

Perceptions of Rural South African Teachers on the National Curriculum Change: “Are We Chanting or Marching?”

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ABSTRACT Several changes with implications for teachers have been effected in the South African National Curriculum in recent years. Though the changes are intended to improve learner achievement from the education system, the frequency at which these changes are made and their inability to make significant improvement, pose challenges for teachers. This study sought to examine rural teachers’ perceptions of the latest changes in the national curriculum as presented through the repackaged National Curriculum Statement. In this study, a qualitative approach involving focus group interviews with teachers from four rural schools was followed. Four themes representing major changes introduced in the repackaged National Curriculum Statement called Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, constituted the interview schedule. The study found that teachers in rural schools could not cope with the pace at which the National Curriculum was changing. This was because they were neither adequately prepared for the change nor given sufficient capacity to implement the change.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers play an important role in curriculum change process. Their role is not limited to the implementation of change in the school, but also includes guiding the change process (Clark et al. 2004). For this reason, they need capacity in the form of training and information in order to adopt and implement the change (Kubitskey and Fishman 2004). In the South African context, change in curriculum policy is necessary if the education system is to be responsive to the continuing challenge of poor learner achievement in schools. For such change to have desirable effect, teachers as key players in curriculum implementation, should be brought on board at every stage of the process. Two major issues need to be stated in this discussion, namely, understanding ‘curriculum change processes’ and ‘bringing teachers on board.’

Curriculum Change in South Africa: Marching Forward from 1996 to 2025

Figure 1 shows the path followed by curriculum change in South Africa since the dawn of democracy in 1994 and reflects the pace of educational reform in the country. Curriculum change, as the figure indicates, went through four stages of development explained briefly below.

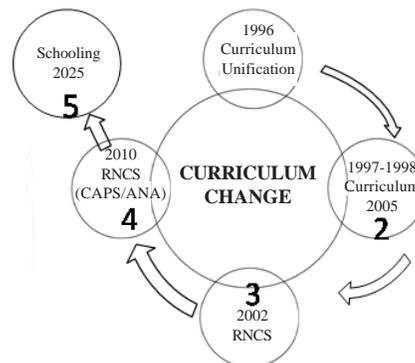


Fig. 1. Curriculum change in South Africa since 1996

Stage 1: The stage is represented by the unification of national curriculum and involves the consolidation in 1996 of 17 racially and ethnically designated education departments into one Department of Education with one curriculum, free of sexist and racist language.

Stage 2: The stage marks the arrival of outcomes-based education (OBE) in the country and is remembered by the introduction of Curriculum 2005 in 1997 for implementation in 1998, aligning curriculum content and teaching with the Constitution-based values (OECD 2008).

Stage 3: The stage saw the review of the Curriculum 2005 and the introduction of the Re-

vised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002 (South Africa 2002).

Stage 4: The stage is represented by the 'refining and repackaging' of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2010 and the introduction of Annual National Assessment (ANA) and Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for implementation as from 2011 (Motshega 2010). The stage also coincides with the implementation of a long-term strategic plan called Schooling 2025 (South Africa 2011a).

Bringing Teachers aboard Curriculum Change Process

Teachers play an important role in curriculum change process. Bringing teachers on board curriculum change involves three things, namely, making them ready for change, providing professional development opportunities for them and letting them participate actively in the change process to meet demands of their work context. The three issues are now discussed in the next three paragraphs.

Teacher Readiness for Change

Readiness for change and active participation on the part of teachers are critical conditions for effective implementation of curriculum policy in schools as this article will show. Readiness or motivation to change is defined as a multifaceted construct, covering intellectual involvement (cognitive component), emotional involvement (affective component) and commitment to change (intentional component) (Bouckenoghe and Devos 2007; George and Jones 2001). What this suggests is that when curriculum change sets in, teachers should have the opportunity to apply their minds to this change, express their feelings about it and have those feelings and thoughts counted in decision-making processes. As studies have found (Blignaut 2008), teachers' ability to translate curriculum policy into practice depends on their ability to make sense of the policy. In other words, when curriculum change is introduced into an education system, it should appeal to the hearts and minds of teachers who are apt to be affected by this change to enable them to effect its implementation in response. Teachers need to understand the change and be passionate about it before they can participate in and commit them-

selves to its implementation (Marishane 2011). Their 'voices' as Carl (2005) has noted, should be heard.

