

# Conceptualising the setting up of a professional learning community for teachers' pedagogical learning

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the conceptual bases that have informed the establishment and functioning of a professional learning community (PLC) that involves a university lecturer and a tutor and a number of practising teachers. The article is a discussion of the intellectual approaches on which the PLC has been founded. The starting assumption is that teachers' pedagogical learning requires a supportive and deliberative set of conversations about the intellectual terms and pedagogical capacitation needed for such change. The authors argue that PLCs are able to provide the reflexive dialogical space, based on action research approaches, for engaging in pedagogical learning. Their ongoing PLC is not primarily interested in results-orientated teaching outcomes, but favours an experimental, messy and recursive conversation that focuses on improving teachers' classroom teaching. The article considers the terms upon which a social justice oriented approach to pedagogical learning and adaptation might be pursued in a PLC. Inspired by the lenses of the theorist, Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), they offer a view of PLCs as a 'habitus engagement', to describe the ways in which their dialogical processing in the PLC might engender pedagogies that induct students into subject knowledge by working with students' lifeworld contexts and knowledges. They develop an argument for the use of a Funds of Knowledge approach as a way of engaging students meaningfully in their learning. The PLC is conceptualised as a safe dialogical space where the participating teachers are able to develop the conceptual capacity and intellectual skills to develop such a social justice approach to their classroom pedagogy.

**Keywords:** professional learning community, pedagogy, social justice, action – reflection, habitus engagement, funds of knowledge

## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the conceptual bases on which a professional learning community (PLC) has been set up involving a university lecturer, a tutor, and practising teachers who are studying towards a Bachelor of Education (BEd) Honours degree at Stellenbosch University. The PLC is intended to generate pedagogical

learning and adaptation by these teachers to inform their school teaching. The PLC emerged out of a module called Education and Society that focuses, among others, on the conceptual parameters of pedagogical learning in complex educational contexts (see Stellenbosch University 2013). The teachers are participating voluntarily in the PLC and most of the conceptual approaches for setting up and running this PLC were vigorously engaged with during class time of the BEd Honours module. The organising framing of the honours module and the PLC revolves around a deliberative encounter with notions of social justice to inform teachers' active pedagogical engagement and empowerment. The PLC has acquired a life of its own since the BEd Honours class came to an end. Setting up the PLC started from the assumption that such a social justice informed pedagogical perspective requires important intellectual work, in addition to engaged professional processes and practices that capacitate teachers to teach with such an orientation. A recent government teacher development document (see DoE 2011) underscores the importance of PLCs in the generation of pedagogical capacity among teachers although there is currently very little rigorous activity among teachers in this regard.

The article is a conceptual consideration of the ways in which we approached setting up and running the PLC. The key conceptual premise that we explore in the article is that teachers' pedagogical practices are exceptionally difficult to shift, despite the optimism of policy pronouncements. Additionally, providing teachers with a pedagogical justice platform intended to explicitly leverage greater responsiveness to the social transformative objectives of society and introduces a layer of complexity in addition to, or as part of, the implementation of the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum (DoBE 2014). We believe, though, that such complexity is not an excuse for not establishing practices that engage teachers in their pedagogical adaptation as a way of getting them to teach more inclusively in South Africa's diverse classrooms.

We conceptualised the PLC as a vehicle for exploring the participating teachers' pedagogical orientations and practices with a view to understanding how change may be mediated within their pedagogical habitus. As a form of 'habitus engagement' it is our intent to actively engage with firmly established teacher identities, educational practices and classroom pedagogical processes. Over time, teachers' pedagogical dispositions to teaching acquire a depth of complexity that is difficult to shift. Nonetheless, professional and pedagogical learning and adaptation are regarded as possible in light of vigorous engagement processes, the type of which the PLC is intended to facilitate.

