Compensatory actions in a context of underachievement: a study of a pedagogical intervention and its impact on teachers

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Abstract

This piece of research is an inquiry into the impact of the introduction of innovative approaches to the teaching of literacy on primary school teachers in the Republic of Mauritius. This is a design-based research, that is, it is about researching the implementation of a project involving introducing new teaching approaches in the teaching of literacy skills. The pedagogical intervention, initiated by the Mauritius Institute of Education, takes place in the 27 low-achieving primary schools grouped under the concept of educational priority areas or “Zones d’Education Prioritaires” (ZEP). The aim of the research was to analyse to what extent the implementation of an interventional compensatory action has helped in the transformation of teachers in classroom practices in their beliefs about teaching and learning. The impact of the pedagogical intervention has been assessed on the degree of transformation observed among the different types of teachers. Three types of teachers’ involvement in the project have been identified: the discursive teachers; the practical teachers; the resistant teachers. Teachers’ involvement has been strongly influenced by their beliefs and attitudes which have their source in a context of traditional practices and teacher-centeredness.

1. Introduction

In the Republic of Mauritius, a small (2040 sq. km) island state, 2000 km off the east coast of the African continent with a population of 1.2 million people, the problem of poor literacy skills among the primary school

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leavers has been a long-standing one as every year more than 30% of students are unable to get through the final national examinations, called the Certificate in Primary Education (CPE) at the end of six years of schooling (graded from standards I to VI). Most of those who are unable to get through the CPE examinations are functionally illiterate. School failure is most dramatic in those schools, 27 of them, located in disadvantaged areas. According to data obtained from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/csoMauritius, in this type of school, performance at the final examinations, the Certificate in Primary Education (CPE) is still below the national average, which is about 65%. Between 2003 and 2010, the success rate in those schools ranged between 31.7% and 36.5%.(http://www.gov.mu/portal/sites/meweb/cpe2010_results/cpestats2010/Zep_schools_performance_2006_2010.htm)

Such degree of low achievement means that these schools were in great need of special pedagogical and social support and this is why the project of the ZEP (Zones d’Education Prioritaires) in Mauritius came into being. The ZEP is one of several compensatory programmes existing throughout the world. In fact, in many countries, compensatory programmes have been implemented to tackle the problem of underachievement in education in general. Compensatory approach to education, backed by a corpus of research (Slavin -2006) consists of actions to offset the effects of socio-economic disadvantage for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The ZEP project in Mauritius is in line with other compensatory education policies in other countries such as the USA (Operation Head Start Programme), France (“Zones d’Education Prioritaires (ZEP). And the UK (Education Priority Area (EPA) Programme). Through all these compensatory education projects, it was expected that the application of certain policies and actions will make it possible to offset the effects of socio-economic disadvantage which may have an impact on the educational achievement of children from socially and economically deprived backgrounds. The success of these programmes has been limited in all the countries named above and they have attracted criticism from sociologists. Nevertheless, the same concept was applied to the low achieving schools located in deprived areas of Mauritius.

1.1. The ZEP project in Mauritius

The ZEP project in the Mauritian primary education sector is an example of compensatory education introduced in low-achieving schools. The compensatory education practiced in that school was designed to enhance the quality of education through a range of interventions (meals, health record, school infrastructure, etc.). Though different types of compensatory programmes have existed before it was only in 2002, that all these low-achieving schools were grouped under the concept of educational priority areas or “Zones d’Education Prioritaires (ZEP). It has been observed that in spite of all the compensatory actions provided by the authorities in the ZEP schools, the students’ academic achievement had not been improving. The reason behind this limited success may be because compensatory action concentrated mainly on compensating for material deprivation. Pedagogical compensatory action was in the form of a series of actions disconnected from one another and spearheaded by private firms in the context of the concept of “Corporate Social Responsibility” (CSR) introduced by the Mauritian government. The classroom teachers did not feel concerned with what was being proposed by these different reading projects. This does not seem to be a situation typical of Mauritius only as:

“There is a common and unfortunate characteristic that is shared by most remedial and special education programs: their detachment from the regular educational effort (Allington, 1986). This separation is evident when classroom teachers and resource teachers have little knowledge of the instructional activities of the other........

