

Evaluation of Teachers' Understanding of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements in Selected Primary Schools in the Gauteng Province (Republic of South Africa)

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Abstract: The aim of the research was to evaluate teachers' understanding of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). This study was underpinned by both constructivist and critical theories. It involved an analysis of the merits and demerits of teachers' understanding of the CAPS in selected primary schools in the Gauteng Province of the Republic of South Africa. Qualitative research assisted the researcher to evaluate how teachers understand the CAPS. Data were analysed by selecting, comparing, synthesising and interpreting information to provide explanation. It has been established in this study that teachers received training on the CAPS. The findings revealed that the facilitators of the workshops were sufficiently competent. It is therefore necessary to find appropriate professional development approaches to ensure that all teachers even the most experienced ones are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for improving learner performance.

Key words: Implementation, curriculum objectives, underperformance, constructivist, evaluation, interviews and analysis

INTRODUCTION

As has happened in many western democracies over the past few decades, post-apartheid South Africa is undergoing educational reform. Gultig *et al.* (2002) point out that: "In 2000, the Education Ministry announced a review of Curriculum 2005. The review team's first report was interpreted as suggesting a move away from a radically integrated, real-world based curriculum towards one in which the subject content was re-emphasized. Curriculum Statements, informed by the review committee's recommendations were then written. The National Curriculum statement became the official curriculum in 2006".

DOBE (2011) states that the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) was amended and replaced by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) and the implementation dates were as follows: grades R-3 and 10 in 2012, grades 4-6 and 11 in 2013 and grades 7-9 and grade 12 in 2014.

According to Beets and Grange (2005), the replaced syllabi provided some descriptions of what could be taught in a specific subject (the content) as well as broad intentions regarding the aims and objectives of teaching and learning. CAPS have also shown remarkable interest with regard to curriculum objectives as it placed focus on topics and specific aims.

As time went on, a need arose to develop CAPS document for every subject that will be the definitive support for all teachers and help address the complexities of the NCS (DOE, 2009). There has also been considerable criticism of various aspects of its implementation, manifesting in teacher overload, confusion and stress and widespread learner underperformance (DOBE, 2011). As part of a solution to the above criticisms, CAPS came to replace assessment standards with topics.

A National CAPS is a single, comprehensive and concise policy document which replaced NCS, grades R-12 (DOBE, 2011). This curriculum came after the Department of Basic Education had appointed the panel of experts to investigate the nature of current challenges and to replace the NCS. The Department of Basic Education informed the parents, teachers and other stakeholders of the progress made on the review of NCS as announced by the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga on 06 July, 2010. This curriculum was aimed at replacing the NCS in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The significance of the study also lies on the fact that the majority of stakeholders are not yet confident about CAPS implementation as it is presently at its new stage. Teachers' experiences have to be reconsidered taking into account the fact that there has been various curriculum periods in South Africa apartheid curriculum, Curriculum 2005, Revised National Curriculum (RNCS) and

NCS (Gultig *et al.*, 2002). Currently, there is CAPS which is already been implemented in grades R-12. Everybody is interested in the ideologies that underlie this curriculum and what its implications are for different groups of learners.

Theoretical frameworks: This study was underpinned by both constructivist and critical theories. In CAPS, teachers need to allow learners to socially construct meanings in the classroom through interaction. Audi (Donald, 2008) argues that in education the idea of learning as a constructive process is widely accepted: learners do not passively receive information but instead actively construct knowledge as they strive to make sense of their world. Another central concept in constructivist thinking is that knowledge is not fixed. It is shaped, constructed and reconstructed in different social contexts and at different times. In some of the NCS's documents, there is also an enduring emphasis on learner construction of knowledge, notably in the Life Sciences (Umalusi as cited in DOE, 2009) and the same applies to CAPS. Teachers will have to use their experiences to expose learners to activities that allow them to attach different meanings to the social reality.

Vygotsky (Donald, 2008) points out that knowledge itself is not absolute and unchanging. It is a social construction that is developed and learned through social interaction. Ornstein (2006) reflects that most of the constructivists favor an activity-centered curriculum in which learners interact with knowledge and each other to construct meaning and new knowledge for themselves.

For example, learners may be given a practical task in which they are required to read and follow instructions, make observations and conclusions. In this way, learners develop confidence and attain problem solving skills.

Booyse and Plessis (2008) states that the key focus areas in the philosophy of critical theory are the "change and emancipation" of societies from being indoctrinated towards being critical and questioning. As for Paulo Freire (Lemmer, 1999), the essence of education about society is that social reality is made by people and can be changed by people. It is important that both learners and teachers see that social and political reality is not fixed but that it can be changed and transformed.

This is because most of the curricula facing most teachers and young people in the developing countries are handed down for implementation without any room for critiquing.

