

Challenges faced by teachers in the implementation of curriculum changes for primary schools: The case of Mamabolo Circuit, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated challenges faced by ten primary school teachers in the implementation of Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS) programme. The study was inspired by the apparent misinterpretation of teaching and learning programmes by teachers in the implementation of CAPS in schools. In consequence, the theory of assimilation and accommodation was used as a lens to understand how teachers cope with curriculum challenges emanating from the new programme at five primary schools. Furthermore, the interpretive paradigm, which was underpinned by the qualitative methodology, was applied because of its significance and relevance for providing researchers with thick data designed for scholarly research. In order to afford participants an opportunity to express their views on the topic, data were collected through interviews, which will engage them on their lived experiences. Interviews strengthen participants' ability to explore facts. Participants were selected on the basis of teaching experience. Findings suggest that although the implementation of the new curriculum seems to be a challenge, teachers acknowledge that curriculum change is imperative. Consequently, they realise that it is important to adapt in order to cope with the new demands espoused by the curriculum.

Key words: assimilation; accommodation; interpretive paradigm; CAPS; veracity; phenomenon and curriculum

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to improve curriculum delivery in South African public schools, the Department of Basic Education announced the introduction of Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012. According to the Department, "CAPS is a single, comprehensive, and concise policy document, which has replaced the Subject and Learning Area Statements, Learning Programme Guidelines and Subject Assessment Guidelines for all the subjects listed in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) Grades R – 12" (DBE, 2012: 9). NCS signifies a policy statement for teaching and learning in all public schools, leading to Policy Statements for all officially accepted school subjects, which define promotional requirements for all

programmes as well as the national protocol for assessment.

In addition, the Department asserts that the central purpose of NCS (Grades R-12) is to nurture learners that would, among others, exhibit the following qualities:

- identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking;
- work effectively as individuals and with others as members of a team;
- organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively;
- collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information;

- communicate effectively using visual, symbolic and/or language skills in various modes;
- use science and technology effectively and critically, showing responsibility towards the environment and the health of others; and
- demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems by recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation (DBE, 2012d: 12).

The Department has also considered the need to implement inclusivity as an integral part of “organising, planning and teaching” in all schools. Essentially, for this to be realised, broad awareness and the ability to handle learning barriers become necessary for serving educators. It is important to understand that all support structures earmarked to address barriers have to work together for proper implementation of Inclusive Education (IE). These structures include School-Based Support Teams, District-Based Support Teams, parents as well as Special Schools serving as resource centres. It is also helpful to note that when dealing with learner barriers in a classroom, teachers take into consideration appropriate strategies as recommended in the Department of Education’s (2001a) Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching and Learning. The preceding narrative forms the basis for challenges faced by teachers in their daily execution of duties.

CHALLENGES FACED BY PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CURRICULUM CHANGES

The dilemma facing teachers involves factors such as readiness for the implementation of the new repackaged curriculum statements. It should be noted that teachers were still grappling with NCS after the discontinuation of Curriculum 2005 (C2005), which lasted for a short

space of time after its revision by the Ministerial Task Team. Failures of C2005 along with Outcomes Based Education are well documented (Jansen, 2007; 2001; 1999 & Christie, 2006). Consequently, more and more teachers got involved in paper work, administration, systematic reporting and attention to recording (Chisholm, 2003). Drawing from previous experiences suggests that curricular implementation is further complicated by teachers’ poor comprehension of the new curriculum. As a result, teacher efficiency is at risk, and the ability to produce sound results is compromised. In the midst of all these dynamics, teacher moral and performance goes into a tailspin.

This paper focuses on challenges of curriculum changes confronting primary school teachers. Studies carried out on this subject involved, to a large extent, secondary school teachers. However, this study seeks to determine the impact of changes as they relate to primary (school) teachers. My view is that literature on coping strategies in the implementation of the curriculum at primary school is inadequate because a lot examines secondary education. For example, Wright (2012) argues that infrastructure in education in the rural schools of South Africa is reminiscent of total neglect. His study focused more on infrastructure and resources than challenges faced by primary school teachers. Similarly, studies by Bersin (2011) and Aguardo (2013) focused on problems faced by teachers in the implementation of C2005 and the consequent abandonment of same in 2002. Jansen (2007) reflected on numerous grounds on the impending failure of C2005 and OBE in schools. Peebles and Mendaglio (2014) pointed out weaknesses of some programmes in curriculum structure and persistent unresponsiveness on the part of authorities to address these weaknesses. It is against this background that this paper addresses challenges of

curriculum change confronting primary teachers.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following aspects form part of the objectives of the study:

- What alternative support could be made available for teachers to mitigate against existing challenges of the CAPS programme?
- To what extent do teachers need support?
- How best can teachers be supported to achieve expected results of teaching and learning within the CAPS purview?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is underpinned by the theory of assimilation and accommodation as espoused by the French psychologist, Piaget. According to Lumadi (2013), whereas assimilation refers to using an existing schema (knowledge) to deal with a new object or situation, accommodation occurs when an existing schema does not work, and therefore needs to be changed to deal with a new object or situation. Construed in the current context, teachers whose training experiences were foregrounded in the past, and who may find it hard to cope with current curriculum developments are duty bound to assimilate the new schema in order to survive the new educational dispensation underpinned by curriculum transformation and change. In essence, curriculum changes bring with them new principles, approaches and methods. Similarly, teachers are expected to accommodate these changes in order to implement them efficiently.

METHODOLOGY

Informed by the need to understand the research problem from the perspectives of (affected) participants, the qualitative

research methodology was used. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally explicit information about values, behaviour and social contexts of specific population (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Creswell, 2014; de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2005). The selection of the interpretive design in this paper was informed by the need to engage participants as well as the desire to accord them a platform to express themselves in their own words. The opportunity to give participants platform to express themselves forms one of the basic tenets of the interpretive design (Creswell, 2014). In the process of attempting to realise the objectives of this study, interviews through purposive sampling were conducted. According to Bornman and Rose (2010), the use of purposive sampling to conduct interviews stretches from long established traditions of social science research. Each sample is selected for a purpose because of its uniqueness, which may suggest studying the entire population or a subset thereof.

In the current study, a subset of population of primary school teachers in Mamabolo Circuit was sampled. Part of the sampling procedure involved participants' age and experience. The latter was considered important because the study required experienced teachers who would have had a berth on both the old and the new dispensations. In the present context, seven female teachers and three male teachers from five primary schools in Mamabolo Circuit participated in the study. Based on the criteria mentioned above (experience and age), two teachers were selected from each of the chosen schools. Consideration was given to these factors because of the need to understand participants' views about their experiences of teaching during the pre- and post-1997 eras. Six of the participants were born in the late 1960s and four in the early 1970s. The majority of them joined the teaching profession in the mid- and late 1980s. They all confirmed their participation in the old and the new

dispensations, and therefore, were eligible to share their teaching experiences. They were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Although the majority appeared to be mature teachers, their gender and subjects offered were not considered for the purposes of the study. As pointed out earlier, the purpose was to examine challenges confronting teachers in the new system of teaching and learning.

RESULTS

As mentioned in the preceding section, data were collected using semi-structured interviews. It should be noted that for study purposes, rather than real names, names and codes used in the study are fictitious to preserve the confidentiality of both schools and participants. The following table shows the number of schools and participants in the study:

Table A: The number of schools and participants including experience of participants

<i>SCHOOL</i>	<i>PARTICIPANT</i>	<i>EXPERIENCE IN YEARS OF SERVICE</i>	<i>PHASE</i>	<i>STATUS</i>
Spegs Primary	James & Mary	19 & 21	Senior Phase	Senior Teachers
Schol Primary	Tom & Trob	17 & 18	Intermediate Phase	Senior Teachers
Part Primary	Jenny & Josh	16 & 16	Intermediate Phase	Senior Teachers
Expar Primary	Peter & Joe	24 & 18	Senior Phase	Senior Teachers
Grads Primary	Kim & Rob	25 & 21	Senior Phase	Senior Teachers

Table A (above) represents the number of schools, participants as well as personal data about participants' teaching experiences. The table also indicates the phase that participants were responsible for in the past fifteen years before 2017, as well as their current status. Once again, the reader is reminded that all names used in this table are pseudonyms. James and Mary command 19 and 21 years of teaching experience respectively, and both are responsible for senior phase classes (i.e. from grades 6, 7 & 8) in terms of the South African schooling system. The same can be said about Peter and Joe from Expar Primary School as well as Kim and Rob from Grads Primary School. However, Kim and Rob's teaching experiences spans more than two decades, as does Peter's. I need to point out that these teachers have all been elevated to the status of senior teachers, and

in terms of the Department of Basic Education's grading system, the position of a senior teacher can be equated to that of the head of department at a school level. Like Jenny and Josh, Tom and Trob are responsible for classes in the intermediate phase. This implies that they are responsible for grades 3, 4 and 5. All these teachers, it has to be pointed out, have taught in different grades at different times in their careers, and have amassed experience over time, i.e. moving from one primary school to another during the years that they spent in the profession. None of them has been at the current work station throughout their careers, but have worked at these stations for more than seven years in recent times (as at 2017 school year).