Unfortunately, such detachment seems more the norm than the exception.” (Allington L, Gaskins R., Broikou K, Jachym N. -1990)

A sustained action to improve the academic performance of the pupils did not seem to exist in the ZEP schools where underachievement is an acute problem. At the same time, underachievement in the ZEP schools may be partly due to poor literacy skills of the students. In most of the twenty-seven ZEP schools, the CPE results revealed that the level of language skills was poor. The statistics for the CPE (MES-2010-http://www.gov.mu/portal/sites/meweb/cpe_general_page.htm) in ZEP schools show that the success rate in English Language is 46.2% while for the French language it is 50.7% (statistics from MEHR) (http://ministry-education.gov.mu/). Therefore we may infer that approximately 50% of children actually have language difficulties and are at high risk of failing the CPE
examinations. In Mauritius, the key to success in primary education, is mainly through being literate, as two of the four core subjects are languages, that is, English and French, and the two other core subjects examined, namely Mathematics and History/Geography, are studied in English which is the official language. There is a body of research evidence to support the view that the foundations of literacy are laid in the first two years of schooling (Riley, 1996). Also, American research suggests that efforts to correct literacy difficulties after the 3rd Grade (age 8 years) are largely unsuccessful (e.g. Kennedy, Birman and Demaline, 1986). Conversely, there is also empirical evidence that supports the view that it is possible for all, except a very small percentage of children, to be taught successfully to read and write and evidence come from reports such as ‘‘Success for all’’ (Slavin et al., 1996) and the intervention programme, “Reading Recovery” (Hurry, 1995)” (Riley -2006:2).

1.2. Pedagogical intervention in the ZEP schools by the MIE

In a pedagogical semi-vacuum within the ZEP project, a group of MIE academics stepped in with a project focused on giving pedagogical support in literacy to teachers and pupils. The MIE project was in line with the compensatory actions of the whole ZEP project but the accent was on a sustained academic support. The main aim of the project was to reinforce the teachers’ skills in the teaching of literacy with the hope that it will impact on students’ literacy skills. It was assumed that if more explicit ways of teaching literacy were introduced in those schools, the level of achievement among the students might improve in the long term. The “in-Class Assistance Program” (DS MANUAL 2090.2-1989) focussed on the school-based training of the teachers through regular classroom visits by facilitators in an area of specific skill deficiency that is, the teaching of “literacy”

1.3. The pedagogical support mechanism as implemented in the ZEP schools by the MIE

The pedagogical intervention consisted of the following elements:
- Counselling in the classroom by facilitators
- Organisation of regular workshops
- Accountability of facilitators
- Distribution of teaching aids
- Provision of learning support for students – worksheets

The design of the support mechanism was to enhance the level of literacy especially in English and this was achieved through the introduction of various strategies to teach language in the different classrooms. Teachers were equipped with skills to develop a range of strategies for teaching pupils to read and write and these consisted of:
- decoding words: segmenting and blending
- decoding words through different methods: phonics, syllabic, whole language approach
- teaching grammar in context
- methods to teach reading (shared, group and individual)
- methods to teach writing of sentences and texts (shared, group and individual)

As I have been closely involved in the “conceptualisation, design, development, implementation” of the pedagogical approach, researching the impact of this intervention has been the next logical step in the whole action.

