).

If we are interested in how teaching practice can enable improved learning outcomes, then we also need to consider how teachers learn to teach. This paper therefore draws on Wenger’s (1998) articulations about learning and practice, which links learning and participation in a community based on shared practice. We suggest that learning to teach can also be seen in this way: the social setting of teaching influences the identity and practice of teachers. In other words, the way that teachers develop as teachers shapes and is shaped through their relationships within the learning environment (Lave and Wenger 1991; Murphy and Wolfenden 2013). The possibilities for being changed and for making change are influence both by individuals’ past learning and existing knowledge, and through ongoing shared engagement within the community (Wenger 1998). In particular, one might expect that the pedagogy at the centre of rural teachers’ practice is rooted in the places where they practice and learn about practice, their classrooms, staffrooms, and discussions with colleagues, and in their relations with the surrounding constellation of social relationships. This is especially true of the norms and values of local society – their learning as teachers is not separable from the social life they lead in a teaching and learning community. While many modes of teacher education in Sub-Saharan Africa separate the learning and the practice (i.e. predominantly through a college programme with limited exposure to school and classroom environments (Moon2013), DAPP attempt to embed learning in these environments, throughout the programme.

Through this pilot we were especially interested in this embedded knowledge. Through participatory video we hoped to better understand the relationship between global discourses on education and pedagogy and the teaching and learning which the teachers practised, engaged with and participated in in their schools – and indeed understand if there was a relationship between these global and local agendas at all. In order to track teachers’ understandings of their own practice we
have operationalised one of Wenger’s concepts - shared repertoire. This refers to a set of communal resources, the result of ongoing reification within the community, whose literal and symbolic meaning can be mobilised to address the challenges of practice. These can be formal procedures, informal institutions and heuristics, shared jokes or commonly held understandings. The shared repertoire is held between teachers, and learning it is part of becoming a teacher. While continuing professional development and capacity building can influence the shape of the shared repertoire through what Wenger calls boundary encounters, one would expect the dominant influence for important aspects of practice to be localised. In addition the meaning imbued on reified concepts can well change as they translate as boundary objects from one community of practice (eg international pedagogical experts) to another (rural teachers). The question then is: how do they relate to one another in practice?

Methodology

The study took place over three weeks in the rural areas surrounding Blantyre in Southern Malawi. Two rural schools were selected in which DAPP trained teachers work and which are supported by the NGO. Three teachers from each school were invited to take part in the project, in each case, the head teacher, a teacher who had attended a DAPP teacher training college for pre-service training and a teacher who had qualified at one of the state-run teacher training colleges. The project then proceeded through a series of workshops, in which the aim was to engage the teachers in a new enterprise, that of film-making through participatory video (PV).

PV has a long history in community development practice and education settings is consider particularly suitable for the scope it gives participants to express their own stories (Mitchell, deLange, & Milne, 2012). This can be for internal viewing by a cognate audience with a close identity, for external consumption by heterogeneous actors from other scales of governance or situation, or hybrid forms that seek to work for both. The key is that the literacies involved in expressing experience well to an audience are more accessible to many people because the models and genres used (documentaries, dramas, adverts, game shows and news stories) are part of their lived experience (High, 2010). Although the literature on PV sometimes expresses reservations about the power relations involved or the skills and capacities required for skilful and appropriate facilitation, it also expresses the excitement and energy that a satisfying PV process generates. It represents a fruitful context for the enthusiasm that Ison & Russel (Ison & Russell, 2000) distinguish as the basis for successful transdisciplinary work that engages researchers and lay participants, mobilising their expertise and intellectual resources.

The workshop process included an introduction, visits to both schools on the part of the whole group of participants, and a set of exercises designed to stimulate visual and narrative imagination and to demonstrate to participants some of the opportunities and modalities of film-making. This culminated in a script-writing and production planning workshop in which a film concept was developed by the team. It was subsequently filmed by the participants in the schools and during the workshops. Two editing workshops gave them creative control over the content and narrative of the final film “We are teachers” (Liwonder et al., 2015), while the technical aspects of the edit were managed by Rick Goldsmith of Catcher Media. This division of responsibilities mirrors traditional roles of director (participants) and editor (facilitator) in standard film-making. It is not the only way
of dealing with the technical challenges of the editing process, which is often furthest from participants own experiences, but it allows for shared authorship which creates space for participants to “...critically reflect upon their lives on their own, without imposing researchers’ views or obstructing participants’ reflexivity with technical barriers that may accompany video production” (Yang, 2012, p. 104).

