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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

**Faculty of Humanities
(Department of Education)**

**THE LOCI OF LEARNING IN FOCUS:
A qualitative study of grade 7 students' conceptions
of 'school' and 'learning'**

**A dissertation presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Philosophy
(Educational Policy, Planning and Administration)**

By Cameron McConnachie

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Abstract

This study investigates the conceptions of 'school' and 'learning' held by twenty grade 7 students between the ages of 12 and 15. While the subjects' participating in the research were selected from two Cape Town metropolitan schools in close proximity, the schools were situated within vastly different socio-economic and cultural environments. The study aimed to explore what factors impact on the development of students' conceptions. The conceptions were analysed against an international body of literature in an attempt to discern whether a particularly South African notion of the phenomenon existed. The subjects' conceptions of 'school' and 'learning' were also viewed in relation to the intended changes that Curriculum 2005 will bring, prior to its implementation, in an attempt to predict the likely sights of contestation and agreement between students' conceptions and the curriculum.

Contextual data was collected using qualitative methods that included photographs taken by the students, group discussions, participant observation and biographical questionnaires which were used to frame responses elicited during phenomenographic interviews. Both an inductive and deductive analysis was done in that themes and categories were deduced from the students' responses but were also fitted into categories from the literature.

The study found that while the two groups of students experienced school in vastly different ways, their conceptions of learning were remarkably similar. These also bore a strong resemblance to conceptions identified in other parts of the world. The factors impacting on the development of students' conceptions of learning were multiple and complex but race and gender did not appear to be instrumental. There were differences between the two groups' conceptions, however, and it is predicted that Curriculum 2005 will have successes and failures in both contexts as a result of these.

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Chapter 1

The Loci of Learning in Focus

The focus of this study is an examination of how two groups of grade 7 students within the Cape Town metropolitan area, conceptualise school and learning, and what the likely factors are which give rise to these conceptions. While the students attend two schools that are in close proximity, Oakland Primary is a predominantly white, and well resourced suburban school, and Thembisa is an under-resourced all-black township school. The study aims to analyse the conceptions identified amongst the two cohorts against both an international body of literature on the "conceptions of learning", and against the goals of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) with a view to predicting likely sites of contestation and success. The study also aims to explore what impact environmental conditions and the curriculum have on students' conceptions of learning.

The identification and analysis of students' conceptions of learning is valuable in a pedagogic sense when teachers are aware of (i) their students' knowledge of their own learning and (ii) their conceptions of what learning is (Meyer & Boulton-Lewis, 1997). They argue that

(t)he externalisation of such knowledge and conceptions is of strategic importance because, theoretically, such *prior knowledge* affects how students engage the content and context of learning, as well as resultant outcomes. What students know about their own learning, what they think 'learning' is, and how they engage 'learning' as a consequence, are therefore important research questions (emphasis in original) (1997: 1).

In reviewing the literature on "conceptions of learning", it became apparent that gaps existed in the field in a number of places. Firstly, very little research has been done in the South African context on student's conceptions or approaches to learning, and that which had been done (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 1999; Meyer & Boulton-Lewis, 1997) was solely concerned with university students:

As many South African students at pre-tertiary levels of education will soon experience a dramatic change in the curriculum they engage with, extending research into this area is appropriate. Very little is known about how South African students conceptualise learning and developing our understanding of this field is important in order to devise pedagogical strategies that will enable them to derive the most benefit from the development of the new curriculum (C2005).

Secondly, on the international front, an age gap existed between Pramling's (1983) study of 3-8 year olds in Sweden, and the study by Purdie, Hattie & Douglas (1996) of 16-18 year olds in Australia and Japan. The 12-15 year old age group presented itself as a sample of students whose conceptions of learning had not been adequately investigated anywhere in the world.¹

¹ Two studies exist that incorporated this age cohort into their research (Dahlin & Regmi, 1995 and Entwistle *et al*, 1989) but did not meet the same criteria for reasons which will be explored in Chapter 2.

Univ learning is more learner-centred

attention to the temporal nature of cognitive development, students in this age-group were thought to be reaching/have just reached the "formal operational stage" which is characterised by the ability to engage in abstract thinking (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 1997: 47). Due to the nebulous, contested, diverse and abstract character of 'learning', how (or whether) this age group of students would be able to express their conceptions of learning is of interest. Understanding the conceptions held by this age group is also important in light of the transition they are undertaking from primary to senior school during this period. How they will navigate that transition academically may well be influenced by how they conceptualise learning. Use Gap

The third gap identified was that most research in this field was only concerned with the identification of 'conceptions of learning', and analysing how they related to each other. The research reviewed paid only cursory attention to the contexts that gave rise to the particular conceptions, even though it was often implicit that the contexts in which the students were learning were very different. For this reason an in-depth and contextually based piece of research was enacted which brought into focus the environmental conditions that were thought to influence a student's conception of learning. It was felt that a study that explored the particular environments that students found themselves and the conceptions which they held of their teachers and of their schools, would provide a more nuanced understanding of the conceptions identified and what factors were likely to have an impact on their development. In light of South Africa's multi-cultural character, investigating the particular conditions of learning in a way that illuminates the diversity and suggests appropriate policy initiatives that cater to that diversity is useful. If C2005's broadly agreed upon goals of addressing equity and development issues are to be achieved in all of South Africa's learning contexts, then a more holistic and empathetic response to the challenges may be needed. Gap

The decontextualisation of the student is a particularly salient concern in light of C2005's one-size-fits-all approach towards the extremely heterogeneous nature of South Africa's student population. As students from rural, township, urban, and suburban environments; speaking different languages and coming from divergent cultures, attempt to assimilate the new ^{university} modes of learning – very little is known about how they currently conceptualise learning (prior to the curriculum's implementation). In addition to incorporating the environmental factors that may influence the student's conceptions, considering the curriculum is of import, as what and how a student learns is largely determined by the pedagogy, content, and means of assessment. One of the hypotheses explored is the impact these have on student's conceptions of learning. Having a better understanding of how students approach learning is likely to help in predicting the likely sites of contestation between curriculum goals and the "conceptions of learning" held by students from disparate socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Use this

Such predictions will facilitate the transition that students will be required to make – a transition which the Department of Education has optimistically termed a "paradigm shift", but what others have deemed a "quantum leap" (van Harmelen & Kuiper, 1996).

^{university} ~~Very little is known on 1st year conceptions + approaches to learning~~
^{university} ~~in a course without a school background~~

- Gaps
- ① conception of learning - 47
 - ② approaches to learning - 49
 - ③ transition process + influences - above

Understanding how students conceive of, and approach learning in different environments will highlight the possible measures needed to affect a change in those approaches.

Learning outcomes, as well as the methods used to produce those outcomes are the normal currency used to assess the 'quality' or 'standards' of student learning that has taken place. A central point of contention for many educationalists, however, is that these indicators are often poor conveyors of how students engaged with the learning material and what the real impact of the learning process was (Meyer, 1999: 167). Most practitioners in the conceptions of learning research field agree that a student's approach to learning is almost certain to affect what they learn and the manner in which they learn it. If a student conceives of learning as seeing the world differently or as an act of transformation and personal growth, they may approach the learning tasks with a more critical or analytical mind in an attempt to make sense of the learning material for themselves. This would be viewed as a 'deep' approach and is generally seen as more desirable (but not necessarily efficient or effective within the structural constraints of a traditional curriculum.)

At the other end of the conceptions continuum we might identify a student with a conception of learning as the accumulation of knowledge which could plausibly translate into an approach that places import on the memorisation of facts. The difference between 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning roughly translate into the difference between traditional modes of learning entrenched in the old curriculum and the approach hoped for in the new C2005. Understanding how South African students from divergent environments conceptualise school and approach learning may facilitate the implementation of C2005 in ways that cater to that which is already present in an attitudinal sense, and highlight areas that can be targeted for the transformation of attitudes where appropriate.

Chapter 2 will provide an overview of four pieces of research that are most relevant to the present study. Each of them brings salient aspects to the discussion, and taken together they comprise a useful framework for an analysis of the student's conceptions. Chapter 2 will also provide an outline of the pertinent debates surrounding C2005 and some of the findings related to the mixed reception which implementation has so far received. These will be used to discuss how the students' conceptions in the schools under investigation are likely to be affected by the new reform.

In Chapter 3, the methodology, which was located within a qualitative approach, is discussed. The tools used to conduct the investigation included ethnographic observation, questionnaires, group discussions with the students, phenomenographical interviews, and student photographs of a "a day in my life as a learner". The method of selecting the ten students at each school will be explained and relevant aspects of how each methodological tool was used will be discussed. While a qualitative approach is concerned with gaining depth of understanding and not the generation of statistical

findings that are generalisable (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), it will also be pointed out why some quantitative results are provided to corroborate the qualitative findings.

Chapter 4 begins by describing the school and community environments that the students find themselves in and which are thought to have given rise to the various conceptions identified and explored. Themes generated during the group discussions and through my field observations are discussed in relation to what students said in the interviews about these themes. This chapter sets the scene for understanding and interpreting the student's conceptions of learning within the context of the students' conceptions of their school, their teachers, and the methods of control and discipline employed at the two schools. It also predicts some of the areas in which C2005 is likely to succeed or fail in relation to school cultures and ethos. The photographs taken by the children are interspersed throughout the text in this chapter as a means of bringing the issues discussed into perspective. This is also done in the following chapter.

Chapter 5 explores the conceptions of learning identified and examines them against the international body of literature on this topic. Similarities and differences between the two groups' conceptions are discussed and ways of interpreting them are proposed. Attention will also be drawn to the impact which gender, race, and socio-economic conditions were thought to have had on the development of the conceptions identified. Examining the likely effects that C2005 will have on these conceptions is another central focus of this chapter.

Chapter 6 summarises the study's findings and makes tentative policy suggestions that will assist students in circumventing the misinterpretation and failure of the key C2005 tenets.

C2005 has been taken as sth to change
the way student approach learning.
It is here to change the old way
(memorization) of learning to the new way
(critical thinking) of learning.

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Chapter 2

Outlining the development of 'conceptions of learning' literature

This study aims to investigate Grade 7 students' conceptions of 'learning' and 'school' at two very different schools against, and making use of, the literature on conceptions of learning. Unfortunately there is very little local South African literature related to this topic, particularly on this age-group, hence the development of a framework for this research emanates from works produced in dissimilar contexts. In some ways this is appropriate as the schools being examined are representative of extremely divergent cultures and socio-economic groups which co-exist in South Africa. Each one could probably find more similarities with a school a continent removed, rather than with its neighbour two kilometres down the road. The spectrum of educational institutions that are represented in the literature reviewed, therefore, will provide a number of useful benchmarks with which to analyse the conceptions unearthed at the two schools.

2.1.

Investigations into student's conceptions of learning began in the 1970s in Sweden and were almost synonymous with the emergence of 'phenomenographical' research. Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty (1993) describe phenomenography as an attempt to "reveal the qualitatively different ways in which people experience and conceptualise various phenomena in the world around them." This paradigm of experiential, or second-order perspective investigation, has largely been concerned with exploring and documenting how students themselves experience the phenomenon of learning (Svensson, 1996: 9). Focusing on the student's own description of a particular phenomena is viewed as a means of avoiding "making assumptions about psychological processes that may underlie that experience or about so-called 'objective facts' about that experience" (Lucas, 1998). Phenomenography emerged as part of a reaction to the positivist discourse that was pervasive in the field of education at the time, and was particularly interested in gaining an insight into the relationship between *what* and *how* students learned, while moving away from the preoccupation with *how much* was learned. The *what* and *how* aspects of learning were first identified as distinct elements in student's conceptions by Pramling (1983) when working with Swedish children between the ages of 3 and 8. This phenomenon has repeatedly been identified across a broad spectrum of learners and has resulted in the conceptions of learning literature taking a more subjective view of learning whereby 'knowledge' is seen as a relationship between the knower and the known, occurring within a specific context... "and not as something that can be tested against an outer reality" (Lucas, 1998:1). Thus, using students' own descriptions of the learning process allows for the contextualisation of the phenomenon, and a better understanding of the forces influencing the process.

Abolition p206 Big book 2.1

2.1 Why is the identification and evaluation of conceptions of learning important?

The importance of identifying + evaluating conceptions + approaches to learning

As it was indicated in Chapter 1, the 'quality' or 'standards' of student learning that has taken place are usually measured exclusively in terms of the outcomes produced or achieved. In the terminology of phenomenography, however, these could be deemed 'surface' appraisals of the learning process as the real impact of the learning process on the student is not conveyed by these indicators. Meyer argues that

... 'quality' outcomes, even when solicited via 'quality' procedures, do not necessarily reflect a corresponding underlying 'quality' of student learning engagement at an individual level or 'quality' that is attributable to teaching factors worthy of comparison, recognition and reward... (In the absence of any corroborating evidence about how an apparently 'quality' outcome has been achieved, an evaluation of just the outcome is incomplete and may even be misleading (1999: 167).

The 'corroborating evidence' that can provide a better understanding of the outcome is the students' own conception of what, why, and how they approached the learning process.

2.2. When teachers are aware of their student's own knowledge of his or her learning, as well as their student's conceptions of what learning is, they will be in a better position to evaluate how the student's prior knowledge impacts on the learning process and how the desired outcomes can be achieved. It could be argued that exploring students' understandings of learning is central to empathetic and effective teaching, particularly in relation to a "phenomenographic pedagogy" which stresses teaching for conceptual change (Lucas, 1998: 6). The elements of such a pedagogy bear a striking resemblance to some of the goals of South Africa's recently introduced educational reform package, Curriculum 2005. Later in this chapter (see section II "The South African Context") the significance of these similarities will be further illuminated and the importance of investigating conceptions of learning in relation to this reform measure will be discussed.

2.2 Significant Conceptions

2.4.1 The identification of five conceptions of learning by Saljo (1979) has formed the basis for much of the related literature. His study argued that these conceptions could be ordered hierarchically moving from an accumulative conception of learning towards one that was more transformative. The logical hierarchy is constituted by: 'an increase in knowledge', 'recall' of information for immediate or future usage, 'application', 'understanding', and 'seeing things differently'. Earlier work by Marton and Saljo (1976) had already posited that one could identify 'surface' and 'deep' approaches in learning and Saljo's hierarchy basically moved from conceptions that were surface-like to ones that were more deep.

The research of Marton *et al* (1993), *Conceptions of Learning*, with twenty-nine students studying in different fields at the Open University in Britain, was conducted over a period of six years and entailed annual interviews that were used to illicit a range of responses from

which categories of conceptions of learning could be identified. The relationships between the categories were also described, and the development and change in student's conceptions of learning were also charted. Using phenomenographic interviews (characterised by an open-ended, empathetic, line of questioning/dialogue) to prompt responses to the question "When you say learning, what exactly do you mean by that word", the research confirmed the five conceptions identified by Saljo (1979) and also posited a sixth conception – 'changing as a person'. Their study also aimed to give a more thorough description of each conception, and explain some of the commonalities, defining differences, and relationships between the conceptions. The most important argument made in the paper is that the first three conceptions:

1. *increasing one's knowledge*
2. *memorizing and reproducing, and*
3. *applying*

have all been described as reproductive or 'surface' conceptions of learning and are thought to be associated with low-level learning outcomes. The latter three:

4. *understanding*
5. *seeing something in a different way, and*
6. *changing as a person,*

have been interpreted as deep or constructivist views of learning that are likely to indicate more complex and desirable thinking processes.

Using the data gathered in conjunction with Saljo's (1979) interview transcripts, Marton *et al* (1993) argue that the first conception, **increasing one's knowledge**, covers all the different conceptions and is the foundation from which all other conceptions develop. In this conception, the 'what' and 'how' aspects of learning are not defined in a specific way within the person's life-world. The 'what' simply alludes to knowledge as having a "discrete and factual nature", and the 'how' is dominated by the 'consumption metaphor' in phrases like "picking up", "taking in" and "storing". Though not expressed as such, Marton *et al* also make reference to a 'when' dimension. They posit that...

common to all six conceptions is the temporal dimension and the idea of permanence. You learn something – it stays – you use it. In this first conception, just as in the fourth, only the first pole of the pair acquiring-using is focused on, in the third and fifth conceptions it is the second pole that is in focus (1993: 285).

In the second conception, **learning as memorizing and reproducing**, both poles of the acquisition-using pair are present. This conception is tied to a test or some kind of educational control or assessment in the school environment, and is differentiated from the previous conception by this anticipated act. One can infer that *how* this activity takes place is through the repeated reading or writing of subject content in order to commit it to memory, and then to repeat it in the test situation.

* Sometimes it depends (intentions/motivations) whether the students) is continuing with the course or just not (understanding/memorising).

The third conception, **learning as applying**, is related to the first conception in the sense that it is the 'using' pole of the acquiring-using pair. But again, learning is not specifically defined within the person's life-world and its usage is not specified. According to Marton *et al* (1993), in all of the first three conceptions "...the knowledge that is acquired by learning is seen as something ready-made, given, something that exists "out there", waiting to be picked up, taken in and stored."

The major point of differentiation between the first three and last three conceptions of learning is the element of *meaning*, with the higher order conceptions putting the learner in an affective role whereby they can influence and shape what the knowledge looks like and means. It is suggested that in these last three conceptions, learners develop a better understanding of reality by deducing meaning from the material presented. The fourth conception, **learning as understanding**, is dominated by visual metaphors such as 'looking into something' and the intention is to generate a personal perspective. Here it is the learner who is deliberating on the constituent elements of the course material and investigating their connections. The fourth conception is also noted for its "...delimitation to the study situation" in a similar fashion to conception two. However, the *modus operandi* is obviously quite different in this context.

The fifth conception, **learning as seeing something in a different way**, is delimited from the previous one by its emphasis on a change in the learner's conception of something. In conception four the idea/issue/material was navigated for the first time while in conception five it is approached again from a different angle which changes the meaning.

The sixth conception, **learning as changing as a person**, adds an existential aspect to learning and is hypothetically surmised by Marton *et al* when they say that...

By developing insights into – or a view of – the phenomena dealt with in the learning material, one develops a new way of seeing those phenomena, and seeing the world differently means that you change as a person (1993: 292).

They use a quote from their interview material to further clarify the meaning of this conception:

Sometimes if you learn something you may actually lose something...some kind of hide-bound ideas that I've had in the past. I lose them – they've changed. I think any type of learning is going to have to change you. (1993: 292)

This conception is conceived of as the ultimate learning outcome. Marton *et al* concede that this conception was expressed in only a few cases in their material.

(W)e do not believe that coming to an understanding of learning as becoming able to see certain things in certain ways or as becoming a different person are typical at all. It is

exactly for this reason that we think it is an important result to show that such a conception can actually be found (1993:299).

While it is acknowledged that the stated goal of the research was to develop better descriptions of the conceptions of learning categories - the analysis of the data gives minimal interpretation or evaluation of the data. We are only told that "there seems to be a developmental trend in the sense that conceptions higher in the hierarchy are somewhat more common in the later interviews than they are in the earlier ones" (Marton *et al*, 1993: 295). There is no attempt to correlate courses taken with changes in conceptions, nor is there any sort of analysis by age, gender, previous schooling experience or out of school occupation. While these items may have borne no correlation to the expressed conceptions of learning, simply knowing that would have been of interest. Another study, however, which did attempt a more comparative analysis in this field was done by Purdie, Hattie, & Douglas (1996), the salient features of which will be discussed below.

2.3 Factoring Culture into the Conceptions Equation

As the title *Student Conceptions of Learning and Their Use of Self-Regulated Learning Strategies: A Cross-Cultural Comparison* suggests, the scope of the inquiry has broadened in relation to the work discussed above. The Purdie *et al* research starts from the premise that "how one conceives of learning is likely to be influenced by the environment in which learning occurs"(1996: 87). They point out that most research into classroom environment variables has focused on Western academic settings. Their study extends the notion of 'environment' to include that of cultural context and asks whether "...Japanese and Australian students operating in different educational contexts, have the same conceptions of learning and use the same set of strategies to regulate their learning (?)"(1996: 87). They note that many of the western beliefs about learning have been applied to the increasing number of Asian students studying in Australia, and one result of this has been the creation of an "Asian" stereotype. This construction includes viewing Asian students as...

highly dependent on rote learning, concerned to produce what is learned with little insight or understanding of the material being dealt with. They are seen to view knowledge as something to be handed down by someone in authority and stored in one's memory. Hence, students do not question teacher's statements or textbooks...(and) they are viewed as passive learners, exhibiting compliance, obedience, and a concern only to absorb knowledge rather than to understand it (Purdie *et al*, 1996: 89).

In contrast, the stereotypical Australian student is regarded as more active, assertive, independent, self-confident, inquisitive, and explorative in their approaches to learning. With these very divergent stereotypes in mind, the study predicted that Japanese students - when compared with Australian students - would exhibit greater usage of strategies such as

'memorising and reproducing' or reviewing textbooks, and would be less likely to seek help from the teacher because of the cultural emphasis on persistence and personal effort.

The study examined 248 male and female Australian students aged between 16 and 18, from a range of five school types in a metropolitan area – and a similar sample of Japanese students. Participants were asked to respond (in writing) to 10 open-ended questions: 8 of which elicited responses to learning strategies that might be used in particular contexts, and 2 of which concerned student's conceptions of learning. Responses to the conceptions of learning could be categorized into nine distinct conceptions, six of which were almost identical to those identified by Marton *et al* (1993). The three new categories included: 'learning as personal fulfillment' which seemed to be quite similar to 'changing as a person' identified by Marton *et al*; 'learning as a duty', which was characterised by expressions of responsibility, obligation, and/or duty to oneself or other people in society (which was more prevalent among Japanese students – 14 versus 1); and 'learning as a means to an end' which generally inferred that it was useful for some unspecified purpose in the future such as a career. When analysed statistically, it was noteworthy that Japanese students did not conceive of learning primarily as a process of 'memorising and reproducing', but rather it was the Australian students who most frequently expressed such a conception. 'Increasing knowledge' (40%), and 'learning as personal fulfillment' (35%) were the most frequently expressed conceptions for Japanese students. Australian students, on the other hand, cited 'learning as memorising and reproducing' (60%) and 'learning as understanding' (58%) most frequently.

An analysis of the learning strategies showed that Japanese students did score significantly higher on the "rehearsing and memorising" and 'reviewing textbooks' strategies. Australian students reported greater use of self-regulated learning strategies but no correlation between *learning strategies employed* and *conceptions of learning* could be identified in either group. The only theme arrived at in this respect was that

...students who are more proactive in their learning, that is, who demonstrate greater overall use of learning strategies, are more likely to think of learning as a complex cognitive process rather than as a 'gathering and collecting' one (Purdie *et al*, 1996: 97).

Purdie *et al* argue that their findings do not support the stereotype of Japanese students as 'surface learners' with a reproductive view of learning. They also found it noteworthy that Australian students have a predominantly school-based view of learning related to studying or performing academic tasks. In contrast, the Japanese students were more likely to see learning as 'personal-fulfillment' which led the authors to suggest that it might represent "a greater congruence between the culture of the school and society in general." While Purdie *et al* sought to challenge some of the myths and stereotypes around nation-wide student identities, it was of concern that they seemed to merely replace old ones with new ones. Despite the samples of students in each country being selected from five different schools with acknowledged differences, the analysis is conducted along either-or lines without any regard for differences within the countries. Socio-economic classes, differences in school

characters (i.e. subjects offered, standards of teaching etc.), and gender issues were all ignored. Their concern with the school-culture relationship, however, does provide a segue into another study (Entwistle, Kozeki, and Tait, 1989) which explored the association between these two elements. Though it was also a largely quantitative study and the results were inconclusive, the correlates explored provide paradigmatic insight into the student-school, and student-learning relationships. This is discussed below.

2.4 Considering Student's Perceptions of 'School' and 'Teachers'

According to Entwistle *et al* (1989), earlier comparative studies of student's motivations and approaches to learning in British and Hungarian schools had shown interesting differences that were thought to reflect methods of teaching. This study was an attempt to develop new scales that would investigate elements of school ethos, school climate as well as perceptions of teaching in order to uncover their possible influences on pupil motivation and approaches to learning. Such a correlation had already been shown to exist in higher education (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983) and it was thought that similar reciprocity could be found in schools (at least at the secondary level). Some work had been done at the school level in this field already, and Entwistle *et al* cite Ramsden's (1981) work which developed a *Course Perceptions Questionnaire* which found that "a deep approach was associated with perceived 'freedom of learning' and 'good teaching', while a surface approach was linked with a 'lack of freedom in learning' and a 'heavy workload'."

This study by Entwistle *et al* (1989), using a sample 516 British students between the ages of 12 and 15¹ and a comparable sample of 602 Hungarian pupils, found that the two groups had very similar conceptions of the variables under analysis (conceptions of school, teachers and learning) despite the different educational and social systems operating in the two countries. For the purposes of my study, it was also unfortunate that the study did not divulge what the students' conceptions of learning actually were. While the conceptions of learning were not explored and the motivations to learning could not be statistically linked to students' perceptions of school climate or teachers, some interesting findings were made nonetheless. Students in British state schools consistently expressed the feeling that school was largely irrelevant – a sentiment not common amongst the Hungarian pupils. The Hungarian cohort perceived their teachers as less likely to use dictation, encourage copying from the board, or to dominate the lesson with teacher talk than their British counterparts. They also perceived their teachers as more ready to make links with real life. The authors concluded that in the light of previous studies showing Hungarian teachers as more likely to adopt higher levels of deep approach and holist styles in their teaching, very real differences in teaching methods and manner become identifiable. While the themes of this study are relevant to my research, the methodology was quite different. The study reviewed below, however, employs strategies

¹ It should be noted that while this is the same age group that I am investigating, they are located in the early phases of secondary school and not in the final stage of primary school as are my sample.

that I plan to emulate and it is likely to provide interesting points of reference against which my findings can be compared and contrasted.

2.5 Away from Categories towards 'Themes'

Dahlin & Regmi's (1995) study of Nepali student's conceptions of learning can be seen in a similar light to the work of Purdie *et al* (1996), in that it problematises much of the Western literatures' assumptions about learning, and makes a strong case for reviewing many of the assumed truths proselytised by academics in the field. A major stimulus for their work was to investigate the somewhat surprising findings of a *Study Process Questionnaire - SPQ* (Biggs, 1987) administered to Nepali and Australian students in 1991. According to the research results, Nepali students were more likely to adopt "deep" and "achieving" approaches to learning than their Australian counter-parts, which was a finding that supported the contention by Purdie *et al* (1996) that the 'Asian stereotype' was indeed a myth. Dahlin & Regmi's study was based on phenomenographic interview data collected from 30 university students engaged in a range of disciplines, and 29 school pupils between the ages of 14 and 16. In their analysis of the data, in some instances, they have veered from the normal phenomenographical method of categorizing the *differences* between the conceptions, and have chosen to concentrate on the *common themes* that recur in and across categories. They argue that an analysis of conceptions in a culture different to that of the authors is a delicate matter, and that the provision of common themes may serve as a useful "cultural context and background" (Dahlin & Regmi, 1995: 7).

The first theme identified is the '*social value of learning*' which Dahlin & Regmi find unsurprising in a developing country where education is often viewed as a privilege: "Through this position one has the possibility of being of help to others and of benefit to society" (1995:7). Learning, therefore, is frequently seen as a means to offer a service to one's family or country. A second theme is the '*moral aspect of learning*', and though only vague examples are supplied by the authors, it seems to refer to a human relations consideration of learning and the possible dangers of conceit, jealousy, or subordination that can be associated with differential education experiences. The '*environmental influence*' of learning forms the third theme and alludes to learning as an occurrence capable of being caused by anyone or anything in ordinary life. Here, "the learning process itself is described in terms of imitation or adaptation." Some doubt about the frequency of this theme may be appropriate, however, when at a later stage in the paper the authors say that almost all respondents seemed to automatically associate learning with what happens in school. The fourth theme is described as '*learning as being taught*' and highlights the inaccuracy of a common assumption that "...learning is being done by the learning person herself." Nepali conceptions of learning, particularly in the younger sample of students, are often embedded in the act of teaching: "...to learn means being taught by someone" (Dahlin & Regmi, 1995: 9).