Firstly, the article provides a conceptual location for the formation of the PLC. Secondly, it moves on to key conceptual considerations of setting up a PLC, and thirdly, we discuss the actual PLC activity by which it was set up. Our main intention with the article is to provide a conceptual consideration of our thinking and doing in relation to setting up the PLC in line with the need to infuse the teachers' pedagogy with social justice commitments, on the one hand, and providing an engaging

platform to generate pedagogical practices that recognise and include a diversity of learners in their classroom teaching, on the other.

## **TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL LOCATION FOR PLC WORK**

Since 1994, South African schooling has witnessed a number of curriculum reforms intended to redress the inequalities and injustices caused by apartheid education. Following a number of curriculum policy reforms during the post-apartheid period, the new CAPS curriculum (see DoBE 2014) was finalised and implemented from March 2011. According to Fataar (2012, 58), CAPS authorises a tightly scripted curriculum that can be considered 'teacher-proof' in its approach to implementation. Broadly in line with this reading, we suggest that the CAPS curriculum has tended to reduce teaching to a scripted pedagogy that expects teachers to teach to the test in a climate of standardised systemic testing intended to improve the quality of education in schools. System-wide tests written in grades 3, 6 and 9 (see DoBE 2013) and the National School Certificate (NSC) written in Grade 12 are an attempt to infuse regimes of performance accountability into the operations of schools across the country. Many schools have become focused on producing measurable outputs and performances, with constant pressure on teachers to improve on these outputs. This often works in ways that discourage authentic and purposeful pedagogical processes in schools.

Ball (2003, 222) explains that teachers in such a situation are no longer encouraged to 'give an account of themselves in terms of [their] relationship to the [pedagogical] meaningfulness of what they do' other than that officially sanctioned through policy. Instead policy constraints narrowly circumscribe the purposes of schooling within a climate of teaching to the test, which in turn foreclose on broader process orientated commitments to educational and democratic transformational goals. The current curriculum reform approach leaves teachers with little conceptual space to meaningfully engage students in lifeworld or socially generated knowledges that will engage and stimulate students within the schools (Fataar 2012, 58). Leveraged via PLC activity, we suggest that our pedagogical commitments require a pedagogic focus and approach to impact student learning that augments the narrow curriculum orientations implicit in the CAPS curriculum. To this end, we start from the view that teachers and their pedagogies are the one factor that can contribute the most significantly to improving student achievement (Coleman et al 1966) as they are key to 'changing the practices and relations that directly shape learning' (Zipin and Hattam 2007, 5).

We (the tutor and lecturer on the course in consultation with the students) conceptualised and set out to establish a professional community of teachers in light of the demands and challenges of the newly implemented CAPS curriculum, and motivated by a desire to develop a space for professional learning to expand the participating teachers' pedagogical repertoires. The teachers from the BEd Honours class module on Education and Society were invited to embark on a voluntary

action research journey that would focus on their classroom pedagogies and student relationships rather than the measurable outputs of their students. The focus of the PLC, therefore, includes an opportunity for the teachers to analyse their teaching practices and involve themselves in critical reflexivity about their pedagogies; to deepen their own learning; to adapt their pedagogies; and to shift their pedagogical habitus to include a socially just orientation in their pedagogical practices.

We understand a PLC as a collaborative, collegial space where professionals use an inquiry-based approach to address daily teaching practices as they emerge within specific school contexts. Such a collaborative inquiry allows teachers to 'reflect on practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes' (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006 in Servage 2008, 63). We favour a collaborative inquiry approach which we suggest 'has the potential to create deep conceptual change and dramatic changes in practice. It includes ... ongoing and challenging engagement with new ideas, rethinking existing beliefs, unlearning past habits and practices, and going through the process of learning how to do things in (sometimes dramatic) new ways' (Katz and Earl 2010, 46). The PLC within this collaborative space engages participants in conversation about their pedagogic learning and lays the foundation for possible shifts in their pedagogic habitus. Conversations within the PLC are, therefore, based on mutuality, trust and respect. This, we believe, will create a safe space that engages teachers as they expose their implicitly held beliefs and practices to scrutiny and debate. Due to the level of implied risk of teachers exposing their teaching styles to critical scrutiny, the PLC emphasises the need to create a respectful and enabling dialogical atmosphere where honest engagement and reflection are encouraged, as well offering an opportunity for the teachers to talk about their uncertainties and conceptual weaknesses; to admit their mistakes; and to expose their vulnerabilities. Within this dialogical space the PLC participants are given a voice in generating possible imagined responses to the problems they encounter during their classroom practices.

