

Teachers' Perceptions of the Factors Affecting the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement in the Mthatha Education District

Berington Zanoxolo Gobingca¹, Logamurthie Athiemoolam² and Sylvan E. Blignaut³

Walter Sisulu University (WSU), Mthatha Campus, Nelson Mandela Drive (NMD), Private Bag X 1, Mthatha, 5099, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa
E-mail: ¹<zgobingca@wsu.ac.za >, ²<logamurthie.athiemoolam@nmmu.ac.za>, ³<sblignaut@nmu.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper was to identify and expatiate on the factors affecting the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in schools in the Mthatha education district in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The research was explanatory in design where the qualitative approach was adopted. Interviews comprising semi-structured questions were conducted face-to-face with ten sampled intermediate-phase teachers from ten randomly selected schools where each school was represented by one teacher. The thematic approach was adopted to analyse the data. The findings indicated that a lack of physical infrastructure and resources, textbooks lacking in content, teacher workload and high learner teacher ratio, slow redeployment process and union influence severely hampered the implementation of the NCS. It is recommended that the Department of Education work collaboratively with all stakeholders and put effective mechanisms in place to ensure effective support to teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The liberation of South Africa (SA) from apartheid in 1994 paved the way for the majority of South Africans to move towards the creation of a new form of education where all races could have equal access to knowledge construction and knowledge empowerment. According to Karikan and Ramsuran (2006: 1), a priority for the first democratic government was curriculum reform. Curriculum innovation in South Africa was implemented in the Foundation Phase commencing from Grade 1 with the adoption of the philosophy of Outcomes Based Education (OBE). OBE at higher grade levels was later implemented in planned stages. The implementation of Curriculum 2005 (C2005), which commenced in 1998, was due to be fully implemented in 2005. C2005 was adopted as a new NCS in 1998 (Department of Education (DoE) 1997). This was subsequently revised and reformulated to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002. The revision or review of C2005 provided the basis for the development of the NCS for General Education and Training (GET) that is, Grades R-9 and the NCS for Grades 10-12 (DoE

2008). These innovative changes required that teachers be empowered to meet the challenges they had to face during curriculum implementation. Grosser and de Waal (2006) asserted that the new curriculum required from teachers a change in attitude, behavior, teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, curricula and environments. This implied that something had to be done at the teacher level in order to improve the situation. The DoE embarked on a skills development program to expose teachers to the NCS through workshops to enable them to execute their tasks efficiently (Grosser and de Waal 2006). It is with this background in mind that this paper aimed to examine the challenges experienced by teachers relating to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) with specific reference to schools in the Umtata district.

There are a number of factors that affect curriculum implementation. In their study on Foundation Phase teachers' experiences of the NCS, for example, du Plessis and Marais (2015) reported that teachers complained about limited teaching resources, lack of guidelines in terms of how to improve teaching, learning and assessment activities, heavy teacher workload and

narrow assessment strategies based on tests. It was thus the intention of the study to examine to what extent some of these factors contributed to teachers' challenges in implementing the NCS in schools in the Umtata district.

According to Fullan (2007), for example, the failure of educational reform goes far beyond the identification of specific technical problems such as a lack of good materials, ineffective in-service training, and minimal administrative support. He argues that one of the basic reasons why planning fails is that planners or decision-makers of change are unaware of the situations that potential implementers are facing. Such conversations point to obstacles that inhibit the implementation of the curriculum and his argument seems to suggest that any challenge that inhibits teachers from implementing the curriculum should be avoided. Fullan's (2007) findings further indicated that policy planners tend to introduce changes without providing a means to identify and confront situational constraints and without attempting to understand the values, ideas, and experiences of those who are essential for implementing any changes.