The authors postulate that the fourth theme may be a result of linguistic features in the Nepali language where the words 'teach' and 'learn' are very similar. They also make mention of 'docility syndrome' in Asian students that Regmi identified in earlier research (1994). (This is identical to the Asian stereotype that Purdie *et al* (1996) attempted to debunk in their work.) Another feature of Asian students is their perceived reliance on rote learning which led Dahlin & Regmi (1995) to investigate the general relations between memorising, rote learning, and understanding. They suggest that Nepali students conceive of memorising as a tool to be used "when the material to be learnt is comprehended during study, but not yet assimilated and remembered", and is seen as a positive act which can increase knowledge and one's capacity to understand more material. Rote learning, in contrast, is generally perceived amongst Nepali students as a poor learning strategy and is used "when the learning material is not comprehended, or only partially comprehended." In rote learning there is negligible understanding of the meaning of the material studied. The absence of conceptions of learning as "memorising and reproducing" in the SPQ-investigation seems problematic as they obviously *are* present. The Nepali responses, however, problematise the common assumption that memorisation is bad, and highlights the complex and textually specific nature of conceptions. True to phenomenographical-style inquiry, the researchers further explored the student's conceptions of "what meaning really is". Their analysis of the responses is a useful addition to the contention by Marton *et al* (1993) that the concern with 'meaning' is the determining factor in higher order conceptions of learning.

Dahlin & Regmi (1995) discerned four categories of meaning from the data. The first category was '*meaning as word intention*' and was characterised by a preoccupation with dictionaries, the substitution of words that retain meaning, and the translation of words across languages to confirm understanding. This is probably more pronounced in Nepal because schooling is conducted in English which is often the student's second or third language. Dahlin and Regmi characterise this conception as being an "'atomistic' apprehension of meaning, focused as it is on single words, and their corresponding objects." The second category, '*meaning as contextual*', is described by the authors as 'wholistic', and suggests a 'totality' of something whereby meaning is understood through its relationship to something else...something larger. '*Meaning as application*' is the third category and captures some students' contention that if knowledge is not put to use or applicable, then the corresponding process of learning has no meaning. 'Application', however, could include explaining or passing on knowledge and is not confined to a practical dimension. The final category is described as '*meaning as knowledge*' where these two elements are almost conceived of as being synonymous. Because 'knowing' implies knowing meaning... "to have knowledge of something is to know the meaning of that thing."

In explaining the relationship between the four conceptions, the authors suggest that the first two conceptions of meaning ('*meaning as word intention*' and '*meaning as contextual*'), are both concerned with the 'acquiring' phase in a temporal sense, but meaning as 'word intention' is shallow by nature and its focus is on 'signs' - while meaning as 'contextual

meaning' is deep and the focus is on what is 'signified.' Conceptions three and four (meaning as application' and 'meaning as knowledge') are also considered to focus on the 'signified' and are therefore viewed as deep conceptions - but they are further along in the temporal dimension with conception three being followed by conception four. It could be argued that, in some ways, they all presuppose each other. The frequency of Nepali students conceptualising knowledge as 'word intention' leads Dahlin and Regmi (1995) to suggest that the findings of the *SPQ* may be misleading. Because meaning as 'word intention' focuses on the 'signs' and not the 'signified', they argue that the Western-centric questionnaire failed to uncover the nuances of the responses and distorted the Nepali conceptions. Ironically, the Western-centric study presented Nepali learners in a very positive light (from a Western perspective), even though the findings were misleading.

Dahlin & Regmi (1995) also investigated Nepali students' conceptions of what the outcomes of learning were, and posit that these could be organized into three groups: '*learning as change of behaviour or way of life*', '*learning as change of consciousness or understanding*', and '*learning as change of both understanding and behaviour*'. The first conception was illuminated by responses that indicated changes in the learner's outward life such as "adjustment to society...changing one's habits and etiquettes...(or) using information in real life activities." The second outcome conceived was characterized by responses which alluded to changes in understanding the self, or change in one's consciousness or intelligence, and the third is an integration of the first two whereby a change in understanding or a cognitive shift has resultant behavioural implications. Dahlin and Regmi ask whether these conceptions of change are equivalent to the conception identified by Marton *et al* (1993) - '*learning as changing as a person*', and suggest that while there are similarities, the differences are more pronounced. The western conception described by Marton *et al* (1993) is restricted to changes in understanding or capability, while the Nepali conception has behavioural, moral, and social connotations. They tentatively attribute these differences to the "prevalence of collective 'moralism' in Nepal...and of individual 'existentialism' in the west." Concluding their report, Dahlin and Regmi posit that "...culture does not determine the content of the learning experience in any absolute sense. But it does seem to influence which aspects of the experience are accentuated, and which are left in the background." In light of the fact that this comparison was based on data generated by different authors, using different methodologies, it seems appropriately conservative and provisional.

While this work provides both an interesting analysis of Nepali conceptions and an informative contextualisation of the phenomenon being researched, the paper did not quantify the responses nor - unfortunately for my purposes, did it clarify differences between the younger and older age cohorts' conceptions. There are intimations, however, that most of the analysis was generated from the university students' responses. The study's most useful contributions to the present research are that it focuses on conceptions of learning held by students that are learning in a second language, and it is located within the context of a developing country (although the specific conditions of neither the education system nor the

economy are spelt out). Most of the literature reviewed prior to Dahlin & Regmi (1995) focused on the Western world of which Oakland Primary is very much a part. Having the perspective of students in another developing country with which to compare the Thembisa Primary cohort's conceptions is a valuable reference point.

Omitted from all of the studies reviewed above is any reference to a) the nature of the educational systems or schools within which the students are participating, b) the specific social and economic environments which the students find themselves in, nor c) any individual insight into the lives of the learners themselves. It is felt that these issues may be of central importance to understanding the conceptions of learning held by students in the present study. The social and economic environments of the two cohorts will be discussed in the beginning of Chapter 4, and pertinent information on the individuals will be forthcoming throughout the methodology chapter and also in the results and analysis chapters. Because both of the schools under investigation are South African state schools that have fallen into the same education system relatively recently (1994), a system in the process of undergoing radical change and revision, it is to this system's transient nature that attention will now be turned.

2.6. The South African Context

Technicist, broadly inclusive, market-oriented, functionalist, critical, western-centric, democratic, equity-driven, positivist, exclusionary, post-modern, neo-liberal, empowering, indigenous, constructivist – are all terms that have been used to describe the new education reform package in South Africa known as Curriculum 2005 (C2005). A possible reason for the plethora of interpretations of the new guiding policy is the sheer size and scope of the intervention. C2005 (and its sister construct the National Qualifications Framework [NQF]), is a comprehensive and ambitious programme designed to fundamentally reconceptualise the way education in South Africa is disseminated, assessed, and credited. First implemented in Grade 1 in 1998, it is characterised by a move from content-based teaching to outcomes based learning; from fragmented subject disciplines to integrated learning clusters; from a teacher-centred pedagogy to one that is learner-centred and creative; from examination based assessment to continuous assessment that takes multiple forms.

The reform rests upon the ANC led government's desire to effect social transformation, speed up reconstruction and redistribution, and create a unified, equitable, and inclusive education system which meets the needs of all the country's people. At the same time, the new curriculum must conform to the pressures of globalisation which inculcate market-oriented societies that demand multi-skilled, critical thinking worker-citizens. A sizeable discourse exists around the deficiencies and inconsistencies of C2005, much of which falls outside of the particular focus of this study. (See Moore, 1996; Mudau, 1998; Muller, 1996; Nekhwevha, 1998; Sieborger, 1997; Soudien & Baxen, 1997; Vally, 1999; and van Harmelen & Kuiper, 1996 for a fuller discussion of these debates.) Elements of this discourse are, however,

pertinent to the question of how the new curriculum is likely to impact on students' conceptions of learning and will, therefore, be referred to in places below. What is most relevant to the present study, however, is the *intended* curriculum as displayed in the Department of Education's explanations and directives to teachers on how to implement the reform.

2.7 C2005 and Conceptions of Learning

In a series of booklets issued by the Department of Education (1997), the new curriculum's goals, pedagogical principles, content, and forms of assessment are laid out. Despite the omission of curriculum considerations in any of the studies on "conceptions of learning" that were reviewed in the previous section, all of these issues are likely to effect the way students conceptualise learning. The Department of Education describes the differences between the "old" and "new" curriculums as follows.

OLD	NEW
Passive learners	Active learners
Exam-driven	Learners are assessed on an on-going basis
Rote-learning	Critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action
Syllabus is content-based and broken down into subjects	An integration of knowledge; learning relevant and connected to real-life situations
Textbook/worksheet-bound and teacher centred	Learner-centred; teacher is facilitator; teacher constantly uses groupwork and teamwork to consolidate the new approach
Sees syllabus as rigid and non-negotiable	Learning programme seen as guides that allow teachers to be innovative and creative in designing programmes
Teachers responsible for learning; motivation dependent on the personality of the teacher	Learners take responsibility for their learning; pupils motivated by constant feedback and affirmation of their worth
Emphasis on what the teacher hopes to achieve	Emphasis on outcome – what the learner becomes and understands
Content placed into rigid time-frames	Flexible time-frames allow learners to work at their own pace
Curriculum development process not open to public comment	Comment and input from the wider community is encouraged

(Government Publication, 1997: 6-7)

What becomes apparent from the changes envisioned is that students' conceptions of learning have to alter dramatically if a) the old system did operate in the narrowly defined way in which it is characterised above, and b) if teachers and pupils can successfully implement the new system as proposed. Because C2005 is essentially concerned with developing students

to who take a 'deep' approach to learning, there is a need to find out what students' conceptions prior to C2005's implementation are and discern the likely sites of contestation and difficulty for attaining the policy's goals. In light of C2005's concern with engendering social equity, it is also important to understand whether socio-economic and cultural factors are likely to be influential in aiding or hindering the reforms' intended goals in particular school settings.

Lucas argues that while phenomenographic investigations cannot explain the causality of the conceptions identified, they do provide a valuable basis for further research into what factors influence the formation of certain conceptions and how they could be changed (1998: 6). Changing conceptions is likely to be a critical factor in determining whether the Department of Education's "paradigm shift", (or what van Harmelen & Kuiper refer to as a "quantum leap", 1998) is successfully navigated. Before the conceptions of the Grade 7 students participating in the present study are looked at in Chapters 4 and 5, some hypothetical scenarios of how conceptions will have to change can be deduced from looking at C2005 directives against the "conceptions of learning" literature already reviewed.

- ④ In terms of the "old" curriculum, one would expect that the 'passive learner' (which would be the character of the students investigated in this study according to the Department of Education) in an 'exam-driven' system learning by 'rote' would have a conception of learning in line with the first two categories described by Marton *et al* (1993) – "increasing one's knowledge" and "memorising and reproducing". What is less clear, however, is how the 'active learner' who will be involved with group work and the "construction and production of knowledge" (C2005 Booklet A, 1997: 17) will conceptualise learning. A conception of learning as "increasing ones' knowledge by producing it" or "learning as constructing knowledge" has not been identified anywhere else in the world amongst any age group of students – something which suggests that C2005 is producing a student prototype in uncharted territory. The C2005 booklet also states that "different aspects of the learner's abilities, such as their creativity and critical thinking will also be assessed" (1997:12). When this assessment criteria is coupled with the contention that students "will know what they are learning and why," it implies that students will have to possess a conception of learning as "being creative" or "learning as thinking critically" if they are to succeed in the system. The first of these hypothetical conceptions has not been identified elsewhere, but the second one could possibly be associated with conception number 5 in the hierarchy developed by Marton *et al* (1993) – "learning as seeing things differently".

C2005's goals of "critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action" imply that students will be expected to hold a conception of learning that is associated with those numbered 3, 4 and 5 in the hierarchy of conceptions suggested by Marton *et al* (1993) – learning as "applying", "understanding", and "seeing things in a different way". One might suppose that the "learning as applying" conception would also be engendered through C2005's aim of making learning "relevant and connected to real-life situations." This translates into an attempt to shift learners' conceptions from the 'surface' approaches in the lower sections of the hierarchy, towards the 'deep' approaches in the higher sections.

While C2005's theory of 'process' is situated in the objectives of promoting learner-centredness, democratic/curricula programmes, active participation, critical thinking, reasoning, reflection, and action...the desired 'product' is very specific in that a student must be prepared for what the Department of Education describes as the "world of work" (C2005* booklet, 1997:13). The subjects of the new curriculum (or "learning areas") also display a *preoccupation with employment. While Accountancy was offered as a subject in the "old" curriculum at the senior school level, the inclusion of "Economic Management Sciences" and "Technology" as subjects in the primary grade levels in the new curriculum indicates the *desire to develop a conception of learning that is linked to "applying" in all students from an early age. In a temporal sense, "learning as applying" will be a conception that is demanded in the present tense through the process of learning, as well as prospectively in terms of *applying what is learnt in the job market. In the description that Marton *et al* provide of the category "learning as applying", they note that application is rarely defined in specific terms of when or how the application will take place (1993: 288). If this is the case for university students who are on the verge of entering the "world of work", how Grade 7 students will be able to make that very specific link envisioned by the Department of Education is unknown.

The "Human and Social Sciences", "Arts and Culture", and "Communication, Literacy and Language Learning" subjects are all included with the intention of inculcating behavioural changes. The subjects purport to enable students to "interact with each other and the environment", "develop creativity and explor(e) the diverse cultures that exist", and improve communication which "can only lead to a South Africa free of intolerance, misunderstandings and prejudice" respectively (Government Publication, 1997). All of these subjects imply that *students will need conceptions of learning as "changing as a person" and "seeing things in a different way" as described by Marton *et al* (1993) if they are to engage with the curriculum's content in an appropriate fashion. Both of these categories of conceptions were sparsely represented amongst the university students in that study, and were not identified amongst the cohorts in the study by Purdie *et al* (1996). Dahlin & Regmi's (1995) findings amongst the Nepali students in a developing country context, however, may be comparable with the intentions of C2005 in this respect. "Learning as change of behaviour or way of life" and "learning as change of consciousness or understanding" were conceptions held by the Nepali students as the "outcomes of learning", which may imply that these conceptual goals are not unattainable. What is of interest is whether or not these conceptions are contextually specific and largely attributable to the developing-nation site of learning. However, without knowing what students' conceptions of learning are prior to C2005's implementation, it will be difficult to gauge whether the desired shift has been effected and in which schools it has been achieved. The conceptions of learning identified in the divergent sites of learning that the students of this study occupy may shed light on whether C2005 goals will be achieved in all contexts.

In attempting to link the elements of C2005 that will demand changes in the way students conceptualise learning, it becomes clear that some of the conceptions called for have not been

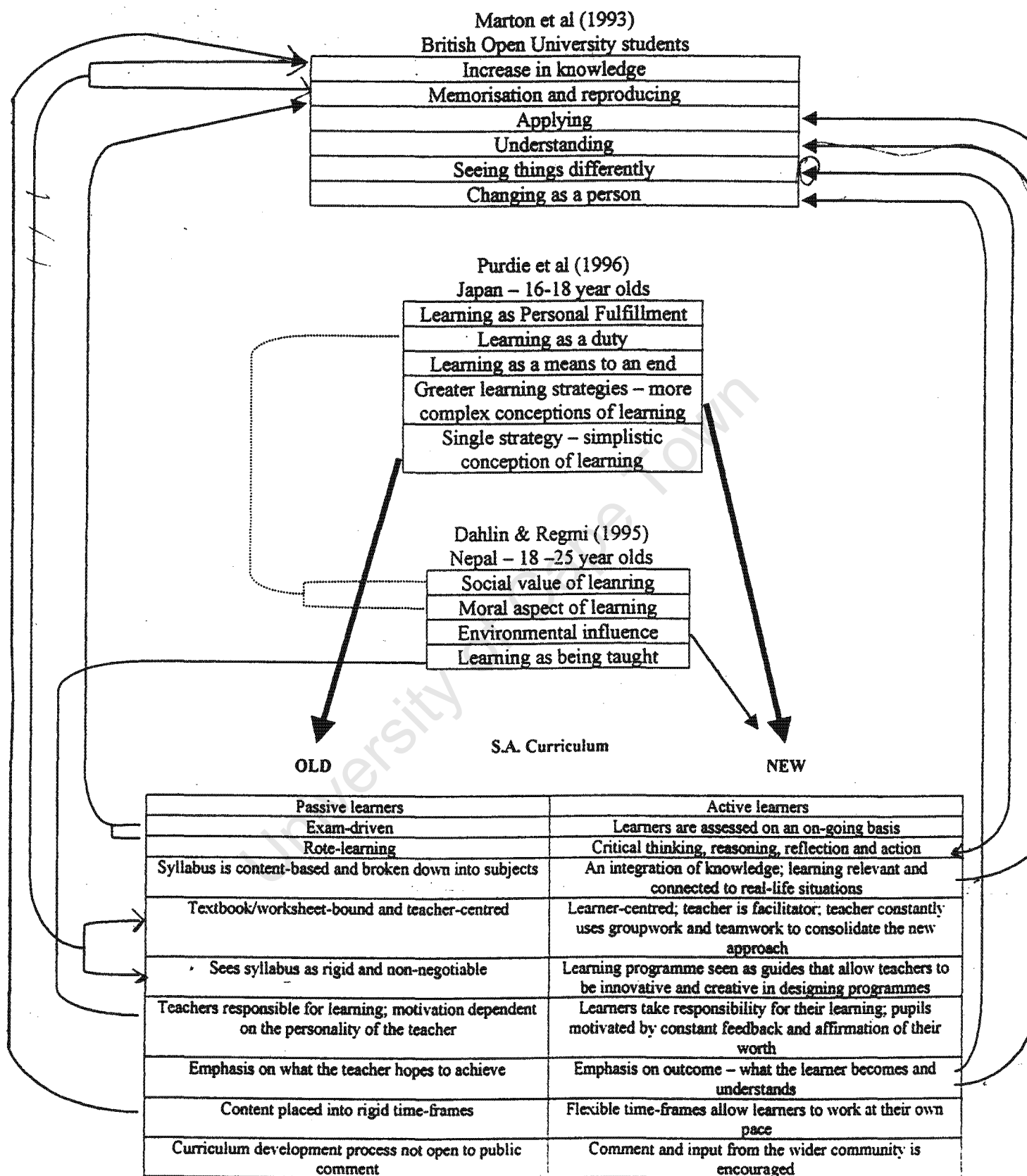
identified in previous research and that others have been located in very disparate contexts in terms of both the age-groups of students and geographically. A map diagram on the opposite page attempts to show which conceptions identified in other research are most closely associated the "old" curriculum in South Africa, and which are linked to C2005.

What the diagram illuminates is that the pedagogical, content, and assessment goals of C2005 are indeed ambitious regarding students' conceptions of learning. South Africa's "old" curriculum exhibited elements that demanded only low-order, "surface" approaches to learning. The only conception of learning identified in studies apart from that of Marton *et al* (1993) that could be located in the old curriculum is that of learning as "being taught" which was identified by Dahlin & Regmi (1995). It should be noted, however, that it is those people wishing to replace the "old" curriculum that have furnished its unflattering character and that it has been portrayed in a somewhat biased fashion. Despite the "old" curriculum's teacher-centred pedagogy, uniform modes of assessment, and disregard for making content specifically relevant to the context a student was learning in – it would undoubtedly have viewed "learning as understanding" as a conceptual goal for students.

Similarly, C2005 has a keen interest in making "learning as understanding" a conception that is held by students. But in addition to this, the diagram shows that it aims to engender the other higher order conceptions linked with 'deep' approaches to learning. The diagram also attempts to show that C2005 implicitly aims to develop a number of student conceptions identified in other studies that make a closer association between learning and society. A learner-centred pedagogy can be linked to "learning as personal fulfillment", and the emphasis on applying what is learnt to the 'world of work' could be associated with "learning as a means to an end" – two categories identified by Purdie *et al* (1996).

The finding by Purdie *et al* (1996) that "students who are more proactive in their learning... who demonstrate greater overall use of learning strategies are more likely to think of learning as a complex cognitive process than as a 'gathering and collecting' one" (1996: 97), is another goal implicit in C2005. The desire to diversify teaching methodologies in the "new" curriculum, coupled with a move away from singular modes of assessment, can be viewed as a refutation of the "memorising and reproducing" conception of learning. What can not be shown in the diagram is exactly what will take the place of memorising and reproducing as this is somewhat vague in the new curriculum's outline and seems to be dependent, to a large extent, on the creativity, preferences and abilities of the individual teachers. A possible concern relating to the locus of control for syllabus design being placed with the teacher in the new curriculum is that 'knowledge' or 'learning' may become more parochial. With subject content being dependent on the teacher's knowledge, innovation, and creativity as textbooks containing a "rigid and non-negotiable" syllabus become subordinate, the conception of learning as "increasing ones' knowledge" may be subsumed by learning as "being able to do..." (the tasks my teacher sets me). When the school's resources and the

Figure 2.1: Conceptions of Learning Literature and Curriculum 2005



knowledge of the teacher circumscribe these tasks, the socio-economic conditions of the school and the quality of a teacher's training become very relevant.

The last section of this chapter will draw attention to some of the concerns raised by critics of C2005, and will attempt to show how these concerns may manifest themselves in relation to the development of students' conceptions of learning.

2.8 Criticisms of C2005 and how these may impact on conceptions of learning.

Some analysts posit that C2005's aim of generating greater equality amongst schools will be undermined as "it is likely to increase the resource and performance gap between black and white schools" (Vally & Spreen, 1998: 14). An impact study of C2005 in thirty-nine schools in KwaZulu Natal supported this hypothesis and found that factors contributing to this unintended divergence of effects were manifold (Vally & Spreen, 1998). Reasons cited included the non-implementation in many Black schools, the resources and materials available through non-state funding to White schools and the limited ability of the state to provide either materials or information to Black schools (1998: 14). What the study does not tell us, however, is whether performance is improved in the black schools where it *was* implemented, or how "approaches to learning" were effected in the divergent contexts. As it was pointed out earlier (in section 2.1.1), outcomes in performance terms alone are often of negligible value in ascertaining the true impact of the learning experience (Meyer, 1999). While a future divergence of conceptions of learning amongst the two groups of students in the present study may be the result of C2005's implementation due to issues of divergent resources, discovering whether they are already different prior to the reform's implementation is a necessity for evaluation purposes.

Commenting on C2005's theoretical underpinnings, Soudien & Baxen (1997: 451) suggest that official departmental documents at both the national and provincial levels reveal the "underdeveloped state of the discussion and debate on the philosophical and pedagogical principles underpinning the OBE initiative". They note that a sense of the relationship between the 'process' and 'what is to be produced' is markedly absent from the discussion. This concern raises the very real possibility of students being lead half way through the "paradigm" shift in terms of pedagogical and content changes, but not being able to achieve the outcomes in the intended fashion due to a lack of clarity on how they are to be produced. Learner-centredness, content changes, and very different modes of assessment will force students to reconceptualise what learning is (i.e. it is no longer about "memorising and reproducing" nor only about "increasing ones' knowledge") – but if the intended results are not achieved then they may be left in a conceptual void and unclear about what learning is about now. ✱

Soudien & Baxen (1997: 456) also note that the standardization of general outcomes in OBE is culturally modern and inescapable for South Africa's majority of Black students.

OBE in this sense is viewed as simply a form of technology designed to shift learner's mindsets from the primitive (in this case, African) to the modern (European)... The OBE vision of the learner has been abstracted from the social conditions of poverty, continued racial oppression, and pedagogical neglect. (1997: 456)

Their argument implies that C2005 is a reform catering to South Africa's white, middle-class minority and is doomed to fail in contexts outside of this orbit. What is not clear from their argument, however, is whether they feel that students in under-privileged learning contexts are unlikely to succeed in the new curriculum because the processes, content, and pedagogies of the reform are incompatible with these students' conceptions of learning and world-view – or whether these students will succeed in the “modern (European)” paradigm only through the refutation of previously held conceptions about learning and society. Is the “shift” possible but insensitive to contexts, or is it impossible due to “social conditions of poverty, continued racial oppression, and pedagogical neglect.”

In another instance Joe Samuels and Natheem Hendricks draw attention to the cultural subversion at work when ‘standard generation’ in the new curriculum is exclusively in English (Nekhwesha, 1998: 27). Nekhwesha feels that “...by adopting these global trends we will end up with global mono-cultural paradigms which exclude our way of life from the global sphere.” He goes on to say that C2005 “...has the potential of excluding the cultural *knowledge and experience of the African people and fostering a culture of science.” While these contentions may have a histrionic tone to them, investigating students' current conceptions of learning (particularly in the township setting) will illuminate whether the issues which Nekhwesha and Soudien & Baxen raise as problematic are likely to be contested.

Other contextually specific issues that may be in conflict with C2005 include the unabated use of corporal punishment despite legislation outlawing it, and the insistence that one's elders (teachers) have undisputed authority in some cultures. From preliminary field research undertaken at the two schools, it was thought that all of these issues would be pertinent in understanding what factors impact on students' conceptions of learning and the reception which C2005 is likely to receive in divergent contexts.

2.9 Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged in South Africa that the dearth of information on the status of education in the country poses serious problems for the planning and implementation of policies. In practical terms (exactly how many teachers do we have and what are their

qualifications?) as well as sociological, psychological, and cognitive terms (what are rural, female, Kwa-Zulu Natal students' attitudes towards the maths curriculum?), the country's data base is woefully sparse. This void becomes apparent in the dissonance between policy and practice as is witnessed by the difficulties encountered in C2005's implementation (see Vally, 1998 and Vally & Spreen, 1998 for an extensive review of the problems). Van Harmelen & Kuiper, (1996) see the major difficulty of implementing the new curriculum as being "...trying to merge rather than match – the objective reality of the curriculum presented as worthwhile knowledge with the subjective realities within which the curriculum operates." Investigating these "subjective realities", the conceptions of learning they give rise to, and their likely implications for the success of C2005 is the focus of this research as a contribution towards bridging the policy-practice chasm. Very little has been written about education from the student's perspective, and investigating educational conditions from their point of view is an attempt to draw attention to an often neglected element of the discourse. It will ultimately be argued that the students themselves constitute a valuable source of information that may provide insight into ways of improving the system.

My research can be conceptualised as an attempt to reconnaissane the territory of conceptions in the divergent school settings prior to C2005 implementation at the grade 7 level in the year 2000. It may also provide useful base line data to monitor the reform's effects on students' attitudes and approaches to learning. Understanding those conceptions is the first step towards being able to change them.

The following chapter details the methodologies that were used to investigate students' conceptions of school and learning.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study focuses on the conceptions of 'learning' held by twenty grade 7 students (between 12 and 15 years of age) at two very different schools, and on the factors contributing to those conceptions. For a number of reasons, a naturalistic or phenomenological approach within the qualitative methodological paradigm was adopted to investigate the student's conceptions. Firstly, because this study is of an exploratory nature in terms of being the first in the South African context amongst this age group, it seemed inappropriate to adopt a large-scale quantitative study before the relevant conceptions had been distinguished and the possible factors contributing to any discernable variation identified.¹ Secondly, my aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of how a limited number of students experience 'learning', rather than produce findings that could be generalised for a diverse student population. While I hope that my findings may raise questions about some of the previously broadly accepted notions of what 'learning' is, I also acknowledge the complexity involved in how these conceptions are arrived at. It is this complexity that I am attempting to interpret, and a qualitative approach that advances holistic inquiry and greater depth of investigation using fewer cases (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was best suited to my goals.

3.1 The Sample

I came into contact with Thembisa and Oakdale Primary schools while completing "teaching practicals" towards a Higher Diploma in Education. The rapport established with the teachers and principals at both schools during this time greatly facilitated the implementation of this research project, and gaining access to the schools was not difficult.

One of the aims of this research was to uncover the *variation* in student's conceptions of learning, and therefore the selection of the students in terms of academic ability, race, gender, and geographical location was thought to be of importance. To include a range of students with varying academic ability at both schools, I asked the teachers to select an equal number of top, middle, and bottom 'achievers' from the two grade 7 classes at each school. There were also an equal number of boys and girls.