1.4. Objective of the research:

The objective of the research has been to analyse to what extent the implementation of an interventional pedagogical action has helped in the transformation of teachers in the two following areas:
- In classroom practices: from traditional practices to more innovative ones
- In their beliefs about teaching and learning in low-achieving schools
2. Research Approach and methods

As it is a research in “naturalistic contexts” (Barab & Squire -2004), this piece of research is one, which may be described as a design-based research (DBR). DBR has been described as “a methodology designed by and for educators that seek to increase the impact, transfer, and translation of education research into improved practice.” (Anderson T. & Shattuck J. -2012)

Researching DBR, involves looking at multiple aspects of the design but as it is not within the scope of this paper to research all the aspects of this intervention project, I am going to focus on the impact of the intervention on teachers’ classroom practice. The teachers have been the most important agent of change in this project and in DBR: “... Practitioners and researchers work together to produce meaningful change in contexts of practice (e.g., classrooms, after-school programs, teacher on-line communities). Such collaboration means that goals and design constraints are drawn from the local context as well as the researcher’s agenda, addressing one concern of many reform efforts (Robinson, 1998).”(DBRC–2003 – vol. 32 No 1 p.6)

It is one where the researcher adopts a reflective stance with rich descriptions as a result of data gathering from questionnaires, interviews and observation. In this research, years of observation has given birth to a lot of reflection about the context and the impact of the intervention on the teachers

2.1. Research tools

Research tools used in DBR are not too different from those used in other research approaches. “Design-based research relies on techniques used in other research paradigms, like thick descriptive datasets, systematic analysis of data with carefully defined measures, and consensus building within the field around interpretations of data.” (DBRC–2003 – vol. 32 No 1 p.6)

Various tools have been used to study the effectiveness of the “in-class assistance program” during the past five years. Data for the research has been gathered overtly and covertly as well as I have been unintentionally acting as participant observer within the primary school set-up. For this piece of research, mostly qualitative data have been used to support my arguments and as Barab and Squire (2004) point out: “it is the responsibility of the researcher to draw on methodological practices consistent with other qualitative methods (e.g., see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to convince others of the trustworthiness and credibility of claims being advanced. It is also the responsibility of the design-based researcher to remember that claims are based on researcher influenced contexts and, as such, may not be generalizable to other contexts of implementation where the researcher does not so directly influence the context. (Barab & Squire-2004)

These qualitative data have been obtained from questionnaires, interviews and observations.

2.2. The questionnaire

The questionnaires were administered to primary school teachers who attended the capacity-building workshops over the years. These were administered each year to participants and focused on literacy practices prior to the series of workshops and in school intervention and after these in a way to investigate whether or not there was any change in their own practices. Questionnaires were distributed to all teachers and other stakeholders to obtain more information from those who did not like to be interviewed.

2.3. In-depth interviews

In-depth interviews (Cohen et al, 2007; Patton, 1980; Tuckman, 1972) of samples of teachers from different schools have been carried out at school or even when they came for workshops at the MIE (after workshops). The interviews helped to obtain a deeper insight into their beliefs and understand the teachers’ approach towards the teaching and learning of literacy. Teachers having actively participated for a minimum of two years in the intervention project, were considered on a random selection for the interview to ensure validity of study. These
interviews were systematically conducted in the year on a continuous basis of three years. Briefing sessions and clear instructions were given to the participants prior to the interviews. Both open ended and semi-structured questions were used in the interactions enabling us to understand whether or not there was any improvement in their own practices as well as the students’ literacy skills and also ensure validity of accuracy of results. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. For ethical reasons students, who are all children aged between 5 to 11 years old were not interviewed.

2.4. Key informants

The facilitators who were also interviewed acted as key informants as they were an interesting source of information for the school context.

