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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. Teachers will have to use their experiences to expose learners to activities that allow them to attach different meanings to the social reality. 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. 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. Teachers' understanding of CAPS was gauged against the background of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Data were analysed by selecting, comparing, synthesising and interpreting information to provide explanation. Data collected were compared against each other and consolidated into a meaningful discussion. 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. Teachers should thus be given the opportunity to give their own opinions on professional development programmes.

1. INTRODUCTION

As has happened in many western democracies over the past few decades, post-apartheid South Africa is undergoing educational reform. Hoadley and Jansen (2009:10) point out that: *“In 2000, the Education Ministry announced a review of Curriculum 2005 (C2005). 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”*.

Department of Basic Education (2011:05) 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 (2005:192) 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 (Department of Education 2009:07). There has also been considerable criticism of various aspects of its implementation, manifesting in teacher overload, confusion and stress and widespread learner underperformance (Department of Basic Education, 2009:05). 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 (Department of Basic Education 2011:08). 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 *National Curriculum Statement* (Hoadley and Jansen 2009:148). 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.

2. 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 (in Donald 2008: 204) 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 the Department of Education 2009:24), 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 (cited in Donald 2008:84) points out that knowledge itself is not absolute and unchanging. It is a social construction that is developed and learned through social interaction. Ornstein (2006:422) 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 (2008:12) 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 (cited in Lemmer 2000:57), 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.

Department of Education (1997:13) 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?*

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

De Vos, Strydom and Fouche (2005:79) state that qualitative research methods elicit participants’ accounts of meaning, experience or perceptions by producing descriptive data in the participants’ own spoken words. Qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomenon, often with a purpose of describing and understanding the phenomenon from the participants’ point of view (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:101). Qualitative research was chosen to assist the researcher evaluate how teachers understand the CAPS. The advantage of this approach is that it provides rich descriptive data as observed by the researcher

during the interactions with participants. It served as the principal method of investigation. This method also enabled the researcher to capture different experiences of the participants accurately. Qualitative method relies heavily on the meanings of communicated information and not on quantity as indicated through statistics. This method contributed to answering the research questions which are informed by the main research question enabling critical theory which examined the spoken and written words in detail.

Hofstee (2006:113) 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 CAPS. 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 Voss (2005:65) recommends that subjects who are tape recorded should give their consent, and confidentiality must be ensured.

4. Data Collection

According to Voce (2005:6), the primary methods of data collection in qualitative research are observation, interviews and focus group discussion. Data collection is simply how information is gathered. In-depth formal interviewing was used as the main data collection method. Other data collecting techniques, such as observation and informal conversations were used to supplement data collected through interviews. Data were also collected through observing and describing the experiences of the participants. The literature review informed the researcher about the topic.

The researcher interacted with the participants in order to get the most reliable information. To avoid manipulation, the researcher gave the participants equal opportunities to participate in the investigation. The researcher used focus group interviews and individual interviews to collect data. Follow-up sessions were appropriate in the form of structured and unstructured interviews.

According to Denscombe (2003:168), focus group interviews provide an opportunity for individuals with common or divergent backgrounds to explore a problem. Focus group interviewing is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment (Krueger 1994:6). Focus group interview relies on the interaction among group members to elicit more points of view as group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in discussions (Mertens 1998:174). This data collection method is actually an open group discussion. The format of this type of group interview is not that of question and answer. The researcher encourages respondents to use their own terminology in describing their experiences. The reason for this is to allow the data to truly emerge from the respondents.

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 (2005:166) 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 is it being measured.

5. Data analysis and interpretation

According to Michelle (2007:103), qualitative data analysis consists of identifying, coding and categorising patterns found in the data. Bradley (2007:619) declares that once the data have been reviewed and there is a general understanding of the scope and contexts of the key experiences under study, coding provides the analyst with a formal system to organise data, uncovering and

documenting additional links within and between concepts and experiences described in the data. Plooy (2007:41) defines data analysis as a process of bringing order and structure to the mass of collected data. Discourse analysis usually uses tapes so they can be played and replayed for several people discussing, not individual person specifically. Data analysis and interpretation involved the analysis and interpretation of documents related to CAPS. Data were analysed by selecting, comparing, synthesising and interpreting information to provide explanation.

According to Creswell (1994:153), in qualitative research data analysis is conducted simultaneously with data collection, data interpretation and narrative reporting. Bogdan and Biklen (1998:145) define qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organising it, and breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned and deciding what will tell others”. Strauss and Corbin (1990:220) contend that the bits of data from the participants provide the researcher with this “big picture” that transcends any one single bit of data. In this study the researcher analysed and interpreted the “big picture” from what the participants said and how individual statements related to what the “big picture” stands for. The researcher used the inductive approach to ensure that the research findings emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data generated.

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.

6. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

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:

6.1 “First I would like to know your views on Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement”.