Fundamental to the success of a PLC is a clearly formulated and communicated focus that differentiates among the various needs and choices of the individuals involved in the group. An engaging focus challenges teachers to 'reconceptualise, unlearn, or make changes to existing practices and structures, legitimating the change process by making the status quo more difficult to protect' (Timperley 2004 in Katz and Earl 2010, 29). We envisaged the focus of the PLC to be problem-based within a socially just pedagogical orientation. The participants of the PLC have been invited to identify and share pedagogical problems that they are faced with in their classroom setting, opening these up for critique and conversation. The emphasis on pedagogical change underscores the PLC as a conversation that unpacks these problems and focuses on the opportunity to infuse a more socially just pedagogical approach to the problems under discussion.

Our PLC follows an action research approach that involves cycles of planning, implementation, observation and reflection and invites teachers to participate

in reflective recursive conversations that move between abstract pedagogical imaginaries and concrete implementation in the classroom. The PLC has thus far been functioning as a space of becoming, where teachers are conceptually and pragmatically engaging with a particular problem, while their classroom teaching serves as the locus for the implementation of their pedagogic adaptations. The classroom is the locus where the pedagogical adaptations are concretised. The PLC conversation, therefore, moves from the abstract to the concrete, cycling back to the abstract through the action research reflective process, bringing back into the PLC a new round of reflective conversation, planning and action. In this way the conversation unlocks the pedagogic imagination of possibilities and allows for the continual adaptation of pedagogical practices.

Teachers who engage in reflective practices are better able to respond to contextual circumstances in their teaching and in so doing refine their teaching practice (Daniel, Auhl and Hastings 2013, 159). Such practices support the continuous development of an effective pedagogy in response to the changing field of education, specifically as found in the South African schooling system. As teachers engage in critical reflection and conversation, a community of practice (CoP) is formed. This CoP serves as way of providing a 'common conceptual framework for action' (Bain, Lancaster and Zundans 2009, 336), which for our PLC involves deliberative encounters with the notions of a socially just orientation that will inform the teachers' pedagogical engagement. Teacher learning that takes place through a CoP involves active participation and engagement within a community of teachers. Wenger (1999) suggests that the reflexive nature of the CoPs would likely lead to the construction of attenuated and adaptive teacher identities that are better able to connect to the imperatives associated with productive teacher learning. It is thus learning in community that the PLC is intended to achieve.

Teachers' identities are defined by their personal experiences and are affected by external (policy) and internal (organisational) control. Beliefs and values about their role as a teacher, and the type of teacher they aspire to be within the political, social, institutional and personal circumstances within which they find themselves, all have an affect on their identity as a teacher (Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons 2006, 610). Spillane (2000) defines teachers' identities as the way in which teachers make sense of themselves, their knowledge and beliefs, 'dispositions, interests ... and orientation towards work and change'. Teachers' identities also encompass 'the way teachers feel about themselves professionally, emotionally and politically given the conditions of their work' (Jansen 2001, 242). New experiences influence and lead to the modification and formation of new belief systems for teachers (or a shift in their pedagogical habitus) and it is at the intersection of these beliefs and experiences that teachers make professional instructional decisions and open themselves up to new pedagogic possibilities (Opfer and Pedder 2011, 387). Teacher professional identities can, therefore, be considered to be 'complex and dynamic constructions, never fully or finally achieved but continually re-achieved and re-defined' (Ovsienko and Zipin 2007, 3).