Following common practice, the teachers were involved in the logging the different shots and assembling a rough outline of the sequence of the edit on a paper timeline. This was accompanied by demonstrations and opportunities to try out editing, in order to allow the teachers an opportunity to experientially engage with the choices made in the editing process. A rough edit and then a fine edit were played to the teachers for comment and correction, before a final cut was produced. This was shown to local audiences at both schools, including the school pupils, other teachers, families and friends, as well as local officials, NGO workers and journalists. A subsequent showing in London brought in a different audience: education researchers, activists and policymakers, as well as friends and families of the research team.

One of the key aims of the pilot project was to catalogue the different kinds of research data that could be generated within and around the PV process. Thus many of the activities in the film-making workshops and the products they produced were assessed to see what types of knowledge they could produce. Treating the film interviews as participatory action research interviews, for example, or analysing scripting and editing discussions amongst the crew, data forms in which the fluid wall (Shrum, Duque, & Brown, 2005) between on-screen and behind-the-scenes activity allows for co-production of knowledge. In addition, this was accompanied by more traditional and less participatory research methods: participant observation on the part of the facilitation team, qualitative semi-structured interviews, including photo-elicited interviewing (cf Rose, 2007), and group interviews. Research ethics and media ethics protocols were established ahead of time, and formal ethical review undertaken at the project proposal stage. This included explicit informed consent for the teachers participation in the project and portrayal in creative commons media – an important issue where research norms favour anonymity unless waived, and media norms favour explicit acknowledgement of contributions, unless waived.

As a pilot the point was to establish in principle what kinds of data generation was possible in field conditions, and so not all of this data was analysed. However two areas were pursued in more detail through interviews – reflections on the process by the participants, and interviews that focussed on the concept of ‘active learning’. The latter strand emerged as a theme during the PV process, and was considered interesting because it highlighted a divergence between teachers’ tacit understandings of core aspects of their practice embedded in their shared repertoire, and a core notion in national efforts to reform teaching practice. As a result one of the on-camera interviews, and two parallel interviews with teachers from different schools were analysed using cognitive mapping (Eden, 1988) to unpack the causal claims underlying the concept from the teachers’ perspective.

**Findings and analysis**

The first interview took place on camera and was planned as part of the script to introduce active learning as an important part of the teachers’ approach. In figure 1 below, one can see some of the
causal connections which were mapped within the interview. An arrow suggests that the concept at the root of the arrow gives rise to, causes or enables the concept at the head of the arrow. Each concept or causal connection is explicitly linked to a statement in the interview. So for example, the link from “Joint learning in the classroom” to “Active learning” is based on a statement in the interview: “Active learning .... is just a process... whereby a teacher can.... [instigate?/facilitate?] joint learning .. in the classroom”.

On the right side of figure 1, the core relationships in the notion of active learning that has been introduced from international progressive teaching practice are quite clear. The teacher takes a role stimulating learning amongst peers, and then provides feedback on the results. It engages learners as actors in the construction of their knowledge, with responsibility for discovery as well as absorption, and it therefore stands in opposition to more didactic approaches which favour the transmissions of facts.

It was the left hand side of the diagram that was more interesting, and which caused considerable discussion on the part of the research team – in particular whether the teacher was confusing the active element in active learning with the notion of activity (for example sports) and how those related to learning. A line of questioning about the relationship between games and active learning gave rise to statements like: “So games are very important, and if there was...if there is a football match played by learners over the weekend.... So in that way as teachers we experience a greater number of attendees in the classroom. So even those learners who don’t like school attend the classes.” The dilemma as facilitators was whether including this apparent confusion of different meanings of the word active was a fair portrayal of teachers’ knowledge. In a medium where rural teachers were assembling a narrative to relate their understandings for both local and international audiences, would it be necessary to discuss with the film-making team a potential hostage to fortune in their script which could reinforce stereotypes of rural teachers as second rate an uninformed?

Figure 1: Cognitive map of active learning from a teacher’s perspective
In the event we decided to follow up on this aspect, especially as cross-talk between the interviewer (one of the other teachers) and the interviewee indicated mutual understanding around the issues, as well as the inclusion of the line of questioning in the script. Informal discussions in the workshops reinforced this notion – somehow the idea of the benefits of physical activity related to the shared repertoire around the notion of active learning as a pedagogical tool within teachers’ practice.

