

Teachers' Conceptions of the Curriculum Review Process

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this paper is to explore and describe teachers' conceptions of curriculum review within the context of educational change in South Africa. Teachers are critical change agents in the curriculum review process as they are the curriculum implementers. Accordingly, their conceptions about curriculum will determine the success or failure of any curriculum review. This study investigated what these conceptions are and how they may possibly influence curriculum implementation in the future. The study employs a qualitative design using interviews, for which ten teachers were purposefully selected. The study revealed that teachers are weary of educational review and there was confusion and uncertainty about the anticipated review and its purpose. It was also unclear what the review seeks to achieve, particularly as the teachers seek to reconcile what they know with the new knowledge they receive and their teaching contexts. The findings also showed that curriculum review remains a foreign concept for most of the teachers as well as presenting challenges to their existing conceptions and beliefs about curriculum review practices. The study emphasised that teacher support remains the cornerstone of the success of every curriculum innovation. Recommendations are formulated to support teachers to implement the curriculum successfully.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum review is a vital element in the improvement of educational quality. Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the curriculum has undergone profound changes in an attempt to transform the schooling system. The Department of Education (DoE 2001) indicates that educational review has been a central part of the country's reconstruction and development project.

It should be noted that the South African education sector has experienced multiple curriculum reviews since 1994, as the school curriculum needed to be revised to reflect the new democratic values and principles contained in the Constitution of South Africa (DoE 2008). The first version of the new curriculum for the General Education and Training (GET) band, known as Curriculum 2005 (C2005), was introduced into the Foundation Phase in 1997. The introduction of the new curriculum was intended to overcome the curricular divisions of the past (DoE 2011). While there was much to commend in the curriculum, the concerns of the teachers led to a review of C2005 in 1999. This review provided the basis for the development of the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) for GET (Grades R–9) and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Grades 10 to 12. Eventually, ongoing implementation challenges resulted in another review in 2009, which led

to the amendment of the NCS. Subsequently, a single comprehensive document known as the National Curriculum Statement Grades R–12 was developed. These amendments came into effect in the Foundation Phase in January 2012.

The National Curriculum Statement Grades R–12 replaces the old subject statements, learning programme guidelines and subject assessment guidelines in Grade R–12 with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), national policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements and national protocol for assessment in Grades R to 12. In 2010, the Minister of Education stated that outcomes-based education (OBE) would not be completely scrapped, but would be modified to improve the performance of learners (DoE 2010).

Consequently, the changes to the curriculum necessitated a probe into teachers' conceptions and beliefs about curriculum review. The research question identified for this study is: Do teachers understand the implication of curriculum review for teaching and learning? It should be pointed out that teachers' conceptions of the curriculum review profoundly influence their day-to-day practice; therefore, their educational ideology regarding educational review needs to be unpacked. Fullan (1991) indicates that teachers are the principal agents in curriculum review. As a result they have to be the main source of analysis and evidence when a new curricu-

lum is introduced. Teachers' views on curriculum innovation and the curriculum implementation process are imperative in ensuring the success of a curriculum is successful. One could argue that teachers' beliefs and conceptions shape and strengthen the curriculum development process in a country.

The teachers' role in curriculum implementation cannot be overemphasised. The DoE (2009) indicates that the implementation of any curriculum is dependent on the teachers who implement it. How teachers make sense of the curriculum; what they oppose and what they regard as helpful, can make a difference. It is therefore imperative that teachers' conceptions and beliefs about curriculum review be investigated, as these will determine their acceptance or rejection of such revision.

Smit (2001) maintains that teachers interpret policy change on the basis of their personal and subjective frame of reference. This is further emphasised by Fullan (1991 in Wedell 2009), who agrees that the success of any educational review depends on what teachers do and think. He adds that practices and ideas about education that are familiar to the people who will be affected by a change need to be considered. The DoE (2009) reiterates that teachers hold certain understandings about the curriculum and its implementation that are not intended by the policy. It is therefore important to bear in mind the fact that teachers' views and beliefs might not be in line with the educational policy. This can result in multiple interpretations, which may occur during the implementation stage of curriculum reviews. Pudi (2006) contends that there is a fundamental problem emanating from teachers' understanding of the way educational transformation unfolds. For example, he indicates that teachers regard the RNCS as a replacement for the C2005 and the NCS as the replacement for the C2005, and not as a means of upgrading it. This shows that there may be disparity between the intended curriculum and the curriculum in practice.