## **WORKING WITH BOURDIEU: THE PLC'S CONCEPTUALISATION OF PEDAGOGICAL CHANGE**

We draw on theoretical resources offered by Pierre Bourdieu, especially his concepts habitus, cultural capital and field in order to conceptualise pedagogical adaptation and change among the teachers in the PLC. Bourdieu (1984, 101) states that the relationship between these concepts is enmeshed and cannot be separated one from the other as they interact and function together within society in complex ways. Habitus functions below consciousness and structures, classifying and categorising the world in which people live through a system of dispositions, internalised principles and values that generate, organise and shape their decisions, actions and thoughts. Although people's habitus is adaptive over time, their primary conditioning from early childhood, socialised perceptions, belief systems and conditioned behaviour, remain dominant (Maton 2008, 59). Habitus also incorporates the structures of the world or 'a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world' (Bourdieu 1998, 81).

It is people's habitus that acts as the strongest and most durable mechanism that internalises the external social world and shapes their sense of their place in the world, and what they are or are not capable of achieving. People's choices, therefore, are shaped by their habitus and, although these choices might seem instinctive and autonomous, they are made based on people's past experience, present circumstances and dispositions embodied in their individual habitus. As the product of social conditionings, the habitus is not static but is permeable and can be 'endlessly transformed, either in a direction that reinforces it, when embodied structures of expectation encounter structures of objective chances in harmony with these expectations, or in a direction that transforms it' (Bourdieu 1990, 116). The habitus, therefore, responds to present circumstances which it internalises and adds as another layer to the early socialisations already formed within the habitus (Reay 2004, 434), thus it has the potential for change or transformation.

We conceive of our PLC work as having the potential to engage teachers in an orientation to learning that can serve as an impetus for change or shift in their pedagogical habitus. Teachers' decisions and actions are affected by their knowledge of themselves, their interpretation of themselves as teachers, as well as their experience as learners of knowledge. There is, therefore, an interplay between the knowledge, identity and practices of teachers. Critical reflection within a PLC has the potential to build on the idea of 'knowledge-of-practice' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999), which involves a deliberate construction of knowledge as teachers draw on both outside experts and their own inquiry into their daily practice. This construction of knowledge in turn holds the potential to transform or shift their pedagogical habitus. Brodie (2013, 7) states that 'in order to truly shift practice in ways that support learner improvement, teachers must be willing to challenge their own practice and give up long-held beliefs if these are seen to not be working'. A key element, therefore, to shifting one's professional identity or pedagogical habitus, is having a disposition



for ongoing learning to adapt one's pedagogy to meet changes in education that suit specific contexts. At the core, therefore, of the professional culture in schools, to enable this shift in the teacher's pedagogical habitus, must be an engagement with the knowledge, conceptual and skills base that informs the teacher's work. This, we suggest, has to be accompanied by a critical reflexive stance by teachers with regard to their pedagogical practices within specific school contexts.

Drawing on Bourdieu, we argue that it is one's individual habitus that develops a 'feel for the game' in relation to the 'fields of play' in which the habitus operates. A field is the social space within which interactions, transactions and events occur at a specific time and location (Thomson 2008, 67). The nature of the field defines the situation for its occupants (Maton 2008, 52) and a field can encompass subfields. We suggest that these fields for the group of teachers involved in the PLC, include their school sites, the BEd Honours class within the university site and the PLC site where the teachers' CoP is taking place. Each of these fields is a structured space that is organised around an accumulation of specific capital or combinations of capital. For Bourdieu (1990), the logic of practice is generated through the interaction of habitus, cultural capital and field and it is the concept of field that gives habitus its dynamic quality. '[H]abitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy' (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989, 44).

For the participants of the PLC, these three fields (school, university and BEd Honours programme) are interlinked and each impacts on the other. The BEd Honours site made available the necessary and important intellectual work that provided the conceptual framework to stimulate the initial pedagogical learning for the teachers, motivating them to question and probe their own professional habitus and inquire into a socially just orientation in their pedagogies at their school site. It was through problematising and capacitating their own reflexivity that a praxis involving an action research approach within a PLC site, was conceptualised.