¹ I am not aware of any studies of this nature having been done elsewhere in the world either, apart from Dahlin & Regmi's (1995) study amongst Nepali students which included some 14-16 year olds in the sample. The results from this study, however, were almost exclusively derived from the conceptions held by the 19-25 year olds participating in the study according to Dahlin & Regmi, and the younger groups' conceptions were not differentiated from the larger sample.

In discussion with the teachers, after they had selected a possible group of 15 students from their school, an attempt was made at Oakdale Primary to include students representative of the racial mix at the school, as well as students from different geographical locales around the schools. After considering all of these factors, the final group from Oakdale Primary was comprised of ten students with the following biographical profiles.

Table 3.1: Oakdale Primary cohort biographical profile²

Name	Age	Gender	Place of Residence	Race³
1. Mvulani	13	M	Oakdale	Black
2. Saphelo	14	M	Oakdale	Black
3. Dumisani	14	M	Thembisa	Black
4. Allistair	12	M	Oakdale	White
5. Alex	12	M	Oakdale	White
6. Rachel	12	F	Oakdale	Coloured
7. Allison	13	F	Oakdale	White
8. Lisa	13	F	Oakdale	White
9. Tamlyn	13	F	Oakdale	White
10. Boniswa	13	F	Thembisa	Black

Academic ability was equally spread throughout the group, and they were all between the ages of 12 and 14. 80% of the Oakdale cohort had spent their entire schooling career there. Rachel had moved in and out of the school on two occasions, as her father's work had required her to do some schooling in Durban and Mvulani had schooled in an ex-model C school in the Eastern Cape before arriving at Oakdale Primary in grade 5. Once the group had been selected, the aims and activities of the research project were described to them, they were asked if they wanted to participate, and parental consent was obtained through a permission slip.

A similar method of student selection was conducted at Thembisa Primary and the biographical profiles of the students there are displayed below.

² It should be noted that the names of the schools and pupils participating in this study have been changed in the interest of anonymity.

³ While I am loathe to perpetuate the categorization of people in terms of race, it has been included because it was a signifier of difference which was relevant to this study in terms of whether race/culture plays a role in the development of conceptions of learning. Race is a very real basis of differentiation in light of South Africa's history of racial discrimination and the differences in resource distribution that stemmed from this. South African schools are still feeling the effects of apartheid policies.

Table 3.2: Thembisa Primary cohort biographical profile

Name	Age	Gender	Place of Residence	Race
1. Sandile	14	M	Gugulethu	Black
2. Vuyani	14	M	Thembisa	Black
3. Bulali	15	M	Khayelitsha	Black
4. Andile	15	M	Woodstock	Black
5. Mandla	15	M	Thembisa	Black
6. Aviwe	12	F	Thembisa	Black
7. Ndileka	13	F	Thembisa	Black
8. Zihle	13	F	Thembisa	Black
9. Nontobeko	13	F	Thembisa	Black
10. Siphokazi	14	F	Newlands	Black

From the initial list of 15 possible students proposed by the teacher, an attempt was made to include representatives from a variety of backgrounds. The students participating in the study from Thembisa Primary had all originally lived in Thembisa Township, however, two of the boys had moved to surrounding townships within the last four years. Andile had moved into a Boys Home in Cape Town's city centre recently, and one girl had moved into a relatively affluent white suburb with her mother who was a domestic worker there. All of those living outside of Thembisa traveled to school by train. Academic ability was equally spread throughout the group, and they were all between the ages of 12 and 15. Parental consent was not sought as the deputy principal deemed it unnecessary and thought it unlikely that the permission slips would be returned.

While I was looking for variation in the student's conceptions of learning, some unintended similarities existed between the two schools that assisted in limiting the possible explanations for the variation uncovered. For example, both of the schools were well established, had been in existence for more than fifty years, and currently had female principles. Both of the student cohorts were in co-educational classrooms of comparable sizes³ and were taught primarily by young to middle-aged, male teachers.

3.2 Choosing a Method

A number of research tools were used to gather data. The conventional ones included ethnographic observation, questionnaires, and group discussions with the students – all of which were employed to uncover background information and develop a context for

³ The Thembisa Primary classes had an average of seven more students per class (43 as compared with Oakdale Primary's 36).

investigating the student's conceptions of learning. Those of a more unconventional nature included student photographs and phenomenographic interviews. While most of the data used to illuminate and analyse the student's conceptions of 'school' and 'learning' came from the interviews, the other sources of information complimented their content and played a role in structuring the interviews.

3.2.1 Group Discussions

Three group discussion were held at each school. At Oakdale Primary these meetings took place in the 'audio-visual room', and at Thembisa Primary in a disused classroom. The meeting times were arranged in advance with the teachers, usually taking place at both schools on the same or consecutive days. At Oakdale Primary they were held during a less rigorous academic lesson such as 'library' or 'singing', and at Thembisa Primary any time after 12:30 p.m. as students were rarely taught after their lunch-break. All of the group meetings began with an 'ice-breaker' that took the form of light entertainment such as a game of charades or a celebrity description competition done in teams.

With the phenomenographical mode of inquiry in mind, which seeks to uncover the subject's own particular understanding of a concept, I thought it imperative that students be able to express themselves freely in their first-language. While I can speak and understand Xhosa with a reasonable degree of proficiency,⁴ I did not feel I would be able to interact with the students optimally in this language. Because I was searching for a nuanced understanding of their conceptions, I employed the services of a first-language Xhosa speaker who was unknown to the students for the first meeting at Thembisa Primary. It soon became apparent, however, that her translation skills were unnecessary, as all of the students could understand my English/Xhosa questions, and that my Xhosa was proficient enough to understand most of what they said. I encouraged students to speak Xhosa and most of them did. Whenever I was in doubt about a student's remark, however, I either asked them to repeat it more slowly or for another student, whose English was very good, to translate. This seemed to be a better arrangement as the translator's age appeared to demand a certain amount of respect more akin to the teacher-student relationship at Thembisa Primary. I felt that it was necessary for a less formal relationship to exist between the researcher and subject if I was to succeed in uncovering honest and uninhibited conceptions of 'school' and 'learning' (which might include negative comments).

While I had been a 'student teacher' at both schools when completing my 'teaching practicals' the previous year, both groups of students had been in the grade below the classes I

⁴ I have grown up in the Eastern Cape (a Xhosa speaking region) and spent one year teaching in a rural Transkei school.

taught. I tried to distance myself from the role of 'teacher' by dressing less formally and insisting that they address me by my first name. All of the group discussions were audio-taped and I assured the students that nothing they said would be relayed to their teachers. Having the group discussions recorded on tape also allowed me to return to sections of the meetings at Thembisa Primary where I had been unclear about what a student had said. With the assistance of a first-language Xhosa speaker I listened to the group-discussion recordings and was able to identify occasions when my understanding had only been partial, and that opportunities for furthering the discussion on interesting points had indeed been missed. This was unfortunate, but to some extent this could be remedied during the individual interviews by reminding the student of what they had said in the group discussion and then asking them to elaborate. The students did not seem to mind the presence of a tape-recorder, and growing accustomed to its presence during the group discussions made it less of an issue when I used it to record the individual interviews at a later date.

The first meeting was used for getting to know the students; asking them general questions about their school and the learning activities they engaged in; listening to some of the issues relating to current events; and finally, for describing the project in detail and explaining what was expected of them. Both groups of students responded very positively towards the games and with the odd exception of an initially shy student, they seemed to enjoy the activities. "This is much better than doing school-work" was a common remark, and their task of describing each other to me in pairs generated a lot of good-humoured information about themselves. Their enthusiasm for discussing the good and bad aspects of their school (particularly the latter at Oakdale Primary) was sometimes overwhelming. It took a fair deal of effort to prevent the discussion from turning into full-blown gossip session, but their remarks were often informative and provided me with useful references upon which to construct the later interviews.

The second group discussion centred on photography and how it could be used to tell us things about people's lives. (This meeting will be discussed further under the photography section below.) The third and last meeting, which was held after the interviews had been conducted and on the next to last day of the school year, was used to look at and comment on each other's photographs and to hold an informal party thanking them for their participation. Issues which had been raised by individuals during the interviews were held up for group discussion, and some of the same questions I had asked individually were put to the group as a whole. The sweets and cool-drinks, however, won their attention and very little additional information about their conceptions of 'learning' and 'school' was gleaned from this session amongst either cohort. The last session was also used to ask them to reflect on their experience of the project.

3.2.2 The Photographs

The reasons for using photographs taken by the students themselves were multiple. A primary motivator was the desire to give the students something to do that would simultaneously be enjoyable and novel, while also provide me with a further source of data for investigating their conceptions of school and learning. It was thought that by giving them a project in which they could express themselves, be encouraged to reflect on their experiences of the concepts under investigation, and have something to take away from the project – their cooperation and trust was more likely to be attained. All of the students responded enthusiastically to the cameras and this was especially evident amongst the Thembisa Primary cohort, none of whom had taken a photograph before.⁵

The use of visual imagery as a research tool is a largely neglected source of information in the social sciences according to Jon Prosser (1998). The case studies reviewed in the book edited by Prosser, *Image-based Research*, provided useful insights into the ways photographs could be used to augment classic research methodologies. Despite the attributes that a photographic mode of enquiry present, the ability to selectively display photographs in ways that serve the researcher's agenda, at the expense of objectivity, may be problematic. This concern is allayed to some degree because the students themselves took the photographs, and I have also attempted to include a sample representative of all the students' photographs.

Kodak agreed to donate the disposable cameras needed for the project, and UCT's School of Education assisted in the developing costs. A period of time towards the end of each group discussion was devoted to talking about how images could be used to portray the way people live and how they feel about issues. The second group discussion meeting saw the students looking at a variety of photographic pictures I had cut out from newspapers over a period of time, which depicted a broad spectrum of people in terms of race, gender, socio-economic class, and occupation. The students were paired up and asked to tell the rest of the group as much about the person as they could using all of the visual clues available to them in the photograph. The aim of this exercise was to get students thinking about photographs as conveyors of information, and to point out that I hoped they would use this photography project as an opportunity to tell me about themselves, their school, and learning, through the use of images.

During the course of the group meetings students were asked to think about what they would photograph that would best depict their lives as learners. On the day prior to the chosen date,

⁵ Advice and ideas on using photographs were obtained from "The E.U. / CWCI Fund Pinhole Photography Workshop" – an exhibition of pinhole photographs by the youth of Nieu-Bethesda, produced during workshops conducted by Jo Ractliffe and Jean Brundrit at the Ibis Art Centre in Nieu-Bethesda in January, 1999.

each student was given a disposable camera with a built in flash that had 15 exposures. By means of a written hand-out [translated into Xhosa for the Thembisa Primary students and back translated to insure uniformity in the directive (Brislin, 1986)] they were asked to photograph "A Day in My Life as a Learner". The instructions went on to say that

(t)he photographs can be of anything, as long as they communicate what a day in your life as a learner is like. Try and take the photographs at intervals throughout the day, but if you want to take more at a certain time because it is an important part of your day as a learner – you can. I am not concerned with your photographic ability, but only with *what* you choose to photograph. //

Because some of the pictures may not turn out, please write down what you have photographed, and roughly what time you took each picture. The cameras have flashes, so you can take your pictures indoors or outdoors, during daylight or when it is dark. // Please bring your camera to school on Friday so that I can collect them and have them developed.

These instructions were loosely based on the directives that Robert Ziller (1990) used when he conducted research using similar photographic procedures. The students were provided with a photograph chart with columns for 'time', 'what did you photograph', and 'other comments' which they pasted into small notebooks I had given them. The directions were discussed and any queries they had I answered. Both groups of students completed the project on the same day. The main reason for limiting the timeframe was to reduce the likelihood of the cameras being misplaced (or stolen). A second reason was more aesthetic in that the idea of making the contrast between the schools more immediate in a temporal sense was appealing given the close proximity of the schools. The only additional piece of advice given to the Oakdale Primary students for taking their photographs was to avoid taking them directly into the sun and they all assured me that they knew how to take photographs. A slightly more detailed set of instructions was given to the Thembisa students on how to operate the cameras and when to use the flash as it was the first time any of them had taken photographs.

The photographs were developed within four days and I had reprints of all the photos made for my research purposes, giving the students their original copies. A major concern of mine was that the photographs would not come out, and I was greatly relieved to find that only four of the 300 photographs could not be developed and that the quality of the images was very good. The students were asked to write their names on the back of each of their photographs and to number them chronologically in the order they took them. The excitement of viewing their photographs and showing them to each other hindered the speed of this process and it proved to be somewhat chaotic, albeit encouraging. Many of the students were keen to begin discussing the photographs with me immediately and were very reluctant to return to their classes when the allotted time for our meetings had expired.

3.2.3 Content Analysis of Photographs

It was envisaged that the photographs would serve two research purposes, the first being that a content analysis alone would be revealing of student's conceptions of 'learning', 'school', and the factors that might contribute to such conceptions.⁶ While some interesting differences and similarities in the two cohorts' sets of photographs did emerge, they were not as revealing as had been anticipated. Two University of Cape Town lecturers and two fellow students also viewed the photographs and they too found it challenging to identify any prominent or consistent characteristics that could form the basis of trustworthy analysis. Some possible explanations for the dearth of information to be gleaned from content analysis might include the limited amount of time, and number of photographs available to the students for depicting their lives as learners. Had more resources been available for an ongoing photographic project where multiple rolls of film could have been taken, interspersed with discussion and reflection, a more nuanced and complete set of data might have been obtained.

A number of the students mentioned people, activities, or objects that they would have liked to include but were unable to. The reasons for limiting the time frame of the photography project to one day have been mentioned above, but it became clear that a number of the activities which students regarded as important did not take place on the specified day.⁷ While this feeling was more prevalent at Oakdale Primary, other complicating factors arose at Thembisa Primary. The novelty of the photographic experience seemed to result in an abundance of portrait photographs with the subject of these photographs being predominantly friends and family, sometimes donning their Sunday best. While these were often telling in themselves and the background content of the photographs portrayed the very different learning conditions these students experienced as compared with the Oakdale Primary students – the opportunity to take more photographs may have produced a more diverse body of visual imagery. Another factor mentioned by the Thembisa students was that of peer pressure. Students who were not participating in the project seemed to convince members of the research group into taking photographs of them on occasion. This only seemed to happen twice but it is still a concern when the objective was to uncover a particular student's

⁶ This component of the photographic research was based on similar studies conducted by Zille (1990) on a range of issues as divergent as differences between men and women's perceptions of 'self', to the differences between conceptions of 'war' held by 9 year olds in the United States and Germany.

⁷ Because 'the day' chosen to take the photographs was during the first week of a school term, no sport was held at Oakdale Primary. A number of students at that school mentioned sport as being one of the most positive aspects of the school experience for them.

portrayal of their *own* life as a learner. Despite these problems the content analysis was revealing in and of itself, though not to the extent anticipated.

3.2.4 Photographs as Interview Aids

The second reason for having the students take photographs was the belief that the photographs could be used to enhance the interviews and make the issues being discussed more tangible. As Carlsson Britta (1999) has argued, five attributes can be discerned when respondents are asked to take their own photographs.

Multiple methods enhance inquiry; photos can serve as communication bridges between strangers; photography makes it easier to represent a situation; photos can be regarded as complex expressions of the photographer's relation to the world; and finally, photos enhance the expressing of feelings.

All of these positions proved to be consistent with my experience. The most noteworthy was that of enhancing communication between strangers, and this proved particularly valuable where three students were reluctant to talk. Their initial hesitancy or (inability) to express their personal opinions on the somewhat abstract concepts under investigation seemed to dissipate after they had warmed up by talking about the people and places they had photographed. Questions about 'learning' and 'school' could then be directly linked to the content of the photographs.⁸ Despite a few of the students' introverted nature, I felt that I came to understand their lives much better through the photographs. This was particularly true for the Thembisa student living in the Boy's Home, the Thembisa student living in the relatively affluent suburb, and for one of the Oakdale students who was partial to monosyllabic responses. Some of the most instructive comments made by all of the students were prompted by dialogue around particular photographs. Britta's (1999) assertion that "photography makes it easier to represent a situation" was also confirmed in that students were able to depict the 'situation' at home far better than they could have described it. For example, my understanding of how, when, and where students did their homework was greatly enhanced by photographs that showed the inside's of their houses.

Roughly one third of the photographs have been interspersed throughout the results and analysis chapters of this dissertation. This is done with the intention of providing the reader with a better view of the research findings and to illuminate specific images that engendered the results. The photographs also force the reader to confront the reality of the student's lives and ameliorate the anonymity that subjects take on in most research. While the photographs will hopefully give the reader a fuller 'picture' of what is going on in the subjects lives and

⁸ Examples of the line of questioning generated by the photographs will be detailed below in the section on 'Interviews'.

how I arrived at my conclusions, it also opens the research up for greater critique. I am fully aware that while photographs purport to 'capture' reality, they also have the ability to distort it. What lies outside of the pictures frame, what events took place preceding and following the brief slice of life depicted, and does the image provide an accurate portrayal of normal life – are all questions that need to be asked. It is felt, however, that the photographs contribute to a broadening of the dialogue around how and why students conceptualise learning and schooling the way they do, and therefore serve an important function.

3.2.5 The Interviews

Once the photographs had been developed and distributed to the students, an interview roster was drawn up at both schools. At Oakdale Primary this was facilitated by the HOD who provided me with the timetables for the grade 7 classes and identified those lessons that could be used for interviewing purposes. The student's then selected the times they wanted to be interviewed within those parameters. Again, these were during the less rigorous academic subjects though some of the 'high achieving' pupils were given permission to miss lessons taught by the HOD himself. At Thembisa Primary all of the interviews took place at 12:30 p.m. and the student's also selected the days they wanted to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted over a three-week period, usually having one at each school on the same day.

The interviews were semi-structured, revolving around ten key questions with some of them containing derivative questions (see Appendix A for the interview schedule). The questions were not always asked in the same order and some of them were repeated at different stages of the interview. Each interview lasted for between 50 minutes and an hour and I began each interview by assuring the student that a) none of my questions had right or wrong answers, b) that I was only interested in hearing about their honest opinions, and c) nothing they said would be relayed to their teachers. Some of the initial interviews then proceeded straight into the interval schedule, and dealt with the photographs at a later stage. I began the fourth interview, however, by asking the student to arrange their photographs on the table, to tell me what was depicted and why they chose to take these particular images. This proved successful in getting the students talking more freely and developing confidence. I retained this method for the rest of the interviews. While I have no doubt that some of the students would have provided sufficiently rich data without the aid of the photographs, I am also certain that the photographs greatly assisted others. Never did I feel that they detracted the student's attention from the core issues being investigated, and the opposite often seemed to be the case.

With the phenomenographical mode of inquiry in mind, many of my questions were derived from their responses to other questions. Asking that they "tell me a little bit more" about

something they had just said or to “explain exactly what you meant” by a certain term were common requests that I made of them. Many of the questions around “what is learning”, or “how do you learn”, were framed by something they had just said about a particular subject or teacher. The word ‘learn’ often seemed to be used by the students in a variety of contexts and I often asked them if there was a difference between ‘learning’ as in *x*, and ‘learning’ as in *y*. I made a point, however, of asking “what does learning mean to you” at the beginning and *end of each interview without the question being related to any particular context. Each interview was concluded by asking the student’s to comment on the six categories of conceptions of learning detailed by Marton *et al* (1993) and to tell me which ones they agreed with, disagreed with, or wished to expand on. This was of great interest as many of the student’s responses to these categories appeared to contradict the conceptions of learning they had expressed earlier. It was also interesting to note that some the student’s conceptions of learning expanded in depth during this section of the interview.

Both an inductive and deductive analysis was done of the student’s responses in that I first attempted to allow themes and categories to emerge from the data, and then attempted to fit the responses into the categories previously outlined in the literature review. The inductive analysis produced variations on previously recognised categories, but did not generate any new ones. The data has been structured in a way that deals with the responses from each cohort that make up a category separately, and then they are compared.

While the phenomenographical approach has the potential to develop insightful commentary, it may also be more susceptible to the subjective ‘baggage’ that a researcher brings with them to the task. Gloria Dall’Alba (1996) points out that phenomenography can be seen as part of the twentieth century rise in qualitative research methods and cites Denzin & Lincoln’s (1994) description of qualitative research to show the affinity between the two. “(It is)...multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This *means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.”

The next chapter will explore the students’ conceptions of their school, teachers, and issues revolving around discipline.



Photograph # 1 (O P)



Photograph # 2 (T.P)

Chapter 4

Interpreting School – Reflections on the Environment

Within the Cape Town metropolitan area, I have encountered two dramatically different schools with vastly different characters. Even though the schools are in close spatial proximity (approximately two kilometres apart), a train line and the enduring effects of divisive apartheid policies divide the racially mixed but predominantly white suburban school (Oakdale Primary), and the all black township school (Thembisa Primary). Statistics gleaned from the *Statistics South Africa* (1999) on the levels of education and income in the two communities provide telling information on the disparities between the environments which the two groups of students find themselves in.

Table 4.1: Highest Education for Weighted Person

Highest level of education	Oakdale	Thembisa
Matric only	2953 (49%)	4596 (80%)
Matric and certificate or Matric and diploma	1533 (26%)	746 (13%)
Bachelors Degree; Bachelors degree and diploma; Bachelors degree and honours	1119 (19%)	360 (6%)
Masters Degree; Phd	396 (7%)	14 (0.2%)

Note: The above table excludes non-matriculants because the available data not show age. The disparity would undoubtedly have been even more apparent had the adult population without matric been included. The table is an approximation of the education levels of adults /peers/ in the two communities with reference to the cultural capital surrounding the participants in this study.

**Table 4.2: Levels of Income for head of household
by Derived household income**

Monthly Income	Oakdale	Thembisa
0	41 (1%)	1869 (17%)
0-2500	641 (17%)	7626 (68%)
2501-6000	1035 (28%)	1247 (11%)
6001 +	1925 (53%)	434 (4%)

* Adapted from *Statistics South Africa* (1999)

The income differentials of the communities have had a large impact on the operating budgets of Oakdale and Thembisa Primary schools. In line with the South African Schools' Act

(1996) which has permitted schools to levy fees¹, Oakdale Primary charges roughly R3000 per annum for tuition as compared with Thembisa Primary's R30 annual fee.² The divergent school fee structure manifested itself in a number of ways when looking at the resources of the two schools.

Where Thembisa Primary has no additional resources apart from the basic building, textbooks, some stationary, and a recently donated computer which has still to be used – Oakdale Primary is endowed with numerous photocopying machines, a fax service, an intercom system, computers for administrative purposes and a computer laboratory for students. Oakdale primary also has a library, an audio-visual room, a plenitude of over-head projectors, a swimming pool, one tennis court, a well-kept sports field, and a number of vehicles to transport students to various sporting and educational events.

Oakdale Primary has 460 students and 14 class teachers. This is complemented by a principal and deputy principal, both of whom teach some subjects to the senior pupils of the school (Technology is taught by the principal, and the deputy principal teaches maths and poetry). The school also has four teacher aides, three music teachers, one librarian, one art teacher, two remedial teachers, and two Xhosa teachers. Additional staff takes the form of two secretaries, one caretaker, one groundsman, three maintenance workers, and four cleaning staff. While Thembisa Primary has a very similar number of students (449), the entire teaching staff is 15 and the principal does not teach any lessons. The only additional employees at the school are one secretary and one groundskeeper.

Despite travelling back and forth between the two schools on a daily basis, the aesthetic contrast was always arresting. Oakdale Primary appeared almost as a natural feature of the environment - looking like a large house in the middle of the neighbourhood, surrounded by trees and an appealing garden. Thembisa Primary, on the other hand, had an institutional feel to it being surrounded by a high, barbed wire fence that enclosed barren, unkempt grounds and a two story brick building that looked somewhat like a prison. A disused security gate-house with the windows smashed welcomed one to the school.

Upon entering Oakdale Primary one is met by a foyer/waiting area that is replete with couches and a water fountain bubbling away. After perusing the numerous photographs of recent and current events at the school on a bulletin board, and the framed artwork by pupils that adorn the walls, one can page through the school's glossy annual magazines. The school's corridors are decorated with ever-changing series of art works, school projects, and pictures of past pupils and staff from the last three or more decades. The photographs taken by the Oakdale students portray the well-kept nature of the school building. A feeling of cleanliness, efficiency and order pervades the school.

¹ This funding policy arose out of recommendations by the Hunter Commission (Gilmour, Soudien & Donald, 1997)

² It will be pointed out later in the chapter how the Thembisa school supplements their budget.



Photograph # 3 (O.P)



Photograph # 4 (T.P)

In contrast to this Thembisa Primary is all but devoid of any aesthetic embellishments. A few government issued posters about learning are scattered about the administration block and the odd poster of photographs from a choir event that took place more than five years ago can be found in the principal's office. Everything else is bare as you sit on the wooden benches outside the secretary's office. Toilets rarely flush, doors are often off their hinges, and the public pay-phone is usually out of order. The contrast with Oakdale Primary is stark.

The disparate conditions of the schools also translates into very disparate levels of teacher morale. Informal conversations with Thembisa teachers revealed a high degree of discontent and disillusion with the education system and a strong desire to leave the teaching profession.³ On the other side of the railway line, the Oakdale teachers appeared enthusiastic, energetic, and their involvement with numerous sporting, cultural, and other extra-mural activities seemed to confirm a dedication to their jobs. In light of the Department of Education's contention that "the curriculum is everything that influences a learner, from the teachers and the work programmes...to the physical buildings" (C2005 booklet A: 10), the contrasts between the two schools detailed above are pertinent factors in trying to illuminate students' conceptions of school (with a view to identifying and understanding their conceptions of learning).

Much of the literature reviewed for this study paid cursory attention to the contexts that gave rise to particular conceptions of learning. It was implicit, however, that Japanese students were learning in a context very different to that of Australian students (Purdie *et al*, 1996), that Nepali students (Dahlin & Regmi, 1995) were learning in a different context from British Open University students (Marton *et al*, 1993), and that the sites of learning were also different for Hungarian and British school-goers (Entwistle *et al*, 1989). In light of the general consensus that 'deep' approaches to learning are good and something to develop in learners, ascertaining what factors are most likely to inhibit or enhance such approaches is important for purposes of policy development. While Marton *et al* (1993) make the point that they are looking at 'learning' within the confines of school or institution based learning, divorcing it from the broader context of the student's life-world may limit how well we can understand the conceptions identified. It is for this reason that I have decided to situate the conceptions of learning illuminated in this study within a framework of the students' attitudes towards their school, their teachers, and their environment. Embedded in these attitudes is information about, *inter alia*, the different communities that the two sets of students find themselves in, the role their parents play in their education, and at times, details of students' personal lives that impact on their approaches to learning. The background detail will provide a useful base for analysing the differences and similarities in conceptions of learning at the two schools which are dealt with in the next chapter. The students' conceptions of their school, environment, teachers, and discipline were intertwined and complex, but for purposes of clarity I have chosen to deal with them separately while also attempting to show that they are connected and how they impact on one another.

³ These sentiments and the low morale of township teachers are well documented in Pager's (1996) dissertation on "The Culture of Learning in Khayelitsha Secondary Schools."



Photograph # 5 (O.P)



Photograph # 6 (T.P)

4.1 Going to School

While conducting this research, it soon became apparent that the socio-economic disparities between the two groups of learners and their schools had a profound impact on the way students viewed school. Even though 'school' for the relatively privileged Oakdale Primary students was often perceived as something that "we have to do" or "I go because my mother tells me to", it was a place endowed with good facilities that they appreciated.

- It's a nice place to go because we've got nice teachers and lots of stuff to do. (Alex)
- I mean... everybody has to go to school, so I have to go too. But it's not so bad... we're always busy and I actually get bored sometimes during the school holidays so I'd rather go to school than not go. (Allison)

It was a place they had to go to, but fortunately it was enjoyable. The Thembisa Primary students held a conception of school antithetical to that of the Oakdale students in that school was a place they wanted to go, but unfortunately it was a place full of problems and in need of transformation. For these students, school was frequently viewed as a passport out of poverty and away from crime. This attitude was particularly prevalent amongst the Thembisa Primary boys, four of whom responded to the question "why do you like going to school... what motivates you to come to school" in ways represented by the following quotes.

