

Teachers' Awareness of Their Role in Planning and Implementing School-based Curriculum Innovation

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ABSTRACT Centrally planned curriculum in most developing countries follows a centre-periphery approach in which curriculum planned by a central authority is simply handed down to teachers for implementation. However, teachers as curriculum implementers still have the room to adapt and adopt curriculum to suit the conditions they face in schools. We sought to ascertain teachers' awareness of their role in planning and implementing school-based curriculum innovation. A quantitative-cum-qualitative descriptive survey design was used. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from a convenient sample of 242 teachers drawn from schools in one educational district in Zimbabwe. Interviews were also held with a purposeful sample of teachers who had responded to the questionnaire. The SPSS statistical package version 17 was used to analyze quantitative data. Qualitative data was analysed through content analysis as emerging key issues led to themes that guided analysis. It emerged from the study that teachers were generally aware of their role in the planning and implementation of school-based curriculum innovation but their understanding of their role was as limited as their understanding of the concept curriculum. The study recommends emphasis on curriculum theory as a key component of teacher training and the implementation of short in-service courses to enhance teachers' knowledge of curriculum and their role in planning and implementing school-based curriculum innovation.

INTRODUCTION

In most developing countries such as Zimbabwe, curriculum is centrally planned and handed down to teachers to implement. In centrally planned curriculum teachers may not be wholly involved as curriculum experts outside the school system take the responsibility of planning curriculum. Cornbleth (1990), for example, sees curriculum as what actually happens in classrooms, that is, 'an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu' (1990: 5). There is often a discrepancy between the planned curriculum as stated in policy documents and actual curriculum as evidenced by the teaching and learning transactions that happen in schools between teachers and learners (Fullan 2002). This discrepancy is largely due to teachers' different ways of

understanding and interpreting the curriculum handed down to them.

However, there is always room for teachers to interact with centrally planned curriculum and institute school-based curriculum innovations. Kelly (2009:135) observes that in school based curriculum innovation:

...the individual teacher or at least the staff of any individual school should accept the research and development role in respect of the curriculum modifying, adapting and developing it to suit the needs of individual pupils and particular environments.

What is clear from the above observation is that teachers should not passively and unquestioningly implement a given curriculum (Brady 1995). In actual fact, teachers should modify and adapt curriculum to meet their local and often unique needs. Centrally planned curriculum or the national curriculum should still allow teachers some decision-making space as Brady (1995) observes. This calls for teachers to be actively involved in school-based curriculum innovation.

School-based curriculum innovation addresses specific and felt concerns of teachers and pupils. In many cases people who may not have practical experience of the conditions in different schools

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are seen prescribing to teachers certain innovations yet the best approach is to have teachers themselves spearhead innovations that address their felt needs (Ramparsad 2001). Fullan (2002) states that in making important curriculum decisions, the teachers make use of present and previous teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge. This results in a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy on the part of the teachers. Oluruntegbe et al. (2010) observe that today's teachers have gained prominence not only in teaching but in providing learning materials. The development and provision of learning material has to be taken at a macro level where teachers write textbooks for use by their own students.

Obanya (1987) observes that teachers are the first people to identify inadequacies in the curriculum and are the people who are supposed to spearhead the necessary adjustments to the curriculum. In school-based curriculum innovation, teachers identify their needs and coin solutions to address the felt needs. This ties well with Sarason's (1982) observation that the surest way to make an innovation reaches the classroom is by involving teachers in its planning. Teachers need to be empowered to make crucial curriculum decisions as this will ensure that curriculum is properly and meaningfully implemented. Teacher participation in the planning of innovation results in what Carl (2002) refers to as the empowerment of teachers that leads to greater sense of responsibility and commitment to the school and student motivation yet the innovations still require to be done within 'centrally determined framework of goal, policies, standards and accountabilities' (Caldwell and Spinks 1998:05).

The other reason why teachers should take a lead in the planning and implementation of school-based curriculum innovation is that they are the ones who deal with pupils on a daily basis. They know the pupils better in terms of their abilities, interests, needs and backgrounds hence it is important that curriculum prescribed by external planners is adapted to suit existing conditions in schools. To buttress this point, Newman and Ingram (1989:01) state that:

Classrooms are unique; any proposal needs to be tested and verified by each teacher in his or her classroom. It is not like a curriculum package that is designed to be delivered almost anywhere.

The above observation alludes to the fact that there are differences among schools, which are not catered for in centrally planned curriculum and teachers should understand their conditions and

adapt curriculum accordingly to suit these conditions by way of instituting sound school-based innovation.