Zipin and Hattam (2007, 9) state that '[a]ction research is crucially about reflexivity: about theory-in-practice aimed at changing social practices and relations, provoking reflection on how well the change effort is working, followed by rethinking/re-practicing'. Action research, therefore, has the potential to improve and change the teachers' practices, approaches or attitudes and allows them to co-construct knowledge and negotiate their identities, their pedagogical habitus, while researching their own practices. Thus, an ethical commitment and pedagogically just orientation, coupled with a methodological orientation that includes developing theory-in-practice that aims to problematise teachers' theory and practice in their classroom contexts (Zipin and Hattam 2007, 9), allows the teachers to take full ownership of their own habitus engagement and professional and pedagogical learning. In response, therefore, to the numerous curriculum changes in the South African context, action research can be used to critically question the status quo and, through a reflective action research cycle, consider ways to implement improvements as well as generate and test the teachers' theories regarding the students' learning on

a practical level (McNiff and Whitehead 2003, 34) as they find solutions to transform their pedagogies.

Through interaction within the PLC there is potential to permeate and shift the pedagogical habitus of the teachers to adapt their primary perceptions and belief systems that have been internalised and structured through socialisation within their particular 'fields of play'. Through the workings of habitus, practice (teacher agency) is linked with capital and field (structure) (Reay 2004, 432). Habitus thus becomes active in relation to a field and 'the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field' (Bourdieu 1990, 116). Thus, the PLC is conceptualised in such a way that it has to contend with the 'field' effects of the teachers' practiced-based professional identities (Fataar 2013, 119). Teachers' educational practices at their school sites or 'fields' involve their own structures, rules and thinking, thus their identities as teachers, their 'habitus' within their fields, will affect the manner in which they relate and engage within the learning opportunity afforded them through the PLC. Members of the PLC are having to negotiate the structures and discourses of each of their professional 'field' sites as they navigate the learning and reflective process within the PLC. The PLC process thus works 'within the possibilities and constraints of their habitus positions' (Fataar 2013, 119) in order that an identity that includes a pedagogically just approach to their teaching profession may emerge and merge with their embodied habitus which, in turn, might allow such an approach to become part of their everyday educational practices.

When conditions in the field change, the habitus is required to change accordingly and reposition itself. Bourdieu points out that individuals might acknowledge the need for change but might not have the tools to realise the necessary change. An example of this can be found in teachers' response to the implementation of CAPS, which is the latest iteration of government-mandated curriculum change, in the South African school system. Discussions in the PLC 'field' involving the BEd Honours teachers are, therefore, positioned in light of a shifting curriculum policy environment, challenging the teachers as to the ways in which they are able to change and adapt their professional identities as they reposition their pedagogical practices. Our PLC work is aware of the ostensive intractability of human change. We are aware that '[a]sking human beings to alter their theory-in-use is asking them to question the foundation of their sense of competence and self-confidence' (Argyris 2004 in Servage 2008, 71). A disposition for pedagogical adaptability, we argue, has to take into account the difficulties involved in undergoing an alignment of their professional identities and knowledge dispositions in light of the expectations of any new or adapted curriculum. Our PLC work is intended to provide a productive conversation about the conceptual terms upon which such an alignment could take place while providing a supportive and non-threatening environment for experimenting with teaching styles and knowledge work in the classroom. The aim of the PLC conversations is, therefore, intended to stimulate innovation and inquiry by connecting the theoretical literature discussed in the BEd Honours class to the practical setting of the teachers' classrooms as the teachers critically interrogate their



pedagogical learning and adapt their pedagogy to include a socially just orientation within their teaching practices. Such an orientation pivots on the necessity to engage learners in their classrooms. Making pedagogical connections across the range of this learner diversity is the fulcrum of a socially just pedagogical orientation.