Teacher Participation in Curriculum Change

Active participation of teachers throughout the curriculum change process is critical for successful implementation thereof. As it has already been empirically noted elsewhere (Carl 2005), restricting teacher involvement in curriculum development to the implementation level is a major challenge to the national curriculum reform in South Africa. Inadequate consideration of other implementation enabling factors may lead to additional challenges that may impact adversely on successful implementation. Examples of such challenges were recorded during the review of Curriculum 2005 and included the following (Chisholm et al. 2000):

Inadequate orientation, training and development of educators; learning support materials that are variable in quality, often unavailable and not sufficiently used in classrooms; policy overload and limited transfer of learning into classrooms; shortages of personnel and resources to implement and support C2005; and inadequate recognition of curriculum as the core business of education departments.

What the above-mentioned challenges collectively suggest is that teachers as implementers of curriculum change should participate in decision making at all levels, (school, circuit, district, provincial and national), during every stage (advocacy, orientation, training, development, monitoring and evaluation) by all means (consultation, information, involvement, engagement and commitment) and through support (resources provisioning) and feedback from curriculum policy makers as illustrated in Table 1.

Teacher Professional Development

Studies consistently reveal an inadequate teacher training, support and monitoring in the area of new curriculum implementation (Christie 1999; Fleisch 2002; Maphalala 2006; NAPTOSA 1999; Zulu 2003). Inadequacy in training is manifested by heavy reliance on traditional modes of training such as workshops, which in many instances take teachers away from schools during working hours for a few-hours training sessions at centres located far from their schools.

Table 1: Teacher participation in curriculum development teacher participation in curriculum development

<i>Participation level (Where?)</i>	<i>Participation stage (When?)</i>	<i>Participation mode (How?)</i>	<i>Support modality (What form?)</i>
Classroom	Planning	Consultation	Teambuilding and
School	Advocacy	Involvement	collaboration
Circuit	Orientation	Engagement	Resources provisioning
District	Training	Commitment	(information, time,
Province	Development		materials) Feedback
National	Monitoring		
	Evaluation		

Studies also document complaints arising from teachers regarding their lack of (timely) information and necessary resources to fulfil the roles and tasks policy makers expect from them (Flores 2005). Support from the Department of Education at every level is critical in enabling teachers to address these challenges. A recent study has, however, found that teachers are poorly supported by administrators working within the education departments, especially when it comes to skills development and provision of learning support materials (South Africa 2011b). Lack of district-based professional support staff (South Africa 2011c) aggravates the challenge.

METHODOLOGY

The research reported in this article was conducted five months after the introduction of the repackaged NCS. It was carried out in four rural schools in Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province, South Africa. The focus on rural school was motivated by research findings that continue to present rural schools as being disadvantaged in terms of their resource provisioning and context (Trupp 1999; Lupton 2004). The schools in this study comprised two primary schools and two secondary schools which were drawn from two circuits in that district. Forty teachers from the four schools formed part of the study which was preceded by a series of workshops on *Curriculum Change in South Africa* (see Fig. 1). The inclusion of the two categories of schools was motivated by the following two reasons:

- ♦ New changes in the National Curriculum Statement were already being effected in both primary and secondary schools. Examples were changes in the Language of Learning and Teaching (LLT) in the Foundation Phase and the implementation of the new assessment policy changes that affected Grades 3, 6 and 9 (South Africa 2010).

- ♦ It was important to get the feelings of both primary and secondary school teachers since all the new curriculum changes affected teachers in both categories of schools.

The purpose of the workshops was to help teachers to reflect critically on the path followed by curriculum development in the country through the four stages described earlier on, the changes effected in the curriculum at every stage and the reasons for such changes. It was also meant to introduce them to the new changes envisaged in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), since by the time of the research teachers in the District were not yet trained in the new changes. A qualitative research method was used for this particular study after careful consideration of the nature of the research problem. Four focus group interviews were held with teachers and during these interviews a semi-structured interview guide was used as a data-gathering instrument. The following main themes, which represented major changes in the National Curriculum, formed part of the interview guide and participants were requested to express their views on each one of them and provide suggestions for improvement:

- ♦ The pace of curriculum change
- ♦ Teacher preparation for and participation in curriculum development
- ♦ Prescribed plans, content and assessment
- ♦ Teacher training and development
- ♦ Reduction in the workload