In their responses sixteen (16) 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”*.

6.2 “How would you rate your understanding of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement?”

Twenty (20) 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 below:

Teacher S, “CAPS is better. We are given the content to teach our learners. Knowledge, skills and values are clearly stipulated. It is for the teacher to decide when to teach a particular skill to his learners. The work programme is also clearly stipulated according to the terms of the year”.

Teacher J, “The content is well stipulated and there are no learning outcomes and assessment standards that used to confuse us. The learning outcomes and assessment standards were so many and we could not memorise them. We were expected to identify the content in the assessment standards and that was not easy. Now we have the content given to us and we must just decide how to teach”.

Teacher F, “CAPS is clear and better when compared to the previous policies. We thank the Department of Education for streamlining the National Curriculum Statement”.

6.3 “What training did you receive in respect of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement?”

Twenty (20) teachers indicated that they attended a three day workshop organised by the Department of Education. Some of the responses from the teachers are indicated below:

Teacher K, “We attended a workshop for three days during school holidays. However, the period of training was not enough. We expected the Department of Education to train us for a longer period than they did with the National Curriculum Statement”.

Teacher G, “The Department of Education called us for a workshop where we were taken through the implementation of CAPS. The three days were not adequate taking into account that the previous curricula were difficult for us to implement because we were not trained for a long time. They always repeat the same mistake when coming to the period of trainings we hope that the Department of Education will call us for more training so that we can implement this curriculum appropriately.”

Teacher N, “Our district office organised a workshop for CAPS and we were invited to attend”. We attended the workshop for three days only. This is not adequate. They must also invite the principals to attend these workshops. The principals do not attend these workshops but they expect us to implement what they don’t know.”

6.4 “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”.

6.5 Can you please clarify the instructional time for all subjects in the Intermediate Phase?

All teachers who participated in this study indicated that they did not know but they always refer to the policy documents as such times are clearly stipulated.

6.7 What are the skills that the learners must acquire in English as First Additional Language?

Teachers who participated in this study mentioned skills such as listening and speaking, reading and viewing as well as writing and language structure. Teacher F said, “Learners will use

listening and speaking skills in order to interact with one another". Another teacher said, *"Reading is very important because learners will read and write in other subjects. We use group reading, independent reading or pair reading"*. However, teachers could not clearly explain the process of reading such as pre-reading, reading and post-reading.

One teacher said, *"Writing is an important skill because learners think about grammar and spelling"*. However, when asked about the process approach to writing, all teachers who participated in this study could not clearly explain.

6.8 My you please mention some language teaching approaches in Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement?

Teachers mentioned approaches such as text-based and communicative but could not clearly the processes of such approaches. They indicated that they refer in the policy documents for the approaches as well as time allocation for each skill in the various subjects.

6.9 May you please identify the content for listening and speaking skills?

Teachers mentioned content such as listening comprehension, conversation, directions and instructions, retelling stories, story-telling, role-play, group discussions, short talks, short poems and rhymes and language games.

6.10 What do you understand by reading and viewing skills?

Reading form their policy documents, below are some of the verbatim responses from the teachers who participated in this study:

"Stories, for example, contemporary realistic fiction, traditional stories, adventure stories, science fiction, biographies, historical fiction, plays and poetry".

"Information texts such as procedures, factual recounts, general knowledge texts and informative texts such as reports social texts like invitations, greeting cards, letters and notices".

"Media texts, for example, advertisements, newspaper reports, magazine articles, notices and pamphlets".

"Visual literacy such as posters, pamphlets, advertisements, notices, drawings, photographs, cartoons, comic strips, diagrams, graphs, tables and charts".

“Types of reading are close reading of texts like comprehension activities, making summaries, etc. Extended reading of texts such as oral discussions, book reviews and projects, prepared and unprepared reading aloud”.

6.11 What do you understand by writing and presenting skills?

Reading from their policy documents, teachers who participated in this study mentioned content such as word writing, sentence writing, paragraph writing, creative writing, descriptive, such as descriptions of people, places, animals, plants and objects, narrative such as stories, personal recounts, diaries diary and autobiography. Imaginative such as short poems. Dialogues and short play scripts based on stories. Transactional writing such as social media and information texts. Furthermore, teachers mentioned content such as notes, messages, letters, greeting cards, invitations, posters, notices, brochures and advertisements. Short written speeches, procedural texts, factual recounts such as news reports, reports of procedures and reports of phenomena observed. Teachers further mentioned content like information texts such as texts for other subjects, informative texts, books or story reviews. Teachers also mentioned visual literacy texts such as tables, charts, mind maps, diagrams, drawings and graphs.

6.12 What do you understand by language structures?

Teachers mentioned content such as nouns, determiners, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, connecting words, tenses, modals, sentence structures, punctuations, vocabulary development, spelling and spelling rules.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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.

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 opinions on professional development programmes.

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