2.5 Observations and reflexivity

Classroom observations spanned the whole period of the implementation of the project. As well as being the researcher, I have also acted as a facilitator. During my weekly visits, I made it a point to visit each class in the school where I was attached every fortnight. In other words my observations were carried out in all classes of the school and duly noted. Much of these observations did not really make much sense in the initial stages of the implementation of the project, as I was a stranger to the primary school set-up even though as a teacher educator I have had access to primary schools during the evaluation of the practicum of primary school trainee teachers. After some time as facilitator in the school I came to realise that I did not really possess an authentic idea of teaching and learning in the primary school. It was really a voyage of discovery in the world of the primary schools as I came to be accepted as a “friend” of the school and everybody acted “natural”. They were not on their guard as they would have been with the presence of an inspector. In the initial stages of the implementation of project I realised that the teachers were reluctant to abandon their traditional ways of teaching the different aspects of language and reading. This allowed me to gain an insight into how the teachers really teach languages in our schools. I regularly discussed with other facilitators during our regular fortnightly meetings when we had brainstorming sessions. Issues were clarified, as most of the MIE facilitators are retired primary school teachers. These meetings and brainstorming sessions also brought in observations and feedbacks from the ministry’s (Ministry of Education and Human Resources) ZEP coordinators, when they joined us every now and then. These meetings allowed me to check with facilitators to what extent the teachers were adopting the project. Feedback sheets were also collected from the facilitators on their visits to the schools and classroom. Making sense of what was really happening in the classrooms happened through my “reflection on action” (Schon, 1982) that is, very often, after having left the school premises. This type of reflection has been described as “retrospective reflection” by Dewey (1933).

3. Results

As the main aim of this project has been to bring changes to the classroom, I consider that the research may be seen within the transformative paradigm (Mezirow 1981,1984,1997) I posit that the solution to the problem of underachievement may be located within the school context or even within the broad education system that is, through the transformation of teachers as well as students. Therefore we may argue that this research may be located within the broader “transformative paradigm” as explained by Mertens (2010)

“The transformative paradigm is a framework of belief systems that directly engages members of culturally diverse groups with a focus on increased social justice”

3.1. Investigating the pedagogical context

As explained earlier, the MIE literacy project was implemented in the ZEP schools as one of the compensatory actions in those low-achieving schools to combat underachievement among children coming from disadvantaged families. It is generally agreed by researchers on the subject that there is no unique way to teach reading:
Presently there is little agreement concerning precisely how to best teach reading. Different reading curricula reflect different perspectives about the nature of reading acquisition and appropriate reading instructional activities.” (Allington, Gaskins, Broikou, Jachym&King-1990)

In the first year of the implementation, there was a lot of resistance from the teachers though they paid lip service to say how far they appreciated these “new” approaches to teaching languages. Through classroom observation, we (other facilitators and I) realised that some did not really master these strategies while other did not believe in them as the new materials did not seem to match the layout and content of the prescribed text-books.

It is only when my contact with the teachers became very frequent through my weekly visits that I was able to gain an insight into the classroom practices of these teacher and at the same time an understanding of the culture of the teaching of languages in the primary schools of Mauritius. It would seem that the teaching of English has not changed very much since colonial times. The teaching of English is very grammar-centered and the text-books themselves are grammar-centered so that teachers’ discourse reflect this grammar-centeredness. They never speak about developing vocabulary, fluency, sentence-writing or text writing, their discourse may be reduced to such phrases as: “Today I am going to teach long/short (active/passive form or present tense or past continuous)”.

The sequence of lessons replicates the sequence of chapters in the textbooks. A typical pedagogical sequence for an English lesson in “reading comprehension” may be described thus:

- First reading by teacher of short text
- Second reading with pupils repeating each sentence after the teacher
- Teacher explains text in French or creole (a literal translation), especially what local teachers call “difficult” words, which are in fact words unknown to students.
- Teacher asks oral questions to check for understanding.
- Teacher assigns a “class-work” to pupils. The writing exercise, found in textbook and related to text read aloud by teacher and pupils, consists mainly of questions checking for understanding.
- Students work individually and then teacher “corrects” questions on the black/white board with the help of students, that is, those who have been able to answer the questions. Students copy the “correct” answer in their workbook.
- The teacher sometimes collects the copybooks to check for writing mistakes.

An analysis of such a lesson tells us that no attempt is made to help student decode words, that is, spelling techniques seem to be absent from the language class. Sometimes the teacher may use a syllabic approach for complex words but phonics approach is absent. Teachers seem to favour a whole language approach. Such an approach may be inappropriate for students for whom English is a foreign language even if it is the official language in Mauritius. Enriching the vocabulary of students does not seem to be an objective of the language lesson for teachers, as their main objective seems to be to “explain” words. Sometimes there are lists of words written on wall charts and the teacher proudly demonstrate how her pupils can read those words and in reality the students have merely memorised the words on the chart. A simple test (carried out by me, several times in different classes) which consist of writing one of the words (from chart) on the black/white board and ask one pupil to read it, show that many pupils cannot decipher that word.