On the question: "have you all been trained in the new NCS/CAPS curriculum?", James and Mary replied in the affirmative. They

went on to indicate that Limpopo Department of Education (LDE) provides continuous training to teachers on the new curriculum. “How often do you receive training?” Mary: “On average I would say we attend workshops twice a year. Remember, the workshops are organised by the Department and are carried out by curriculum specialists”. I went on to ask: “Do you feel that the workshops are helpful in preparing you for curriculum implementation?” James expressed mixed feelings and indicated that some of these specialists leave much to be desired. Both James and Mary agreed that the training workshops are important but more needs to be done. “What exactly do you mean by ‘more needs to be done?’”, I asked. “By that we mean sometimes you come from the workshop and you are not very clear about some of the explanations given. We are also expected to cascade the training to our colleagues at our workstations. You cannot train someone on something about which you yourself (sic) do not understand.” Does this suggest that your trainers do not understand CAPS? I asked. Peter interrupted by stating that “Certainly, some of these specialists do not seem to understand CAPS and I hold the same view as James that some specialists need more training to up their game.” Peter further pointed out that teachers, at times, get frustrated from these workshops. Joe further hinted that one cannot be expected to understand and carry out a successful curriculum process after a two-day training workshop - “it is insufficient”- he concluded.

Let’s get back to the issue of implementation in class: what could be challenges confronting you in handling the subjects that you teach?” James retorted: “My problem is mainly about paper work. Having to deal with paper as it relates to reports, portfolio records as well as lesson preparations, etc.” Isn’t what you have to do as teachers, isn’t the same with everybody? I asked. “Yes, that’s correct that has to be

done by all of us but my view is, the Department does not ‘feel for us’, they demand this and that within a short space of time and this, at times, compromises quality of curriculum delivery.” The views of the two teachers relate more to the challenge of paper work than curriculum delivery.

The same questions were put to Tom, Trob, Jenny and Josh from Schol and Part Primary Schools. The reader is reminded that the quartet is responsible for teaching classes in the inter-mediate phase in their schools. Their opinions were slightly different from those of Mary and James, as captured in the preceding paragraph. They raised the issue of jam-packed classrooms as some of their major concerns. Jenny: “I am worried that the issue of overcrowding has become a norm in our classrooms and the government appears to condone that”. What do you mean by that, Jenny? “By that I mean teachers are overburdened with work and we are expected to meet submission deadlines without delay in a situation like this. Where is quality? How can you be expected to produce quality in this kind of environment?” protested Jenny. You really sound aggrieved, I said. “Sir, you see, it is like the case of somebody promising you a fish and in turn giving a snake”, Tom added. “Since the dawn of the new dispensation, Ministers after Ministers came up with acceptable teacher-learner ratio of 1:35. In most schools, I believe, this is just a complete ruse, it is non-existent”, remarked Tom in support of Jenny. Kim and Rob touched on poor teaching facilities and lack of home-school bond to enable an appropriate teaching-learning environment. All participants expressed displeasure of issues such as insufficient training by (curriculum) specialists, the ineffectiveness of trainers, as well as insufficient training time. In the ensuing section, I will discuss these issues as raised by participants.

DISCUSSION

The preceding section looked at participants' responses in which they raised

important issues that warrant special attention. *Table B* below presents themes identified during interviews with participants. Each of the themes will come under the spotlight later.

Table B: Depicting themes emerging from participants' responses in the current study

THEMES	PARTICIPANT(S)
Insufficient training time on CAPS Implementation	James & Peter
Training abilities of (curriculum) specialists	Peter
Precarious training by specialists	Mary & James
Exaggerated paper-work for teachers	Tom, Trob, Jenny & Josh
Continuous submissions within shorter space of time.	Tom, Trob, Jenny & Josh
Overcrowded classrooms	Tom, Trob, Jenny & Josh
Quality of teaching	Jenny
Poor teaching facilities/resources	Kim & Rob
Poor home and school connection	Kim & Rob

Table B above summarises participants' views and their feelings about the CAPS programme. The table further outlines challenges that participants come across in the implementation of the curriculum in the five selected schools. In the present paper, I have adopted Piaget's theory of assimilation and accommodation as the underpinning framework of the study. I indicated earlier in the section on *Theory* that assimilation refers to using existing schema to deal with a new object or situation. Relating this to the current setting, one is convinced that the study participants command enormous wealth of experience in respect of the erstwhile education dispensation, and a reasonable amount of experience regarding the new dispensation. Therefore, it is possible that their schemas can be deployed to successfully confront curriculum implementation in the new dispensation. However, their responses point to a unanimous, negative view of the CAPS programme.