DOE (2011) acknowledges that through critical theory, learners learn the skills to "collect, analyze, organize and critically evaluate information". The emphasis on reconstruction and on critical and questioning attitudes in the new curriculum reflects the

key aspects of the philosophy of critical theory. Critical theory raises questions of consciousness when dealing with knowledge. Critical dialogue about educational issues that affect the society is encouraged. Learners should be given tasks that force them to be in dialogue with themselves and nature. Once learners start doing so, teachers can now say that CAPS has been mastered.

The main research question was as follows: How do teachers understand the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Hofstee (2006) reflects that in the research design one does not have to explain the details of how to implement the techniques but only discuss the technique/s that will be used. Qualitative research assisted the researcher to evaluate how teachers understand the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements. Teachers who are currently teaching in the Intermediate Phase were interviewed. Teachers' understanding of CAPS was gauged against the background of the NCS. Their noticeable experience of the NCS and accessibility has contributed to them being selected sampled. Respondents were interviewed separately on individual basis. This study was conducted in five different schools and this created room for multiple diverse ideas.

A complete coverage of the whole population is seldom possible. The sampled schools have ± 20 teachers each and the learner enrollment of about 600. Twenty participants were central to the research. Interviews were conducted and respondents were tape-recorded and data transcribed.

Firstly, a letter requesting permission to conduct investigation was forwarded to the five schools that were part this study. The letter informed the teachers of their right to privacy, anonymity and protection from harm. De Vos *et al.* (2005) recommends that subjects who are tape recorded should give their consent and confidentiality must be ensured.

Data collection: The main data collection method was interviews. Supplementary methods of data collection such as videotapes, audiotapes and diary notes were used. Interviewing provided room for face to face interaction and clarification of concepts that might be confusing to the participants. Collection of data from fewer participants is a wiser choice for virtually any qualitative data. The interviews were audio-taped in a cassette and transcribed.

In trying to avoid biases and maintain validity and reliability of data, a process of triangulation was

administered. De Vos *et al.* (2005) defines validity as referring to the degree to which an instrument is doing what it is intended to do. Validity was maintained by choosing the sample that is accessible. This saved time and costs during interviewing process. Reliability is primarily concerned not with what is being measured but with how well it is being measured.

Data analysis and interpretation: Data analysis and interpretation was done after data collection. Data were sorted accordingly, conceptualized, refined and organized into a coherent new structure. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed then analyzed. Contradictory points of view and new insights were revised and refined. Data collected were compared against each other and consolidated into a meaningful discussion. It was necessary for the researcher to maintain trust and confidentiality when analyzing data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main issue investigated was the teachers' views about Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). In order to get more information about the teachers' knowledge of CAPS, the following questions were asked.

"First I would like to know your views on Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement". In their responses, sixteen teachers indicated that they were more comfortable with CAPS. This was confirmed by teacher P who said, "The facilitators were well prepared". This was supported by teacher I who said, "CAPS is good. The number of subjects has been reduced and what you must teach the learners is clearly stipulated".

"How would you rate your understanding of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement?" Twenty teachers who were interviewed concurred that they understand CAPS and were confident that they would be able to implement it in their classrooms. A few of the verbatim responses are indicated:

- Teacher S: "CAPS is better. Researchers are given the content to teach the learners"
- Teacher J: "The content is well stipulated and there are no learning outcomes and assessment standards that used to confuse us"
- Teacher F: "CAPS is clear and better when compared to the previous policies"

"What training did you receive in respect of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement?" Twenty teachers indicated that they attended a 3 days

workshop organised by the Department of Education. Some of the responses from the teachers are indicated below:

- Teacher K: "We attended a workshop for 3 days during school holidays"
- Teacher G: "The Department of Education called us for a workshop where we were taken through the implementation of CAPS"
- Teacher N: "The district office organised a workshop for CAPS and we were invited to attend"

"What are your views when you compare the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, the Revised National Curriculum Statement, the National Curriculum Statement and Curriculum 2005?" All teachers who were interviewed indicated that CAPS is better than C2005, RNCS and NCS. A few of the verbatim responses are indicated below:

- Teacher C: "CAPS is better than the previous policies on teaching and learning"
- Teacher P: "Some aspects such as assessment standards that use to confuse us have been excluded in CAPS"
- Teacher H: "CAPS is not complicated and we are given the content to teach the learners"

CONCLUSION

The research findings of this study indicated that teachers received training on the CAPS. The time frames in which teachers were trained were not adequate. The study found that the only intervention strategy to assist teachers in implementing teaching and learning policies was in the form of workshops. This study further indicated that the facilitators of the workshops were sufficiently competent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The need for high quality professional development is imperative for improving quality education in South African schools. It is therefore necessary to find appropriate professional development approaches to ensure that all teachers even the most experienced ones are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for improving learner performance. Teachers are the key actors in continuing professional development and should be involved in the decisions made by the authorities. Teachers should thus be given the opportunity to give their own opinion on professional development programmes.

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