- If you just stayed at the location, you'd think of all the wrong things, like you will think, "heh, I don't have money, let me go steal something"... like, "let me go steal empties from this place in my street where they buy them for 50c, let me go steal empty bottles and sell them." Like it will grow in you. They say that something big starts off small. /t¹ (Sandile)
- Because when I go to school I want to have knowledge so that when I'm old I don't have to sit around in the location. When I'm old I want to be able to do some work. Maybe when I'm teaching or when I'm working some place I can have my own things and money. /t (Mandla)

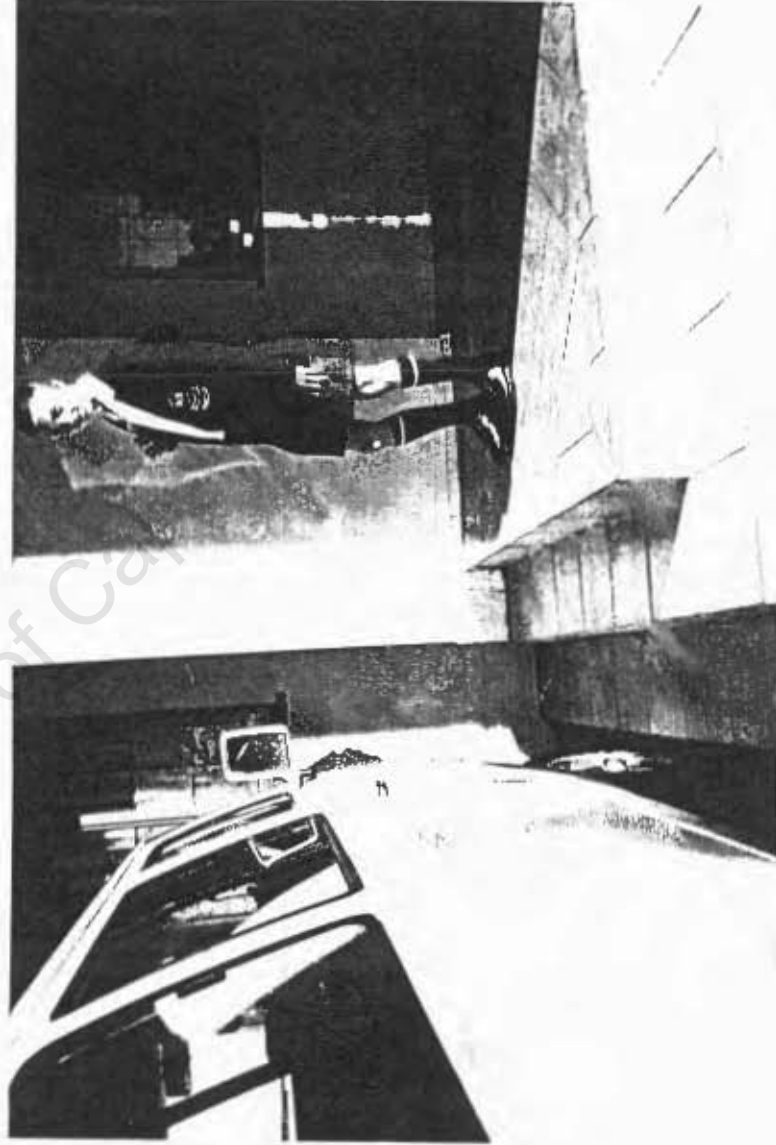
While school was a place to gather the skills necessary to affect a positive change in one's life (or prevent a negative change from occurring), the students' disenchantment with township conditions was often carried over to the school, a site that reflected the environment from which the students came. When students were asked if they would make any changes to the school if they were the principal, the types of responses elicited from the two groups of students were indicative of their levels of happiness at school. The Thembisa cohort was particularly vocal about problems needing attention, problems that ranged from those of a physical nature to those concerned with the conduct of individuals. Improving the school's security and lamenting the absence of recreational areas were the most common critiques in terms of resources.

- ... I'm going to change the school gate and put in an alarm because the break-ins need to stop... the caretaker doesn't see anything. t (Siphokazi)

¹ /t/ means the quote has been translated from Xhosa



Photograph # 7 (T P)



Photograph # 8 (O P)



Photograph # 9 (T.P)



Photograph # 10 (T.P)

- Firstly, you know this old man who is supposed to look after the school ... I'm going to let him retire and get some security guards with big guns or something. /t/ (Sandile)

School security was obviously a major concern with six of the ten students mentioning it as something they would address if they were the principals. Its impact on the school was noticeable in the form of broken windows and doors hanging on hinges that had been forcibly opened. Imposing security gates on all classroom doors and burglar bars over all windows induced comparisons with a prison. The bareness of classrooms, almost completely devoid of posters, bookshelves, over-head projectors, or anything else but the bare essentials bore testimony to the threat of vandalism and theft. It was interesting that while the Thembisa students were critical of the school's security, rarely did they complain about the lack of teaching resources. (Only one student, Ndileka, cited the absence of computers and the shortage of textbooks in some subjects as problematic.⁵) The apparent satisfaction with the available resources may have suggested that they were simply unaware of supplementary means to learning such as multiple texts in a library, educational videos, computers, art and technology workshops etc. It will be shown in the following chapter that the Thembisa Primary students' acceptance of the materials they had to learn with seemed to influence their understanding of learning as being confined to, or defined by, the given text (or the notes on the board). The students could, however, see the state of neglect and disrepair that the school's sporting facilities were in and it proved to be a much maligned aspect of their conception of school.

- These fields at the back must be fixed so that we can play sport. soccer or cricket, netball, whatever. The teachers are just ignoring sport at Thembisa. And they ignore us because we can't play on the field at the back because it's just bushes, but then the teachers shout at us when we play here (in the parking lot next to the administration block). /t/ (Sandile)

- And they must make this ground right for playing soccer. /E/⁶ (Bulafi)

Some variation on these comments referring to the neglect of the field, was mentioned by eight of the ten Thembisa students and it became apparent that both the boys and girls sorely missed sports facilities at the school. The only extra-mural activities mentioned by the Thembisa students were 'choir' (mentioned by two of the boys - both saying that it was their favourite thing about school) and 'dance'. Aviwe was the only student to mention 'dance' but was not very positive about it as the following dialogue illustrates.

A: I was doing the dancing and drum majorettes. We practised and then we would get invited to perform at a funeral or something... but I didn't like it.

Q: Why didn't you like it?

A: Because when we were given the donations for XXX (inaudible), and then we came with the money, the teacher who was teaching us the dancing, she ate the money... we didn't have the kit to dance. She ate the money so I didn't like it.⁷ /E/ (Aviwe)

⁵ Ndileka expressed disappointment over the perceived failure of a short-lived computer course that was once offered at the school. It cost R10 a session and took place six times over a two-week period. She did not know why it had been discontinued. She also said that few students had been able to afford to partake, and that she did not think she had learnt very much from the course.

⁶ /E/ means that the response was given in English by the Thembisa Primary student.

In a similar vein but from the opposite perspective, the Oakdale students repeatedly mentioned the importance of extra-mural sport as one of the highlights of their schooling experience. The following responses to various questions show the centrality of sport in the student's experience of school

Q: What motivates you to go to school?

A: ummm...I guess because I play so much sport and I have lots of friends and it's a really nice school to go to... I just really enjoy coming here... doing all these activities. (Alex)

Q: Tell me about this picture. (see photo # 11)

A: Well, I took this one because I'm a house captain and this year my name's going on that trophy because we won the inter-sport. So, I guess I took it because I like the sport here a lot and I'm good at it. (Dumisani)

Q: If someone moved into your neighbourhood, how would you describe your school to them?

A: It's quite nice. I think we have the nicest school in Oakdale because (at) some of the other schools you have to do a certain number of sports. You only have to do one sport here, and I'm not a sporty person so that's actually good, but I like swimming so I do swimming. (Tamlyn)

Q: If you were the principal of this school would you make any changes?

A: No...but I'd make sure there was proper soccer at the school. And rugby too...that's it. (Saphelo)

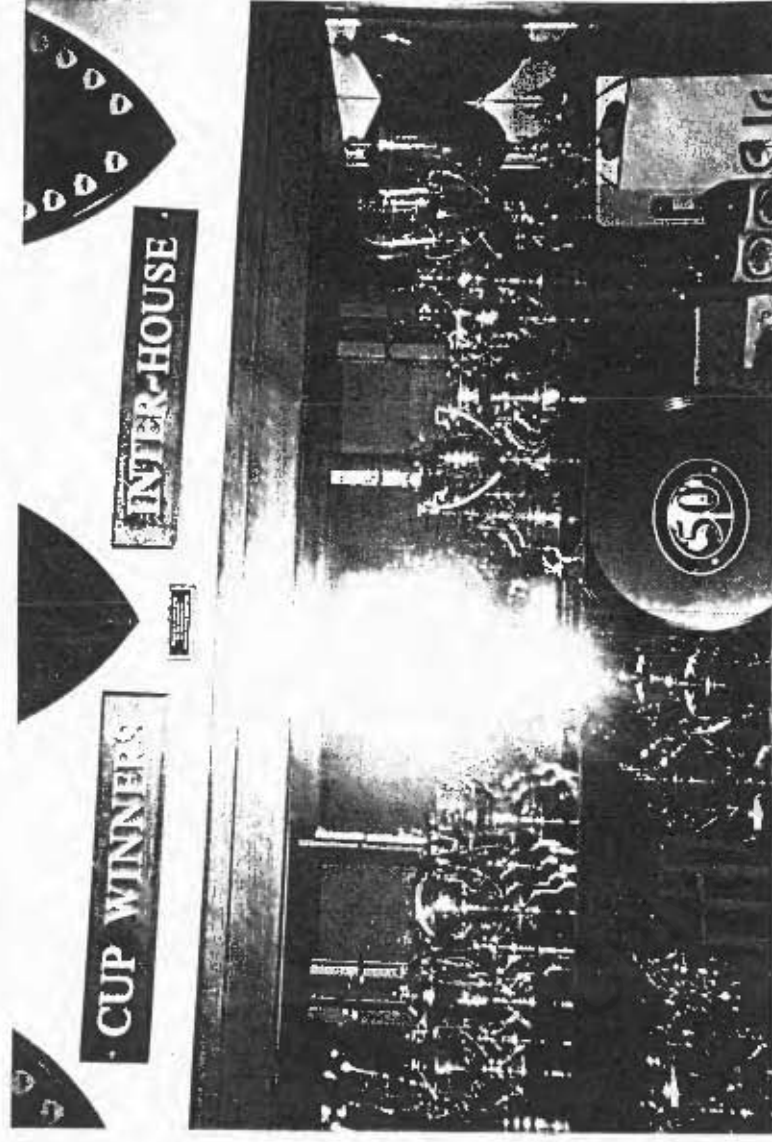
- Actually, I think I'd include more sports because we hardly have any. Like at X (the private school she's going to next year) they have softball, because it's a girl's school anyway. (Boriswa)

Q: What do you think of your school?

A: I think it's pretty cool, but I think the field could be bigger and we could have more tennis courts... (Allison)

The Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, recently commented that it was regrettable that sport was absent from many schools in South Africa. "The experience of other countries has shown that school sporting activities lead to a higher performance in competitive sport" (Cape Times, 15/03/2000 – Sapa). While these comments were made in the context of South Africa's attempt to secure a World Cup soccer bid, with the emphasis being on competitive sporting success, interviews with the students showed that sport played other very important functions. Even though larger fields, more tennis courts, and a larger variety of sports were some of the things the Oakdale Primary students would change if they were the principal, the comments made by them reinforced the important role sport played in making the schooling experience attractive. While its recreational value was obvious, it could be argued that sport was an important corollary to learning in that it provided meaningful opportunities for teacher-pupil relationships to develop outside of the classroom in a more relaxed atmosphere. The following comments by Alex and Mvulani illustrate this.

⁷ It was subsequently revealed that the 'teacher' was not an employee of the school, and that "eating the money" meant that she absconded with the funds



Photograph # 11 (O P)



Photograph # 12 (O P)

Q: How are your relationships with the teachers?

A: I've got a good one with Mr A. because he's my hockey and cricket coach, so I'm XXX (inaudible) with him. /.../ I roil the pitch for cricket and I set up all the kit /.../ and I do all that stuff with him. So I have a good relationship with him. (Alex)

Q: What's your relationship with the science teacher like?

A: It's pretty good because...when we played in the soccer tournament, I was in the team and he was the coach...but it's not as strong as my relationship with Mr W. (Mvulani)

A major problem with peri-urban/township education is the extremely high incidence of 'drop outs' (see Motale, 1995). Three of the five boys at Thembisa Primary mentioned playing informal sport in the school parking lot as the thing they enjoyed most about school, and all four of those boys played soccer in the afternoons with clubs that were not affiliated with schools. While providing students with 'quality' education is obviously the primary aim of schools, getting them to attend is a prerequisite and sport may be an effective draw-card. While the Thembisa students participating in the study are obviously still in school, four of them said that they missed school at least once a week. Two of the older boys (Sandile and Mandla, both 15 years old) had missed one entire year of school (or large portions thereof) through truancy. Sandile explained that

I repeated standard four because I just didn't go there (Thembisa) for almost a year. I got up in the morning and went to a friend's house...and we just watched movies. Or we went to the station over the railway lines at Epping and played video games. /.../ I think my friend influenced me the most to do these things...and my mother *always* thought I was at school. /t/ (Sandile)

Sandile said that he eventually returned to school because he "wanted to be a better person", and Mandla returned because he "had to get serious about school." It was apparent in these two cases that school was not a very inspiring, entertaining, or active place to be for them, and it was only through self-motivation that they attended. Mandla did say that he enjoyed participating in the choir, but that was the only positive attribute he could think of.

- There's nothing else I can enjoy about school. In the classroom they just teach. /t/ (Mandla)

One of the Thembisa student's favourite photographs was that of the athletics medals won by her sister who attends an up-market private school at the expense of their mother's employer. The obvious value she placed on these awards highlighted an activity and the recognition which she coveted but was not given the opportunity to participate in.

The information about students and their conceptions of school detailed above raises a number of questions about how C2005 will impact on them. The high rate of absenteeism coupled with cases of missed years of schooling by some students is a major problem at Thembisa. A C2005 booklet wistfully argues that making the curriculum more engaging will ensure that students come to school. From the student's comments, however, what seems more likely to ensure their attendance is more extra-mural activities, particularly in the form of sport. While it is possible that an engaging curriculum would improve attendance records, it doesn't solve the problem of bringing those students who have missed years of schooling up

to speed through remedial tuition. Where Oakdale Primary employs two teachers specifically for that purpose, 15 year old students like Sandile and Mandla are likely to fall further and further behind without extra assistance.⁸ Gilmour, Soudien & Donald (1997) argue that conditions of poverty and social disadvantage have led to numerous South African children developing special needs that are not “intrinsically generated or deficit related...” They posit that “close to 40 % of the school-age population could be in need of some form of special education help – particularly in the early stages of compulsory schooling (1997: 16, citing works by Donald, 1993; NEPI, 1992; and Kapp, 1991.) While the Thembisa students’ conceptions of school did not reflect a yearning for remedial education, they did reflect a desire for a more engaging school climate, something that is not only to be found in the classroom.

4.2 Takes on the Teacher

The pervading sense of discontent brought on by the dearth of activities at school seemed to be compounded by the generally negative conception of teachers held by the Thembisa students. The students’ views of their teachers varied markedly between the two schools and where a strong sense of familiarity and close interactions between teachers and students emerged at Oakdale Primary, this was noticeably absent at Thembisa Primary. The initially polite, but ultimately very critical view of teachers held by the Thembisa students was widespread. While they often had positive things to say about individual teachers:

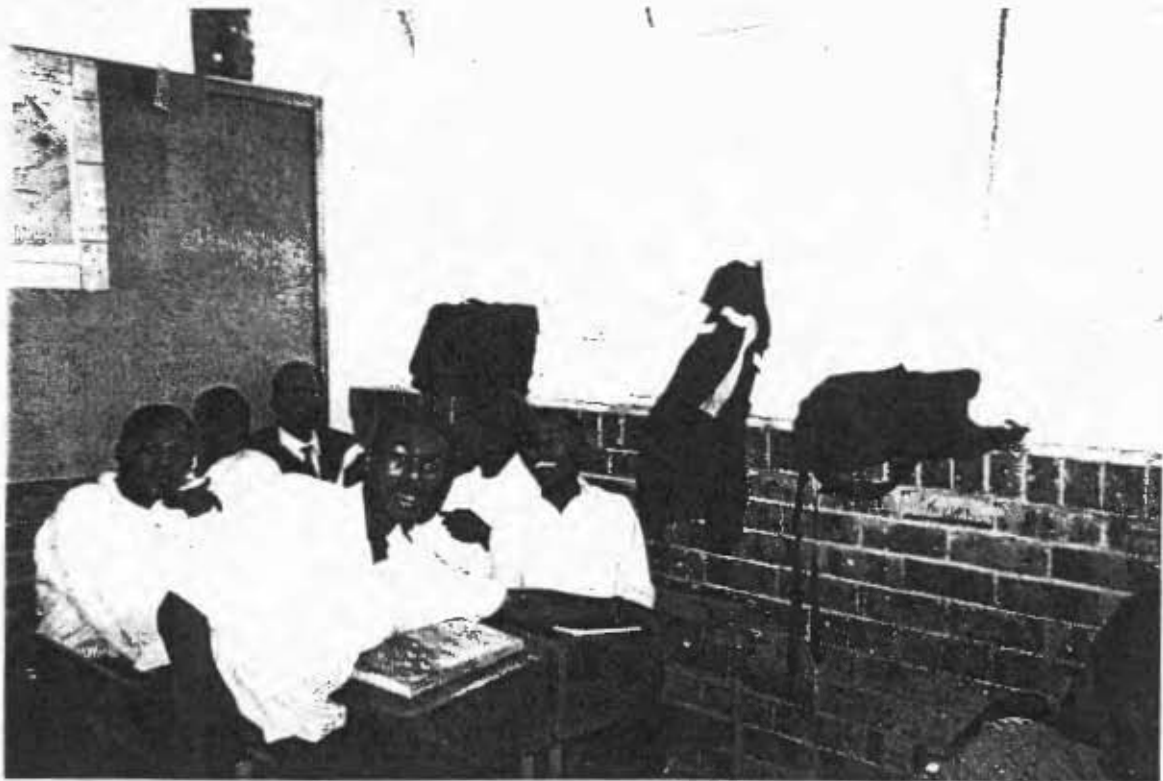
- Mr N. teaches maths very nicely /E/ (Awiwe), or
- I like Mr M. because he doesn’t beat us a lot and he explains things again if you are absent /t/ (Ndileka),

... as a collective, they were not viewed positively. Responding to the question of what they would change if they were the principal, the following comments pointed to the realisation that their teachers were not fulfilling their duties.

- I would change this thing of the mistresses coming and sitting in the classrooms and not teaching. Maybe the principal enters and thinks that they are teaching but they sit and chat/gossip. They just sit and eat chicken feet (*umagana*). /t/ (Nontobeko)
- Children must come back on time (after break). The gates must be closed. The teachers must always be in their classrooms. When the teachers aren’t in the class the children can’t learn. I would go around and *look* in the classrooms to see if the teachers (*umis*) are in their classes. /t/ (Andile)
- I think the principal should make sure that the teachers are teaching and not just sitting. But the principal never does that. Sometimes they just sit and play. (Vuyani).
- I would change this thing of teachers just not coming to school. If they don’t come to school, the principal must *know* the reasons why they didn’t come. /t/ (Nontobeko)⁹

⁸ It will be shown in the next chapter that Mandla struggled to express a conception of learning, and that Sandile’s conceptions were all of a low order.

⁹ On the day Vuyani was interviewed both of the grade 7 teachers were absent and he did not know why.



Photograph # 13 (T P)



Photograph # 14 (O P)

Thembisa students were more critical of the female teachers but a general view of teachers not performing adequately was common. One of the few students who did not criticise her teachers said that her teachers were nice because

...when we want them to teach us we just go to the staff room and call them and they usually come. At X (another school in Thembisa Township) my friend says that they just tell them to go away. /t/ (Siphokazi)

What Siphokazi registered as positive teacher conduct in comparison to teacher performance elsewhere, is indicative of the relative, but pervasive, nature of poor teacher work ethics at the school. It was interesting to note that the Thembisa Primary students were not critical of teaching styles nor the tasks they performed in order to learn, but only of the lack of actual teaching time. Again it seemed to be a case of not being cognisant of alternative teaching methods, but only that they were spending far too much time in the classroom without actually being taught. (When looking at **photo. # 13**, Vuyani commented that "we were just sitting around doing nothing... waiting for the teacher"/V.) When asked how much time the teacher spent out of the class, Zihle guessed that they were without a teacher for 3 of the days' 7 periods. Even though other students suggested that it might be only one or two periods that the teacher was absent, it was obvious that students registered it as too much and that Zihle's conception of this phenomenon was an honest one.

Having repeatedly heard this theme at Thembisa Primary, I asked many of the Oakdale students whether they thought their teachers worked hard and whether they were usually in their classrooms. Without exception, the Oakdale students thought their teachers worked hard, enjoyed what they did, and were usually in class. (Rachel gave **photo. # 14** the caption "Even teachers need a break.") Two students did say that the maths teacher often gave them exercises to do and then left the class, but they both pointed out that he was the deputy principal and had administrative duties to fulfill.

The Oakdale Primary students also had a very different conception of, and relationship with their teachers. They were generally very fond of them and consistently commented on their humorous and interactive styles of teaching. This contrast was also evidenced in the number and nature of photographs the Oakdale students took of their teachers and staff (27, versus 6 at Thembisa Primary). Teachers were the focal point of these photographs at Oakdale and almost always appeared to be complicit in the taking of the photograph. In contrast to this, teachers were often photographed from behind at Thembisa and one student said that her teacher had refused to have his photograph taken. The following quotes are illustrative of the types of conceptions that Oakdale Primary students had of their teachers.

- Some of the teachers I've had in the past, they just come in and tell you what to do. Ours are much better. /.../ Both of our class teachers are very funny...we're always teasing them because they're bald and under forty. (Allison)

Q: Why do you think your teachers are nice?

A: ...I guess attitude. Because they're not that strict. They don't just talk, they make jokes. /.../ Like Mr D. is really quite fun. Everyone thinks he's an alien 'cause he's always acting, he's weird...and he wears funny socks. (Alex)

- Class is not boring, like this guy (pointing at **photo # 15**)... Mr A., he's always got a joke for a subject or a lesson. So he's always making jokes, teaching us. Because you see, he travels the world...so he teaches us for geography, and he knows what he's teaching. (Saphelo)

- The teachers know a lot about the pupils, they know basically everything about their lives...who's doing what in sport...or who's dating who and stuff like that. And then sometimes they'll make a joke about it. (Rachel)

Mvulani, however, was cynical about their "unfunny jokes" and said that he felt there was too much favouritism amongst the teachers. It was apparent that he was not happy at school in general and was negative about most aspects of the school experience. The more prevalent conception of their teachers, however, was one of familiarity, with students often describing their teachers as 'weird', 'clowns', or 'they look like funny monks'. It was not in a condescending or critical manner, however, and the following comment by Saphelo underlies this point.

Q: When you say teaching, what does 'teaching' mean to you?

A: Forcing us to learn. No...just teaching us from life and books and things like that. Being a mother at school, or a father. that kind of thing. (Saphelo)

Positive conceptions of teachers at Thembisa Primary, however, were not completely absent and two students did redeem the generally negative view of teachers there when they made the following comments.

Q: Tell me about Mr N. (looking at **photo # 16**)

A: We give him respect and he respects us. He understands his students, he doesn't judge us too quickly and he tries to find out why we might not be doing well in class or why someone's being lazy. /.../ Sometimes he just goes away from the topic he's teaching and he just talks about other things, nice things. /t/ (Nontobeko)

- Like if we're just sitting around not doing any work, the teacher makes us feel like he's not really a teacher because he'll talk to us about soccer or girlfriends or something like that. He'll just play around with us. /t/ (Vuyani)

Over the course of time I spent at the two schools it was apparent how differently the teachers were organised at each school and how dissimilar their modes of structuring and planning were. Oakdale Primary held a 10 minute staff meeting every morning before school, and a lengthier one (roughly two hours) on Fridays at the end of the school week. Thembisa Primary staff meetings, on the other hand, were more difficult to identify as there always seemed to be a small grouping of teachers that were chatting in the staff room. Full staff meetings with all the teachers present were held randomly, but always during lesson time and they were usually lengthy affairs. Of the three meetings I attended, one dealt with funeral preparations, one was held to organise a choir concert, and one was a discussion about a holiday trip to Durban upon which only 60 of the students and four of the teachers were partaking. In contrast to this, Oakdale Primary meetings had numerous items on the agenda (written out) and included issues such as homework policies, fundraising events, budget debates and discussions over the acquisition of new equipment.



Photograph #15 (O.P.)



Photograph #16 (T.P.)

In contrast to the very real concerns of the Thembisa Primary students regarding institutional things that needed to be changed at their school (teacher absenteeism, lack of teaching, upkeep of sports facilities, and the issue of discipline which will be discussed below), the Oakdale students struggled to think of things that could be improved. As mentioned above, needing more sporting codes was the dominant critique, and the majority of students could think of nothing they would change about the school. The following changes suggested by Oakdale students highlight the comparatively inconsequential nature of their concerns and the resultant degree of satisfaction with school which it implies.

- I would change the colour of the school. (The principal) had it painted pink, and that's not good. (Alex)
- We should have more stuff to eat in the tuck-shop... 'cause there's only really health food in there. Hot-dogs, pies, fruity bars... (Mvulani)
- The only thing I would change is that I don't think the grade 7s should have to do all the things that the younger grades do...like we have to sing songs in the choir which are babyish. (Tamlyn)

In contrast to this, I was struck by the mature and weighty concerns that students at Thembisa Primary held – both in relation to what was going on at the school, and the larger role that they thought school should play in preparing them for the future. In relation to C2005, the Thembisa students' conceptions of their teachers revealed the immense gap between current teacher practice and that envisioned by C2005. The C2005 booklet for teachers says that “the Education Department will no longer be telling you what to do...” and “(i)t's (C2005) not difficult, it's your mind you have to master...” The change in teacher practice called for may demand far more than a different curriculum. The Department of Education's assertion that

...there will be pressures on your time and time-management abilities. You will have to schedule your time carefully, starting with the organisation of the learning programmes. Then there's the planning of the class time-table, enabling learners to learn at their own pace... You will have to allow further time for training, time for discussion and reflection with your colleagues, time for assessment. Many outcomes depend on the way you manage your time. (Booklet B, 1997: 20)

While this seems like an immense challenge for the teachers at Thembisa Primary, it is evident that what the students at that school expected of their teachers was in line with what the new curriculum is calling for. The wisdom of trying to improve teacher work ethics through the implementation of a challenging, demanding, and oftentimes confusing curriculum, however, remains to be seen. In contrast to this, the Oakdale students conceived of their teachers in a way that intimated that they already place a large degree of emphasis on time management. My own observations of staff meetings at that school suggested that teacher discussion and “reflection with colleagues” was something that was already happening.

The comparatively adult and pragmatic approaches to schooling held by the Thembisa students were somewhat undermined, however, by the inconsistent and authoritative nature of the systems of control at their school. As I will attempt to illustrate below, a somewhat



Photograph # 17 (T.P)



Photograph # 18 (O P)

paradoxical contrast emerged between the two schools in the way that teachers attempted to maintain order and effect discipline.

4.3 Authority and Control

During the group discussions, a theme characterised by students' attitudes towards rules, regulations, and discipline became apparent in response to open-ended questions about what students thought of their school. Whether it was talking about the duties and functions of prefects at Oakdale Primary, or students' displeasure with the frequency of corporal punishment at Thembisa Primary – how to negotiate the school's system of authority and control was a concern common to both groups. While conducting the interviews, this theme was a recurring one but I was vigilant against allowing my own views on discipline and authority to influence their responses. I made a point of only asking questions relating to this theme once it had already been raised by way of a student's description of a photograph or an attitude towards a teacher. Both groups of students, however, had strong opinions on the subject and needed little prompting. In talking about their schools and responding to questions such as 'what would you change if you were principal of this school' or 'what are the best and worst things about your school', it became apparent that the two cohorts held very divergent attitudes towards schooling. Where the Oakland Primary students were generally positive about their school and the discipline measures employed there, a deep sense of unease and concern was evident amongst many of the Thembisa students. Underlying their positive, yet somewhat vague conceptions of school, was a consistent critique of their school in matters relating to discipline as well as student and staff behaviour.

