

## An Investigation of the Challenges Experienced by High School Teachers in Implementing the Life Orientation Curriculum in Selected Fort Beaufort District High Schools, Eastern Cape of South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** This paper investigates the challenges experienced by teachers in implementing the Life Orientation curriculum in selected high schools in the Fort Beaufort District in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The research described in this paper is located within the interpretivist paradigm in which a qualitative research design was used. Data was collected through individual and focus group interviews held with 48 participants comprising of teachers, principals and learners in six high schools. Data analysis was done by clustering common themes and writing stories to uncover the main issues that arose. The paper reveals inadequate training and the challenge of learners turning against lessons taught as part of the challenges experience in teaching Life Orientation. The researcher concluded that the subject is not being handled properly despite its importance and recommends that the Department of Education provide support to meet the urgent needs of teachers in the high schools.

### INTRODUCTION

Life Orientation is a “new” learning area, with “new” content and “new” implementation challenges for teachers (Chisholm et al. 2005; Prinsloo 2007). It is a program put in place by the Department of Education to equip learners to solve social and personal problems, and make well-informed choices vis-à-vis community, personal and environmental health. It further guides learners to make sound choices and to take the right steps to ensure meaningful and successful living in a fast changing society (South African Department of Education 2003; Van Deventer 2008).

One of the implementation challenges of Life Orientation is pre-conception about the non-examinable status of its earlier components, such as Guidance, Physical Education, Youth Preparedness and Religious Education (Department of Education 2008b; Mamvuto 2013). Christiaans (2006) is concerned that some principals’ attitudes are not conducive to implementing Life Orientation successfully. For instance, a Religious Education teacher may be expected to teach all aspects of Life Orientation, which may not be well known to the teacher (Rooth 2005). It appears that Life Orientation is often taught by teachers who are not specialists in the area (Rooth 2005; Christiaans 2006; Roux et al. 2008;

Van Deventer 2008). Christiaans (2006) states that inadequate support from school heads and the Department of Education worsens the situation.

Furthermore, although Life Orientation is currently being implemented as a subject in the National Curriculum Statement, the program is still sidelined. The time assigned for the subject is repeatedly used for a formal learning areas such as Mathematics that are supposedly more significant, as Life Orientation is not externally assessed, in spite of the fact that it is a required subject. Life Orientation is thus seen as a learning area not demanding much training or expertise from the teachers’ point of view (Ahmed et al. 2006; Christiaans 2006).

Life Orientation teachers also appear to experience difficulties in handling diverse learners who do not display the same level of growth and maturity (Wight and Buston 2003; Gay 2010). Many learners also do not have positive attitudes toward the Life Orientation program as they do not understand its objectives. While this is experienced among the learners, teachers are frequently moved about, resulting in a state where learners experience a lot of diverse teachers, resulting in inconstancy (Christiaans 2006).

More so, some teachers are unqualified for teaching this learning area, and learners at times feel short-changed. Therefore, some learners are

not interested in putting effort into learning the subject, and this leads to learners questioning the value attached to Life Orientation when presented by unqualified teachers (Christiaans 2006; Van Deventer 2009). According to Marshall (2010) and Department of Basic Education (2010) the challenge of Life Orientation being taught by non-specialists should be handled as an important issue, since the knowledge and the skills of the teachers handling it are the determinant of the status and practice of the subject.

It was noted by the Review Committee for C2005 in 2000 that motivated teachers who are sufficiently prepared with the needed support for the work, are the foundation of the positive application of an outcome-based framework. It was also established that many teachers in South Africa lack adequate training (Department of Education 2000a). Roux et al. (2008) and Van Deventer and Van Niekerk (2008) are of a similar opinion as the Review Committee about Life Orientation, that is, most of its teachers are inadequately trained.

Rooth (2005), Christiaans (2006), Van der Walt and De Klerk (2006), and Van Deventer and Van Niekerk (2008) all maintain that there are many misconceptions about Life Orientation. Overall it appears that many teachers and learners do not attach much importance to the knowledge of Life Orientation as a learning area.

From the reviewed literature it appears that Life Orientation in the background of curriculum change is disjointed and struggling to define itself (Rooth 2005; Van der Walt and De Klerk 2006). Under these circumstances, it is necessary to systematically examine the challenges experienced by teachers in teaching this learning area.

### **Objectives**

The main objective of this paper was to investigate the challenges experienced by teachers in implementing the Life Orientation curriculum in selected high schools in the Fort Beaufort District, in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Hence, this paper sought to identify the challenges Life Orientation teachers encountered as a result of inadequate training, examine the challenges Life Orientation teachers experienced due to learners' lack of seriousness, and examine the other types of challenges Life

Orientation teachers experience in implementing the Life Orientation curriculum.