Research was done on educational change by various researchers (Fullan 1991; Hargreaves et al. 1998; Smit 2001; Jansen and Christie 1999; Swanepoel and Booyse 2006; Fullan 2007). According to research done by Swanepoel and Booyse (2006), the implementation of educational review has frequently failed as a result of improper planning by change innovators. These authors add that, in the past, teachers did not

associate themselves with the changes that were effected in the curriculum, as they did not believe that these changes would improve their teaching and the learners' learning.

Research has also been carried out on implementation problems in South Africa and the way in which implementation could be made more efficient (Smit 2001; Chisholm 2003; Pudi 2006). Implementation problems, such as multiple interpretations of the curriculum and workload, are among the challenge that teachers face in the implementation of any new curriculum. However, little research has been conducted on teachers' conceptions of and beliefs about curriculum review. The researcher believes that identifying teachers' existing practices and beliefs could be a starting point for discussing new practices. When you understand your own practice it is easier to adapt or change, as you are able to compare it with new practice. This study argues that a failure to acknowledge teachers' conceptions of curriculum review exacerbates the implementation problems the South Africa faces.

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the experiential theory propounded by Kolb (1984). He defines experiential theory as "a holistic perspective that combines experience, perception, cognition and behaviour". The experiential theory holds the assumption that people learn better when they are presented with sound logical theories to consider and are provided with "hands-on" experience. Teachers need to understand the implications of the review for their practice and be given a chance to explore the new methods that they will need to implement in their classrooms. When they are convinced that those methods are better than those they have used before, they will embrace them.

Conceptions mean different things to different researchers. Consequently, a few definitions of the term *conception* will be discussed. Kelly (1991) defines a conception as "a mental construct or representation of reality". Thompson (1992) refers to conceptions as "mental structures that encompass beliefs, concepts, meanings, propositions, mental images and other terms". Accordingly, the terms *beliefs*, *opinions* and *conceptions* will be used interchangeably in this paper. This paper adopts Pratt's (1992) definition of conceptions which explains the

term as the specific meanings attached to phenomena which mediate our response to situations involving these phenomena. This suggests that teachers have attached specific meanings to teaching, their role and how learners learn that will mediate their view of curriculum review. This understanding of the terms *conception* is important because it captures teachers' ideology in terms of curriculum review.

Teachers' educational ideology as regards curriculum review plays an important role in ensuring that the anticipated reviews are carried out successfully. Educational ideology is defined by Hoadley and Jansen (2010) as a system of beliefs that gives direction to the educational policies and activities of those who hold those beliefs. They maintain that people's educational ideology directs the way they act in educational contexts. This is emphasised by Stein et al. (2007), who state that teachers' views and beliefs have a powerful impact on the way they teach. Accordingly, their beliefs will influence the way they react to curriculum review processes.

Hoadley and Jansen (2010) argue that educational ideologies are important because, in deciding on what makes up the curriculum, choices have to be made and it is on the basis of a particular ideology that the choice of what to include in and what to exclude from the curriculum is made. Therefore, in terms of curriculum review, teachers' educational ideology needs to be challenged before any positive view of such a review can be expected.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the purpose of this paper a qualitative approach was used. Qualitative research is concerned with the participants' perspectives: that is, how they understand the social world and what meaning it has for those that are under study (Yates 2004). This view is emphasised by Schumacher and McMillan (2001), who maintain that a qualitative methodology presents data as a narration using words that help in the understanding of the phenomena from the participants' perspective.

Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to form a detailed picture of participants'

beliefs and conceptions about the curriculum review process. A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to follow up particularly interesting avenues that emerge in the interview (De Vos et al. 2011). An interview schedule was drawn up so as to avoid the omission of important information during the interview.

Sampling

Participants for this inquiry were identified from intermediate and senior phase schools in the Brits district of the North West province. Ten teachers were purposefully selected on the basis of the number of years they had been in the profession, with teachers who had been in the profession for ten years or longer being selected. The researcher believes that by virtue of being in the profession for a long time they will be able to provide information that will be useful to the study. To ensure representation, five teachers were selected from rural schools and five teachers were selected from urban schools.

Data Analysis

Verbatim transcriptions of the recordings were done and subsequently themes were identified. Data collection and analysis were done continuously in order to build a coherent interpretation of the data. According to De Vos et al. (2011), continuous analysis gives the researcher the opportunity to check the data, as well as identify the emerging trends and the ideas that need to be followed up.

Ethical Considerations

All participants signed the consent form and were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time; hence participation was voluntary. In addition, permission to visit the schools was sought from the District Office. Participants were also given the opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretations and contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study (this is referred to as "member checking"). According to Schumacher and McMillan (2001), member checking refers to providing participants with feedback on the preliminary findings and interpretations and securing participants' reactions to it. This was done in order to share the emerging themes with the

participants and to ask for their comments on whether the themes captured their beliefs and conceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four main themes emerged from the study, namely, teachers' conceptions of the curriculum review process; teachers' beliefs about learners' learning; teachers' roles in the classroom; and the support needed to change teachers' classrooms practices.