4.3.1 Discipline at Thembisa Primary

A major difference between the two schools in terms of discipline and authority was that corporal punishment was still prevalent and widely employed at Thembisa Primary. It was used for disciplining children for offences ranging from late coming to school and not doing their homework, to failure to know an answer during a lesson or not returning the 'donation sheets'. 'Beating' largely took the form of lashes on the hand with a stick, and nine of the ten Thembisa students brought up 'beating' as a major problem at the school, many during their initial responses to "what is your school like" or "tell me about your school". It was somewhat ironical, however, that many of the students felt corporal punishment should be retained as it was necessary in order for teachers to keep control. The following comments by Thembisa students highlight their ambivalent feelings towards beating, but their desire for it to be limited is evident.

Q: Tell me about Thembisa.

A: Sometimes it's good but sometimes it's bad. It's good when sometimes we are going out (school outing)...but sometimes our teacher is beating us too much and it's bad. /E/
(Bulali)

- It's 'right' here at Thembisa and the teachers are 'right'. I don't criticise them for beating, but they are over-doing it. And they like to ask for too much money. /t/ (Sandile)

- ...even if we've done something serious, the teacher shouldn't be allowed to give us more than three lashes. Sometimes we can get 6 or 8. /t/ (Ndileka)

- Something I don't like here at school that they do, they want money. Maybe if you don't bring it they beat you...they beat you on the bum if you don't have the money they're collecting. /t/ (Mandla)

- Even this thing of the children that are beaten for something that is an unimportant thing or maybe they (the teacher) feel "Yhuu...I hate this child", you see. Even if they've done something minor/inconsequential, they really want to beat them. /t/ (Nontobeko)

- I would change the beating. No beating. /.../ If you don't do your homework they beat you. And the donation papers, if you don't collect them they beat you. /E/ (Awiwe)

A number of the Thembisa Primary students connected 'beating' with the collection of monies. Thembisa Primary's financial difficulties were something that the students were aware of, but they often felt that it was a burden they were unfairly expected to bear. Awiwe went on to explain that they can go anywhere they like in search of donations but explained that people rarely give them money.

-They always say when we ask them "What is it this time, I don't have any money, go away" (very animated and angry voice). And I go and give my mother the paper and she gives me the money. /E/

In addition to the collection of monies raised through what has become the ubiquitous 'donation paper' in many urban areas in South Africa, Thembisa Primary students were also expected to bring 50c every Friday in exchange for being allowed to wear 'civvies'. Paradoxically, a R1 fine was incurred for failure to bring the money or for not wearing civilian clothing. During time spent observing the classes, Fridays seemed to be all but written off as actual teaching days. The holiday atmosphere brought about by the absence of school uniforms, the lengthy amount of time taken up by the collection of the monies and the resultant beatings meted out to those without the required fee, and a general lethargy on the part of teachers seemed to imply that the weekend was already under way.

The dominant view held by Thembisa students towards the financial demands was one of disgruntlement and students' conceptions of school were often intricately tied up with monetary concerns. Mandla's comment that "(e)very Friday we have to bring 50c but I don't know where it goes...and they don't hire someone to cut this long grass here at the back"/E/ was indicative of the general mood. Mandla suggested that as principal he would just have the students pay an extra R20 school fees "...instead of this 50c every week and all of this beating."/E/ Even though one student did cast the teachers in a more positive light when she said made the comment quoted below, the pervasiveness of economic hardship was apparent.

Q: Tell me about this school. What do you think of Thembisa Primary?

A: firstly...here at school they teach us, and even if they want money, they understand the bad conditions that some of the children and their parents are living in at home. Like, they don't ask for a lot of money for things that are not important. /t/ (Nontobeko)

While concerns with money and beating were numerous, it was interesting to note that many of the Thembisa students used discipline as a benchmark to describe their school. Characterizing their school as being 'good' or 'bad' in relation to their perception of the level of obedience at the school was particular to the Thembisa students, the following comment by Aviwe being illustrative of this phenomenon.

A: It's a good school. It's not corrupt, we obey the rules. We do what we must do. When the teacher tells us this is wrong and that's right, we do what the teacher tells us. /E/ (Aviwe)

Many of the students, however, were less positive and conveyed a feeling of frustration about the school's rules that suggested a lack of clarity or consistent enforcement of them. Six of the ten Thembisa students cited drugs, weapons, theft, and disrespect as problems that were not being dealt with properly at the school. **(photo. # 20 of boys smoking on the train was taken by Andile on the way to school.)** While few of them had attended any other school, they sensed that discipline was not what it should be at Thembisa Primary, and a yearning for more structure and better enforcement of the rules was apparent.

- The students here, some of them are not right. Thembisa is all right but not the students. Because most of the students here are children that come from homes that are not respectful (taught respect at home). So they come here and they corrupt the other kids and that thing influences the other kids and they do that. Some of the children end up learning it and it's mostly the old students who do that. /t/ (Nontobeko)

- Ja, they must search the students coming on the way to school for their cigarettes, or their dagga, their knives... and all of those bad things. /E/ (Vuyani)

- Sometimes there's too much fighting going on. The teachers aren't strict enough. /t/ (Andile)

Q: Do the pupils get along well with each other at the school?

A: Ja, we do. But sometimes there's a lot of fighting and the boys are just causing too much trouble. /E/ (Aviwe)

- I really don't like this thing of some of the boys going to the 'special quarters' at break time and smoking cigarettes and dagga. The teachers know about it but I don't know why they don't go and do something. They must either confront those pupils or they can go to that house and tell them not to let the boys in when they're coming to smoke. /.../ When people in the location talk about wrong things, they always talk about Thembisa Primary. The people here (in Thembisa) say that the kids there are old, they smoke, they go over to the Pick 'n Pay in Oakdale during break and they steal things... they stab, they fight, they're not well-mannered... they smoke in front of older people when they're in their uniform. /t/ (Sandile)

- At school there are rules but there should be better rules. Like at white and coloured schools they obey the rules, but at Thembisa they don't.

Q: Is it because of the teachers or because of the pupils?



Photograph # 19 (T.P)



Photograph # 20 (T.P)

A: The teachers don't know like, how to tell you something like this and that...that you must stop it in the school. Like they do stop the pupils but not that much. Maybe they stop someone and beat them, but that person will do the same thing again tomorrow. // (Sandile)

While discipline at Themboisa Primary was viewed by the students as Draconian at times, they also felt that it was inconsistently applied and with little effect. The regularity with which these issues came up was suggestive of how central it was to the Themboisa student's experience of school and the demoralising effect which drugs, weapons and violence was having on student morale. Despite their criticism of beating, seven of the ten Themboisa Primary students felt that it should be kept and only two of them thought it should be done away with completely. Corporal punishment had obviously been reified into the accepted and best manner of disciplining children at Themboisa as no alternatives had ever been attempted. Many of them said that the teachers needed to have a stick when they teach so that they can keep order and make sure everyone listens. Mandla went so far as to say that "...I learn better when I know that the teacher is going to hit me if I get the answer wrong"//. As it will be argued in the next chapter, how Themboisa students conceive of 'learning' is, to some extent, influenced by the school's culture of authoritative discipline.

4.3.2 Discipline at Oakdale Primary

Discipline was also a common theme at Oakdale Primary, but for quite different reasons. A system of 'prefects' was in place at the school whereby approximately one third of the grade 7 class were elected by staff to perform duties that assisted in the day to day running of the school. Four students participating in this research project were prefects and it obviously formed an important role in shaping their school experience. Most of the other students, however, also made mention of issues relating to discipline or had plenty to say when asked about it. A tension seemed to emerge at Oakdale Primary whereby authoritative control through strict rules and liberal doses of verbal discipline was not liked by the students, but was seen as necessary for the school to function effectively. As the most senior students in the school, the cohort under investigation at Oakdale Primary (particularly the prefects) seemed to have been inculcated with a sense of ownership and responsibility in running the school. Duties performed by the prefects included running the office and administering first aid during break time when teachers and administrative staff were in the staff-room (see **photo. # 21**). Keeping students quiet in the hall-ways; making sure they walked on the left side of the corridor; over-seeing the lines formed by the various classes before school and at the end of breaks; and watching over sections of the playground during recesses, were some of the activities that students mentioned were necessary to keep order. In the absence of corporal punishment a system of detention was in place, but this was only mentioned briefly by Saphelo and did not seem to be a cause of much concern. Teachers also seemed to use a system of penalties and rewards in terms of break time allowed students - something that was photographed by Dumisani (see **photo. # 22**) and described as "we were being kept in because we didn't line up properly for Mr A." The first four comments below were made by prefects and the remainder by non-prefects.



Photograph # 21 (O.P)



Photograph # 22 (O.P)

- ...I just help teachers and I make sure things go smoothly while they're in the staff-room or not around. ...that's all basically. /.../ I think it's important (to have prefects) because if we didn't... there would be chaos. (Boniswa)

- There would just be noise in the corridors the whole time. ...it would be a problem and Mrs. Y would be shouting the whole time...but she does anyway. But the school needs to be quiet so pupils can learn. (Tamiya)

Q: Do you think it's important to have discipline in the school?

A: Ja, because you can't just have children running around in the corridors, because if they're running around they're going to wipe (fall)...just for safety reasons...they're going to fall, cut themselves and have to get stitches. (Alex)

Q: Why do you think you became a prefect?

A: My behaviour was better. I wasn't so bad. Basically I was well behaved... I wasn't so talkative anymore, I did my work. I just guess my attitude changed. /.../ It's also about leadership and how we'd react in different situations. (Alex)

Q: Is it important to have prefects?

A: Ja, it is... to keep the children in line and that and make sure they know what's wrong and what's right." (Allison)

Q: What do you think of all these rules, having to line up, walking on the left side of the corridors, having to keep quiet?

A: I think it's great. I mean to have an organised school you have to have rules, and without rules it would be lots of people doing like what my friends in Thembisa are doing now. They don't care about their lives. They're just throwing them around to cigarettes and stuff like that, while this school is doing pretty well. (Dumisani)¹⁰

Giving the students responsibilities and rewarding them with the 'privilege' of being a prefect seemed to be a powerful tool in the process of enculturation. Almost all of the students at Oakdale Primary felt that the rules were necessary and largely effective. The only problem that students raised, something that was mentioned by almost all of them, was the 'extremely strict' discipline that the principal demanded and the amount of shouting she did. It was apparent that in contrast to the Thembisa Primary principal who kept a low profile and was rarely seen outside of her office, the Oakdale Primary principal was very vocal and seemingly omnipresent. The principals' frequent use of an intercom system added to one's sense that her authority was consistently with you. The following comments by students illustrated their displeasure.

- She really shouts too much ...she doesn't care if she makes someone cry. She just stands there and shouts. (Rachael)

Q: Do you think this is a successful school?

A: I would say yes and no. The way the principal is going on, nothing ever goes wrong. Everyone's scared of her. Things go perfectly right. Why wouldn't it be a successful school? I mean...everyone is scared to do the wrong thing you see. Everything goes right. If Mrs. Y. says 'pick up papers', everyone's going to pick up every single piece of paper. (Mvulani)

¹⁰ Dumisani didn't want to be a prefect because "...it's too much responsibility."



Photograph # 23 (O.P)



Photograph # 24 (O.P)

- I wouldn't do so much shouting if I was the principle. I mean sometimes you might have to, but not all the time. (Sapheio)

Despite these criticisms, it was apparent that most of the students appreciated the certainty of the school's rules and it was also apparent that they were closely followed. One morning I witnessed the students lining up in the courtyard before school after the bell had rung. A second bell sounded a few moments later and a complete hush came over the students, something that happened without a teacher in sight and only the prefects patrolling the lines.

Even though the principal's interruptions to class-time, through the use of the intercom system when making announcements, were often met with a rolling of the eyes and 'what now' comments – even this was thought to be useful.

- ... (I) gets people to know what's going to happen a lot quicker, and you don't have people running around with lots of messages. (Dumisani)

- The principal is good because the pupils learn that if you don't do something you'll get shouted out... And she's done a lot for the school. She's re-tarred the playground and bought new desks.../.../ She's painted the school. (Tamlyn)

It appeared that Oakland Primary was run along almost militaristic lines in terms of lining up, walking on the left hand side of the corridor, plenty of verbal directives from the general (principal) at the top, and a chain of command that worked its way down to the students themselves in the form of prefects. The system, however, seemed to work as students were a part of it and had appropriated a sense of ownership and responsibility in the process of organising and running the school. In contrast to this, the Thembisa Primary students experienced school as chaotic, brutal, and oftentimes felt alienated as their concerns and needs were not addressed. Elements of the disadvantaged and 'rough' communities from which they came were obviously being reproduced in the school and the corporal punishment being used as a means of disciplining and apparently 'reforming' the children was not effective in the students' opinion.

In concluding this section it should be noted that while many of the environmental factors contributing to the Thembisa cohort's conceptions of discipline are beyond the scope of an educational reform policy (being more closely linked to macro-economic conditions and justice department policies), teacher's roles as disciplinarians will be difficult to change. When the Department of Education calls for teachers to "apply democratic and non-discriminatory practices..." and to "create a supporting and caring atmosphere in the classroom", very little information is provided on how this is to be done. They dismiss any misgivings the teacher may have by saying that

(t)his may sound like a major adjustment, but that depends on how you look at it. It could be as simple as climbing down off the podium, mixing in with the class, and taking it from there. (C2005 booklet B, 1997: 18)

The Thembisa students' conceptions of, and attitudes towards their teachers illustrate that a major change in teacher conduct will have to take place if the 'democratic', 'non-

discriminatory', 'supporting and caring environment' goals of the department are to be achieved. What is evident again, however, is that the changes envisioned by the department are changes that the Thembisa students would applaud. Even though many of the students supported corporal punishment in some form, one could argue that this reflects a measure of desperation on their part and a desire for change. Oakdale Primary on the other hand seems to already embody many of the principles laid out by the new curriculum in this regard.

4.4 School Pride (or a lack thereof)

Even though Thembisa Primary had recently begun to offer grade 8 at the school, very few of those participating in the research were planning to stay on at the school upon completing grade 7. Some couldn't really cite a reason for not staying, while others were very clear about their reasons for leaving as soon as possible. Mandla said that Thembisa Primary rules were too strict and he was just going to have to "...try and hang in there until the end of the year"/¹¹. Ndileka said that the shortage of textbooks for the grade 8 classes and the absence of computers were the reasons she was trying to go to a better school within Thembisa Township. During the final group discussion I asked whether they were happy to be leaving the school and the general consensus was that it was time for a change. The boys were more vocal about their desire to leave the school for social reasons, and four of the five girls seemed to think they would get a better education elsewhere. There was no conformity in where students were planning to study the following year, and at least six different schools were mentioned.¹¹

At Oakdale Primary, on the other hand, seven of the ten students were planning to attend the local Oakdale High School; two students were going to private all-girls schools in the city; and one boy was going to a boarding school in Potchefstroom in order to be closer to his father. It became apparent during the interviews that the Oakdale cohort were either sad to be leaving the school because they enjoyed schooling there, or were nostalgic about leaving the school. Three of the boys explained why they had taken pictures of the school with responses such as "...it's my last year here and I want to have a picture to remember it with" (Dumisani). Saphelo mentioned that Mr. A always kept a class photograph of the previous grade 7s next to his desk and commented that "...it's important to have these pictures so that you can remember the people who were here before you. And I want them to remember me next year when I'm gone." A sense of school pride was also apparent in the photographing of a school blazer (see photo # 25): "I took this picture because I like my school...and also because this is after I became a prefect and it also shows my full colours for hockey" -- and in numerous comments declaring that Oakdale Primary was *much* better than all the other schools nearby, even though they had never attended those schools and could rarely say why it was better... "it just is."

¹¹ This seems to support Hoadley's (1999) finding that under-privileged/working-class students do make choices in where they go to school – a finding which questions the belief that poorer students would be less likely to take advantage of the choice that would be offered should schools be subjected to the market system.



Photograph # 25 (O.P)



Photograph # 26 (T.P)

4.5 Divergent sites of learning and disparate modes of navigation.

When the students' experiences of their home and communities were viewed in conjunction with the three themes that emerged around 'school' (attitudes towards going to school, conceptions of teachers, and the systems of authority and control) it was evident that the two sets of students approached, experienced, and reflected on school in very different ways. While I do not want to suggest that an entire cohort's conceptions were uniform, the frequency with which similar attitudes were expressed validates the making of some general, but tentative inferences. Much of the following commentary was gleaned from analysis of "the day" which was photographed by the students and complimented with their responses to the question "what is a normal day like" or "tell me about everything that you usually do in one day."

'School' for the Oakland students was a much larger portion of the day as they often remained at school for as much as three hours longer than their Thembisa counterparts while participating in sport, the environmental club, music groups, or any number of additional activities. In contrast to this, the Thembisa students were home by 2 pm and largely left to their own devices. Some of the boys sought out soccer clubs in which to participate, and one girl attended a church youth group every day, but for the most part, afternoons were spent socialising or playing informal sport in the streets. Dumisani and Boniswa, the two Oakdale students living in Thembisa, both commented on the very different lifestyles which children in the two communities experienced. When I asked Dumisani whether he thought some of his friends in Thembisa would like to come to Oaklands Primary, he doubted whether they would.

I wouldn't know, because they're already used to that lifestyle... so I don't know if they'd like it here. I mean in Thembisa, it's like you play lots of sport in the streets after school but here in Oakdale it's quiet. You're in your house playing on your computer the whole day. So it's a different lifestyle. It's boring here. So I don't think they'd like coming to this school. (Dumisani)

In addition to the student's verbal portrayals of their activities, the preponderance of photographs taken by Oakdale students which had a computer as the focal point, and the frequency with which street life was photographed by the Thembisa students, appeared to support Dumisani's descriptions of how the two groups spent their afternoons.¹² The difference in the structure of students' lives out of school was reflected in how they experienced the in-school structures. For the Oakdale students, school was an onslaught of consistent messages which sought to engage them. Punctuality, tidiness, order, productivity, and responsibility were all demanded by the school system and conduct was subsequently rewarded or penalised depending upon the degree to which these codes of conduct were achieved. This was mirrored by the Oakdale students' after-school activities that were

¹² While Thembisa students seemed to know that model C schools were 'different' but couldn't really say why, none of them appeared interested in attending schools outside of the township apart from Ndileka. Sandile said that it would be very difficult to go one of 'those schools' unless you started there when you were very young because of the language barrier.

dictated by organised sport or societies, and then what seemed to be a large degree of solitary activity within the house, often with some degree of parental supervision as they did homework, played on the computer or studied for tests. The following comments illustrate the role parents played in assisting with homework and extending the structured nature of the students' lives in Oakdale.

- Ja, my mother usually tests me on my work on most days... She just asks me questions about the stuff and she helps me if I don't understand something./.../ My dad goes over my maths almost everyday... because he's good at it and I think he actually likes it. And he's a good teacher. (Allistair)

Q: How did you write your speech for the competition (about HIV/Aids)?

A: Well since my mom is a pharmacist she knows a lot about that kind of thing. So she helped me and like she told me about it, and she likes gets magazines every week, ...and there was an article in there but I couldn't understand it because it was too technical and stuff so she explained it to me exactly what it meant./.../ We usually talk about what I did in school most days and then she sometimes asks me questions and sort of tests me, but more like to make me think about it. (Allison)

Q: Does anyone help you when you're doing your homework?

A: Not unless I really need it, then my dad will help me

Q: Are your parents interested in whether you've got homework or not?

A: Ja, they are. They're always asking, it's the first thing they say when I get home. "How much homework do you have? When does it have to be done by?" Especially my dad, he goes on and on about school. (Rachel)

Similarly, the very loosely organised and highly sociable post-school structure of the Thembisa students' lives was mirrored by what students conceived as chaotic discipline, a dearth of teacher engagement, and an absence of established sport. Their desire to move away from the poverty and crime of the township was extended to a desire to get out of the school and into places which they thought would facilitate this move. While the Thembisa cohort's parents also came across as being interested in their children's studies, it seemed to be in different form. Probably due to the parents' own education levels, they played a negligible role in their children's studies and when they were mentioned it often seemed to be in a policing role. The following comments made by Thembisa students highlight the parents' function as being a continuation of the Thembisa teachers' authoritative and disciplining nature.

- No one helps me with my homework but my mother always checks my book to see if it's signed by the teacher. Because if it's not then she's going to think that I just marked it myself and then she'll shout at me. /t/ (Zihle)

- Ja the teachers must mark your books because then your mother can see that you've done your work and she can give you some pocket-money. No work, no pocket-money. /t/ (Mandla) (see photo # 30)

Very few students at Thembisa Primary said that they were assisted with the homework they did receive. If they did receive help, it usually came from an older sibling, friend, or cousin. It was also apparent that many of the students were not living with their parents as they had died or were living elsewhere. It was only Andile living in the Boys Home, due to the death



Photograph # 27 (O.P)



Photograph # 28 (O.P)



Photograph # 29 (T.P)



Photograph # 30 (T.P)

of both his parents, who appeared to have a structured afternoon with the attention of hostel parents. One girl at Thembisa Primary, Ndileka, said that doing homework was difficult due to the noise coming from the shebeen next door to her house.

As the above chapter has attempted to illustrate, the different circumstances governing the two groups of childrens' lives have a marked effect on how they conceptualise their school, teachers, and issues around discipline. It should be noted that the differences identified in their conceptualisations did not appear to be connected to gender or race, but only to the socio-economic conditions in which the students were situated. The conceptions of school held by Black students at Oakdale Primary were almost identical to their White counterparts, and bore no similarities to the conceptions held by Black students at Thembisa Primary. Very few differences could be discerned in the students' conceptions along gender lines either, except that the Thembisa Primary boys seemed to be slightly more vocal about the role school could play in helping them avoid crime and poverty in the township.

It was thought that the marked differences between the two groups' conceptions of school would bear directly on how they conceptualised learning. Before moving on to these conceptions in Chapter 5, one similarity between the groups of students should be noted. Within both groups there were very different attitudes towards homework and studying. Some students in both groups seemed to be spending roughly two hours everyday doing homework (some of it prescribed and some of it of their own accord), while others said they did very little, if any. Self motivation and an internal drive to succeed in the system were character traits exhibited by students in both cohorts which questions the totalising nature of school's ability to enculturate uniformly. In his doctoral thesis, "Apartheid's Children" (1996), Soudien argues that

The significance of form (as the embodiment of the social structure) in the lives of young people means that they takes on aspects of that which is mediated through school but are never conditioned in an unqualified way by school. Receptive as they are to the messages of the school, so are they receptive to other messages too. It is the considerable turbulence of these multiple texts in their lives which undermines the singularity of the form of school. Students thus emerge as people who are inscribed with the multiple messages of their complex world. How they make sense of these messages is, however, by no means uniform. (1996: 24)

While it was thought that the divergent *contexts* of learning would produce divergent *conceptions* of that phenomenon, Soudien's comment may bear testimony to the learner's ability to construct and experience learning in ways that are not wholly regulated by the form of the school or the environment in which they live.

The next chapter will examine the students' conceptions of learning that have developed in the disparate school environments discussed above. The differences and similarities between the students' conceptions will also be examined against the body of literature on "conceptions of learning", the goals of C2005, and issues of race and gender.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 5

Interpreting Learning – Students' Reflections on a Process

One of the main aims of the research was to investigate whether the conceptions of learning described by Marton *et al* (1993) and others could be identified in South Africa amongst grade 7 pupils in both a disadvantaged township school and a relatively affluent suburban school, and whether these conceptions could be expressed. As it was mentioned in Chapter 1, very little research has been done on this age group's (12-15) conceptions of learning anywhere in the world, and none in South Africa (to my knowledge). A gap existed in the "conceptions of learning" field between Pramling's (1983) study of 3-8 year olds in Sweden, and the study by Purdie *et al* (1996) of 16-18 year olds in Australia and Japan. While Dahlin & Regmi's (1995) study of Nepali students included some 14-16 year olds in their sample, it was mainly comprised of 19-25 year olds with the majority of the data divulged and analysis made being drawn from the second cohort. Entwistle *et al* (1989) did conduct their research with 12-15 year olds, but that quantitative study was concerned only with "pupil's perceptions of school and teachers" and not with their "conceptions of learning".

The Oakdale and Thembisa Primary students participating in my research were mostly between the ages of 12 and 14, with three of the students from the latter school being 15 years old. In light of Piaget's 'stages' of development, which drew attention to the temporal nature of cognitive development, the students participating in this study were thought to be reaching/have just reached the "formal operational stage" which is characterised by the ability to engage in abstract thinking (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 1997: 47). Due to the abstract character of 'learning', how this age-group of students expressed their conceptions of learning is of interest. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the socio-economic conditions that the two groups of students found themselves in differed dramatically, something that Piaget argued would affect when a person adopted the "formal operational stage" of cognition (Donald *et al*, 1997: 47). If conceptions of learning could indeed be identified, a number of subsequent questions would arise. Do they correspond with the conceptions identified elsewhere in the world; is there a distinct character to the conceptions that makes them unique or suggestive of a South African prototype; and most importantly for comparative reasons, do the township and suburban students' conceptions differ markedly and how will this effect the implementation of C2005?

During the analysis of the data, it became apparent that the students did not always conceptualise 'learning' in ways that fitted neatly into the six categories laid out by Marton *et al* (1993) and others, nor the themes identified by Dahlin & Regmi (1995). Rather, the conceptions were often multifaceted and complex, dynamic and in a state of flux - sometimes being internally congruent and hinting at a logical hierarchical construction similar to that proffered by Marton *et al* (1993), but oftentimes seemingly contradictory and disjointed. For this reason, and in keeping with the phenomenographical mode of enquiry (Lucas, 1998), I

have organised the data in a way that reflects the predominant themes emerging from the student's voices. The analysis does, however, often overlap with previous studies at times, particularly the categories of Marton *et al* (1993). With minor exceptions, the themes or categories expressed by the students will be divulged and analysed in the order they occurred with the most frequency. Sometimes a category or theme was prevalent amongst one group of students while being almost completely absent amongst the other. In order to make the comparison between the two schools more immediate and a contrast of the similarities and differences more evident, I have chosen to move back and forth between the two cohorts' conceptions while highlighting the contextual conditions that may have given rise to them. I will also point out where the data conforms with, and diverges from, the literature reviewed.

The six categories of learning identified by Marton *et al* were divided into two groups. Those associated with a 'surface' approach to learning included *increasing one's knowledge, memorising and reproducing, and applying*. The second group of categories, or the 'deep' approaches, were constituted by learning as *understanding, seeing something in a different way, and changing as a person*. Marton *et al* argued that these last two categories were not common and pointed out that they had identified them in very few students. The last one had been recognisable in only one student's conception of learning in their sample. As will be shown below, the grade 7 cohorts in this study also laid more emphasis on the surface approaches but there were numerous exceptions to this, particularly when responding to the categories of Marton *et al*.

5.1 Memorising and Reproducing

A 'surface' approach to learning is often characterised by a conception which emphasises memorising, repetition, or other activities done with the express intention of being able to reproduce material for a particular assessment such as a test or exam. The general view held by educationalists in the Western world is that memorisation and deep understanding are mutually exclusive with the former being a strategy for short-term academic achievement, where the latter is the real goal of education.

Memorisation, repetition of material, and studying for assessment purposes was a theme common to both Thembisa Primary and Oakdale Primary, and was the most commonly cited conception of learning. Five students at Thembisa Primary and seven students at Oakdale Primary expressed a conception of learning dominated by memorisation for test or exam purposes. There were, however, a number of differences in how it was expressed and described at the two schools, and how the students perceived it when asked to reflect on it. While students at Thembisa Primary mentioned a conception of learning as 'memorisation and reproducing' with less frequency than their Oakdale counterparts, they were more consistent in their view of its value as a learning strategy. Their understanding of the phenomenon will be dealt with first before discussing the more diverse and seemingly contradictory attitudes revealed by the Oakdale Primary students.