The majority of teachers find it difficult to know what to teach and tend to act as mere technicians without the necessary conceptual and content tools. This means that many of them lack adequate pedagogical content knowledge. This is illustrated by the poor performance of Grade 12 learners in the Eastern Cape Province's Matriculation examinations; educational performance in the province, since the implementation of the NCS, is ranked among the lowest in the country and teachers demonstrate deficiencies in the teaching of specific content knowledge, leaving their students with knowledge gaps. The poor performance of the learners is a function of curriculum implementation. The general consensus is that something is amiss in the formulation and implementation processes of the NCS. However, it appears that no one knows for certain which aspects of the NCS and related issues need attention to reverse the situation because of the dearth of accurate data. The rationale for this study is to generate data that could assist education planners and teachers alike to improve the curriculum implementation that will lead to better performance and the development of appropriate skills.

Objective

The objective of the study is to establish what factors teachers perceive to inhibit the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement in the Umtata School District. Since the data is locally generated, the solutions based on the data will dovetail with the life world of stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Approach

A qualitative research approach was implemented for the purposes of this study due to its flexibility and openness to adaptability (Biggam 2011). This approach enabled the researcher to change if the situation changed and to entertain responses as they emerged. This is a phenomenological method that holds the primacy of the subjective experiences of the participants (Cresswell 2013), since it is concerned with the individual educator's subjective interpretation of the factors affecting the implementation of the NCS in schools.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), qualitative research views reality as a shared social experience by individuals. Since qualitative research requires the researcher to physically go to the people, setting, site, or institution (Cresswell 2013), schools were visited to conduct interviews with the aim of investigating how the educators perceived the implementation of the NCS in Umtata schools, their perceptions and experiences and the way they made sense of their experiences. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 3) qualitative research can be described as an emergent, interpretative and naturalistic approach to the study of the phenomena in their natural settings in order to expose, in descriptive terms, the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world. It is precisely with this view in mind that the study sought to explore challenges experienced by teachers with the implementation of the NCS.

The intermediate-phase teachers constituted the population from which the sample of this research was selected. The intermediate-phase teachers are those teachers who teach grades 4, 5 and 6 in primary schools. Purposive sampling was used in selecting the 10 interviewed teach-

ers who were actively teaching grades 4, 5 and 6 from 10 randomly selected schools at the time of conducting this research. They were purposively chosen to share their insights and experiences relating to the challenges that inhibit them from implementing the NCS in a meaningful manner (Creswell 2013). It was ensured that each school from the 10 randomly selected schools was represented by one teacher with a view to attaining as wide a range of viewpoints as possible on factors that inhibited the successful implementation of the NCS.

Data Collection Strategies

Interviews, which were conducted face-to-face with 10 sampled teachers, lasted 25 minutes per interviewee. An interview is a data-collection method in which an interviewer requests information from an interviewee (Johnson and Christensen 2008). Semi-structured questions were designed in an interview schedule guide and posed to all participants in English as a data collection strategy. The use of semi-structured questions provides a high degree of objectivity and uniformity, yet allows for probing and clarification (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). The participants were asked to share their experiences on the NCS curriculum implementation process, the extent to which they experienced challenges and the strategies they implemented to address the challenges.

Permission was sought from and granted by the Eastern Cape Department of Education (EC-DoE), identified schools from the Mthatha education district and the NMMU Ethics Committee. The informed consent forms were filled out by those who volunteered to participate before the researchers embarked on the data collection process. All the interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Data Analysis

In analyzing data, the researchers applied inductive analysis. According to Mertler (2009: 244), inductive analysis is the “process of logically analyzing qualitative data in order to reduce the volume of collected information, thereby identifying and organizing the data into important patterns and themes to construct some sort of framework for presenting the key findings of the study.”

Data analysis focused on descriptions, themes and assertions which involved finding information and drawing conclusions. The thematic approach was used to analyse the collected data from the transcribed interviews as it allowed for rich, detailed and complex descriptions of the collected data (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79).