Effective interventions in classrooms require teachers to have an understanding of how the inter-relatedness of the curriculum, learning opportunities of their diverse students, as well as how their students' life world contexts affect the way in which students perceive and act in social situations and relations as are found in school sites. Lingard (2007, 245) calls on us to consider what he and his colleagues call a productive pedagogies approach which includes creating supportive classroom environments that connect all students to the learning process and value and deal with difference while upholding intellectual quality in our pedagogical practices. Classroom pedagogies must incorporate authentic instruction, 'higher order thinking, deep knowledge, substantive conversations and connections to the world beyond the classroom' (Newman and Associates 1996 in Lingard 2007, 254). To consider ways in which we can ensure that we include these dimensions in our pedagogies, we use Bourdieusian insight to understand the way in which different structural positions of students and their cultural dispositions or 'habitus' operate in differing school contexts as 'cultural capital'. We suggest that a socially just pedagogical approach has to engage students' cultural capital, that is, work with their embodied intellectual capacities as learning assets, in order to establish an effective and inclusive pedagogical engagement platform in the classroom. We go on below to explain the outlines of such an approach for our PLC work.

## **PLC ENGAGEMENT WITH STUDENTS' HABITUS AND CULTURAL CAPITAL**

This section concentrates on the manner in which PLC engagement turns on an acute understanding of the ways in which teachers in their classrooms are able to get students engaged and involved in their school learning. Conceptions of the students' learning dispositions and how to shift these with appropriate classroom pedagogies, are key to such a consideration. Bourdieu (1984) describes the early-life immersion where children embody distinctive qualities of cultural dispositions or habitus as the 'primary habitus'. These repetitive patterns of practice and interaction, the child's 'primary habitus', are internalised during the formation of core dispositions for perceiving and responding to different conditions and relations. Primary habitus formation takes place in family and community contexts and are, according to Bourdieu, largely bound up in specific class contexts, that is, a working class child's primary habitus would correspond to a working class habitus.

Secondary habitus acquisition is conceptualised as taking place at the school, the site at which students are provided a knowledge platform that engages them in acquiring elements of a more expansive middle class disposition (Zipin and Brennan 2006, 335). As children navigate their social spaces by moving from their home-based settings to school sites, they begin to acquire overlays of the 'secondary habitus' as

new experiences are assimilated onto the dispositional scaffolding of their 'primary habitus'. Schools are meant to facilitate this habitus shift via engaging students in learning processes that facilitate secondary habitus acquisition, that is, processes that educate students to develop new knowledge conceptions. Their subconscious and early-formed patterns of habits will operate as a scaffold that forms the base in new contexts. Bourdieu explains that while habitus is a composite of multiple dispositions, it is also always individual. It embodies codes that it senses as a familiar identity and in turn will make a distinction to that which it is less familiar with, considering them as 'others' (Bourdieu 1984). The degree of this secondary assimilation by students, via their learning at school, will, therefore, depend on whether the codes of pedagogical interaction as well as other features in the school site are familiar to, and connect with, the student's primary habitus. Our PLC thus operates on the view that pedagogical activity at school has to connect with, and actively engage the student's home socializations, interest and knowledges. We support the view that interaction between the students' primary habitus and mainstream school 'standards', which is often framed as disconnected from the students' lives, is where a misrecognition of the embodied dispositions can take place. It is here that teachers within the PLC must consider ways of engaging with the students' lifeworld knowledge to connect their students to the learning process that allows them to acquire the 'secondary habitus' layer. This would mean that PLC activity is made up of conversations and activities among teachers that connect the students' home-based identities and knowledge practices to their school-based learning engagements. Here we favour a social justice pedagogical orientation that gives expression to providing access to school knowledge on the one hand and emphasises that such knowledge production processes are done via deep recognition and engagement with the life world contexts and knowledges of the students.

In order to afford all students in our class the same opportunities to achieve success or feel that schooling is in their best interests within our classrooms, Lingard (2007, 246) encourages us to consider pedagogies that work with the 'weave of identity construction and knowledge generation'. Teachers in the BEd Honours class showed a strong support and caring attitude towards their students but found it more challenging to find the balance between the need for intellectual demand, authentic connectedness to the students' life worlds and an engagement that valued the diversity of students in their classes. The PLC is meant as a dialogical space to generate reflexive conversation about the ways in which the teachers' pedagogical orientations can become informed by teaching that emphasises knowledge acquisition via active connection and engagement with students' life world contexts and knowledges. Such an orientation, we explain below, can be facilitated by emphasising a funds of knowledge infused teaching approach.