5.1.1 Learning as Memorisation at Thembisa Primary

Five of the Thembisa Primary students characterised learning, of their own accord, in ways that alluded to a conception dominated by memorising and reproducing. The following statements were made in response to the question 'what is learning' or 'how does one learn' and are connected by a theme of repetition and trying to remember something for a test.

- It's when the teacher teaches you something and you keep that in your mind. Maybe then when you are writing the test, then you won't forget it. /T/ (Bulali)
- I read over things again and again so you don't forget. /t/ (Vuyani)
- I just learn/read from a book. When I'm finished I know it...I read the book and then again, and ask myself questions and write questions in the book and then I answer them again. /t/ (Zihle)
- I practice it and then I know it for the test or whatever we have to do. /T/ (Aviwe)

Nine of the ten Thembisa students, however, strongly agreed that learning was about the memorisation of facts and reproducing them on tests when they responded to the categories of Marton *et al* (1993).

- Yes...like maybe if the teacher is teaching us something yesterday, and then today he comes and revises that thing...I think he is trying to help us to memorise that thing. /E/ (Andile)
- You have to memorise because when you write the exams you won't have your notebook with you. (Mandla)
- yes...I memorise the important things. It's easier when the teacher tells us what to underline in the textbooks you know...because then I can just write those things in my notebook again and read them again. (Siphokazi)

Memorisation was identified as the most important concept in learning for Zihle, Aviwe, and Ndileka when they were asked to identify one amongst the six different conceptions they had just responded to. (They also were also three of the top four academic achievers in the Thembisa Primary cohort.)

One student, Sandile, did not recognise the word 'ukunqaya' which we had been using to translate 'memorisation' up to this point. When it was described to him as the repeated reading or writing of a text in order to remember it, he understood it but said that he used the word 'ukubamba' for that action which translated directly means 'to catch'. This interpretation lends itself to Dahlin & Regmi's (1995) finding amongst Nepali students that memorisation is a tool in gaining understanding. Phrases such as "Do you *get* it?" and "Do you *catch* my meaning?" are possible colloquial equivalents in the English language that imply understanding.

Ndileka was another Township Primary student who did not express a conception of learning that included memorisation initially, but said that it was very similar to learning when asked to reflect on it.

It's similar to memorising because something you don't know you are going to forget. Like some people like to quickly forget things. I also forget things quickly. /t/ (Ndileka)

Her comments indicated, however, that memorisation was a strategy employed for remembering material that was not really known/understood, something which the Nepali students identified as a characteristic of 'rote learning' (Dahlin & Regmi, 1995). This suggested that Ndileka recognised memorisation as a more shallow approach to learning which was consistent with some of the deeper approaches to learning she expressed later on in the interview.

Nontobeko was the only other student at Township Primary to register some skepticism about memorising as noted when she did not include it in her initial conceptions of learning and said that "... (memorising) is not really learning... it's more like remembering" /E/. She went on to say that when she prepares for exams she does have to memorise some things, especially in history. Nontobeko revealed the most advanced and inclusive conceptions of learning out of the Township Primary cohort, but it almost seems as if her aversion towards memorising material had a negative effect on her academic achievement. While she was well above the class average, her overall aggregate was more than 20 percentage points below the top achiever Aviwe. Aviwe said that 'learning as memorising and reproducing' was what learning was "really all about" and her results suggest that the system rewards such a conception. She held the top position in the class rankings with an aggregate of 87% which was more than 10 percentage points above the next person participating in the study. It also became apparent that many of the students at Thembisa Primary enjoyed engaging in repetitive learning styles such as repeatedly writing out notes or reading things over many times for extra work to do at home. Homework assignments seemed to be restricted mainly to maths exercises, and three of the female students at Thembisa Primary said that they

- ... write out at least ten sentences everyday, or I read that thing we did in the class again and again so that I know it. /.../ The teacher doesn't tell us to do these things but I have to do it if I want to do well. And I like doing it. /E/ (Aviwe)

The students at Thembisa Primary who regarded memorisation as the most important concept in learning were invariably the one's achieving the best academic results. It was evident that while these students often held additional conceptions of learning, memorisation was the activity they practised the most and it assumed a dominant character when they reflected on what learning was. This theme was repeated at Oakdale Primary even more frequently, but a stronger cynicism towards memorisation was also present.



Photograph # 31 (T.P)



Photograph # 32 (T.P)

5.1.2 Learning as Memorisation at Oakdale Primary

The surface approach to learning where knowledge is conceived of as being discrete and factual and something to be imbibed and committed to memory was more common amongst the Oakdale Primary student's initial statements. For more than half of them it formed the dominant part of their conception of learning. The following two examples were conceptions that remained consistent throughout the interview with these students (not changing when asked to respond to Marton's six conceptions), and are representative of similar responses made by four others.

Q: What do you mean when you say 'learn'? What does 'learn' mean to you?

A: I mean study, study for exams...I just read through the notes and I try and memorise it...and I read them everyday because I want them sunk in my head, so I read the same thing over and over.

Q: Do you enjoy learning like this?

A: I don't enjoy it but I have to... I don't have a choice. If I want to pass grade 7 I have to.

- /.../ (Responding to Marton's category 'learning as memorising and reproducing')

A: Yes, like I said...it's just taking information and sticking it in your head.

(Dumisani)

- Learning means you know something off by heart. If somebody asks you something that you've learnt at school then you'll know it. (Tamlyn)

- What's the point of learning if you don't get tests and you don't get marks. (Tamlyn)

- I don't like it when I don't understand something.

Q: Why don't you like it?

A: Well I know, so when it comes to the test or something, I need to know how to do it... I don't want to worry about how to do it. (Tamlyn)¹

While Dumisani's academic scores were near the bottom of the Oakdale cohort, Tamlyn was the top academic achiever in the group getting between 80% and 87% for maths, geography, history and science despite her surface approach to learning. It was interesting to note that her marks for languages – subjects which don't lend themselves to memorisation – were substantially lower (66% and 69% for Afrikaans and English respectively).

'Learning as memorising' proved to be a part of education that many Oakdale Primary students had mixed feelings about. Many of them used it to explain 'how' they learned but were skeptical of its worth when comparing it with other conceptions of learning. Alex initially described learning as "when you sit at home, open a book, go through it, write it

¹ Even though Tamlyn used the word 'understanding', which is a key determinant in whether a student holds a 'deep' approach to learning according to Marton *et al* (1993), she doesn't suggest that 'understanding' is of importance in any context outside of assessment. Her response to the category of 'learning as understanding' underscores its subordinate status for her and shows it to be an optional extra and not a necessity.

- "Well, maybe. If you understand it helps when you learn. Ja, I suppose it is."



Photograph # 33 (O.P)



Photograph # 34 (O.P)

down, study it, and then do it again to make sure you remember it all." Later in the interview he said that

I don't think you should really learn like that, like memorize the whole thing and write it down as a parrot. You should learn it and then put it into your own words. Not just write it down as it comes in the book.

Q: Do you try and do that?

A: Ja, sometimes. But sometimes I do just memorise it and write it down as it came in the book. You've got to have...you've got to know like, that if you learn it, that you can do it in many different ways.

Alex struggled to explain a different method of learning and seemed to realise that his alternatives expressed the same conception.

Q: What could those other ways be?

A: You could read through it and record it and then listen to it again and again. But I guess that's like a parrot too. Or you could make a rhyme or make a song to remember it, and write it down.

A number of Oakdale Primary students mentioned memorisation in their initial conceptions but then refuted or dismissed it when asked to reflect on the six conceptions of learning outlined by Marton *et al* (1993). Initial statements included things like:

- You read through your notes once or twice, and then you write down the information so that you can remember most of it, your parents ask you questions, and then you read through it again. (Allistair)

- I write in notes or I just underline that part in the book...when we do have to do exams I just make sure I look at that stuff again. It does go in...but it just disappears because we get soooo much work. We're supposed to remember all that stuff. /.../ When I learn for exams...the problem is I have to study for hours because I can't get something into my brain...I'm gonna look at the same sentence all the time and then memorise it. Just memorise the whole sentence. Memorise it memorise it memorise it. That's the only way I can do it. (Mvulani)

Roughly half an hour later in the interview, after discussing various other aspects of their experiences of school, Allistair brought attention to the shortcomings of memorisation for him and Mvulani strongly dismissed it.

Memorising is not really learning but it can be. Memorising is like just remembering...a few months in the future then you might not remember it. You might remember it for a test or something but in the future you just don't care.

Q: Do you do a lot of memorising for tests or exams?

A: Ja, I do...sometimes it's necessary just to pass your exams. (Allistair)

-No, not at all. What's the point of memorising...if you do it now it's over. If you learn it, it's something that...it's something that you know. If it's something that you know it can't get out. If you memorise it, you're memorising it all the time because you know it can slip through. But if you learn something, then you know you've learnt it, you know it. (Mvulani)

Even though there were differences in how memorisation was conceived of at the two schools, the similarities were more surprising in light of the different contexts of learning for the two groups of students. It appears that the form of assessment used in schools or educational institutions is of paramount importance in influencing student's conceptions of learning. This appears to be an oversight in all of the 'conceptions of learning' literature. The slight difference in how frequently memorisation was cited as the dominant conception of learning at the two schools could well be a reflection of how often students are assessed there. Weekly tests were combined with end of term exams at Oakdale Primary, with the former being less common at Thembisa Primary.

The most notable difference between the two groups, however, was the attitudes towards the act of memorising. At Thembisa Primary it was often enjoyed, thought to be effective, and was performed by many of the students there without prompting from the teacher but as an added extra. There appeared to be an intrinsic value in memorising for the Thembisa students as opposed to something that was only done at Oakdale Primary for extrinsic reward. While C2005 had not been officially implemented at the schools when the research was conducted, elements of it were already evident. On the day in which the students took their photographs, the Thembisa students used group work and applied learning by cutting pictures out of newspapers which contrasted "forms of transport used today and long ago." When asked what they had learnt from the lesson, their responses were vague and all of them intimated that they would only really 'learn' when they memorised the notes that they had copied off of the board for exam purposes (see photo. # 35 and 36). Oakdale students on the other hand, were often skeptical of memorisation's worth as a learning strategy (besides Tarnlyn), rarely enjoyed it, and perceived it as an unfortunate necessity to succeed in the system.

What seems to be happening is that while the shift to C2005 (OBE) has already begun at both schools, only the students at Oakdale Primary are exhibiting the expected change in attitude towards learning while almost none have affected that shift at Thembisa. It remains to be seen whether a change in assessment formats will be enough to alter conceptions of learning at the latter school. It is also questionable whether simply changing the forms of assessment will have the desired effect, as the change in teaching methodology witnessed in the "transport" lesson appeared to be of little consequence with regard to what 'learning' was in that lesson. In relation to the "conceptions of learning" literature, the co-existence of memorisation and deep approaches to learning begins to call into question the perceived wisdom of drawing clear distinctions between the two as a degree of 'complimentarity' between the two seems to exist.

The next section will deal with the second most commonly expressed conception, 'increasing one's knowledge'. It was interesting that students often placed more emphasis on the memorising than on the increase in knowledge, but the latter aspect may have been perceived as 'a given' by the students.



Photograph # 35 (T.P)



Photograph # 36 (T.P)

5.2 Increasing One's Knowledge

For the oldest student participating in the research project, Mandla aged 15, it was impossible to explain what 'learning' was and he repeatedly said that "learning means learning", insinuating that it was self-evident.² The idea that "it is what it is" and difficult to describe, is a characteristic of this first category described by Marton *et al* (1993). They describe this category as

...a general conceptualisation of learning that covers all the different conceptions. This is because one of the keywords in the subject's answer is "learning", which is exactly what the question is about, and the other keyword, "knowledge" is not further explored.

The conception of learning as "increasing one's knowledge" was mentioned by exactly half of the students in both groups and was the second most frequently cited conception. All of the students agreed, however, that it was a part of learning when asked to respond to the categories of learning outlined by Marton *et al* (1993), and roughly half of the students at both schools identified it as the most important part of learning. While this conception often only formed a segment of the student's complete conceptualisation of learning, it was their first response to the question "what is learning?" and hence formed the foundation for the other aspects of their conceptions. Responses at Thembisa Primary that are illustrative of this category include

- So that I know things. /t/ (Andile).
- Things that you take into your brain. /E/ (Vuyani)
- I come to school. I want to know things. /E/ (Bulafi)
- To have education and to have knowledge. /t/ (Sandile)
- To try to get a lot of knowledge. /t/ (Nontobeko)

Below are some of the responses at Oakdale Primary that make up this category and the similarities between the two cohort's sets of statements are apparent. While this might seem to confirm the argument by Marton *et al* (1993) that "...this is the conception from which all other conceptions develop...(i)n this way it is both prior and superordinate to the other conceptions", the more commonly cited conception of learning as memorising questions this assumption.

- It's to find out what happens when something happens... And the past is learning history. You're just learning things. (Allistair)

² The question was back-translated by a third party and checked with other Xhosa speakers to ensure that the question did indeed make sense. Because some of the students at Thembisa Primary responded immediately and without difficulty, it is not thought that the question was culturally biased or linguistically inaccurate or clumsy.

- It means taking things and putting them in your brain. (Dumisani)
- Getting to know new things, different things. Gaining knowledge or education that you didn't know before. (Rachel)
- To get more knowledge. Expanding your knowledge. (Boniswa)

Again it was the similarity between the two cohorts' conceptions that were most notable. Not only were they similar to each other others', but they were also very similar to the university students' quotes that Marton *et al* used to illustrate this category. Such a finding gives credence to the suggestion by Marton *et al* that some elements of people's conceptions appear to be universal. It also points out that 12-15 year olds have already formulated concrete conceptions of learning that are comparable to much older students.

The similarity between their conceptions in this instance was even more surprising given that the "increase in knowledge" was of a very different nature at the two schools. Where Thembisa students were being asked on their end of year Geography exam to:

State whether the following are True or False.

- a. An aeroplane is a water transport.
- b. Cape Town is one of the important harbours in South Africa.
- c. Passenger ship is another type of ships.
- d. Electric locomotives are trains that use diesel. Etc.

Oakland Primary students were being asked to "Compare and discuss the types of industry and agriculture in Great Britain and Brazil." Examinations for Thembisa Primary students were largely a matter of understanding the language and directives of the question paper (the signs), while Oakland pupils were expected to explore the issues that were raised (the signified). In light of these differences one would have expected the conceptions to differ more markedly.

With both groups viewing "knowledge" as discrete and factual and something to "have", "put into your brain", or attempt "to get", C2005's assertion that knowledge will be "constructed" by the pupils with the assistance of teachers is a goal that is far removed from students' present conceptions of the phenomenon. The change envisioned is also something that will be heavily dependent on resources that students can interact with in the form of experiments or use for investigating and comparing different sources of information on the same topic. Oakdale Primary is in a far better position to begin "constructing" knowledge than Thembisa Primary, and whether the teachers at the latter school can facilitate this shift in conceptualising knowledge is doubtful.

An interesting corollary to the students' conceptions of subject content which "increased their knowledge" emerged when students were asked to "tell me about your favourite subject" and "which subject do you think you 'learn' the most in?" At Oakland Primary the responses varied dramatically with science being given a slight preference as far as "learning the most



Photograph # 37 (O.P.)



Photograph # 38 (T.P.)

in" was concerned. At Thembisa Primary, however, maths was cited by eight of the ten students as both their favourite subject as well as the one they thought they learnt the most in. While the students could rarely explain the reasons for these preferences or conceptions, good academic results in this subject did not appear to be one of them as it was the subject most of them got the lowest marks for. Mr. N. who taught them maths also taught them a number of other subjects so his personality was unlikely to be the reason. Siphokazi said that "I don't understand maths and I don't get the answers right, but I just like it a lot" /t/. Possible reasons for their affinity for maths might include that it is the one subject that they do get some homework in regularly; it is the one subject that is at a level of sophistication comparable to their Oakdale counterparts; and it is the one subject that seems to be less dependent on comprehension of the English language.

'Increasing ones knowledge' at Thembisa Primary appeared to be a much more challenging task in the light of unchallenging subject content. The above finding seems to echo Dahlin & Regmi's contention that

... culture (it seems) does not determine the content of the learning experience in any absolute sense. But it does seem to influence which aspects of the learning experience are accentuated, and which are left in the background (1995: 28).

This sentiment conformed with many of the findings of this study. While 'increasing one's knowledge' and 'memorisation' were the two dominant conceptions of learning held by the students, a number of interesting differences and similarities emerged in the ways in which knowledge is initially attained (apart from or prior to memorisation), and the uses to which the knowledge can/should be put. The differences seemed to be reflective of the environmental conditions surrounding them, linguistic considerations, and pedagogical practices employed at the two schools.

5.3 Learning as Being Taught

How "teaching" is enacted in the new curriculum will be fundamentally different from the traditional methods of lecturing, providing notes, and assessing. Students' dependency on the old style of "chalk and talk" is therefore of concern when trying to shift students' notions of how they, and the teachers will operate and interact in the classroom. The identification of the category "learning as being taught" (and what that meant) may provide useful pointers for where interventions should be targeted in helping students to reconceptualise what "teaching" will mean in the new curriculum.

A connection between 'learning' and 'being taught' was evident at both schools but Thembisa Primary students mentioned it far more frequently and in response to a wide range of questions. The factors contributing to a closer relationship between these concepts at the one school are likely to be multiple – the most probable being of a linguistic nature. In their

research on the conceptions of learning held by Nepali students, Dahlin & Regmi (1995) drew attention to the theme 'learning by being taught' and argued that

One reason for this close association of learning and teaching seems to reside in the Nepali language. In Nepali "to teach" – *sikaunoti* – is actually the causative form of "to learn" – *siknu*. Therefore, to teach, in a purely linguistic sense, means "causing to learn." The root of these words – *sik* (of Sanskrit origin) – also appears in *sikshaya*, "education". Thus, teaching, learning and education seems to be part of the same "concept cluster" (Rosemont 1988), internally linked to each other

The same linguistic association is made in Xhosa with the word 'learn' – *ukufunda* – being the root of the word *ukufundisa* – 'to teach'. The following statements were all in response to the original question "what is learning?"

- I learn when it is explained to me. If they don't stay with me it's not explained well. /t/ (Siphokazi)

- It's when the teacher teaches you something and you keep that in your mind. /E/ (Bulali)

- When the teacher teaches us. /E/ (Aviwe)

☞ The centrality of the teacher in the learning process for Thembisa Primary students was consistently expressed in response to numerous questions that didn't necessarily relate to the teacher. In the following segments of dialogue, students were asked to respond to various categories of conceptions of learning. The responses illustrate the important role that the teacher plays in numerous conceptions of learning.

Q: Learning as 'increasing ones' knowledge'?

A: Yes, like something I didn't know, I will know when I come here to school, maybe the teacher tells me about it. /t/ (Zihle)

Q: Learning as 'understanding'?

A: Yes, to learn knowledge so that I know something that I've been taught. /t/ (Andile)

Q: Learning as 'understanding'?

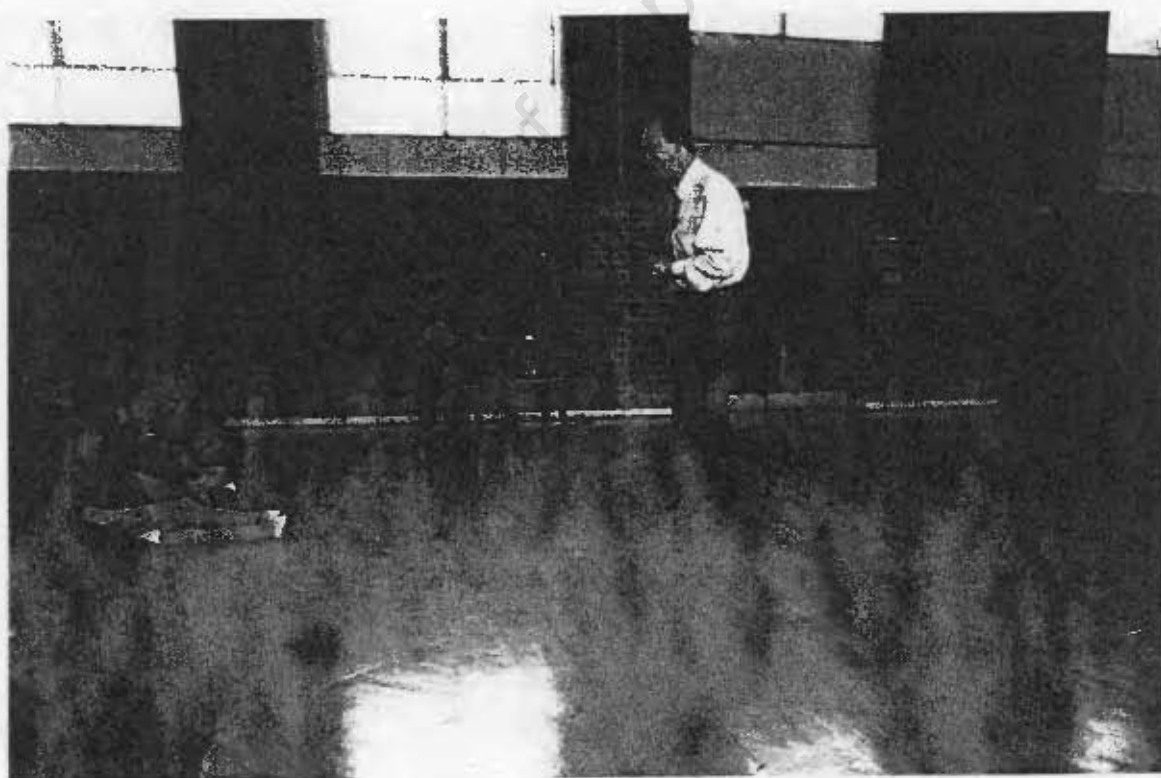
A: When the teacher teach(es) you something and you understand it, then I think you learn. /E/ (Bulali)

Despite the linguistic connection between learning and teaching in the language of Thembisa Primary students, it may have been that the culture of respect, the authoritarian pedagogical practices, and the dearth of alternative means of learning for these students were more influential factors in engendering such an association.

As mentioned in the previous chapter under the section dealing with students' conceptions of teachers, almost all of the Thembisa Primary students praised their teachers during the initial stages of the interviews, but were subsequently more critical of them. The following portions



Photograph # 39 (T.P)



Photograph # 40 (O.P)

of dialogue illustrate how the nature of student's interactions at that school may develop conceptions of learning which place teachers in a more central role than at Oakdale Primary.

Q: Do you think the teachers and pupils have a good relationship at your school?

A: Yes.

Q: Why do you think it's a good relationship?

A: Because the children they don't say like, they don't say what they want to say, like they don't say anything to the teachers. They know what to say and they know what not to say... to the teachers. You don't make too many questions or talk too much when they want to teach.

Q: How do you know what to say and what not to say?

A: You can tell the difference when you're talking to a friend and to the teacher. You talk nicely to the teacher. To your friend you can say what you want to say. Teacher is old, you don't say what you want to say.

Q: If you say what you want to say to the teacher what happens?

A: The teachers... they say you must go out the school and call your parents.

Q: Do the pupils sometimes say what they want to say?

A: No, when the teacher is shouting you just keep quiet. /E/ (Aviwe)

Q: Do you think you are learning when the teacher is 'writing on the board and explaining things'?

A: Sometimes I do... but sometimes I don't. I mean, if there's a word that you don't understand, the teacher doesn't ask you... you just shut your mouth. If you start disrupting him he gets angry and *yhuhuu*... it's not nice. /E/ (Bulali)

The all-knowing teacher providing discrete and factual information for consumption where debate, critical-thinking, and alternative sources of knowledge are absent, was the norm at Thembisa Primary. While surface approaches to learning, in the form of memorising material supplied by the teachers for exam purposes, were common at Oakdale Primary also – they were complimented by a conception of learning which included the student's own input. The following quotes illustrate the existence of teacher-pupil dialogue, a diversity of learning activities, an ability to critique lessons and the resulting awareness of knowledge's subjective nature at times.

Q: Learning as 'increasing one's knowledge'? (Respond)

A: Ja, 'cause if you're like watching the news at night and you see what's happened and then the next day at school you talk about it, you talk to your teacher about it or something like that. (Alex)

Q: When your teachers ask you questions, do you think they're more interested in hearing about facts or are they more interested in your opinions?

A: Ja, arguments actually. You know like having a class argument... not an argument but like a debate. We had one yesterday in science, like a debate, quite a big one. It was about technology, people cloning... building people and stuff. (Saphelo)

Q: How do you learn? Is it by reading or repeating things or...

A: (interrupts) No, I would say listening... where you make it interesting and you put actions to it and you put in something nice... something useful. Not like 'today class we're going to do this and that ...here's the work, explain explain explain explain finished'. Make it more interesting, put special things in... like put in projects and stuff like that. /.../ Most of our teachers are good about that but not all of them. Like maths is just explain explain explain, *do it*. (Boniswa)

- It's a fact because everyone knows it's a fact. Teachers teach us and we know it's... well we're supposed to believe that it's true. Most of the time they're wrong... well when it comes to things like science or maths they're probably right. But history... oh history. History can twist and turn. (Mvulani)

Another contributing factor to the common conception of 'learning as being taught' at Thembisa Primary is the relative dearth of alternative sources of information for 'learning' or 'increasing one's knowledge'. The absence of a library, computer lab, video facilities, and most importantly, educated parents invariably leaves the teacher as the sole font of knowledge for most students. Questionnaires filled out by the students at both schools revealed the occupations and levels of education attained by their parents, and the disparity is apparent. (See table 5.1.)

An example of how the teacher's word is paramount at Thembisa was displayed by students there when responding to the category - *learning as applying* – identified by Marton *et al* (1993). Two students at that school mentioned using knowledge they had learnt in science recently whereby they remove plants from the sleeping area at night because they will 'take your oxygen'. While it is true that the process of photosynthesis is reversed at night and oxygen is being changed into carbon-dioxide, it is of a negligible nature and the information is more mythical than a scientific fact. Yet students at Thembisa Primary have little else to go on besides 'learning by being taught.' While students at Oakdale Primary also described learning with reference to being taught:

- ...the teacher telling us things and me understanding what's going on." (Allison)
- Like when the teacher tells you stuff... (Allistair)
- (To learn something)... it's explained to us... you have to read it, you have to see it with your eyes and you have to write it out so it can go fully into your head because that's how your brain works. It's divided into sections... you see, read, whatever, whatever. (Boniswa)

...it was usually in addition to a host of other activities which complimented the teacher's input. After mentioning learning about the pyramids in history lessons, I asked Alex "what happened in order for you to 'learn' this information?"

- We got notes, we wrote them down, we watched a few movies on the pyramids, we studied them, we got books out from the library on them... we just learnt about them. (Alex)

Surprisingly, the students at Thembisa Primary were rarely critical of their teacher's teaching styles, content, or learning activities – and copying notes off the board was mentioned by three students as their favourite activity at school. It seemed that because actual teaching time was severely limited through teacher absenteeism and staff 'meetings', Thembisa student's were content to be engaged in almost *any* 'learning' activity.