### **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The researcher used a case study design, as it was qualitative in nature. This technique was chosen on the strength of its competence to offer an in-depth and detailed justification of the phenomenon and so permits the researcher to notice things that might not have come to be ostensible through more superficial research (Corbin and Strauss 2014).

#### **Participants**

A sample of 48 participants, six principals, six Life Orientation teachers and thirty-six learners in six selected high schools were chosen from the Fort Beaufort Education District in the Eastern Cape. Principals and other colleagues were used as gatekeepers to identify the six teachers and thirty-six learners. Teachers who had experience in the teaching of the Life Orientation curriculum were selected. Three learners each from Grades 11 and 12 were purposively selected. Hence, the schools and the participants were all purposively selected.

#### **Research Instruments**

The researcher used semi-structured and focus group interviews to solicit information on the challenges experienced by Life Orientation teachers in implementing the Life Orientation curriculum. Semi-structure interviews were used to gather information from the teachers and principals. The interviews facilitated direct interaction between the researcher and six Life Orientation teachers and six principals from six selected high schools in the Fort Beaufort Education District in the Eastern Cape.

The interview format allowed the researcher to collect rich, descriptive data from information-rich informants who provided an in-depth understanding of the challenges the Life Orientation teachers experienced in implementing the Life Orientation curriculum in the Fort Beaufort District. The semi-structured interview procedure first permitted the researchers to ask a series of structured questions before going deeper by using open-ended questions in order to obtain more data and allow respondents to express themselves (Adams and Cox 2008). As a data gathering technique, the semi-structured

interview's flexibility and adaptability permitted the researchers to probe for deeper responses, follow up leads, elaborate on original responses, obtain additional and more detailed data, and clarify answers (Creswell 2007; Adams and Cox 2008).

This paper also included six focus group interviews, and six groups of six learners per school in Grades 11 and 12 were interviewed (three learners from each grade). Focus group interviews were selected in order to gain an understanding of the learners' perceptions of the challenges Life Orientation teachers experienced. The researcher noticed that focus group interviews allowed interaction between participants that highlighted their view of the world, the language they used about the issue in question, and their values and beliefs about the situation (Freeman 2006).

### Procedures

Permission was obtained from the Provincial Department of Education. Furthermore, the researcher obtained permission from the principals of all selected schools to organize the dates for conducting the interviews.

Data was collected using handwritten notes and tape-recorded interviews from all participants during official working hours. All the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and all the participants were asked to review the transcripts for verification and to sign the agreement forms allowing the researcher to use the interview data.

### Data Analysis

The process of data analysis in this paper began by transcribing verbatim audiotaped interviews. The researcher crosschecked the results with the participants and the raw data from the interview was coded in order to develop data sets. Responses were treated according to the research objectives to which the participants were responding. Also, the researcher made use of the transcriptions, and organized the data listed under each research objective. The researcher was able to bring together data sets for each objective by doing so.

## RESULTS

The researcher attempted to account for the main research question, which aimed at investigating the implementation of the Life Orienta-

tion curriculum in high schools in the Fort Beaufort Education District. However, this paper gives information on one of the sub-questions that tried to find the challenges teachers experienced in teaching learners the Life Orientation program.

The paper's findings are discussed below. For the purpose of this paper the participants are identified as follows: Focus groups (FG1-FG6), the Life Orientation teachers (T1-T6), principals (P1-P6) and the high schools (S1-S6).

### The Challenges Teachers Encountered as a Result of Inadequate Training

Participants were asked about the challenges Life Orientation teachers faced due to inadequate training. The following were some of their responses.

T1, T2 and T4 concurred on lack of training being a major stumbling block to the implementation of the Life Orientation curriculum.

T1 revealed: *Lack of adequate training. This is because I have not been effective in the teaching of Life Orientation. I need training so that I will be able to teach Life Orientation effectively.*

T2 disclosed: *Lack of training may be the biggest problem. An untrained teacher may not be able to manage different questions asked by learners. He or she may not have a good approach in handling sensitive topics in Life Orientation.*

T4 said: *...many other teachers are not aware of what is expected of them.*

P2 said: *Some of these Life Orientation teachers were not trained, so they do not know how best to teach the subject.*

### The Challenges Teachers Experience Due to Learners' Lack of Seriousness

The researcher investigated the problems teachers experienced as a result of the learners' lack of seriousness in learning the subject. Responses were sought from learners, teachers and principals. The following responses from the focus groups indicate that the learners themselves were acutely aware of a range of challenges faced by their Life Orientation teachers.