It is imperative that teachers should assume a more leading and meaningful role in making the necessary adjustments on the curriculum taking into account the conditions they find themselves working under rather than taking the prescribed curriculum as immune to changes. Some of the issues teachers could spearhead changes include selection and designing of content, selection of learning materials, selection and designing of teaching approaches, assessment and evaluation issues, syllabus interpretation, diagnosis of teaching/learning problems and coining solutions, classroom and school management and any other staff development issues (Ogott et al. 2010; Quist 2005).

Research Context

Schools in Zimbabwe operate with a centrally designed curriculum at all levels and curriculum is designed by the Curriculum Development Unit, an arm of the Ministry of Education. At Grade Seven, Form Four and Upper Six levels are centrally planned examinations which are common in every school in all the provinces. These examinations are administered by the Zimbabwe School Examinations Council, a parastatal mandated to administer school examinations.

In their teaching, teachers have school-based staff development workshops which are designed to address challenges teachers face in the school, in general and in the classrooms, in particular (Maphosa et al. 2007). Apart from cooperation of teachers within an individual school, teachers are also in a position to cooperate with their counterparts in other schools. This cooperation was formalized by the cluster system. According to Ndawi and Maringe (1998), by 1998 almost every school in Zimbabwe belonged to a cluster.

Objective of the Study

The study sought to ascertain teachers' awareness of their role in the planning and implementation of school-based curriculum innovation.

METHODOLOGY

Design: A quantitative-cum-qualitative descriptive survey design was employed in this

study. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies is normally appropriate for studies that seek to gather more insights from participants beyond those collected quantitatively (Onwuegbuzi and Teddlie 2003). A descriptive survey, as Orodho (2003) describes it, entails collecting data in order to get a detailed description of the status of the subject or situation required. This study sought to ascertain teachers' awareness of their role in the planning and implementation of school-based curriculum innovation.

Sample: Two hundred and forty-two teachers participated in the study. The sample was conveniently selected from school clusters where the researchers had contact persons for easy data collection. Thomas and Nelson (2001) cited in Chabaya et al. (2009) observe that convenient sampling in case studies is mostly used where the purpose of the study is not to generalize results to a wider population but simply to select lessons to be learnt from cases. Ten teachers were purposefully selected from those who had completed the questionnaire for the purpose of interviews. The sampling targeted those with rich experiences in clusters and these were information-rich sources.

Instrumentation: A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data whilst phenomenological interviews were used to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire was used to collect mainly the quantitative data required for the study. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed and some qualitative data was also collected through the questionnaire as respondents were allowed to comment on issues in some instances. The use of semi-structured questionnaires to collect qualitative data has been successfully used in previous studies by Matveev (2002) on the administrative capabilities of managers utilized a semi-structured questionnaire as the main data collection instrument and the questionnaire managed to gather the data quickly and in a cost effective manner.

Interviews were a supplementary source of data collection in the study in line with the adopted style to combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single study. Interviews were preferred to other forms of data collection as they enabled the researchers to naturally converse with the teachers. This allowed the teachers to freely express their feelings. The interviews also enabled the researchers to probe and prompt on answers given and this flexibility of interviews made it

possible for the researchers to gather as much information as possible.

Procedure: The researchers administered the questionnaire with the assistance of contact persons who had been identified in the participating schools. Through the use of trained contact persons the administration was easily done to ensure a high return level. A total of 242 usable questionnaires were returned out of the 300 administered, marking an 81% return rate. This very high return rate could be attributed to the facts that the researcher and contact persons were on the ground to administer and collect questionnaires and the teachers were very willing to participate in the study.

Ethical Issues: Permission to conduct interviews for research purposes was sought from the relevant authorities at provincial, district and school levels. The research participants completed an informed consent form after the purpose of the study was explained to them.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analysed statistically with the aid of the SPSS version 17 software whereas qualitative data was analysed using content analysis and reporting took form of narratives and thick description.

RESULTS

Demographic Variables

Table 1 shows that the majority of participants in the study were mainly male teachers and the results

Table 1: Biographical variables for teachers (N=242)

<i>Biographical variables</i>	<i>Variable descriptions</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Male	221	91.3
	Female	21	8.7
<i>Academic Qualifications</i>	'O' Level	168	69.4
	'A' Level	72	29.8
	Bachelor's degree	2	0.8
	Master's degree	0	0
<i>Professional Qualifications</i>	PhD	0	0
	Certificate in education	47	19.4
	Diploma in education	193	79.8
	Bachelor's degree	2	0.8
<i>Levels Taught</i>	Master's degree	0	0
	Primary	174	72.0
	Secondary	68	28.0
<i>Teaching Experience</i>	1-3 years	32	13.2
	4-6 years	137	56.6
	7-9 years	53	21.9
	10 and above	20	8.3

of the study were not affected by gender. Most of the participants had Ordinary Level as their basic academic qualification and a Diploma in Education as a professional qualification and the fact that all the participants were trained and qualified teachers meant that responses were solicited from professional teachers. The respondents were also experienced in the teaching with a majority of them having taught for more than four years.