Another typical lesson is about teaching “grammar”. It is most of the time a deductive lesson. The sequence is the following:

- The teacher “explains” the grammatical form and the “how” and “why” and then gives examples to the pupils.
- Pupils recite in chorus, for example present tense (I am, you are, he/she is, we are etc.)
- Students are asked to tackle a cloze exercise (fill in the blanks) from the textbook, which consist of writing the correct form of the verb in a pre-set sentence.
- The teacher “corrects” on the blackboard and students “correct” in their workbook.

The two examples of teaching sequences described above inform us that students are not being given the appropriate tools to read with understanding. Even the grammar is being taught in a mechanical manner. Students may recite the conjugation of verbs but are not able to write a grammatically correct sentence. In fact Students of
Standards I to IV rarely write sentences. Most of the written work consists of “filling in the blanks”. Most exercises in textbooks are of this type and most primary school teachers' pedagogical practices are determined by the content of those textbooks.

As for text –writing, it is not an exercise which pupils are encouraged to engage in. It is only in standards V and VI, that students have the opportunity to write short texts. It would seem that the teachers' pedagogical practices relate more to tradition than to practice based on pedagogical scientific knowledge, which they may have acquired during training. The teachers are teaching within a specific “frame of reference” - a belief structure about the world in which the social actor operates. Mezirow (1997) defines “frame of reference” thus:

“A frame of reference encompasses cognitive, conative, and emotional components, and is composed of two dimensions: habits of mind and a point of view. Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set of codes. These codes may be cultural, social, educational, economic, political, or psychological. Habits of mind become articulated in a specific point of view—the constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shape a particular interpretation.”

It would seem that primary school teachers tend to find it difficult to move from one frame of reference to another as there is the recurrent complaint from diverse quarters that teachers to a wide extent do not put in practice most of the strategies which they had learned during training. This situation is more pronounced in ZEP schools of Mauritius as the teachers enter the sector with sets of beliefs about the background of pupils and preconceived ideas that these students are “hopeless” and that they are doomed to underachieve. The following feedback (from questionnaires) from teachers of the ZEP schools who were asked “what were the major difficulties encountered in teaching?” the majority of answers seem to infer that the problems may lie with the pupils themselves or originating from their social background:

“Language barrier, lack of motivation of pupils”
“Low achievers are not motivated in class”
“Language problem, many pupils cannot understand English, resulting in demotivation both at pupils’ and teachers’ levels”
“Pupils are not motivated, no follow-up at home,”
“Lack of motivation among pupils, no follow-up at home, pupils has very poor retention memory”

(Different ZEP teachers' responses from feedback questionnaires)

With such prejudices, teachers are not motivated to innovate in their teaching and the result is that teaching is uninspiring and does not motivate pupils to develop an interest in learning. Poor teaching coupled with poor opportunities to learn in the home background put the children of the ZEP at risk of failing or underachieving. The following extract from a report on U.S. Schools tell us how children’s lack of interest in learning at school may be mainly due to poor teaching rather than to the children’s own poor background:

“If instruction fails to engage and challenge students, classroom climate and intellectual development may suffer. In fact, interest is a significant determinant of how people attend to and persist in processing information. Children are more likely to learn material that stimulates their interest... (Ames and Ames, 1984, 1985, 1989; Brophy, 1987; Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Lepper, 1988; Willis, 1991). The lack of active learning experiences may help explain why students' interest in challenging subjects tends to decline (Anderson, Pruitt, and Courtney, 1989; Reyes and Laliberty, 1992); others cite pressure and boredom (Farrell et al., 1988).”

The above extract summarises the situation in the ZEP schools of Mauritius or even in many other schools of the Mauritian primary education system as confirmed by the facilitators engaged in this literacy project who through their regular observation of classes acted as “key informants”.