## PEDAGOGICAL JUSTICE

To address the intractability of a socially just orientation, the teachers in the PLC through an action research approach, were invited to consider ways to include and recognise the diverse cultures and identities of their students while engaging them in meaningfully relevant learning that would enable academic success. This includes building a rigorous and meaningful engagement with school learning while working with pedagogies that connect the students' lifeworld and community knowledge to school-based learning. Finding ways to value and scaffold student lifeworld knowledge into standardised school curricula work assists to establish a link for students to experience the intrinsic value in education, one that allows them to see schooling as 'for' them rather than internalising a sense that they are a 'failure' within the educational context (Delpit 1988). By acknowledging and providing a significant curricular place to the cultural codes that are valued in the students' home and community lifeworlds, teachers value the students' lifeworld knowledge, their cultural capital, and assign these value within the schooling context.

Bourdieu (1998) states that mainstream pedagogy preserves universal standardised curriculum knowledge (school codes) that actually only a small elite group has historically cultured in the process of investing school knowledge with their selective values (Zipin 2013, 4). Codes of standard performance remain implicit, allowing the students from power-elite positions to perform successfully while students from non-elite positions are seen as having 'deficit' cultural capital within school sites (Zipin 2005, 4). Despite notions that schools teach students how to perform according to the assessment standards at schools, this is rarely the case and the school codes for 'good' academic performance are kept implicit rather than made explicit (Ovsienko and Zipin 2007, 1). By 'making explicit the usually implicit codes for school success, one hopes to cut to the redistributive chase, enabling learning of dominant cultural capitals without need for those capitals to dominate classroom time and space, thus leaving room for more meaningfully engaging learning based on lifeworld funds of knowledge' (Zipin 2005, 5). Too often students receive messages from schooling that they suffer deficits in their learning. Yet these students have valuable cultural assets, their 'funds of knowledge', that if shared and incorporated in the curriculum would engage them in their learning and enhance the learning of all the students (Zipin 2013, 1). When the students trust that the curriculum that we teach will value and include their cultural knowledge, dispositions and identities, they will choose to engage with the learning process. The PLC work, therefore, involves a challenge to the teachers towards a socially just pedagogical orientation that redistributes the power-elite cultural codes, or cultural capital, of schooling to those who did not inherit them from their families, while recognising the students' lifeworld ways of knowing that engages their identity structures, thus working on the 'weave' as Lingard suggests. This approach involves a curriculum that recognises cultural knowledge and identity and scaffolds this into the learning process, creating

a pedagogically responsive curriculum and a pedagogy by which diverse students can thrive in mainstream institutions.

## **THE PLC'S FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE APPROACH TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

The 'funds of knowledge' (FoK) approach provides a theoretical framework that can inform teachers to adapt their teaching practices and find ways to reconceptualise their teaching to increase the academic and social outcomes for all the students (Lingard, Hayes and Mills 2003, 410). It is essential that teachers retain a rigorous but meaningful engagement with their students by providing curricular activity that resonates with their ways of knowing that has informed their core identities and dispositions and is deeply ingrained as their primary habitus. By capitalising on household and community resources the FoK approach offers a socially just alternative that 'far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction' (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez 1992, 132) that children commonly encounter in schools. Using this approach teachers are encouraged to discursively and practically reach beyond the received curriculum and mobilise the students' lived knowledge, using this as an asset and resource in classroom work.