Teachers Views on the Role in the Planning and Implementation of School-based Curriculum Innovation

(a) Teachers' Role in Making Curriculum Adjustments

Table 2 shows that the majority of the teachers, 65% (n=157) confirmed that as teachers they could make adjustments to the curriculum whereas 35% (n=85) held the view that teachers could not make adjustments to the curriculum.

Table 2: Teachers responses on their role in school-based innovations (N=242)

View on teacher's role	Affirmative	%	Negative	%
As a teacher you can make adjustments to the curriculum.	157	65	85	35
As a teacher you know what a curriculum is.	225	93	17	7
You encounter issues in your teaching which require improvement.	218	90	24	10
You have the knowledge on curriculum to effect curriculum improvement.	152	63	90	37
You have the adequate time to work on planning and implementing changes.	73	30	169	70
Teachers have the necessary resources to engage with curriculum and improve it.	24	10	218	90

In interviews held with some of the teachers the following were revealed.

As a teacher you may use the teaching methods you deem appropriate for your class.

Some textbooks recommended for use in schools may not be suitable to learners and as a teacher I have to look for more appropriate resources.

Some exercises set for students in some books may be too difficult for learners and a teacher will have to set his or her own questions.

Once given a syllabus to teach there is nothing you can do except to teach as prescribed in the syllabus.

If they are any changes to the curriculum the Ministry (of Education) informs us so our duty is to teach.

Teachers do not plan the curriculum. It is the duty of CDU (Curriculum Development Unit).

(b) Teachers Understanding of the Curriculum

The majority of the respondents 93% (n=225) as shown on Table 2 indicated that they knew what a curriculum was whereas only 7% (n=17) indicated that they did not know.

In interviews carried out with some teachers those who claimed to know what curriculum was defined it as follows:

A curriculum is the syllabus that we follow when we teach.

Curriculum is what we teach as shown in textbooks.

All the subjects on offer in this school.

Subjects learnt by pupils including sports and other out of classroom activities.

Content that we teach which will make pupils write the examinations and pass.

The quotations saw that teachers had different understanding of the concept curriculum.

(c) Issues in Teaching that Require Improvement

Table 2 shows that another majority of the respondents, 90% (n=218) affirmed that there were issues in their teaching that required improvement whilst 10% (n=24) indicated there were no issues in their teaching that they deemed required improvement.

The interviews revealed the following on issues in teaching that required improvement:

Some textbooks are just not meant for our type of students. The English reader that I am using with my Form ones has stories that are beyond children's imagination. It will be more useful to use books that link with children's experiences.

Some recommended methods of teaching which are child centred are time-consuming and if you use them you will never complete the syllabus.

Some topics in the Form one Geography syllabus such as Map work should not be taught in Form one. If I had a choice I would teach them later on say in Form three.

I feel the issue of language affect our pupils' understanding of the concepts we teach. Why

should we force learners to learn in a foreign language?

The above verbatim quotations highlight some of the views raised by interviews on the areas they felt required improvement in their teaching.

(d) Knowledge on Curriculum Necessary to Effect Curriculum Improvement

A majority of the respondents 63% (n=152) confirmed that they had the knowledge on curriculum necessary for the implementation of curriculum improvement. However, 37% (n=90) indicated that they did not have the curriculum knowledge necessary to effect curriculum improvement.

In interviews the researchers asked the interviewees to expound on the kind of knowledge they had which could assist them to effect curriculum changes.

I am a trained teacher so I really know the needs of my students.

As a History teacher I am a specialist in my subject and I can suggest improvements in the subject.

During teacher training we studied Psychology (of Education) and it provided me with skills on how to align my teaching to the pupils' levels and this helps me to make improvements when teaching.

My knowledge of teaching methods make (sic) it possible for me to know the most useful teaching methods.

Through questioning when teaching one can easily tell that the content taught is difficult for learners. This can be done well before assessing them by way of tests. So at times some topics suggested by the syllabus may be too difficult for the learners.

The above views showed that teachers could attribute knowledge and skills imparted to them as trained teachers necessary to make them effect necessary changes in the curriculum.