Table 5.1: Parents' Occupations and Education

Oakdale Primary

Student	Parents' Occupation	Parents' Education
Mvulani	M: Businesswoman F: Judge	University 'over-qualified'
Saphelo	M: High-school Principal F: Divisional Manager (Municipality)	University Graduate University Graduate
Dumisani	M: 'House-wife' F: Lawyer	Technikon University Graduate
Allistair	M: 'House-wife' F: Accountant	Not sure University Graduate
Alex	M: 'Secretary' F: (deceased)	Not Sure -
Rachel	M: 'House-wife' F: Computer Analyst	Not sure University Graduate (Phd)
Allison	M: Pharmacist F: Pharmacist	University Graduate University Graduate
Lisa	M: Personal Assistant F: Textiles Businessman	'College' University Graduate
Tamlyn	M: 'House-wife' F: Manger (food company)	Not sure Not sure
Boniswa	M: Social-worker (UCT researcher) F: High-school Maths Teacher	'very high' Teachers Training College

Thembisa Primary

Sandile	M: 'No Job' F: I & J (factory line worker)	Std 10 Std 9
Vuyani	M: (deceased) F: (deceased) G/father: fruit vendor	- -
Bulali	M: 'cleaner' (hotel) F: soldier	Std 10 Std 8
Andile	M: (deceased) F: (deceased)	Died when doing Std 4 No education
Mandla	M: 'not working' F: 'not working' (Old age pensioner)	Std 7 No education
Aviwe	M: office messenger F: (deceased)	Std 8 -
Ndileka	M: 'domestic worker' F: works in a rent office	Std 8 Std 10
Zihle	M: 'No job' F: (deceased)	Std 4 -
Nontobeko	M: 'cleaner' F: (deceased)	N4 Computer (Technikon) -
Siphokazi	M: 'domestic worker' F: taxi driver	Std 9 Std 10

- I just like it (copying notes) because it keeps me busy...and I like to see if I can write down the words the teacher is writing because then, even if I'm at home maybe, I can look at those notes again. /t/ (Zihle)

The ways in which a teacher should teach had obviously been reified into an accepted format of giving notes, reading from the text book, and providing some explanation as they saw fit. In three interviews with Thembisa Primary students I asked them to describe a lesson that had been photographed and this was the standard format. What was interesting was that when I asked how *they* would have taught the lesson had *they* been the teacher – the exact formula outlined above was regurgitated.

In contrast to this, students at Oakdale Primary often had a lot to say about what was 'good teaching' and what was not. It was clear that while they often didn't enjoy some of the learning activities, they had come into contact with enough alternatives from the traditional 'chalk and talk' methods to have an opinion on what teaching and learning should include.

- Like if you go on an outing and you see something that you've learnt about then you actually understand it and will learn it faster. I think I probably learn best when we're learning about... when you can actually like see what it is in the real world that you're learning. (Lisa)
- Mr W's very serious about maths...but if you were more lively and you taught like jokingly, maybe people would take it in properly. Like a new approach...people like rap music more than they like schoolwork. They learn music much quicker than school work, like geography. Like maybe if geography was music, maybe people would learn things more quick(ly) and easier. (Dumisanu)
- When you're entertained and interested then you can learn better and you'll remember it for the test. (Allison)

The diversity of ways in which students at Oakdale thought they learnt, should learn, or should be taught was in noticeable contrast to the limited nature of Thembisa Primary students' conceptions of instruction, being taught, and learning. Even the work that some Thembisa students did at home seemed to be an exact repetition of the material narrowly taught at school.

- Q: Is there a difference between learning at home by 'reading, writing, answering your own questions'... and learning at school when your teacher is teaching you?
- A: No it's the same because I'm just repeating what my teacher was teaching me at school. /t/ (Zihle)

While both groups of students displayed conceptions of learning which encompassed an element of "being taught", the emphasis on the number of possible ways in which this could happen was the factor that differentiated their understanding of this phenomenon. The dependency on the teacher at Thembisa Primary, due to the dearth of alternative sources of information, the authoritarian nature of the teacher-pupil relationships, and the limited methodologies which teachers employed while teaching was apparent. This seemed to be the impetus (or one of them) for students at Oakdale Primary beginning to develop deep



Photograph # 41 (T.P)



Photograph # 42 (O P)

approaches to learning while this did not appear to be occurring at Thembisa Primary. The obstacles for Thembisa students affecting a similar shift away from a conceptualisation of 'being taught' are manifold and many of them may be located in a cultural heritage that is unlikely to change simply because of a change in directives from a department of education far removed from the site of learning. While the next theme explored was not a common one, it highlights another conception that is at odds with the new curriculum. "Learning as reading" is a particularly volatile theme in the context of Thembisa Primary where there is a dire shortage of texts to read. While reading may form a part of the learning process in C2005, the reform would view it as only an initial stage with a number of critical thinking, comparative, and implementation activities following it.

5.4 Learning as Reading

The theme of 'learning as reading' has not been identified in any other research. It only became evident to me during the interview with Mandla (the Thembisa Primary student who said that "learning is learning"). After many attempts at phrasing the question differently, he declared in an exasperated fashion that "I just pick up a book and I learn." In Xhosa, the word 'ukufunda' can be translated to mean either 'read' or 'learn' in English, and understanding what it signifies is dependent on the context of its usage. The sentences *Ndiyafunda incwadi phaya elibrary* (I 'read' the book in the library) or *Ndiyafunda ihistory phaya esikolweni* (I 'learn' history at school) underscore the similarity between the two words. Mandla was the only student, however, who made a direct link between these two activities. When the words 'read' and 'learn' were written down in English, Mandla only recognised the former one. Because reading and learning sometimes seemed to be synonymous for Mandla, and due to the close linguistic ties between the two words in the Xhosa language, it was thought that 'learning as reading' would be a recurring theme amongst the Thembisa Primary students. While such an association was often made, it proved to be no more frequent at Thembisa Primary than at Oakdale Primary, and the Thembisa students could readily differentiate between the two phenomena. The following quotes illustrate occasional associations made between the words or activities when expounding on the act of learning at both schools. When asked if she 'learnt' anything when doing her worksheets for homework (see photo. # 43), Tamlyn said that

...you have to fill it in and then read through it...so you check if you haven't left anything out...so anything you read you learn a little bit from, so I would count that as learning. (Tamlyn)

- You can learn by reading, listening, watching... (Boniswa)

- When I'm reading I'm learning. /E/ (Nontobeko)

Q: How do you learn?

A: I read my books and I write down notes. /U/ (Sandile)



Photograph # 43 (O.P)



Photograph # 44 (T P)

The first two quotes by Oakdale students illustrate that reading comprises a part of learning but is not delimited to that act. The Thembisa students in these instances, however, viewed it as the encapsulation of the process. While such a conceptualisation of learning would not be unhealthy if there were a plentitude of 'quality' texts and a degree of guidance from the teacher by way of helping students to discuss and reflect on what they read, it is problematic in the context of an under-resourced school with teachers ill-disposed towards discussion and debate. Another problem which such a conception raises when viewed against C2005 is that the content of texts that *are* available at Thembisa are far removed from the environment which the students find themselves in. C2005's desire to make learning practical, relevant, culturally sensitive, and intricately linked with the student's life-world will be thwarted by the absence of texts which can make linkages with their surroundings. The next section explores how students at the two schools currently make connections between what they learn and their surrounding environment (both during the process of learning and prospectively with the world of work).

5.5 Learning and Applying

Marton *et al* (1993) describe the 'external horizon' of a person's conception of learning as a descriptor of "how the phenomenon is delimited from, and related to, its context..." In the conception of 'learning as memorising' that was discussed earlier, the context of learning was invariably that of acquiring knowledge in order to reproduce it on a test or exam and this was the case for both the Thembisa and Oakdale Primary students. (The only exception to this was Mandla's comment that he 'reads' and memorises the contents of newspapers so that he can tell his friends about what he had read.) The 'external horizon' for the two groups of students often seemed to be quite different, however, when seen in relation to many of their other comments about what learning was. While the 'what' and 'how' aspects of learning are raised by researchers in this field, the 'why' aspect has not often been broached. Learning or going to school in order to get out of the township, attain future employment, and learning in order to teach others were themes that emerged at Thembisa Primary but were far less discernable amongst the Oakdale cohort. Even though students at Oakdale Primary were far more likely to exhibit conceptions of learning which linked *what* they learned with the world around them, and Thembisa Primary students were more likely to associate *what* they learnt with rigid teachers and specific texts gleaned from notes off of the board – the latter groups' external horizon appeared much larger.

5.5.1 Jobs – Learning for Future Employment

A dominant theme in Thembisa Primary student's conception of learning was linked to job attainment in that they go to school in order to equip themselves with that which is necessary

to secure employment. While such a conception existed at Oakdale Primary, it was mentioned far less frequently. There were also differences in how it was expressed in terms of both the specificity of the learning being linked to a particular job, and the urgency of the expression. At Thembisa Primary learning so that work and an income could be secured (generally any work) was a necessity, and often formed part of the respondent's first response to the question 'what is learning?'

- It means doing something... it means that I'm doing work that I can use to help myself when I'm old. Most jobs are going to be for people who are educated. /t/ (Andile)

- I learn because I want to be something when I grow older. I want to be able to have a job. /E/ (Aviwe)

- ...like your dreams, you realise that thing I wish to be, a teacher or a fashion designer, whatever you like to be. So if I don't know how to do that thing and become that thing that I want to be... I learn to learn so that... thing I learn, I will achieve it. /t/ (Nontobeko)

-You can't go anywhere outside Thembisa without education. /t/ (Sandile)

- If I have a shop one day, I will have to know how to read and write and count my money so that I can make sure people aren't cheating me. /t/ (Siphokazi)

For Marton *et al* (1993) these conceptions fall into the 'application' category of learning and are seen as 'surface' approaches. While the theoretical argument behind this centres around the view that students with such a conception are not affecting the way the knowledge looks (it's meaning), are accepting it as given, and are only expropriating it in order to use it again in its given form, this didn't seem to be the case at Thembisa Primary. It may have been true in some instances but if a more post-modern perspective is adopted (one that emphasises a multiplicity of truths and gives credence to the multi-cultural nature of society), then it becomes apparent that students affect the way the knowledge looks without even trying to. Their individuality presupposes an affectation of that which is learnt.

The last quote cited above by Siphokazi pointed to the idea that education was a necessity and, as the next quote illustrates, not only a necessity in terms of having a job but also for mere survival in the modern world.

- Maybe if I don't come to school and I grow up and maybe I go to Cape Town to the bank and I don't know how to count the money and I don't know how to write my name... and then that's bad. I have to learn things so that I can live properly. /E/ (Bulali)

Three students at Thembisa Primary linked learning with literacy and the ability to function in society, something that was not mentioned at Oakdale Primary and was seemingly taken for granted. Mandla's reference to his father's plight (see photo. # 45) is illustrative of how the township students' conception of learning is often intricately tied to its usage in the economic world.

Q: (looking at the photograph of his father) What does your father do?



Photograph # 45 (T.P)



Photograph # 46 (T P)

A: My father doesn't do anything. He just goes to the Ciskei to get his money (old age pension)... and then he comes back and lives here with his wife for some weeks.

Q: Do you ever talk to your father about school or learning?

A: Ja, he always tells me to study so that I can get a job, because you see, he can't read or even pick up a pencil and write his name. So he's never been working. And he's right. /.../ ... because I don't want to live with my sisters all my life and just wait for them to have some money. I want to get a job soon so I can 'do my own thing'/F/. /U/ (Mandla)

The above quotes by the Thembisa students seem to echo a theme identified by Dahlin & Regmi (1995) amongst Nepali students - "the social value of learning". They describe this theme as

...hardly surprising in a developing country where education has been - and still is to some extent - a privilege for the rich. Learning implies education, which makes possible the distinction between the educated and the illiterate. By learning one may achieve a distinguished position in society. (1995: 7)

The notion of changing ones' status in life through education seemed to be something that was reinforced by the Thembisa Primary teachers as well as evidenced by the following comment by Nontobeko

Q: What does he (Mr. N.) say about 'learning' when you talk about it?

A: They're teaching us as teachers so that we will be like them. They don't want us to be teachers you know...but they just want us to be like them. /U/

While the idea of learning in order to effect a change in status or for future gain was not exclusive to Thembisa Primary, the next three quotes from Oakdale Primary students illustrate that the timeframe for such usage was more vague and not of the same urgent nature.

- ...you learn it ('past stuff from history') and then you'll have the benefit when you're older. (Allistair)

- Maybe it will help you later in life. (Dumisani)

- Something that I'm actually gonna keep for a very long time, until I use it...or there comes a point in time when I take it out and I use it. (Saphelo)

Two of the three Oakdale Primary students who directly connected 'learning' with employment did so at a more advanced stage of the interview when they were asked if the extra-mural drama lessons they made mention of could be considered as 'learning.'

I don't think you learn that much unless you want to do it as a career. Then you'll learn how to act, what to do, what not to do. (Rachel)

Q: Is that (drama lessons) a different kind of learning?

A: Ja, because you're not learning work...it's very similar though. If you're learning science and then drama... scientist - actor. So it's the same. It's a job. (Tamlyn)

The third Oakdale Primary student to make a direct link between learning and future gain was Boniswa, an Oakdale student living in Thembisa.

Q: What motivates you to go to school and to learn?

A: Because I want to be a person one day. I want to have a job, I want to have a car. I want to have a house. I want to be independent. I want to own a company...I've got dreams. (Boniswa)

The similarity between Boniswa's comments and those of Mandla and Nontobeko in this context were striking, something that gives credence to the idea of a 'township' conception of learning that is closely tied to future work and a transformation of lifestyle. *Why* they learn is to 'change as a person', something that Marton *et al* deemed to be a deep approach to learning. When viewing this against Soudien & Baxen's contention that OBE can be viewed as "a form of technology designed to shift the learner's mindsets from the primitive (in this case, African) to the modern (European)..." (1997: 456), it seems plausible that many Black students are already living in a 'modern' world, with 'modern' mindsets, and view education as a means of succeeding within that paradigm. While C2005 and OBE may be more explicit about the aims and end-goals of education, the conceptual link between learning and work (or changing as a person) is already present amongst students prior to OBE implementation. The question is whether the reform will cater to students' needs and help them effect the link which they desire. From the comments made by the two groups of students that are written below, the "old" curriculum's success in this regard seemed to be more effective in some contexts than others.

When 'learning' was directly connected with jobs at Oakdale Primary, there appeared to be a feeling that subject content was relevant to future employment. This was best illustrated by Allistair and Allison.

- Ja, like when you become an accountant you can use what you've learnt in maths. Or when you become a scientist you can use all of your science. (Allistair)

- I think maths and science are probably the subjects I learn the most in because I like the stuff we do there (in those subject lessons), and I know that I'm going to use them one day like if I become a pharmacist. I *hope* I do. (Allison)

The Township Primary students, however, rarely felt that subject content was pertinent and the following comments made by boys at that school seems to suggest that they found school largely irrelevant. This was something that Entwistle *et al* (1989: 337) also found to be evident amongst 12-15 year old boys in British state schools.

- ...the things we write just help me to go on to other standards... that's it. /t/ (Andile)

- They just teach... but I don't know why some of these things we have to learn them. /E/ (Bulali)

- Maybe these things (subject content) will help me one day, but I think I have to learn the important things, like the things to help me get work, there in high-school or somewhere. /t/ (Vuyani)

The above quotes suggest that the subject content and teaching practices at Thembisa Primary do not engage these students and a surface approach to learning (at best) is indeed present.

While eventually applying what is learnt was rarely foremost in the minds of the students at Oakdale, the school's management explicitly cited the linking of subject content with 'the world of work'. The following quote from the principal's address in the annual school magazine highlights this.

Clem Sunter... says that very few jobs will be available in government or large companies such as Old Mutual. Children of today will need to make their own employment when leaving school or finding employment with small businesses. He also says that according to statistics, employment is the number one indicator of happiness! Oakdale Primary has in the past few years, introduced subjects which will aid your children in this task. Subjects such as art, needlework (see photo. # 47), woodwork or technology, will enable your son or daughter to make something to sell at a market, thus bringing in revenue for the family. English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, computer and drama, will enable your child to communicate effectively, and having to motivate why a child should be chosen to attend an Extra Mile outing will also positively influence the communication skills. Economic Management Science, entrepreneurial skills, currently taught in Grade 6 will next year be taught also in Grade 7 to better prepare our children for the world of work...

What was interesting, however, was that only two students at Oakdale Primary responded affirmatively to the category of learning "changing as a person" – the category that Marton *et al* (1993) imply is the 'deepest' approach to learning as it is placed highest in the hierarchy of different conceptions. Eight of the Thembisa Primary students, however, felt that one does change as a person. The following responses by Thembisa students illustrate that they are (or hope to be) affected by 'knowledge'.

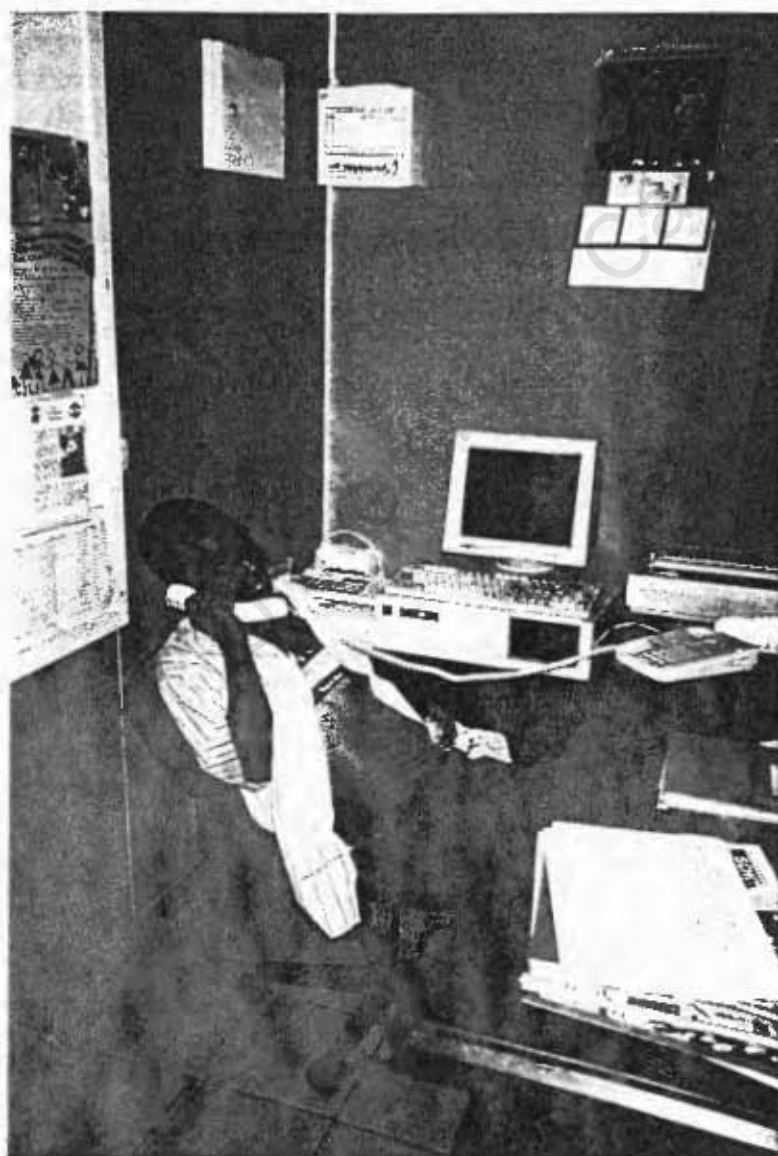
- ...learning can make you a different person, like maybe I'll be working in an office. // (Siphokazi)
- ...you'll be able to get a job and that will make you a different person. // (Sandile)
- ...maybe you'll learn about how bad smoking is and then you can change yourself and stop smoking. Or maybe you'll be getting a job and you can change. // (Ndileka)
- You do change because... it can make me become a better person. When I see a poor person maybe I can give them a 'clip' (R100 note). // (Mandla)
- Yes... because when I was young, I didn't know many things, so I went to school and I changed... because I knew lots of things and now I can think about these things. // (Aviwe)

It should be noted that Marton *et al* (1993) viewed the category of 'changing as a person' as a change in mindset or attitude developed by engaging with learning content, and not as a behavioral change resulting from the completion of school and entering the work-force.³ Only the last comment by Aviwe would be likely to fall strictly into that category. The

³ A number of the photographs by the Thembisa students were taken as they posed with telephones or cell-phones – something which seemed to represent a social or economic status which they yearned for. (See photo. # 48 where Andile poses with a phone in the office of the Boy's Home, as well as photo. # 36).



Photograph # 47 (O P)



Photograph # 48 (T.P)

Oakdale cohort seemed to believe that they would change in time, but more as a result of the natural process of growing up and not as a direct result of engaging with learning material.

The above findings, in addition to the myriad of ways in which memorisation was conducted and perceived, go some way towards illuminating the often complex fashion in which 'learning' is conceptualised and the way in which it is thought to effect a person. The manner in which the Thembisa students and Boniswa linked learning with jobs, seems to suggest that this conception of the outcome of learning is not the result of gender or race identities, but rather by socio-economic context. The following section deals with a conception that may be more linked to race and cultural history, rather than socio-economic group.

5.5.2 Learning in order to Teach Others

The second instance where the two cohorts diverged in terms of *applying* what is learned appeared in their responses to this category – 'learning as applying'. Most of the Oakdale Primary students (seven) said that they 'don't know about that one' or 'I don't have an opinion about that'. In contrast to this, eight of the Thembisa Primary students interpreted this category in a way that suggested that learning carried with it a social responsibility to teach others. The following responses are illustrative of this theme.

- You will use it when you pass it on to others. /t/ (Zibhe)

- You mustn't keep it to yourself... you must share what you learn. Like if I was learning about how rain is made in the sky with evaporation and all those things... and then I could go and tell my friends who don't go to school how it works. /t/ (Sandile)

- Yes, it is about using it, and doing something with that work you have studied.

Q: Can you give me an example of that?

A: Like the story we read said that a child mustn't talk to strangers, so I learnt that thing...and then I was telling my sister she must be careful here in Thembisa. /t/ (Aviwe)

Q: Which one of those six ideas about learning do you think is the most important?

A: I think it's the using it, because like I think it's important to record what the world is like now so that I can pass on all of this information to my grandchildren. /t/ (Ndileka)

- Yes... like if someone doesn't know something then I can tell them...and I think I am also learning about that thing when I have to think about how I can explain to them that thing. /E/ (Bulali)

It was thought that the way in which the word 'applying' was translated into Xhosa when the category was offered up for response, might have led to the similarity in the nature of the comments. The word *ukusebenza* – 'to use', was employed which also has the same root as the word 'to work' - *ukusebenza*. The association between 'using' and 'working' (as a teacher maybe) might have influenced such a confluence of responses, but because two of the

students at Oakdale Primary also made such an interpretation of the category this probably was not the case.

- Ja...when you apply it to something then you'll learn more about that thing...like teaching. When you learn something and then you teach it to someone else, you'll probably learn more things about it because you'll learn from the student, things you didn't know, and you'll learn about...I don't know how to say it...you'll learn about the different situations in life and you'll learn about how it really is. (Rachel)

- Ja, you've got to make use of it. You don't know it for nothing now do you (?). You don't learn just to learn...you learn for a reason. So maybe you can tell people who don't know and make them learn. (Mvulani)

The conception of learning as “teaching others” is best illustrated by Rachel’s comment where the act of teaching results in learning. She was the only student who made this connection in either school, and her assertion that you will “learn how it really is” suggests an acknowledgment of the difference between knowledge as theory (in the text), and knowledge in practice (as applied). It also implies a broader view of learning that incorporates the experiences of others.

The more prevalent connection made between learning and teaching others was a conception where the process of learning carries with it a social responsibility to teach others. Race does seem to be a factor in this instance as almost all of the Thembisa students held such a conception of learning, as well as Rachel (a ‘coloured’ student), and Mvulani (a Black student).

It could be argued that South Africa’s history of racial segregation and differential education opportunities has resulted in a awareness of educational responsibility being inculcated in the children of those who were denied education in the past.

During the course of the interview with Mvulani, he related a story about how his father had been a political prisoner on Robben Island during the apartheid era but had been able to continue studying there through a system of peer tutorship. Mvulani said that his father continually told him how lucky he was to be learning in a nice school, an opportunity that he had not had. He also spoke of how his mother had grown up in a rural village and was forced to tell her parents that she was going to collect wood in the forest when she went to school as they would not permit her to study. A sense of the value of education and the social responsibility that accompanied learning had obviously been instilled in Mvulani, and his comment about teaching others reflected this.

The comments cited above by the Thembisa students and two of the Oakdale students are illustrative of the “social value of learning” theme identified by Dahlin & Regmi whereby learning “becomes a ‘service to the country’” (1995: 7). While this may be a somewhat abstract notion of learning and difficult to relate specifically to the content of a curriculum, it does seem to sit well with what the (then) Minister of Education Sibusiso Bengu referred to as C2005’s goal of fostering “reconciliation and nation-building” (C2005 Booklet, 1997:1).

Even though it is unclear how the content, pedagogy, or modes of assessment will develop “nation building” conceptions of learning – being able to identify this conceptual goal amongst students prior to the reform’s implementation provides optimism for a degree of compatibility between intended goals and current conceptions in this area. It also seems likely that this compatibility may be more evident amongst students from previously disadvantaged race groups. Whether this tentative finding proves accurate, however, is far more likely to be dependent on the content and particular ideologies of teachers than on the students’ own conceptions of learning. It is also unlikely that students without such a conception of learning are going to be at a disadvantage as it does not appear to be a conception of learning that is central to the learning process. The following section, however, is concerned with the ‘deep’ approaches to learning that were identified amongst the two cohorts and it is here that disparities between current conceptions and the goals of C2005 become most evident.

5.6 Focusing on (even) ‘Deeper’ Approaches to Learning

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, many students harboured conceptions of learning that simultaneously included surface and deep approaches. While the former were more prominent, a few students at both schools displayed conceptions that could be deemed as instances of the latter. For Marton *et al* (1993), “learning as understanding”, “learning as seeing something in a different way”, and “learning as changing as a person” were the categories of conceptions which comprised ‘deeper’ approaches. What differentiates ‘deep’ from ‘surface’ approaches to learning is a concern with *meaning* whereby students acknowledge (or seek out) the possible underlying dimensions of the material being engaged with. A change in the ‘external horizon’ of a student’s conception is also evident in the last two deep conceptions in that the test situation is no longer the central focus (Marton *et al*, 1993: 288-289). It should be remembered that these ‘deep’ approaches to learning were identified in annual interviews conducted with university going students over a period of six years. It was therefore somewhat encouraging that ‘deep’ conceptions of learning (in any form) could indeed be distinguished amongst these 12-15 year olds during one-off interviews. That these conceptions were held less frequently and often only illustrative of a portion of a deep approach was also not surprising given their ages.

5.6.1 Learning for pleasure and to achieve understanding.

With one distinguishing element of the ‘deep’ approach to learning being that a student’s ‘external horizon’ shifts away from the test situation, it was interesting (or depressing) to find that very few students (four) at either school expressed an innate interest in learning for learning’s sake. In light of the environmental pressures, desultory teaching practices and

limited resources at Thembisa Primary, it was not surprising that only one of the students from this cohort, as compared with three from the Oakdale Primary group, held such a view of learning. The Thembisa student's comment precedes those made by the Oakdale students.

Q: How do you learn for science?

A: I learn well because I really like learning about plants and nature and it's just so interesting... really, I don't mind if we do that subject all day. (See Ndileka photo. # 49)
/t/ (Ndileka) (Thembisa)

Q: Why do you go to school?

A: Because I have to... and sometimes because things are interesting. (Allison)

-...and I just like learning because I'm interested in it. I like learning about plants and how they actually look like... the structure of it. It's interesting. (Boniswa)

- It's amazing, like when something is interesting, you can learn a lot about it. /.../
... you get to discover and know things, amazing things. Things that you didn't know before. (Mvulani)

All of the above quotes point to an intrinsic desire to learn – something that C2005 explicitly aims to develop and nurture amongst students. The C2005 Booklets abound with comments such as "...promoting a thirst for knowledge" or "...the enthusiasm to instill a love of learning..." (1997: 4 and 22). The finding that only one student at Thembisa Primary held such an attitude towards learning compared with three at Oakdale Primary was not surprising in the light of the divergent resources and different pedagogical styles at the two schools. It also seemed likely that the Thembisa students' preoccupation with the material and social benefits of learning leave little room for a more self-indulgent view of learning. Ironically, however, it is such an indulgence that is likely to see students engaging with learning materials in the most beneficial manner.

All of the students quoted above achieved good academic results through the traditional assessment methods, apart from Mvulani who had the lowest overall average in the Oakdale cohort. Mvulani's comments exhibited a deep approach to learning throughout his interview and they point to a case where C2005 is likely to be of benefit. Mvulani's aversion towards memorising and taking tests was very clear during the interview with him, and his academic results suggest that this attitude is penalised in the old curriculum. While one cannot be certain that he will succeed in C2005 assessment modalities, it does seem likely that a greater congruence will exist between his deep approaches to learning and the aims of a C2005 system of learning. As the next section will suggest, Saphelo, another Black Oakdale student is also likely to benefit from the new system while the case for others is less clear.