Similarly, accommodation as spelt out above occurs when the existing schema

does not work, and therefore needs to be changed to deal with a new object or situation. It is expected that when one commands a wealth of knowledge, as displayed by participants, spontaneity and resourcefulness could be relied on to address challenges that confront them about implementation, particularly because the teaching profession remains their realistic territory of expertise. Needless to say that the state, through its curriculum advisory teams, provides basic training in the curriculum implementation process. Whereas one may accept that curriculum implementation is a complex process, one also assumes that guidelines need to be interrogated and understood at a baseline level for propitious articulation in schools and, indeed, in the classrooms as well. While it may not be easy to apply a one-size-fits-all approach in the complexity of curriculum implementation, the new dispensation provides an auspicious platform to engage teachers in curriculum implementation. Creswell (2014), along with De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Deport (2005), maintain that understanding curriculum complexity constitutes the threshold of human endeavour in

ascertaining the dynamics of the curriculum act.

Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari (2010) point to rhizomatic thinking. In terms of this view, thinking is a complex process that is like rhizomes or assemblages stretching from one level to another, guided by curriculum philosophy at play. Ordinarily, the rhizomorphic reality constitutes differentiated layers that could be viewed as conjoined thinking patterns characterised by banality and complexity. To comprehend this assertion, challenges faced by teachers at primary school level may best be understood through processes of assimilation and accommodation. These processes are further elaborated below.

As pointed out earlier, the underpinning theoretical framework of this paper relates to the concepts of assimilation and accommodation espoused by the French psychologist, Piaget. According to McLeod (2015), whereas assimilation refers to using an existing schema (knowledge) to deal with a new object or situation, accommodation occurs when the existing schema does not work, and therefore needs to be changed to deal with a new object or situation. Construed in context, teachers whose training experiences are foregrounded in the past and who may find it hard to cope with current curriculum developments are duty-bound to assimilate new schemas in order to survive the new educational dispensation, which is underpinned by curriculum transformation and change. In essence, curriculum changes bring with them new principles, approaches and methods. Similarly, teachers are expected to accommodate these changes in order to propitiously implement them as the new curriculum unfolds. It is therefore important for all teachers to accept that change cannot be postponed due to reluctance to transform. It is hoped that teachers in the affected schools would eventually accept and live with the reality

that CAPS is here to stay, and the sooner they embrace it, the better for the schools. Such a process occurs in keeping with the philosophy espoused by Deleuze and Guattari (2010), and by Piaget's assimilation and accommodation theory.

CONCLUSION

The present study has demonstrated that the struggle for perfection is enormous and is far from being won for schools to become efficient in the delivery of curriculum. What is distressing is the fact that the blame game continues unabated. This is notwithstanding the need for young people to prosper. The authors raised questions about challenges that confront the teachers under the spotlight, but many of them cite numerous factors that have nothing to do with teaching and learning but administration of schools. It is inconceivable that learners, who are depended on teachers, often suffer because teachers and the Department of Basic Education cannot get their act together. The current study has revealed that polemical forces prevail in the environment of learning when least expected. Ordinarily, the training of teachers is part of the policy directive of the Department of Basic Education towards the advancement of teaching skills of its workforce. However, it inexplicable that well qualified teachers would consistently complain about lack of training and poorly trained specialists, when in fact, they can read and, to a greater extent, improve their efficiency for curriculum delivery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings above, the following are recommended as part of efforts to make our schools functional:

- That all curriculum specialists should be trained sufficiently as competent trainers;

- That the Department of Basic Education should use some of the former colleges of education in the provinces to improve teacher in-service capacity;
- That existing in-service programmes be reviewed, renewed and reinvented to breathe new life into teacher professional development;
- That the state should prioritise in-service programmes and invest

heavily in the institutions to create a cohort of expertise that will engender superior appetite for school transformation; and

- That collaboration amongst continental teacher sectors be strongly encouraged to consolidate relationships and foci towards the reinvigoration of professional teacher discipline.

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