FG1 stated: *Learners do not concentrate in class; they laugh when the teacher is teaching about sex... Whenever the Life Orientation teacher mentions social problems like drug use,*

*we end up teasing each other about it... At times we do not hear our teacher because he has a small and tiny voice.*

FG4 disclosed: *A Life Orientation teacher is faced with the problem of many learners not taking the subject seriously; they take it as something to socialize with since it involves their personal lives... Learners go through different stages in their lives; therefore they laugh and tease each other by looking at their stages in life, comparing that to what is taught in the classroom... The Life Orientation teacher is also confronted with sensitive topics that make some learners break down and cry, while others get offended and become rude.*

FG2 revealed: *Some learners like to experiment with what we are taught in Life Orientation class and this causes them to fall pregnant because they do not listen to the teacher's warning, and this makes our Life Orientation teacher to be sad... Others use drugs, alcohol, and they also smoke... Our Life Orientation teacher is disappointed, and feels as if she is not doing her work... Some of these learners are under peer pressure.*

These comments raise concern. It appeared to be quite common that learners did not take Life Orientation seriously. This could be because some teachers were also not seeing it as crucial. The researcher naturally also enquired from the teachers themselves what problems they experienced in teaching young people Life Orientation. The following were their responses.

T3, T4 and T5 all found the seeming perversity of learners' behavior particularly distressing.

T3 pointed out: *There is the problem of learners challenging the information provided in Life Orientation class. Learners want to experiment, in spite of the information received.*

T4 commented: *The biggest problem is seeing learners going against things taught in Life Orientation class.*

T5 said: *There is the challenge of learners wanting to experiment, notwithstanding what they are learning. They want to practice what is taught in class. So they are sexually active and contact STIs. (There is) teenage pregnancy and abortion. Some of the problems are also caused by a lack of parental examples and guidance.*

However, T6 was of a contrary opinion, when they said: *I doubt if there is problem. The pre-*

*scribed texts are designed to meet with the level of learners, so I don't think there is any problem.*

P1 and P3 viewed the biggest problem as learners not taking the subject seriously.

P1 revealed, *the problem is that learners are playful and do not concentrate as expected. I think the issues of child rights make them to be indisposed to discipline.*

P3 said: *Learners may not be serious.*

The principals further shed light on the other challenges encountered by the Life Orientation teachers in implementing the program, like that of how best to present a particular subject or issue, not because the teachers find it difficult, but because they feel handicapped by the diverse and often conflicting political, cultural and religious sentiments, and by the background of learners as well as their own backgrounds. They added some other points like the issues of discipline, guidance and parental monitoring at home to support the efforts of the Life Orientation teachers, cultural sentiments and some of the topics being above the learners' standards. Below are the samples of some of their comments.

P4 commented: *Some Life Orientation teachers do not know how to handle some of the topics like sex-related topics because of inadequate training and their religious background.*

P5 referred to the limiting influence of culture over teachers' smooth teaching of some aspects of Life Orientation: *Our culture may affect the smooth teaching of Life Orientation because teachers may want to shy away from teaching some topics in Life Orientation like sex-related topics because of cultural sentiments.*

P6 and P3, on the other hand, felt that the standard of lessons was high for the learners' age group: *I think that some topics that learners have to deal with are above their age, that is, topics related with sex. This is because they are young, and more so, teachers are also parents, who may struggle to discuss these things with learners who they see (as being) like their own children.*

*There is always the challenge of raising the level of their development, and they do not practice what they learn in class. This is because there is no guidance and monitoring by parents at home to support classroom learning.*

One of the focus group members also confirmed what the principals indicated by stating

that Life Orientation teachers seemed to find it difficult to teach some sensitive topics like sex, teenage pregnancy, and drug abuse because these teachers sometimes saw the learners as children who were not supposed to be exposed to such topics.

Though the comments and responses of some of the research participants suggest that the learners' tendency to experiment comes to the fore in the course of their exposure to certain ideas in Life Orientation class, it is highly likely that learners would have learnt about such things elsewhere. In other words, the assumption that they are experimenting with things they have "picked up" in Life Orientation is rooted in a conservative argument that tends to oppose sexuality education. It can also be said that this situation has become a sore spot for most of the Life Orientation teachers interviewed because the information that is supposed to liberate learners may be counter-productive. These attitudes on the part of the teachers may reflect the challenges that come with improper qualifications and training for Life Orientation teaching.

## DISCUSSION

This paper investigated the challenges experienced by teachers in implementing the Life Orientation curriculum in selected Fort Beaufort District High Schools in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

One of the findings in this paper revealed lack of training as one of the main problems for Life Orientation teachers, one, which confuses teachers as to whether or not they were doing the right thing. It was established that an untrained teacher would not be able to handle adolescent learners and their curiosity, and may not have a good approach in handling sensitive topics in Life Orientation, which could make teaching distressing.