Teachers' Conceptions and Beliefs about the Curriculum Review Process

Teachers' understandings of the implications of the revised curriculum are crucial, as these will be translated in their teaching. Wedell (2009) argues that if policy makers ignore existing local practices and beliefs when deciding on the content of curricula and the process of change, it immediately makes it very unlikely that the change will ever reach the institutionalised stage of becoming an accepted and normal aspect of most classrooms. Vandeyar and Killen (2007) reiterate that any effort to change teachers' pedagogical practice, whether by mandate or through professional development activities, may be doomed to fail, unless their conceptions are acknowledged, challenged and eventually changed. Teachers were asked about their conceptions of and beliefs about the curriculum review process. The following quotes capture the views of one of the participants:

It is a good thing; let's just hope it will last. Every time it's a change; every time it's training on new material and a new curriculum. It is also extra work for us.

How far can one go when one has so little time to learn new things? I think the curriculum is changing for the third time now – it's too much.

Curriculum has been reviewed several times. I am not sure if this change will last. This is very confusing to us as teachers, we keep learning new things.

The results of the investigation indicate that teachers experienced a feeling of fatigue and disenchantment with the change processes. They felt that curriculum review has been done repeatedly and this could result in confusion among teachers. It is important to note that

teachers' conceptions will influence their judgement, which will in turn affect their teaching.

Teachers' conceptions are shaped by their experiences. The following quote illustrates that some teachers view curriculum review negatively because the changes that were brought about by the review do not work for them. Here are some of the teachers' comments:

I do not like these changes because they do not work for me. There are no nice materials, so I usually stick to the old methods and do what I have been doing and neglect the LO and AS that I do not understand.

I have been teaching for the past ten years, so I believe I know what needs to be done in the classroom. The methods that they are introducing do not work in our school because of large number of learners. I guess I must just do what I believe will work for me and my learners

These changes are confusing, I do not like them think I will continue to do what i have been doing. Who knows tomorrow they might bring new things. So i will do what i have been doing, my learners are performing well.

According to Devlin (2006), the conceptions teachers hold influence their judgements, which in turn affect their classroom behaviour. Jacobs et al. (2011) are in agreement, stating that teachers' knowledge informs their actions when they want to implement the curriculum and when they actually implement their planning. In addition, the above responses indicate that it is business as usual despite the changes that are advocated by the DoE. Spreen and Vally (2010) emphasise that teachers still turn to their old methods of teaching and behaviour. One needs to add here that this is a disaster for learners, as teachers need to run with curriculum developments that are aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Group work as one method we are supposed to use is good, but in my circumstances, I have large numbers of learners, how can I do group work, I don't even have space for that kind of activity

I understand we have to involve learners, but it is not always easy, as they say easier said than done. Anyway I use the methods that I have been using and my learners are performing well.

The above quotes suggest that teachers will teach the way they were taught unless their embedded assumptions about education are challenged through practical experience. Spreen and

Vally (2010) argue that teachers still turn to authoritarian teaching and even corporal punishment despite the call from the Department of Education (DoE) for teachers to refrain from it. They add that, for any curriculum review to achieve its intended outcomes, teachers' conceptions and assumptions about education and teaching must be confronted. Jacobs et al. (2011) suggest that for teachers to implement the curriculum effectively and to work towards realising the expected outcomes, their knowledge, skills and views need to be addressed in pre-service and in-service programmes. In order for training to be effective and relevant it needs to take teachers' views into account.

Teachers' Beliefs About Learners' Learning

The study revealed that teachers hold different conceptions of and beliefs about learners' learning and this has a direct impact on the teaching and learning process. Here are some of their comments on learners' learning:

As a teacher, I have been in the classroom for some time and I think they learned better when I gave them notes.

Learners must discover things on their own, do research and not depend on the teacher at all times.

Jacobs et al. (2011) argue that learning in the classroom depends entirely on the teachers' personal theoretical frameworks of what teaching is about and how human beings learn. Spreen and Vally (2010) maintain that teachers' embedded assumptions about teaching must be confronted in order for any curriculum review to achieve its intended outcomes. One could argue that any form of training provided by the department to the teachers in order to introduce them to changes in the curriculum, must consider the teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching. In view of this, these beliefs must form the basis of every professional development. If they believe that new methods or knowledge will not improve practice, they will use what has worked for them in the past. As Vandeyar and Killen (2007) argue, any effort to change teachers' pedagogical practice needs to acknowledge their conceptions.