Two subsequent interviews in the parallel research stream explored these connections, using photo-elicitation to engage in a reflective discussion. One interview with the teacher who had originally made the connections on camera, and another with one of the teachers from the other school. These were again analysed using cognitive mapping, and as there were a number of overlaps and no contradictions, the results were combined into a single cognitive map, which is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Collated cognitive map of two teachers’ understanding of active learning

The composite representation of teachers’ understanding of active learning reveals a rich and interconnected set of ideas and practices. As well as the mainstream, international pedagogic methodology of active learning in the classroom, the teachers indicated connects to a diversity of other factors, such as the school feeding programme that provides all attending children with a bowl of porridge each day, or the direct and indirect consequences of a supportive family to enable active learning. There was also mention of the consequences of active learning in addition to the causes: It produces learners that are happy and walk with confidence.
Although it is possible that the interviews and the analytical technique overemphasises the connections between all these factors, we are happy that they suggest a consistency in the understanding portrayed here, enough to qualify as shared repertoire that is mobilised in the practice of being a rural teacher. The overlaps between two teachers from schools that have little to do with one another on the day to day level, the supporting evidence that these ideas helped to shape the script, and cross-checking and triangulation against participant observation and informal discussions suggest that an interpretation of sophistication rather than a deficit in understanding should at least be considered.

It may well be that the label ‘active learning’ has come to encompass a wider category of child-centred learning – a connection that is evident in some of the literature (Mtika & Gates, 2010). However, the important point there is that the richness of the concept as an operationalised element of teaching practice surpasses the more limited nature of the concept on which capacity building and training builds. The teachers have co-opted the term and their practice incorporates a more holistic and appropriate understanding of how to foster active learning.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates a difference between an important element of teaching as it is understood and practiced in rural schools, and a conceptual underpinning of efforts to improve and enhance teaching practice in a developing country. As such it provides a black swan case study (sensu Flyvbjerg, 2006) that demonstrates that local understandings can be more complex and textured than expected from the outside, and more so than the transferable ideas that underpin efforts to improve the learning outcomes produced in schools. They are by their nature implicit rather than explicit and so not necessarily immediately apparent to non-members of the community of practice in which they are embedded. It does not mean that such understandings are always more complex or appropriate, but it at least motivates an enquiry into the practical significance of such divergence.

The importance of surfacing, valorising and reflecting on locally held knowledge in development is nothing new and has been a staple of attempts to foster more participatory forms development practice (Chambers, 1997; Cornwall, 2006; Swantz, 2008). Indeed it’s an important question why it is still worth thinking and writing about in 2017. Yet, time and time again it is reported that teachers’ voices are ignored in education policy making – most recently in the 2014 EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2014) - even when there are legal frameworks in place to incorporate their input (VSO, 2011). Rarely are teachers’ voices featured on the same page as the policies that govern their work and, at the analytical level, ‘too little space is given for reflection on everyday practice and how this can help with reviewing processes and structures’ (Unterhalter, 2013).

The pilot project demonstrates three truisms within the participatory literature. Firstly that participatory sense making based on mutual engagement between different communities of practice (researchers, teachers and NGO workers in this case) through engaging narrative and visual based methodologies is a fertile ground for surfacing novel hybrid understandings and representations. Secondly, that time for engagement and the building of trust between different actors is central to this. Thirdly the data indicates the importance of the socially embedded nature of the teachers’ understanding. Their practice as teachers draws on their relationship to the surrounding community
and it is not unsurprising that this relationship is in itself reflected in their understanding of that practice.

The project therefore suggest that Eade’s (1997) exposition of a people-centred vision for capacity building is still relevant, and also that it is not straight-forward. Our team included substantial research and operational expertise as well as an explicit commitment to being open to the expertise of teachers as teachers. Even so we flirted with the trap of easy judgements and a deficit model in relation to one of those experts. Are there more sophisticated ways of working with hybrid knowledge that can inform not only better research, but better policy and practice? Is there more to say than “more time is needed in projects?”

On reflection, we believe that it’s not only a question of more time and openness, but also how that time is used. The teachers in their feedback to us pointed to the importance of language in the workshops, of their anxieties about communicating with Europeans in English, even though it is a language they use in the classroom. Critically, they also pointed out that it is not often the language of the staffroom. Trudgen (2000) has cogently argued in a different context (health amongst aboriginal people in Australia) that just because there is some shared language between members of different cultural communities, does not mean that everything is mutually intelligible. He points to the important work of building lexicons and mutual understandings at the junctions of diverse communities, where misunderstanding can perpetuate undesirable outcomes for decades in ways that do make sense to either side.

We therefore suggest an engagement with the boundaries between communities of practice in terms of both knowledge and practice. A practical bricolage of different ways of understanding the world that could support improved education policies in Malawi and elsewhere through a true spirit of partnership and an understanding of the ground realities of teachers as expert practitioners and more sophisticated and engaging ways of working with hybrid knowledge.

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