This finding supports the argument of Fullan (2007) who states that there were concerns among teachers with respect to the correct execution of Curriculum 2005. In other words, implementation of the national curriculum in schools faced great challenges. The challenges include ineffective classroom administration and an overall inadequate academic performance by learners, basically because of inadequate preparation and ongoing support for teachers.

Prinsloo's study (2007) found that teachers who did not have adequate training and skills required encouragement and self-assurance. He also found that these teachers had only a slight effect on the students' creation of standards, and were incapable of changing the students' conduct.

This researcher revealed that teachers have to be sufficiently trained to comprehend the content, goals, results and approaches of the Life Orientation program.

It also emerged that the Department of Education needs to organize training for Life Orientation teachers who were as yet untrained to handle the subject. The Department of Education (2002) has a vision of Life Orientation teachers who are socially and politically serious and answerable, professionally capable, and informed, particularly in their own field, and accept the learners' opinions, which may be different from the teachers'. Clearly these are attributes, which are unlikely to develop without adequate professional education.

Issues of learners' indiscipline, guidance and parental monitoring also emerged in the paper. The participants indicated that many learners did not take the Life Orientation program seriously. Naong (2007) and Amstutz (2015) view discipline in schools as forming and upholding a learning situation in which teachers can impart, and learners can study in an atmosphere that boosts respect for teachers, other learners and managers. In this regard, Kahne and Westheimer (2014) contend that discipline and the possibility of effective teaching go together. The fact that learners did not take Life Orientation seriously poses a contradiction, since in some cases the same learners appeared to claim that Life Orientation was of value.

This paper observed inadequate parental guidance and monitoring as another challenge faced by the Life Orientation teachers. According to this observation, there is little continuity between what is taught in Life Orientation class and what is allowed at home. For instance, some of the parents condone behavior, which the Life Orientation program condemns. Prinsloo (2007) also notes the presence of inadequate parental guidance and monitoring at home to support the efforts of the Life Orientation teachers. Laurillard (2013) states that while the support of parents does not assure the realization of the aims of the program, so also can inadequate sup-

port from parents disrupt even the most well-meaning modifications. Therefore, the parents' support has vital significances for the implementation of the Life Orientation curriculum.

Religious background and cultural sentiments are other problems that the teachers experienced. It was established that Life Orientation teachers found teaching some concepts contrary to their religion or cultural background. This finding is supported by Adewumi and Adendorff (2014) who found that Life Orientation teachers are worried about striking a balance between their beliefs and the notion that they are required to impart some topics that they trust ought not to be taught to students. Teachers feel sometimes that their principles are conflicting with some of the topics they are required to teach. This is correct in the instance of teaching students the use of condoms, which many teachers think supports loose standards. Situations like this make teachers feel that teaching certain topics in the Life Orientation program is to teach against the values fostered in the learning area (Helleve et al. 2009).

### CONCLUSION

This paper established that Life Orientation teachers encountered challenges in the implementation of the Life Orientation curriculum. The challenges these teachers faced were indicated to be difficult in teaching some concepts due to teachers' principles, religion and culture. This was blamed squarely on inadequate training. It was also observed that many learners did not take Life Orientation seriously. Learners reacted in undesirable ways to some of the lessons taught in Life Orientation. They indulged in drug or alcohol abuse, or risky sexual activities, partly in response to such topics being discussed in the Life Orientation class.

Some of these learners took teachers teaching the use of condoms as condoning promiscuity. While it is possible that learners might experiment with certain drugs or less common sexual practices that they have heard about in Life Orientation, it is extremely unlikely that today's Grade 11 and 12 learners would only have heard about basic sexual intercourse or dagga in Life Orientation class. However, it is not at all unlikely that such a story would make a useful excuse for youthful experimentation in forbidden areas.

It was indicated that these learners could not be disciplined because of their awareness of children's rights, ironically something they had probably been taught about in Life Orientation. Furthermore, the paper revealed that in many cases there was little or no continuity between what was taught in Life Orientation class and what was learnt at home. In other words, there was often lack of parental guidance and monitoring to support the efforts of the Life Orientation teachers.

These factors affecting the implementation of the Life Orientation program need to be addressed so that learners may be adequately guided towards positive self-concept formation, and as a result they may become fulfilled adults in life who are able to fit into the society.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the number of teachers who have not been trained in Life Orientation, and the fact that Life Orientation is a compulsory learning area in schools, there is good reason to conduct a needs assessment for effective in-service training programs so that training can be provided to meet the urgent needs of teachers in the high schools. Life Orientation teachers should furthermore be given in-service training to re-orient their thinking about religious education and cultural issues in the classroom. In addition, peer education in terms of negotiated curriculum in the learners' own classes should be adopted. This could encourage learners' input and make them involved in the teaching as well as the learning of some of the topics in Life Orientation, so that learners could learn from the experiences of people from their own age group.

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