According to data obtained during the course of this research, the Teachers’ classroom practices in the primary schools of the ZEP seem to have been influenced by their beliefs about their students, especially about their home background. The above-listed responses, inform us that, for these teachers, the onus of underachievement is on their pupils themselves and their home background.

4. Discussion - impact of project implementation teacher transformation? How far teacher transformation has occurred.
It cannot be affirmed that the program introduced by the MIE brought total transformation of the teachers as the teachers have different professional profiles and degree of motivation. (Their profiles may differ in terms of sex, age, educational background, and experience and these factors impacting on the degree of adoption of MIE program by the teachers.) The transformation of teachers has occurred to a certain degree among some of the teachers. Evidence of this transformation of teachers have been obtained from different sources, namely the teachers themselves (interviews and questionnaires), the facilitators’ reports, the researcher’ own observations and to a lesser extent from the ZEP Unit of the Ministry of Education and Human Resources. From the data gathered, I have been able to analyse the impact of the MIE project on teachers. I have thus identified three types of teacher involvement in the process of the implementation of the project:

- The discursive teachers- those who have developed a discursive consciousness about their practice.
- The practical teachers - those who have only a practical consciousness about the various strategies to teach languages.
- The resistant teachers - those who prefer to cling to their “traditional” methods of teaching.

The concepts of “discursive” and “practical” consciousness are located within Giddens’ theory of “structuration” but though I am not going to use the theory of structuration as a theoretical framework, I am borrowing the concepts of “discursive” and “practical” consciousness. Godden’s describes “discursive consciousness as:

“What actors are able to say or to give verbal expression to about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action” (Giddens-1984:374)

In other words, Giddens is saying that the individual who is able to explain the reasons for his/her action possesses a discursive consciousness. On the other hand the individual actor who cannot explain his/her actions, possesses only a practical consciousness. Giddens 1984 describes “practical” consciousness as:

What actors know (believe) about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action, but cannot express discursively; no bar of repression, however, protects practical consciousness, as is the case with the unconscious. (Giddens, 1984, p. 375)

4.1 An analysis of the different types of teacher adoption of innovative teaching approaches

4.1.1. The discursive teachers:

This type of teacher involvement within the MIE project may be observed among teachers of all age and background. They were the more motivated and the way they were teaching seemed to demonstrate that they had a deep understanding of the didactics of language teaching and they were implementing the strategies very effectively and creatively. This has been observed in the video taping of about fifteen teachers in six of the ZEP schools. My own observations also confirm this transformation of those teachers. They make use of a variety of teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, discussion, role play, brainstorming and story-telling while specific approaches to language teaching at word, sentence and text levels. They practice spelling through an eclectic approach that is through the use of phonics, syllabic and whole language approaches. Writing of texts even in the lower grades is encouraged by the teacher, especially through the “shared writing’ approach. The classroom environment is a print-rich one. Teachers show creativity in creating their own teaching aids to support learning, especially through the use of ICT. These teachers have become more reflective about their work. Mezirow (1995) emphasised the importance of critical reflection in transformative learning theory. It would seem that the process of transformation is more present among this type of teachers. These teachers also seem to understand why they are using the different strategies to teach different aspects of literacy. This teacher demonstrates knowledge of the importance of phonics within the mechanisms of the development of reading:

“At word level, phonics should be introduced in our textbooks as from standard I as they are the basic things needed for reading.... After 4 years of being involved in this MIE project I have developed lots of strategies which
tackle literacy problems. Examples are: (Distinction between) word, sentence, and text level ... now I can tackle more specifically the problems children face in reading and writing (standard IV teacher - questionnaire).

Another teacher explains how her attendance of the regular workshops organized by the MIE has brought change in her beliefs about teaching and learning in literacy.