RESULTS

In analysing the data, it emerged from the in-depth interviews that some teachers and schools were facing challenges in implementing the NCS in a meaningful manner for quality teaching and learning to be attained. It transpired that teachers were experiencing difficulties in implementing the NCS especially in view of its complex nature. In this research project, the responses of sampled teachers to the question, ‘*What factors do you believe inhibit the successful implementation of the NCS in your school?*’ led to the construction of five broad themes that the researchers believed provided a meaningful representation of the findings. The themes are as follows namely; a lack of physical infrastructure and resources; quality of content in textbooks, astronomical teacher workload and high learner teacher ratio; slow redeployment process and limited filling in of vacant posts by the DoE and the role of teacher unions in curriculum development.

Lack of Physical Infrastructure and Resources

According to Burton and Brundrett (2005) resources are imperative for successful curriculum delivery and the enhancement of learning. The resources include the number of teachers, physical infrastructure, finances, furniture, and learning and teaching support materials (LTSM). The research results uncover that some schools are struggling to access the LTSM. Most reviewed studies highlight the significance of LTSM in any curriculum reform process as pivotal for effective teaching and learning in schools.

The sampled teachers expressed the concern that there was a shortage of Mathematics, Commerce and Natural Sciences teachers in their schools. It was reported by some of the sampled teachers that the vacant posts were not filled timeously. Mzie, one of the teachers, highlights

the challenge in the following response, “We have a shortage of teachers and we are told to wait for the redeployment process that will address our school problem.”

The sampled teachers indicated that they experienced major challenges as they were forced to teach in dilapidated classrooms that were furthermore not user-friendly for inclusive education. The data collected indicates that a majority of the sample reported that teaching space is a challenge in some schools. Some schools are conducting teaching and learning in dilapidated classrooms which, as pointed out by Boetie, “consist of mud structures”. Conditions such as these will have detrimental effects on the lives of teachers and learners and militate against any meaningful teaching and learning based on curriculum reforms. It was observed that there are no libraries and laboratories in sampled schools. The unavailability of science or computer laboratories could impact negatively on the teaching and learning of science subjects. Libraries and laboratories are of paramount importance to enhance learner academic achievement and the absence thereof in schools deprive learners of rights to access quality education.

Another teacher by the name of Mara, further reinforced the above assertion as follows, “The condition of infrastructure handicaps teachers in implementing the NCS.” This is yet a further indication of how the infrastructure can impact teaching and learning negatively.

Quality of Content in Textbooks

It was advanced by the sampled teachers that textbooks that are published and approved by the DoE to be used in schools for the implementation of the NCS are lacking in content to empower learners with adequate knowledge and skills. The interviewed teachers indicated their dissatisfaction with regard to the textbooks published and supplied to schools. Mzie claimed that, “There are a lot of tasks than what is to be taught and it affects learning of learners.” Bruce argued, “The content of textbooks is not user-friendly for their learners in rural areas.” He further reiterated, “There are lot of assessment tasks than what should be learnt by learners and what should be taught by teachers.” Botie argued that, “I struggle to teach using those textbooks instead I prepare my lessons from the NATED 550 textbooks.” Mzie articulated that,

“Without textbooks that have sufficient content, learning and teaching will not prepare learners for quality education, skills and employment.” Queen asserted that, “I really do not know what to teach my learners using the prescribed textbooks.” She further reported that, “I just use textbooks that were used before the introduction of NCS to supply my learners with knowledge required to respond to the assessment activities in NCS textbooks.” From the above responses provided by the sampled teachers, it is evident that there is a content gap in textbooks that are used in schools for the implementation of NCS which could impact negatively on teaching and learning and militate against the effective implementation of the curriculum.