(e) Adequacy of Time to Work on Planning and Implementing Changes to the Curriculum

As Table 2 shows only 30% (n=73) of the respondents indicated that they had adequate time to work on planning and implementing changes to the curriculum whilst 70% (n=169) indicated that they had problems with time.

Some of the interviewees had this to say about the challenge of time:

We teach larger classes and at the end of the day we are too tired to seriously think of improving the curriculum.

I do a lot of marking on a daily basis and this consumes the bulk of our time.

There are a lot of records we have to keep in this school and we spend a lot of time updating the records. Heads will write nasty reports about you if your records are not updated.

Co-curricular activities also take most of our time as we need to be with the children for sports and clubs which may involve trips out of school.

Time could be found but teachers are just demotivated of their working conditions.

The above quotations summarise some of the views held by teachers about the inadequacy of time.

(f) Availability of Resources to Undertake School-Based Curriculum Innovations

Only 10% (n=24) of the respondents as shown on Table 2 confirmed that teachers had the resources to undertake school-based curriculum innovations whilst 90% (n=218) indicated teachers had the challenge of resources in their attempt to undertake curriculum innovations.

Interviews carried out with teachers revealed the following views on resources:

Teachers are struggling to survive and they completely do not have own resources to invest in curriculum improvement.

Schools do not support teachers who may have the desire to engage in school-based curriculum innovations.

Some improvements required to the curriculum are costly. You may require new equipment for use and you will never get it so you just ignore (the project).

Other ideas may need to be tested out before use. All this involves money.

Issues may require research into latest development and this is virtually impossible when we do not even have internet access or electricity in the school.

The above captures teachers' views on the issue of the availability of resources necessary for the undertaking of school-based curriculum innovation.

DISCUSSION

It emerged from the study that teachers were aware that they had a role in making curriculum adjustments. This finding is consistent with those in a study by Bezzinna (1991) which found that

teachers had limited understanding of their role in school based curriculum development. According to Bezzina (1991:40) this school based curriculum development entailed:

...a process in which some or all the members of a school community plan, implement and/or evaluate an aspect or aspects of the curriculum offering in the school. This may involve adapting an existing curriculum, adopting it unchanged or creating a new curriculum.

The finding that teachers were generally aware of their role in making curriculum adjustment buttresses claims by Obanya (1987) that teachers are the first people to recognize weaknesses or inadequacies of the curriculum hence they are the ones who should spearhead curriculum improvement. The study also revealed that teachers were aware that some of the areas they could affect changes included teaching approaches and learning materials. This finding ties very well with Ogott et al. (2010) and Quist (2005) who state a wide range of areas that teachers can effect improvements only and these include assessment and evaluation issues, syllabus interpretation, diagnosis of teaching/learning problems and coining solutions, classroom and school management and any other staff development issues.

It also emerged from the study that teachers had different understanding of the concept curriculum. One's understanding of curriculum, invariably, affects the extent of engagement one can have with the curriculum. The way professionals differ in the understanding of the concept of curriculum is in sync with the observation by Oliva (1997) that one may hold a narrow or a broad view of the concept curriculum. Coles (2003) argues that curriculum is the sum of all the activities, experiences and learning opportunities for which an institution or a teacher takes responsibility – either deliberately or by default. This includes in such a broad concept of curriculum the formal and the informal, the overt and the covert, the recognised and the overlooked, the intentional and the unintentional. Wojtczak (2002) also defines curriculum as an educational plan that spells out which goals and objectives should be achieved, which topics should be covered and which methods are to be used for learning, teaching and evaluation. Teachers, therefore, need to hold a broader view of the curriculum and not to take separate parts of the curriculum as the whole curriculum (Oliva 1997). One who holds such a broad view of the curriculum is bound to engage with the curriculum more widely than the one who views it simply as a syllabus.

The study had an interesting revelation that teachers were well aware of some areas that required improvement in their teaching and could enumerate them. The finding is consistent with Howells' (2003) observation that teachers should not passively and unquestioningly implement a given curriculum but should modify and adapt it to meet their local and often unique needs. It is only when teachers are able to identify problem areas in the curriculum that they would be able to effect school-based innovations that address the real and felt needs. Such improvements will certainly result in enhanced teaching and learning. The revelation in the study that teachers could enumerate some areas they felt needed improvement in the curriculum is consistent with Gopinathan and Deng's (2006) assertion that teachers can be curriculum developers within a context of centralised curriculum development in a process they term 'school-based curriculum enactment'. The finding that teachers were aware of some of the areas that needed improvement refutes claims by Pilot (2007) that teachers' involvement in school-based innovations is hampered by lack of alternative innovative options. Fullan (2001) further argues that teachers' current practice is rooted in beliefs and in experience accumulated over time and this often makes them resistant to change. The study, however, found that teachers were aware of better ways of doing things.