Guided by the participants' reflections on what took place in the four stages of curriculum development and their subsequent responses to interview questions, a thematic analysis was conducted. This is a method used in qualitative research to identify, analyse and report on patterns(themes) within data to ensure that data

are organised and described in detail (Braun and Clarke 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: The Pace of Curriculum Change

Reflecting on the pace of change in the National Curriculum since 1994 participants in the study expressed their concerns regarding the impact of such change on teachers and learners. For this reason, they expressed different views on such change, depending on their length of service in teaching. Newly appointed teachers expressed *frustrations* with the fast pace of curriculum change since what they found happening in schools was disconnected from what they had learned at university. Long-serving teachers perceived the change in curriculum as either *politicisation*, serving the best interests of politicians and not of learners, or as a *trial-and-error exercise* involving *experimentation*. One teacher expressed his feeling in the following words:

When I look at the way they present curriculum, it appears to me they are experimenting and they are experimenting with our children. The frequency of change in search of a suitable curriculum for the country is tantamount to experimenting. Yes! When you are experimenting, you should first have all the necessary tools and materials and ensure that laboratory conditions (space, safety and other security measures) are conducive for the performance of the experiment. They should pilot this thing to see if it works or not before they implement it on a wider scale.

Participants in all focus group interviews collectively shared the view that the pace at which curriculum was changing in the country should be reduced. The following is an expression of that shared point of view:

This curriculum keeps on changing and the question is: is there any improvement? Looking at the frequency of curriculum change in the country, what guarantee do we have that this time round the change will bring about improvement? In education, Sir, you need time – enough time to plan and enough time to implement and enough time to review your implementation.

Analysis of the teachers' collective response registers a prevailing sense of scepticism about the manner in which curriculum change is intro-

duced in the country. This is reflected in their attitudes towards the pace of such change regardless of their length of service in the teaching profession. These kinds of attitudes, as one study has found (Mokua, 2010) may lead to a loss of hope in the education system. What this suggests is that when new changes are introduced in the curriculum, it is important to provide motivation for changes and to give teachers time to adapt to the changes.

Theme 2: Teacher Preparation For and Participation in Curriculum Development

It emerged during the interview that teachers in the District had not yet been trained in the new developments in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement. They were, therefore, not adequately informed about what was changing and what was remaining the same. Those who were somewhat aware of the changes acquired information from sources outside the Department. This was viewed by participants as a setback in the implementation process – a recurring challenge to them. One teacher put it in the following way:

When change in curriculum is made, we only hear about it late after people who are not even teachers have already captured it from the media. When change comes, those who are affected should be the first to know. Why do they expect us to implement change, when we do not have the necessary information?

This view was reinforced by a sense of sadness and despondency expressed by one teacher who felt that teachers were side-lined when curriculum was developed:

We feel good about curriculum change in the country, but we are worried about how it is done because, first, they don't consult us as educators, I mean as teachers. Secondly, we are not invited to participate in decisions relating to curriculum change. My feeling is that the principle of Batho Pele (People First) must be applied to teachers in preparing them for new curriculum changes. It would be better if the Department could establish from teachers how education can be improved and how children can be assisted before effecting changes. The changes just come as a package and they expect you to implement them and besides, those changes do not come once. Every time a minister is elected that minister comes with new

changes. As teachers, we end up being confused, not knowing what actually we should do. Right now we don't know whether we are marching forward or just chanting.

Considering teachers' remarks, one notices lack of motivation to implement curriculum changes as teachers feel isolated when these changes are planned. In a way, they feel virtually "alienated from the tool of production", to borrow a Marxist expression. The teachers' views express a virtual detachment from the curriculum that policymakers expect them to deliver in schools, particularly in view of what they perceive as lack of clear goals to achieve through curriculum change. As Fullan (2011) once remarked, system-wide success requires the alignment of change with the motivation of participants in the change process. This implies logically that a situation in which key service providers (teachers) are disenchanted with the service they deliver (curriculum), poor delivery of such service (academic results) must be expected. Teachers' detachment from the introduced changes came out clearly during the interview when they consistently talked emotionally in third-person terms when engaging in talk about curriculum issues: they talked about "*their facilitators*"; "*they say that we should ...*"; "*they don't consult us when ...*"; "*why do they expect us to ... when we do not have ...*" Analysis of the teachers' remarks reveals that the teachers are not against curriculum change, but are concerned about how that change is introduced. In other words, what the Department of Basic Education may see as a positive change, teachers regard as an imposition.