Teacher Workload and High Learner Teacher Ratio

The teachers, who were interviewed, advanced that they are confronted with overcrowded classes which inhibit effective curriculum implementation. Botie put it this way when he was responding to the research question, “The learner: teacher ratio is awkward as a result of teacher supply to schools by the DoE.” Lilly responded by saying, “The implication of high learner-teacher ratio minimises the possibilities of paying individual attention to the pupils.” Mara, Azzie, Queen and King identified overcrowded classes as a stumbling block to curriculum implementation. In support of this challenge Mara stated that, “I am faced with 68 to 80 learners in my class.” Azzie also highlighted overcrowded classes as problematic by expressing her opinion as follows, “We need smaller classes to be able to give children individual attention.” Queen reported, “Another barrier that prevents teachers from providing individual instruction to learners is large teacher-learner ratios and overcrowded classrooms.” King answered, “I find it very difficult to give the learners individual attention, as there are too many learners in my classroom.” It was expressed by Jonkie that, “teaching grade 4 learners requires individual attention as those learners are exposed to many subjects (six subjects) versus 3 subjects that they were doing in foundation-phase level.” Mzie was vocal in his criticism of the heavy teacher workload by stating, “Some teachers have opted for resignation due to heavy workload.” He also proclaimed

that the DoE does not employ substitute teachers in place of teachers who are on maternity or sick leave. The heavy teacher workloads thus have a detrimental impact on effective teaching and learning resulting in teacher apathy, teacher burnout and negative attitudes towards the profession.

Slow Redeployment Process and Limited Filling in of Vacant Posts by DoE

The sampled teachers advanced their dissatisfaction in which the pace of redeployment is conducted by the DoE. The teachers reported that in their schools there is a shortage of teachers as a result of death, and resignation. Jonkie put it this way, *“Ever since one of our colleagues passed on, her post has never been filled.”* He further stated, *“You will be told that the post will be filled by redeployment process.”* He asked, *“When will redeployment process fill that post as we are suffering by teaching more subjects with no payment for the extra work?”* Mara asserted, *“The Morkel model should be discarded as it does not assist us in rural schools.”* These concerns expressed so vocally by teachers illustrate that the DoE is implementing the redeployment process at a slow pace which could cripple the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

Union Influence and Involvement

After the democratic elections of 1994 in South Africa, the unions’ were more vocal and were afforded opportunities to be more influential in the formulation and implementation of policies. Such practices had both negative and positive implications for effective curriculum implementation. This assertion was affirmed by the interviewed teachers. In a question that was posed to establish to what extent teacher unions contribute to the implementation of NCS; the sampled teachers indicated that teacher unions hinder teachers from implementing the NCS. Botie emphasized that, *“teacher unions prohibit us from implementing the NCS by calling teachers to strike.”* Mara stated that, *“Government cannot achieve its main educational goals where teacher unions contest the approved policies and that could hamper the implementation of NCS due to union policy preferences and strike activity.”* Mzie further expanded on

Mara’s view by reporting that, *“Teacher unions are not advocating for the improved education in their schools but are willing to support policies that benefit them.”* Queen criticized the teacher unions in this way, *“Workshops organized by the DoE should not be attended only by those organized by teacher unions that should be honored.”* Jonkie showed that, *“We are informed by our leaders of teacher unions not to cooperate by refusing to submit documents and by go slow in attending to school activities.”* Lilly was critical of teacher unions as they often insisted on having meetings during teaching and learning time. This impacted negatively on learning as children were either sent home early from schools or left unattended. Sabs reflected, *“There is a clash between the DoE and unions as such at times learners are left unattended to by teachers.”* Nozie advanced the view that, *“Nothing will happen without us.”* She qualified the slogan of their teacher union by stating that the government will not be able to implement policies that are not understandable and agreed upon by them. Her rather militant stance highlights the conflict of interest between the government on the one hand and unions on the other. The above responses seem to indicate that there is non-compliance on the part of teachers to perform their duties efficiently as they are paid to do. This means that they do not subject themselves to the implementation of NCS as they tend to be controlled by unions and are guided by their decisions.