The findings in the study show that the teachers confirmed that they had the appropriate knowledge to engage in meaningful curriculum improvements buttress assertions by Fullan (2002) who argues that in making important curriculum decisions, the teacher makes use of present and previous teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge. However, the finding that teachers confirmed that they had the appropriate knowledge to effect curriculum improvement refutes findings by Ogott et al. (2010) who found Kenyan teachers to be ill-equipped in effectively selecting, developing and using learning materials. Teachers need the knowledge and skills to effect meaningful changes to the curriculum. This ability results in a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy on the part of the teachers. Teaching becomes a real profession if teachers are able to engage with the curriculum at a macro level using their knowledge and skills as trained teachers to improve teaching and learning on a larger scale.

It also emerged from the study that teachers indicated that they did not have adequate time to work on planning and implementing school-based curriculum innovations. Such a finding corroborates

Bezzina's (1991) findings in a similar study that lack of time and aspects of professional burnout were limiting factors in teachers' full participation in work to improve the curriculum. This also ties well with Beti's (2010) observation that difficult pupils and parents, ever-increasing duties and ongoing reforms are pushing some Swiss teachers to burnout. This leaves teachers with no time for extra responsibilities such as working to improve the curriculum. However, issues of improving the curriculum make teachers true professionals as professionalism goes beyond mere implementation of a given curriculum (Shoham 1995).

The study also found that teachers had serious challenges in having the requisite resources to undertake curriculum innovation. The finding is consistent with Wedell (1986) cited in Norwich et al. (1994) who contends that any effective work on curriculum development undertaken by teachers should be backed by strong resource provision. Teachers may have the best of ideas to engage the curriculum and effect meaningful changes but for as long as they are incapacitated by lack of resources their ideas remain untested. The issue of supportive school environments is also shared by Bezzina (1991) who observe that limitations to teachers' endeavours to institute macro curriculum innovation are often hampered by the schools whose environments are not supportive and often lack the necessary resources for curriculum development business. Parker and Day (1997:87) cited in Kruger (2003: 207) recommend that principals need to support the teaching programme and provide resources that teachers need to carry out their task because as Fullan (2001) contends curriculum innovation remains a challenge in teacher practice. The finding on lack of resources is also consistent with the observation by Oluruntegbe et al. (2010) that in Sub-Saharan Africa, teachers are poorly remunerated and by virtue of their socio-economic status lack commitment on issues related to curriculum improvement which are taken as an extra burden.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that teachers were generally aware that they had a role to play in making curriculum improvements. Teachers were aware that curriculum handed down to them for implementation was not immune to changes. They needed to interact with the given curriculum to adapt to existing conditions found in schools

The study further concludes that teachers appeared to have a limited understanding of the concept curriculum. The lack of a broader understanding of the concept curriculum led teachers to view isolated elements of the curriculum as the curriculum. Limited understanding of the concept curriculum, invariably, negatively affected teachers' broader engagement with the curriculum in order to effect meaningful changes.

Teachers generally believed that the areas they needed to improve were solely related to teaching and learning in the classrooms. These areas could be deemed 'safe' areas which affected teachers in their day-to-day operations.

The study also concludes that teachers indicated that they had the knowledge necessary to effect innovations in the curriculum but lack the capacity in terms of time and resources. Knowledge emanated from the nature of training as teachers and subject expertise. However, lack of time and resources hampered their attempts to engage in meaningful school-based curriculum innovation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the findings the study makes the following recommendations:

- ♦ Curriculum theory courses should be given adequate attention during teacher training. It would be important that during teacher training, colleges and universities give broader emphasis on curriculum theory courses. Without a sound theoretical base in curriculum issues it would be difficult for teachers to tackle broad curriculum improvements.
- ♦ In-service courses on curriculum theory should be introduced by the Ministry of Education for practising teachers. Such courses assist to capacity-build teachers with a view to enable them to appreciate their crucial role as teacher-researchers for curriculum improvement.
- ♦ Teachers should be equipped with adequate resources to engage in curriculum innovation at a macro level. Establishment of well-resourced teacher-resource centres in educational districts will help in the provision of the necessary resources required for school-based curriculum innovation.
- ♦ Incentives should be provided to encourage teachers to research into curriculum issues and to develop major innovations within the curriculum.

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