Theme 3: Prescribed Plans, Content and Assessment

Upon learning that the new CAPS envisaged prescribed lesson plans, content and assessment, one participant jokingly remarked, "*I saw it coming! Now they are turning to the nationalization of minds.*" When asked to express their opinions regarding common plans, content and assessment envisaged in the new CAPS, teachers felt that consideration should be given to the differentiated needs of learners and policies such as the policy on Inclusive Education which might make prescribed lesson plans difficult to implement. For this reason, they suggested the appointment of teacher assistants. One teacher had this to say in this regard:

In a large class, there should be a teacher assistant and a remedial teacher to teach and support learners with difficulties. That is where a common plan can work. It is difficult for one teacher to teach, control the class and to do remedial education at the same time.

Teachers also expressed reservations with regard to what they perceive as the failure to accommodate expected interferences in planning for curriculum delivery in schools. To clarify this, one language teacher argued:

Let me say right now, for instance, there has been a full complete week: there have been these days called voting days and so on. That teaching time has now been reduced. Then they expect that I should have completed all those books and do you see now that before I complete them the exam starts? ... And for the learners the exam is not set by me? That is why we have a failure rate. It is not working!

The issue of a prescribed content was not a comforting one either, since teachers voiced their dissatisfaction with what they perceived as a mismatch between assessment and textbook content. As teachers argued, prescribed content was seldom helpful as most textbooks were neither context-sensitive nor did what was contained in the textbooks appear in the examination papers. Regarding prescribed assessment, one teacher said:

We have experience of common (formal) assessment. While we have monthly informal assessment tasks based on the different abilities of our learners, you find that they give you a year programme indicating what you should teach in Term 1 or Term 2. At the end of the day they tell you that there comes a common assessment. This assessment does not consider the different paces at which children learn. You also find that as a teacher you cannot do the tasks yourself.

It follows from the teachers' views that there is a mismatch between plans, content and assessment which confuse teachers. Such a mismatch translates into a clash between curriculum policy and daily practices in policy implementation in schools. What this suggests is that when curriculum changes, there is a need to consider existing policies and the impact the change will have on these policies. For example, the national policy on inclusive education (South Africa 2001), strengthened by the new national curriculum policy called National Curriculum

Statement for Grades R-12 (South Africa 2011c) recognizes curriculum as one of the barriers to learning. To remove this barrier, the policy advocates recognition of the different needs of learners which should be satisfied by differentiating curriculum through instruction and assessment. This stands in stark contrast to the prescribed content teachers complain about and teaching and learning materials (textbooks) they use.

Theme 4: Teacher Training and Development

Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the mode of training, experience of trainers, length of training and lack of monitoring which collectively impacted on the quality of training. Teachers welcomed the Department's admission of the ineffectiveness of the cascade model ('train-the-trainer' model) of teacher professional development, discredited on the grounds of 'watering down' curriculum with every level of training (OECD 2008). They wished that this could be improved as this model had problems. Referring to training provided by the District officers, one teacher remarked:

With current training there are problems: one person comes and train you; then, someone else comes and train you on the same thing differently. Besides, a person who has never been in a Foundation Phase is sent to train us. This person does not even know what happens in a typical Foundation Phase class. They must be careful when they recruit trainers.

Concern was also raised with regard to the attitudes of trainers towards teachers. One teacher put it this way:

During the few short training workshop sessions we have, their facilitators seem to be poorly prepared for us and become angry when questions for clarification are raised. And when you press them further, they tell you, "That is how we were trained." They say that we should adapt or die.

Another teacher went on to say:

Personally, I am not satisfied with their training because I don't think they should just call us to one-day training and say they are training us. Only for two days? They just take you by surprise when you are still busy teaching and say, "Today at 11h00 or 12h00 there is training." By 16h00, training stops. I don't think this type of training can enable us to push

what we are struggling in. The training is further weakened by the fact that there is no follow-up to assess us whether we are correctly implementing what they say we should implement.