DISCUSSION

There is general agreement that conditions in classrooms for teachers and learners play a pivotal role in teaching and learning (Adler and Reed 2003; Onwu and Stofells 2005). Chaudhary (2015) supported this view and posited that neat and safe buildings help to establish and maintain a sound culture of learning and teaching. From this research, it appears that adequate teaching space and the condition of infrastructure are vital for curriculum implementation to be successful. In South Africa, Adler and Reed (2003) argued that the availability and use of school resources should not be taken for granted if organizations are seriously concerned about their success. They further articulated that school resources are not only seriously limited,

but also unequally distributed. Unequal distribution of resources amongst schools could pose challenges such as ineffective curriculum implementation. In the research project undertaken by du Plessis and Marais (2015) on factors inhibiting curriculum implementation participants indicated that they struggled to teach as there were limited resources, the quality of the material was poor and there was a lack of prescribed books.

In another study conducted by Selesho and Monyane (2012) the intermediate phase teachers identified challenges relating to the amount of training they received, the quality of the trainers and the lack of learning support materials as the major challenges they experiences with the implementation of both the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS).

In view of the above findings, it is quite clear that the provision of adequate and appropriate resources will enhance curriculum implementation. Supporting this view, a pilot study conducted in Namibia by Van Graan et al. (2006) indicated that limited resources have a negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning. It is evident from the above findings that the lack of resources in under resourced communities affects the performance of employees (Christie 1999). Once there are limited or no resources, envisaged effective curriculum implementation is negatively affected. Onwu and Stoffels (2005) contended that physical resources are certainly a major factor that can contribute to or inhibit change. Furthermore the research conducted by Laugksch et al. (2007) indicated that the availability and quality of physical resources constitute a challenge in some South African schools. They further contended that implementing a curriculum in such an uneven landscape could exacerbate inequalities. Importantly, their findings imply that physical resources have a bearing on curriculum implementation. This is further supported by Bragman (2008) who asserted that adequate physical resources increase the potential of a school in terms of curriculum implementation. Erden (2010: 37) also pointed out that if there is anything lacking in the natural surroundings, the curriculum cannot be properly executed. This is supported by Mbeshu (2010) as well who asserted that if there are insufficient resources the implementation of the curriculum is hampered.

A study conducted by Mammen (2003) revealed that for effective learning to occur, learning materials are imperative to improve students' learning and their success in assessments. What can be learnt from the literature reviewed and the responses of the sampled teachers is that, teachers require adequate and relevant resources if meaningful and effective teaching and learning is to be realized. The findings presented in this study indicated that the quality and nature of textbooks is inadequate for successful curriculum implementation. Textbooks are critical to the enhancement of sound knowledge and skills. According to Egunza (2014) textbooks constitute valuable learning material for teaching and learning and for accessing the set educational goals.

The content in textbooks are designed to foster in learners effective skills, sound knowledge, good social values and positive attitudes that will enable them to participate in, contribute to, adapt to and survive in a complex economic society (DoE 2003). A good textbook should have organised content with examples and activities to enhance teaching and learning. The prescribed textbooks, however do not appear to meet the criteria synonymous with good textbooks as articulated by the respondents.

Van der Berg and Louw (2008) asserted that the teacher-learner ratio in schools in South Africa should be 1: 36. The research results indicate that there is a lack of conformity to the specified teacher: learner ratio by the DoE in some schools. These concerns during interviews in the sampled schools were verified and confirmed by learner attendance registers and mark schedules that were observed by the researchers to verify teachers' contentions that they were unable to implement the NCS in their schools due to astronomically large classes which are difficult to manage. There are some learners who need more individual attention than others, to be able to benefit from the teaching in the classroom. In the case of an overcrowded classroom, those learners might not receive the necessary assistance they need. Similarly, teachers would not be able to have sufficient time for one-on-one teaching with the learners who need individual support. In the prevailing conditions such as these where there are 65 to 78 learners in a classroom, the opportunities for the effective implementation of the NCS is limited. The findings of this study confirm that there is a high

learner-teacher ratio which is tightly coupled with too much paper work. The problem of overcrowded classes is particularly prevalent in the rural areas as pointed out by Bantwini (2010: 86) as large numbers of learners are placed in single classes. Since these rural schools find it difficult to attract teachers some classes are left unattended or one teacher is expected to teach an astronomically large class leading to disciplinary challenges. This results in teachers feeling demotivated and discouraged (Bantwini 2010).