"I think that if I would not have attended the workshops, from what I have observed I would have started working from the beginning of the book like all teachers do: page 1, page 2 and so on. I would have explained on the blackboard and students would work on their copybooks or books... But after these workshops. No. I take the book... I look at all the units which are based upon themes and see what I can take out to work on vocabulary, grammar, reading etc... For instance, if today I am working on "reading", I would take a text from a unit even if I have not completed the unit and work on it just for Reading..." (interview - teacher standard V)

Some teachers feel that participation in the activities associated with the project has developed their professional autonomy. This teacher speaks of a "push factor" describing the effect of the project on her classroom practices:

"...It is a push factor and encouraging in the sense that we can go outside our textbooks to teach and develop various skills like oral, reading and writing"

For those teachers who have developed a more discursive consciousness, I have noticed that their assumptions about students in ZEP have begun to change. They no longer believe that those students are doomed to underachieve. The teachers quoted above seem to demonstrate a deep insight into the way they have moved from "traditional" teaching to more meaningful and effective teaching languages. Being able to evaluate their methods of teaching previous to the implementation of the project and to compare it to their new approaches to teaching is a sign of "discursive" consciousness and announces deep changes in their teaching. These changes will hopefully be beneficial to the quality of learning in our primary schools.

4.1.2. The practical teachers

These teachers implement various strategies advocated within the project in a mechanical manner. That is why some teachers reveal that they use whole language approaches and phonic approaches alternatively, without being sure of the relevance in the context or when to use which approach. The quality of their answers in feedback questionnaires give an insight into their consciousness about the importance of the different strategies in the development of literacy among their pupils. When asked about the effectiveness of the project, some teachers talk only on the development of vocabulary:

"Pupils have learnt vocabulary (names of animals, action verbs, high-frequency words)"
"Consolidation of word and vocabulary"
"Learning of new vocabularies, names of animals (fun and interesting)"
(Standard III teachers - from questionnaires)

On the other hand teachers with discursive consciousness will mention the development of reading skills:

"This project has been effective as it provided opportunities for pupils to become independent readers." (Standard III teacher - from questionnaire)

I am not going to say that the practically-minded teachers are not working for the development of literacy but that they have not been able to develop a degree of autonomy to develop their own resources for the teaching of literacy and they need more pedagogical support to be able to sustain the effort for the development of the literacy skills of their students.

4.1.3. The resistant teachers

These teachers demonstrate resistance to change. They are simply more confident in using a whole language approach (which is the traditional approach in Mauritian classrooms) only and spend the time "explaining". This reveal the contribution of a certain long-held belief that this is the way in which literacy instruction should take place. In other cases we observe that teachers having more experience generally assume that pupils should be able to recognize words simply after repeating it aloud once or twice. These teachers are reluctant to change their teaching
strategies. Differentiated instruction seems to be a constant difficulty and raise questions pertaining to attending to slow learners while others complete the task much earlier than others.

Then you have to go and see them. but it’s loads and loads of time. how to proceed?... I am not able to handle it in such a way. I can do it but...”

Through the implementation of the MIE project, the teachers involved seemed to have gone through different types of transformation which may range from their classroom practices to their way of thinking about teaching and learning as well as to their attitudes to their work as a teacher and to their pupils’ potentials as learners.

5. Conclusion

The observations made about the quality of language teaching in Mauritian primary schools may lead to a certain interrogation about the quality of the initial teacher training in our primary schools. Evidence obtained from this piece of research point to the fact that trainee teachers who start their career in the primary schools are ill-equipped to teach languages at primary school level. They do not seem to possess the basic skills to teach their students the necessary skills, which the latter will need to be able to read and write. This issue is not specific to Mauritius only. In more advanced countries, the same issue about the quality of teacher education has been observed. A study by Reutzel et al (2011) conducted in the USA, points out that there is a “Nationally pervasive deficit in the preparation of elementary teachers in reading and writing” (p. 187).

This issue has also been highlighted by Cohen and Ball (1999) and also explained by Carlisle, Cortina & Katz (2011). The pedagogical intervention as described above point to the fact that teachers need well-informed and regular specialist support to enable them to meet the greater demands placed upon them in an age when reading and writing have become even more crucial with the increased use of information and communications technology.

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