The FoK approach conceptualises a theoretical framework where teachers use 'historically accumulated bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household functioning and well-being' (Gonzalez, Andrade, Civil and Moll 2001, 116) to enhance classroom learning. This approach values the students' ways of knowing, acting and being (Zipin 2013, 3), thus their 'cultural capital', and incorporates this into intellectually challenging curriculum units that enable school achievement and academic success through a pedagogic orientation that bridges lifeworld-relevant curricula into the learning of cultural capitals that are needed for mainstream academic success (Zipin and Hattam 2007, 3).

The FoK approach links to a pedagogical justice orientation that works on the 'weave' of recognition of student identities and redistribution of school knowledge. When teachers demonstrate to their students that they desire to learn about them and from them, the teachers value and recognise the students' identities and acknowledge that they are experts of their lives and that the teachers can learn from them. This gives the students psychological assurance that the classroom is a safe environment for them to share their FoK as well as an 'ethical affirmation that their intelligence and cultural ways of knowing deserve respect' (Zipin 2013, 8). This honours their FoK and uses it productively in the classroom, thereby establishing a pedagogical relationship between the teacher and student as well as a 'strong and fundamental form of democracy' (Zipin 2013, 8). By the teacher showing a readiness to learn from the students, the students learn that they have value and agency to shape their own learning.

Zipin (2013), however, warns that student engagement will not simply follow by putting the students' FoK into the curriculum. The students will require further

persuasion and invitations to encourage them to engage with their learning. 'Processes of making such invitations are matters of pedagogy – in particular, of teachers' efforts to develop learning-and-teaching relationships in which the invitation feels real to students' (Zipin 2013, 8). Teachers are still having to work hard to enable the students' FoK to come alive as they incorporate it into the standardised curriculum work. Working with the FoK approach forms part of the PLC deliberations as the teachers consider ways for the students' FoK to provide the building blocks for the further development of school concepts and academic work. The PLC is involved in on-going discussion about ways in which they (the teachers) can engage their students to become co-constructors of knowledge and to deepen and extend the students' engagement with the extant curricula knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The article has focused on our conceptual approaches for setting up a PLC based on what we called a socially just pedagogical approach. The focus in the PLC is not on the success of the pedagogical actions and adaptations that the teachers embark on but on the teachers' learning, specifically with regard to their students' habitus via adaptive pedagogical capacity acquired through the collaborative and dialogic processes during PLC activity. The PLC is aimed at leveraging a safe space where through deliberative and supportive conversations the teachers can critically reflect and challenge one another regarding their responsiveness to a socially just transformative platform.

Bourdieu warns that although a person's habitus can be shifted, it is never easy and takes time and persistent effort. Accepting, therefore, that teachers' pedagogical dispositions have acquired a depth which is difficult to shift, the PLC attempts to build on the idea of knowledge-of-practice towards a deliberate construction of a pedagogically just orientation towards teaching. The PLC is playing a vital role in encouraging teachers to constantly re-position their thinking and pedagogies towards a pedagogical relationship that includes a democratic two-way give and take between students and teachers as both work towards shaping curricula work through an attitude of democracy and agency (Zipin and Hattam 2007, 8).

We have suggested that the FoK approach provides a conceptual framework for teachers as such an approach would encourage students to bring their lifeworld knowledge into the classroom and share the community space that they inhabit beyond the school with the class and teacher. By scaffolding the students' lifeworld knowledge into the curriculum, teachers would create a learning environment that takes into account the students' diversity, thereby making classrooms a safe place where students can take risks and have a voice and agency in their own learning. The classroom environment should also include a pedagogy that engages all students through intellectually challenging learning that is made richly relevant to their 'lived-cultural identities' (Zipin, Brennan and Sellar 2006, 2).

Our conceptualisation of the PLC, therefore, lies in the dynamics of a possibly messy, staccato and non-linear process that does not necessarily focus on finding the answers, but rather on questioning and disrupting the teachers' current notions of their classroom pedagogy. By building trust among the teachers in the PLC and encouraging critical reflexivity, teachers' pedagogies will hopefully be challenged regarding 'pedagogy for transformational learning' (Servage 2008, 74) that lies at the heart of a socially just pedagogical approach to teaching and learning.

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