The schools impacted by Morkel's model, find themselves with fewer teachers, who are required to have heavier workloads. Those schools and teachers who are affected by the re-deployment process are expected to function at the same level as schools with sufficient teachers in ensuring the successful implementation of the NCS in all grades. This is, however, extremely difficult to achieve. It could be concluded that the redeployment process and delays in the filling of vacancies by the DoE aggravate teachers' workloads. The sampled teachers confirm that redeployment has affected the staff establishment at some schools and as a result, they were left with fewer teachers to manage the curriculum. It was confirmed by the sampled teachers that the excessive workload might be due to large numbers of learners in their classes and excessive administrative duties. The participants in Du Plessis and Marais' (2015) study also indicated that their overwhelming administrative responsibilities and copious planning were time consuming which affected their actual teaching in the classroom. If the bulk of the teacher's time is consumed by administrative functions, then effective and productive teaching and learning will be severely stifled. The findings of this study also highlighted how the excessive teacher workload had a bearing on effective teaching and learning.

According to Treu et al. (2010: 243) the schools such as those in rural areas and the townships that require resources the most do not receive them. It is thus imperative that the focus of attention be placed on especially the needs of previously disadvantaged schools. If schools receive learner teacher support material timeously teachers will also be less stressed and teaching and learning could proceed in a more organized manner (Mulaudzi 2009: 7).

After the 1994 democratic elections in South Africa, teacher unions enjoyed political rights

hitherto unknown to them. Teacher unions are viewed as a powerful force for change, and for providing support for the implementation of legislation set by the government. Moe (2011) argued that teacher unions function as interest groups, blocking changes to the *status quo* through activism, lobbying, and campaign donations. This means that they are inhibiting the efforts of the government in improving the quality of education in schools. Their resistance on many fronts illustrate that they are not supporting the practical implementation of curriculum policies which impedes the overall quality of education. Such practices could inhibit learners from acquiring quality education that is pivotal to their overall progress. The efforts of the government in improving the quality of education cannot be realized if teacher unions block the teaching personnel from implementing its policies.

CONCLUSION

The results reported in this research study indicate that while some intermediate-phase teachers were apathetic towards the implementation of the curriculum, others experienced challenges with the implementation of the NCS in their classrooms. The challenges that militated against successful curriculum implementation included amongst others a lack of resources such as a shortage of teachers, unsafe classrooms, limited furniture and irrelevant LTSM; astronomical workload; high learner teacher ratio; slow redeployment process, the role of unions and filling in of vacant posts by the DoE. It is evident that the successful implementation of any curriculum is dependent on the interplay of a variety of factors and a concerted effort on the part of the state, unions and all other affected stakeholders to work collaboratively and in a spirit of good will to address challenges that affect the successful implementation of the curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The actualization of curriculum implementation in schools could be realized only if stakeholders such as the DoE, parents, unions, teachers and learners work collaboratively to pursue excellence in the quality of education. This can only transpire when the stakeholders commit themselves to ensuring that each stakeholder plays its role responsibly, efficiently and effec-

tively. A needs analysis should be conducted in all schools by the DoE to address the shortcomings that could hamper the implementation of quality teaching and learning. The DoE should address the shortage of teachers by ensuring that learners are identified annually in each district to pursue teaching careers especially in rural areas as well in scarce subjects such Mathematics and Science.

The higher education institutions that offer teacher education programs should empower teacher-trainees with the relevant skills to implement the approved curriculum by the DoE effectively. Resource distribution should be revisited by ensuring that there is a system in place to enable the DoE to address the anticipated challenges timeously and learner enrolment should be considered in relation to the availability of classrooms and teachers. The state and unions should aim to forge closer relationships and should make a concerted effort to ensure that ultimately the interests of the learners and teaching and learning is foregrounded and that narrow minded, selfish interests are placed in the background.

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