5.6.2 Understanding prior to learning.

A second observation was that 'deep' approaches to learning were sometimes exhibited as a precursor to surface approaches. A deep understanding of the material was sought in order to



Photograph # 49 (I.P.)



Photograph # 50 (O.P.)

facilitate studying for a test or exam. This is best illustrated by the following comments by Oakdale students.

- ...but science isn't a thing you can just know, you have to *understand* it. When you're learning a plant, you don't just revise it, you have to know what this part does and what that part does... and then you'll know it better than if you just revised it. Learning comes before revising. I learn, then I revise what I learn. (Saphelo)

- I don't just say 'oh, a dicotyledon is this and this'... I think about it and why it's like that or whatever, and then that sometimes helps me to know what it is. /.../ I think it helps you if you know why it happens or doesn't happen or what's going on and you're not just told something... like the story behind it as well. /.../ You have to understand something in order to know it properly for the test. (Allison)⁴

Four students at Oakdale Primary consistently expressed 'deep' approaches to learning during both the open-ended section of the interview and in response to the six categories described by Marton *et al* (1993). As the quotes above illustrate, however, this did not preclude some of them from employing a strategy of memorisation out of necessity at times – but it was clear that their overriding approach to learning was directed by a desire to achieve understanding.

- ...actually listen to what they say and take in what they're saying... actually understand what they're talking about. (Rachel)

- When I learn I try and get the whole picture of something, like... I see a plant OK, so that's the plant and there's the root system and those are the leaves and this does whatever in order for this other thing to do its job. Like I want to understand what's actually going on. (Boniswa)

Q: How do you know when you have learnt something?

A: You understand it. Not revise it... understand it. Not memorise it. If I'm not memorising it then I understand it. Then I'm fine... I know it. My mom always says "Don't memorise, understand it... understand how it works."

Q: Is that what you do?

A: Ja, I try... but it only works for some things... like maths. That's what I like to think I do (understand the material), but sometimes I have to memorise it. (Saphelo)

While deep approaches to learning could be identified in nearly half of the Oakdale Primary students' conceptions, they were completely absent amongst the Thembisa Primary cohort during the open-ended portion of the interview. This finding suggests that the divergent socio-economic conditions, teaching methodologies and available resources at the two schools may indeed result in a significant chasm between how the two sets of students approach learning. It is significant that almost half of the Oakdale Primary students recognised a difference between a mode of learning where material (knowledge) is accepted and committed to memory in the format it is supplied in – and learning by understanding.

⁴ When asked whether she thought her teachers succeeded in providing 'the story behind' the things that they learnt in school, she felt that "yeah, they're pretty good about doing that... we can always ask them for more of the story if we need it."



Photograph # 51 (O.P)



Photograph # 52 (O.P)

interacting with, thinking about, and questioning the content of the curriculum. The absence of what could be termed a "second-order" approach to learning amongst the Thembisa students suggests that C2005's goal of developing a 'deep' approach to learning will be more challenging in this context.

What becomes clear, however, is that this difference is not predicated on race or gender identities as there were girls and boys, and Black and White students at Oakdale Primary who exhibited deep conceptions of learning. Neither does the difference seem to be brought about by assessment methods as both schools write tests and exams. The determining factor seems to be pedagogical approaches, resources, and possibly the curriculum contents' level of sophistication. The section on students' conceptions of their teachers illustrated how debate and critical thinking were encouraged at Oakdale Primary and creative teaching methodologies were appreciated. The diversity of resources at Oakdale Primary in the form of computers, libraries, video facilities, and parental input also illustrated how the 'resource' base at that school provided a myriad of texts which encouraged, and possibly demanded, a degree of reflection and comparison on the material being taught. The differences in the content taught at each school, as was illustrated in the different geography exams, also suggests that a 'deep' approach to learning was not needed at Thembisa Primary. As a result, the process of learning at Thembisa Primary appeared to be delimited by what the text offered.

While the 'surface' 'deep' chasm that materialised between the two schools appeared to be constituted by the different approaches to learning, the students' responses to the categories of learning identified by Marton *et al* (1993) questioned this. The section below examines how their responses illuminated latent conceptions of learning at both schools.

5.7 The Broadening of Student Conceptions

Almost all of the students exhibited (to some degree) a broadening of their conceptions of learning when asked to comment on the six categories described by Marton *et al* (1993). Many conceptions that had not previously been mentioned by them were subsequently affirmed and, as was mentioned earlier in the chapter, the conception of 'learning as memorisation' that had originally been cited by some students was then refuted. The table on the opposite page depicts the students' initial conceptions of learning during the open-ended section of the interview, and then shows how their conceptions developed or expanded when asked to respond to the six categories of conceptions of learning. It should be noted that in some cases it was questionable whether a student's affirmation of a 'deep' approach to learning could be deemed an honest reflection of their conceptualisation of learning solely on the strength of a positive response. Even though a number of students at both schools agreed with some of the categories they were asked to reflect upon, often they could not substantiate why they agreed, or their explanation revealed a misinterpretation of the category and reinforced a 'surface' approach. The number of asterisks in each box represents the degree to

which their responses were thought to accurately reflect that conception of learning. Only those responses exhibiting a truly deep approach will be discussed below.

One student from each of the schools associated the category of 'learning as understanding' with a desire to move beyond the surface statements and thoughts that people make, and to comprehend the underlying factors that may have given rise to those attitudes or beliefs that people display.

- I think the most important one is understanding. Like also (be)cause I want to understand what someone else is saying. You can't just say "oh, so and so said that... they just said it." You've got to know *why* they said it, and understand why they say it. Because you don't just say it for nothing. You've got a reason for saying it and you've got to understand it. (Mvulani)

A: Yes... If I want to know what kind of a person this person is... I want to know how this person is. I can learn to understand why this person thinks like this, what makes them think the way they do. /t/ (Nontobeko)

The similarity between these statements is evident, and even though they use a person's thoughts or actions to explain how learning involves understanding, it is not difficult to imagine curriculum content being substituted as the text under scrutiny and being dealt with in the same manner.⁵ Nontobeko's response to 'learning as seeing things differently' did, however, make use of subject content in exhibiting a 'deep' approach to learning as the following quote illustrates.

Q: Learning as seeing something in a different way. (Respond)

A: Or maybe I see things right (?)... this thing I see it goes this way, another person sees it another way round. Or like I can study maths and geometry or whatever and see that this house looks skew... another (person) sees it like it's straight. /t/ (Nontobeko)

Nontobeko's comment alludes to the subjectivity of attitudes and the way in which learning can affect our perception of the world. In a similar vein, the following comment by Ndileka illustrates an awareness of the multiplicity of texts and how their nature is often contested.

A: Yes, because like something that you might learn, maybe in one particular history book won't be written the same in another history book even though they're talking about the same person. So if we read different books we're going to see things differently. And like some people don't go to school and don't read any books so I'm going to maybe see some things that they don't see. So I will be seeing things in a different way. /t/ (Ndileka)

While Ndileka and Nontobeko, along with most of the Thembisa Primary cohort, did not display 'deep' approaches to learning during the open-ended section of the interview, their responses to the 'deep' categories of learning showed that these do constitute a part of their conceptions. While a 'deep' approach may not be the central focus or cornerstone of their

⁵ While neither of these students' original conceptions of learning incorporated 'deep' approaches, they had both refuted memorisation as a description of learning (with Nontobeko being the only one to do this at Thembisa Primary).

conception of learning, the above comments indicate that they are present. In relation to C2005's goals of developing students with deep approaches to learning, it appears that they are attainable in contexts such as Thembisa Primary. What is surprising is that 'deep' conceptions do already exist at that school in spite of the dearth of motivating resources, engaging pedagogical styles, or modes of assessment which place less emphasis on memorising and reproducing. The sophisticated nature of the above quotes is made more apparent when contrasted with the responses made by the two students' at Oakdale Primary that agreed with the category of learning as "seeing things in a different way."

A: Ja, because like, when you thought that trees are just like one bark and leaves going up, (after learning about it) you see it in a different way. You see like more detail to it. (Boniswa)

A: Ja, you could read it from a textbook and then you could go outside and then whatever that thing is that you just learnt about, you might see it in a different way. (Rachel)

In these two instances 'seeing differently' seems to be more closely linked with, or a result of, an 'increase in knowledge' and not a change in mindset or attitude as Marton *et al* (1993) conceive of the category. Despite instances where Thembisa students exhibited conceptions that appeared more sophisticated or higher up on the hierarchy of conceptions than their Oakdale counterparts, the opposite was generally true. It was pointed out in the section on *applying* what is learnt (section 5.5.1) that most of the Thembisa Primary students interpreted the category of 'changing as a person' in a way that linked learning to job attainment, a change in social stature, or a change in outward appearances. Two students at Oakdale Primary did, however, respond to the category in a way that mirrored how it was understood by Marton *et al* (1993). Marton explains the category in the following way.

By developing insights into – or a view of – the phenomena dealt with in the learning material, one develops a new way of seeing those phenomena, and seeing the world differently means that you change as a person. (1993: 292)

The 'deep' conceptions given below reflect these views of learning and are also interesting for two reasons. Firstly, they are made by Allison, one of the top academic achievers in the Oakdale cohort and by Mvulani who was at the very bottom. As it has been pointed out throughout the chapter, students' approaches to learning rarely seemed to conform with their academic achievement – which is in contrast to what most researchers in this field have argued (Marton *et al*, 1993; Meyer, 1999; Purdie *et al*, 1996). The second issue is Mvulani's recognition of the value of reflecting upon what 'learning' might (could or should) mean to the student, and how the practice of raising up a reified concept for critical inspection may be both liberating and instructive.

Q: Learning as changing as a person. (Respond)

A: It can be because when you learn things you can change, because... I don't know, you like... know what to do in a situation and before you didn't. You might understand people or things in a new way after you learn about them... so now you can change how you feel... and how you do things. (Allison)

- Well sometimes it does... when you come to terms with realising like "no man, this isn't like this, it's like *this*." So now I know it's like this, I'll keep it like this and you change. Ja, I think learning does make you change now that I think about it. It's kind of weird to realise that. (Mvulani)

C2005's intention of developing learners with a "a greater sensitivity to the many ways of seeing, thinking, and forming value judgements" (C2005 Booklet, 1997: 10) appears to be compatible with the conceptions displayed above. It became clear, however, that few of the students at either school had ever really thought about what learning was or what it meant to them. It also became evident that when they were asked to respond to the 6 categories of "conceptions of learning" their view of what learning was expanded, often in a way compatible with the goals of C2005.

When the students were asked to reflect on which one of the six categories of learning they felt was the most important, no discernable trends emerged as each category was selected by at least one student. A slight preference for learning as 'increasing one's knowledge' and learning as 'understanding' was in evidence at both schools. What was most interesting, however, was that two of the Oakdale Primary students were able to sum up the hierarchy of conceptions constructed by Marton *et al* (1993) and echoed the idea that each conception builds on, and is linked to, the previous one.

- I actually think they all go together...each one kind of adds a little bit more onto the whole thing. But at the end of the day you just say its increasing your knowledge. Increasing your knowledge is the most important thing...these other things are like just little sub-headings which go under it. (Boniswa)

- I think they're all right except for the memorising. I guess the last one, changing as a person is the most important, but you've got to understand what it is first before you decide whether it's good to change or not. I think they all sort of add up one after the other until you get to the final change of the person. (Rachel)

When the above comments are viewed in conjunction with the other conceptions of learning cited in this chapter, it becomes clear that students at the grade 7 level have well-defined, and often very sophisticated, conceptions of what learning is. The last section of this chapter will attempt to summarise the conceptions identified and interpret their significance in relation to the implementation of C2005.

5.8 Concluding Comments

Of the 20 students participating in the study, 90% of them could express a conception of 'what' learning was, and *all* of them could describe 'how' they learned. This suggests that most students in this age group have indeed reached the "formal operational stage" of cognitive development. One of the implications of this finding for C2005 implementation at the Grade 7 level is that students will be forced to dramatically change their conceptions of learning. Had the students not held concrete conceptions of what learning was, the introduction of a new mode of learning may not have been as challenging.

Individual pupils, however, often expressed a number of divergent conceptions, and the range of conceptions within both groups was sizeable. They varied from an inability to conceptualise 'what' learning was on the one hand, to the ability to summarise the theoretical underpinnings of the hierarchical characterisation of conceptions of learning suggested by Marton *et al* (1993) on the other. While it was initially thought that gender and race would play a discernable role in the development of the students' conceptions, the results suggested otherwise. The Thembisa Primary girls did appear to have slightly more advanced and complex conceptions of learning than the boys in that cohort (see table 5.2 on page 116), but the sample is not large enough to validate any findings in this regard. The conceptions of learning held by the boys and girls in the Oakdale group, however, were extremely similar in levels of sophistication and complexity. The most influential factors on conceptions of learning seemed to be students' socio-economic background, parental input, the schools' resources, and the pedagogical styles enacted at the two schools.

Given this, it was expected that the Oakdale Primary students would be more likely to hold a 'deep' approach to learning than their township counterparts. However, the majority of students at both schools had a 'surface' approach to learning whereby knowledge was viewed as discrete and factual with an emphasis on memorisation. This finding seemed to be related to the similar modes of assessment employed at the two schools. What this means for both groups of students is that with C2005 they will be challenged to engage learning tasks in a more critical, creative, and reflective manner as they will no longer be assessed on what they can remember or reproduce on tests. It does appear, however, that elements of such an approach to learning already exist among the Oakdale cohort and that less of a shift will be necessitated in that context.

Already many of the Oakdale students were critical of memorisation as a learning strategy and acknowledged the need to seek a deeper understanding of the learning material. A major hindrance for the Thembisa students in this regard was that their conception of "learning as being taught" is in diametric opposition to the learner-centred curriculum envisioned by C2005 which places an emphasis on "learners tak(ing) responsibility for their learning". Some of the comments made by Thembisa Primary students, however, could be construed as having the characteristics of a deep approach to learning which intimates that such an approach will be possible to engender in that context.

To summarise, despite occasional anomalies, the research showed clear links between the conceptions of learning and the old curriculum and its associated pedagogy; and between conceptions of learning and socio-economic status. Significantly, although there were differences, the impact of both race and gender on the development of conceptions of learning appeared to be relatively minor.

Chapter 6 provides a summary and conclusion.

Table 5.2: The Broadening of Students' Conceptions

Thembisa Primary

(Initial conceptions)

		Increasing One's Knowledge	Memorising and Reproducing	Applying	Understanding	Seeing things Differently	Changing as a Person
Sandile	*		*				
Vuyani	*	*					
Bulali	*	*	*				
Andile	*		*				
Mandla			*				
Aviwe		*	*	*			
Ndileka	*		*				
Zihle		*	*				
Nontobeko	*						
Siphokazi			*				

(Responses to categories)

	Increasing One's Knowledge	Memorising and Reproducing	Applying	Understanding	Seeing things Differently	Changing as a Person
Sandile	***	**	***	*	*	*
Vuyani	**	***	**	*		
Bulali	***	***	**	*	X	X
Andile	**	**	*	*		
Mandla	***	***	***	***		**
Aviwe	**	***	***	***		*
Ndileka	***	**	**	***	***	**
Zihle	***	***	**	*	*	X
Nontobeko	***	X	*	***	***	***
Siphokazi	**	***	X	*		*

Oakdale Primary

(Initial conceptions)

		Increasing One's Knowledge	Memorising and Reproducing	Applying	Understanding	Seeing things Differently	Changing as a Person
Mvulani	*	*					
Saphelo		*	*	*			
Dumisani		*					
Alitstair	*	*	*				
Alex		*		*			
Rachel	*		*	*			
Andrea	*	*		*			
Lisa	*	*	*	*			
Tamlyn		*	*				
Boniswa	*	*		*			

(Responses to categories)

	Increasing One's Knowledge	Memorising and Reproducing	Applying	Understanding	Seeing things Differently	Changing as a Person
Mvulani	***	X	***	***	*	***
Saphelo	**	X	*	***	*	*
Dumisani	***	***		***	**	***
Alitstair	**	X	***	***	*	X
Alex	***	X	*	***		X
Rachel	***	X	***	***	***	***
Andrea	***	**	*	***	*	*
Lisa	***	*	*	*	X	X
Tamlyn	***	***	*	*	X	
Boniswa	***	X	**	***	***	***

- Note: 'X' signifies disagreement with that description, and a blank space signifies "no opinion"

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

This dissertation has investigated how Grade 7 students in two very different educational environments conceptualise both school and learning. A primary aim of the study was to explore the lacunae that existed in the “conceptions of learning” literature around this age group (12-15 year olds), and to examine the findings in relation to the intended changes envisioned by C2005. It was felt that the attitudes, opinions, and conceptions of the students themselves constitute an under-utilised resource in the discourse of trying to improve education in South Africa, and that much of the literature provided by the Department of Education on C2005 failed to address what was expected of students or how they were likely to respond to the changes. This oversight seemed to be largely attributable to limited information on the conceptions held by students prior to the reform’s implementation, with national matric result differentials being the main source of information to evaluate students. While the ‘success’ of a curriculum is usually measured in terms of students’ academic performance, Meyer (1997) has argued that this often tells us very little about how students actually engage with the material or if ‘quality’ outcomes have been solicited in the process. Developing an insight into students’ conceptions of, and approaches to learning is crucial if C2005 is to be implemented sensitively, intelligently, and successfully. The results of the study have shown that the challenges for students to adapt to the new curriculum are likely to be as significant as the challenge to teachers.

A second aim of the study was to investigate how contextual issues such as a student’s socio-economic environment, parental involvement, their gender or race, or the content, pedagogy, and assessment formats of their curriculum impacted on their conceptions of learning. The omission of these considerations in previous work was thought to be problematic and the study has shown that some of these issues do appear to play a central role in the development of conceptions. While gender and race did not appear to be determining factors in the students’ conceptions, all of the issues mentioned did play influential roles.¹

The results of the research were illuminating for a number of reasons. Firstly, the two cohorts’ **conceptions of school** were extremely different. Oakdale students viewed schooling as something that they had to do but fortunately it was enjoyable due to the variety of learning, sporting, and extra-mural activities. They also liked their teachers, supported the codes of discipline, and displayed a large degree of pride in their school. The Oakdale students generally felt that their teachers were engaging in their teaching styles, but the

¹ While gender and race did not prove to be influential factors, a slightly higher incidence of ‘deep’ approaches to learning was discernable amongst the female subjects in the study (see table 5.1.).

students also had very strong opinions about what was good pedagogical practice and what was not. "Chalk and talk" was severely criticised while interactive teaching that was entertaining and innovative was commended. There were no noticeable differences between either the boys or girls' conceptions of school, or the conceptions of school held by the Black and White students at Oakdale Primary.

In contrast to this, the Thembisa Primary students viewed school as a passport out of the township, away from poverty, and a means of securing employment. While they all wanted to attend school, it was generally felt that their school was laden with a multitude of problems which ranged from the lack of sports facilities and the poor work ethics of teachers, to the excessive use of corporal punishment and the inconsistent application or enforcement of school rules. The Thembisa Primary students were also very critical of many of their peers' behaviour which they felt gave the school a bad reputation. Many of the students were keen to move on to another school as soon as possible. Despite the frequently mentioned criticisms listed above, rarely were the Thembisa students critical of the dearth of teaching resources at their school, nor were they critical of their teachers one dimensional teaching methodologies which entailed giving the students notes and explaining them.

Secondly, the very large difference between the two cohorts' conceptions of school was not surprising in light of the very different resources, cultures of learning, and modes of discipline at the two schools. But what was interesting was that despite these differences in the way they experienced school, the two groups' conceptions of learning were extremely similar. The notion that somewhat universal **conceptions of learning** exist (Marton *et al*, 1993) does not appear to be without its merits in light of this finding, but as Dahlin & Regmi (1995) have argued, culture does seem to influence which aspects of the learning experience are accentuated. These have been discussed elsewhere (see sections 5.3-5.5 in the previous chapter). In relation, however, to the hierarchy of conceptions it is noteworthy that conflicting and seemingly contradictory conceptions of learning were often expressed by students. For example: while students may have, on occasion, held a 'deep' approach to learning, 'surface' approaches often co-existed (and appeared dominant) out of a necessity to survive in a system still preoccupied with test and exam assessment formats. It was interesting to note that there was very little correlation between a student's conception of, or approach to learning, and their academic achievement in final year exam results. Deep and surface approaches to learning were not rewarded or penalised in a consistent fashion. This finding questions the assumption made by many researchers in this field that deep approaches to learning are synonymous with high academic achievement. In some cases the opposite proved to be true, as a refusal to adopt the surface approach of memorising material for tests and exams resulted in poor marks. It appears that a correlation between approaches to learning and academic outcomes can only be predicted when viewed in the light of the system of assessment in place. In relation to the alternative methods of assessment that C2005 will

employ, it is likely that those students currently opposed to memorisation but holding 'deep' approaches to learning will benefit from the change in emphasis.

Following from this, the third key result relates to **conceptions of learning and C2005**. While the higher frequency with which 'deep' approaches to learning were expressed at Oakdale Primary suggests that students at that school are likely to adapt more easily to C2005's goals of critical, creative, and reflective thinking outside of a test/exam assessment format, the Thembisa students' conceptions may be conducive to success in other areas of C2005. The pervasive concern with applying what is learnt amongst the Thembisa cohort, and viewing schoolwork as a link to employment, is very compatible with the goals of C2005. In this instance, it appears that the Thembisa students will be more likely to make the conceptual links between the way in which the new curriculum's content is pitched and the intended outcomes. As was discussed in both Chapter 4 (section 4.1) and Chapter 5 (section 5.5.1), the Thembisa students often wanted to make links between the current curriculum and the world of work but often found the content irrelevant (particularly the boys in this cohort.). As C2005 is likely to alter its content, pedagogy and modes of assessment in a bid to become more practically oriented, students at Thembisa Primary may be more receptive to this shift than their Oakdale counterparts.

It also seems likely that the Thembisa Primary students will adopt the new curriculum's goals of nation-building, and being "aware of their responsibilities to the environment and the people around them" (C2005 Booklet B, 1997: 27) more easily due to their concern with "teaching others" and "changing as a person". While these are not educational criteria that are conducive to academic assessment, it does mean that the Thembisa students are more likely to engage the content with more interest as C2005's subject content becomes framed by issues relating to the society's welfare. The successful linking of the Thembisa students' current conceptions that do correlate with C2005 intentions and a new learning process, however, will undoubtedly be largely dependent on their teachers' abilities to appropriate the new pedagogical and assessment modalities.

Should Thembisa teachers successfully move their students away from the surface approaches to learning that centred around memorisation and reproducing material for the test (which is likely to happen as tests and exams are phased out), yet fail to instill an understanding of what is to be done in its place – students may end up in a conceptual vacuum that is both confusing and less productive than the outcomes of the old curriculum. If concrete learning activities do not take the place of note-taking in the classroom and rote-learning at home, the Thembisa students may feel they are being denied the very tangible activities which they have come to associate with self advancement and learning.

The anomaly that these findings point to – that some students will relate conceptually to the learning skills embedded in C2005 (the Oakdale students), while others may relate better to the broader goals (the Thembisa students) – illustrates further the complexities surrounding C2005 and the difficulties of implementation.

Fourthly, the results have shown that most students have already developed very concrete conceptions of what learning is by this stage and that these are intricately connected to the “old” curriculum’s methods of assessment. While the students’ conceptions were by no means uniform, most of them will have to dramatically alter their approaches to, and understanding of learning if they are to succeed in the new curriculum. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the existence of very discernable conceptions makes the implementation of the new curriculum more challenging as not only will new conceptions have to be developed, but **old conceptions will have to be deconstructed**. Of some interest too, was the identification of a further category of learning outside of the accepted six described by Marton *et al* (1993) was identified – “learning as reading.” It was slightly more prevalent amongst the Thembisa Primary students and this was thought to be attributable to the same word being used to denote “reading” and “learning” in the Xhosa language – *ukufunda*. While “learning as reading” was not a particularly common conception of learning, it is felt that its identification is an important addition to the body of literature on “conceptions of learning” and to the ways in which teachers may wish to adjust their pedagogical practices.

Finally, apart from producing a better knowledge of the conceptions of learning in the South African context, the project also raised two additional points, one being a research methodology concern and the other being policy related. The methodology used to elicit the students’ conceptions of school and learning was located within a qualitative research paradigm with the two major sources of data collection being photographs taken by the students that depicted “a day in my life as a learner”, and phenomenographic interviews that focused on the question: “what does learning mean to you?” Asking the students to comment on the 6 categories of conceptions in a structured format at the end of the interview was very instructive (see Broadening of Students’ Conceptions – table 5.1), even though it fell outside of the phenomenographical mode of enquiry which is based on relatively unstructured interviews. None of the other studies reviewed on “conceptions of learning” employed this strategy which might suggest that the conceptions of learning identified in those studies were only partial reflections of the subjects’ views. This technique may, however, be particularly relevant for investigations amongst younger students who may have more difficulty expressing their conceptions of an abstract concept such as ‘learning’. It was felt that the data was greatly enhanced by asking students to comment on the six categories rather than deducing from general comments, as it provided a more accurate understanding of the students’ conceptions, even if they could not express them initially.

In relation to education policy, the students' responses to the categories of learning (as well as the initial question "what is learning") showed that they rarely (if ever) reflect on what learning actually means to them. Providing them with descriptions of learning to think about seemed to raise their awareness about the implications of learning as well as the processes that it entailed. Scrutinizing the forms of learning, some of which have become reified and seem to operate as debilitating notions that limit the manner in which students engage with learning, could be a very valuable exercise for students particularly as they begin with a new curriculum. This would obviously be facilitated by teachers if they themselves analysed "conceptions of learning" literature either during their training to become teachers, or through in-service training.

This research has answered some questions about how Grade 7 students in disparate education environments conceptualise learning, but it has raised many more. The possibilities for further research in this field are numerous. Research of this nature in rural contexts, amongst other language groups, or indeed in any other schools is likely to be illuminating for any number of reasons. More specifically, however, the basis for uncovering a wealth of information about the impact of C2005 on students in the two schools investigated has been established. The experiences of students and the comments they make about their conceptions of school and learning are a valuable resource in the discourse around improving schools and the curriculums that operate in them.

In keeping with this study's emphasis on the views, attitudes, and conceptions held by students, it seems appropriate that they have the last word.

No one knows how we learn...or what makes us learn properly. Scientists don't even know how the brain learns. Except for seeing, saying, writing...we still haven't figured it out. (Saphelo)

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

A: Semi-structured section of the interview:

1. What is 'learning', or what does 'learning' mean to you?
2. How do you know when you have learnt something?
3. Which is your favourite subject and why?
4. Which subject do you think you learn the most in?
5. Tell me about your school. (alternatively: "If some moved into your neighbourhood, how would you describe your school to them?")
6. What do you enjoy most about school?
7. What do you enjoy least about school? *attend your classes.*
8. Why do you go to school, or what motivates you to go to school?
9. If you were the principal of this school, would you make any changes?
10. Tell me about what you do on a 'normal' school-day, starting from when you get up in the morning until you go to bed at night.
11. Tell me about your teachers.
12. What is 'teaching'? What does 'teaching' mean to you?
13. What is your relationship like with the teachers? (or) What is your relationship like with teacher X?
14. How much homework do you do? / When do you do your homework? / Do you think you get too much homework, too little, or the right amount?
15. Tell me about the other students at the school. / Do the students get along with each other at the school?

* It should be noted that this interview schedule was not rigidly followed and that many additional questions were asked that were derived from the photographs taken by the students.

B: The structured section of the interview:

16. I'm going to read out 6 different descriptions of learning and I want you to respond by telling me whether you agree or disagree with the description, or whether you have some other comment to make about that description.
 - Learning as increasing one's knowledge.
 - Learning as memorising and reproducing.
 - Learning as applying.
 - Learning as understanding.
 - Learning as seeing things in a different way.
 - Learning as changing as a person.