Teachers' views on professional development through traditional workshops are supported by current studies that find this mode of training to be insufficient in terms of effectiveness, specificity and sustainability (Fullan 2007:35). While training is short and detached from the point of practice (the school), it robs both teachers and learners of the important teaching and learning time. What this suggests is that training in curriculum change is not tailored to the teachers' needs in terms of the mode of training, training service providers and duration of training. What the teachers' views suggest is the need to restructure the continuous professional development programmes made available to them with consideration given to various training alternatives. Numerous studies (Wei et al. 2009) advocate job-embedded or practice-based capacity-building models such as teacher networks, school-based coaching and peer observations of practice. These models have been found to be effective for professional development of teachers (AERA 2005)

Theme 5: Reduction in the Workload

With regard to the reduction in the workload planned by the Department of Basic Education, teachers expressed great relief. Though the reduction in the workload was appreciated and welcome, they were sceptical about the actual reduction of the workload in practice. They were of the opinion that only the administrative part of the workload would be reduced, while their teaching work would increase proportionally. One teacher put it this way:

We are overloaded here, especially those of us who teach multi-grades. Even those of who do not teach multi-grade classes, they are expected to adopt differentiated instruction for which they have not been trained. I think they (Department of Basic Education) should strike a balance between administrative workload and teaching workload. They should provide clerks to do administration and teacher assistants to reduce our teaching workload. As long as we don't have assistant teachers like they do in other countries, we are always going to be overloaded and our teaching will suffer.

It follows from the teachers' views that significant reduction in teacher workload can be achieved not by reducing the work that should be carried when curriculum changes, but by employing people such as support staff who share the work those teachers do. Research (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, Russell and Webster 2009) shows that support staff has a positive effect not only on teachers' workload, but also on job satisfaction and stress. What this suggests is that where schools employ support staff such as administrators and teaching assistants, teacher workload is reduced while stressful working conditions are improved, paving way for an enhanced motivation. While administrators have the potential to reduce administrative workload, thus enabling teachers to focus on teaching and learning, teaching assistants can reduce teaching load by assisting teachers in ensuring effective teaching and learning, especially in view of advocated policies like Special Needs Education and strategies such as differentiated instruction that accompany curriculum change.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the need to recognise teachers as key role players in curriculum implementation by bringing them on board the curriculum change process. This reinforces the view that teachers as agents of change should be involved in different phases of the curriculum change process. This, as the study shows, requires preparing teachers for the change by giving them the necessary opportunities for professional development to enable them to participate actively in the change process. What this suggests is that for curriculum implementation to be successful, the necessary logistical and professional conditions should prevail. A collective view emerging from the interviews with teachers is that teachers in rural schools in particular, cannot cope with the pace at which the National Curriculum in South Africa is changing. This is attributed to inadequate readiness on the part of teachers for the change coupled with insufficient capacity to implement the change once it is presented to them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study lays emphasis on the role of the teacher in successful implementation of curricu-

lum change. While this view may be generally accepted as orthodox, this study reveals country-specific challenges. More specifically, it highlights problems relating to a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach to curriculum change and teachers' response to such an approach in the South African context. The logical link that should exist between the teachers and the curriculum when change in the latter occurs weakens when teachers feel that they are not prepared for implementation. This is especially true when teachers lack both the direction pertaining to change and the time to learn the new curriculum. Considering this view in relation to the results of this study, a number of recommendations can now be given.

First, for successful implementation, curriculum change process needs to be negotiated between key role players, that is, policy makers (Department of Basic Education) and implementers (teachers) for collective accountability and ownership of the outcomes of such process. Such negotiation, as this study shows, needs to be strengthened by consultation, involvement, engagement and commitment of the role players at different levels in the education system. It should include communicating the rationale for curriculum change and creating sufficient space and time for implementation of the new change. In other words, implementation should be preceded by clear articulation of new policies relating to curriculum content, assessment and implementation strategies. Secondly, for teachers to be motivated in implementing changes in the curriculum, they need capacity in the form of professional development. The modalities of professional development, should however, be adjusted to the demands of the new context of change for sustainability. This involves shifting away from traditional models of professional development of teachers such as workshops facilitated by external service providers to new emerging job-embedded or practice-based capacity-building models such as teacher networks, school-based coaching and peer observations of practice. Lastly, teacher workload accompanying curriculum change in South Africa as currently represented by CAPS requires investment in people such as teaching assistants and school administrators – enablers of effective curriculum implementation. This is more pressing, considering current policies on inclusive education and teaching of learners with

special needs, which demand teachers' special focus on learners.

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