Teachers' Roles in the Classroom

According to Jacobs et al. (2011), the classroom teaching-learning relationship is by its

very nature dynamic rather than static and predictable. The teaching and learning process will unfold differently in different circumstances and teachers' roles will change accordingly. Here are some of the teachers' comments:

Teachers should stand in front of the class, teaching and explaining concepts. One can make it interesting by using a lot of visual materials and resources. Teachers must have control of their classes; explain concepts and so forth to learners. They must know their subject.

Teachers must facilitate learning by organising learners in small groups; give learners the chance to learn from each other.

I like group work and I believe it assist learners to work together and help each other learn. It is a good approach to teaching, teachers should not be seen as "know all", and learners must be given a chance to participate in their own learning.

The responses show that teachers have conflicting beliefs about their roles in the classroom. Some teachers believe that the teacher is a "know-all" and he/she must explain concepts to learners. It should be noted that this view treats learners as empty vessels waiting to be filled by the teacher. Teachers that hold this view believe that the teacher should occupy a central position in the teaching and learning process. It should be noted that this position is not in line with the NCS which emphasises learner-centeredness.

By contrast, some teachers believe that they should act as learning facilitators and learners should be allowed to learn and discover on their own. This facilitator role of the teacher is emphasised by Conley et al. (2010), who state that instead of merely delivering content in a transmission style, the teacher is responsible for designing learning tasks that challenge, stimulate and motivate learners to think critically about their work.

It is also evident from the results that teachers believe in group work. Conley et al. (2010) maintain that allowing learners to work in small groups can be highly effective. They maintain that, in small groups, learners can share their opinions and develop outcomes such as communication skills and respect for other peoples' viewpoints. When learners work together they can share ideas and learn from each other and collaboration can enhance their academic achievement. Killen (2007) contends that group work is based on the belief that learners can

achieve more by working collaborately than working alone or by passively receiving information. Therefore, the teacher needs to ensure that the learning environment is conducive for learner interaction in groups so as to enable them to reach the desired goal.

Support

Preparation for curriculum implementation long before the actual implementation will ensure the success of the process. The following utterances capture teachers' views of support:

Subject advisors must demonstrate what they are saying; there is no use just to talk without doing in the classroom.

If subject advisors can give us practical examples during training, that could solve the problem, but they do not do that. I am not sure if they really understand what they are doing

Thorough training must be provided over a period of time – we can't be expected to learn so much over a short period of time.

The above responses indicate a feeling of inadequacy on the part of teachers to handle new information and therefore they need more training. Training remains the most viable option for informing teachers of the developments in the curriculum. Jacobs et al. (2011) maintain that curriculum implementers need to be prepared for and supported in the successful execution of their task. They add that it would be unfair to expect teachers to implement a written curriculum successfully if they had not been properly prepared to do so.

In addition, teachers felt that subject advisors should give them practical applications of the new knowledge. Practical demonstrations could be done through follow-up visits from subject advisors in schools to assist teachers. Carl (2009) reiterates that teachers cannot be expected to implement a radically new school curriculum if they are not properly trained in the new methodologies and the use of the new materials. Subject advisors need to act as intermediaries between curriculum policy and implementation in the classroom. However, a study conducted by the DoE (2009) indicated that many subject advisors do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to offer teachers the support they require for improving learner performance. The trainers need to be properly trained to avoid misinformation and misinterpretation of the policy documents by teachers.

Trainers need to appreciate what I know; they should not always bring new information. I feel it's overwhelming.

Teachers felt that there should be a balance of prior knowledge and new information when changes are introduced. This suggests that what they already know should be acknowledged. The study conducted by the DoE (2009) on the challenges of curriculum implementation indicated that teacher development training did not provide the support needed by teachers. This was as a result of the fact that what teachers already know is not taken into account when training programmes are designed. Teachers should not be treated as a tabula rasa; they too can contribute to the building of knowledge and suggest ways to implement a curriculum effectively.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum review is still a thorny issue, regardless of the various attempts the DoE has made to ensure that the implementation process runs smoothly. This study advocates that ideological change should take place on the part of the teachers in order for a curriculum review process to be successful. Teachers will only work on what benefits them and will ignore what they do not know. Teachers need to test new knowledge, accept it and view it as important and relevant for them. The study revealed that teachers are weary of change. This could be attributed to the fact that teachers view curriculum review as something that is imposed on them. Consequently, teachers need to understand the rationale for change and to view themselves as part of that change.

RECOMENDATIONS

Despite criticism of teacher training workshops, they are the only way that teachers can be capacitated in new developments in the education sector. Therefore, teacher support should come in the form of in-service training (INSET) by the provincial department of education. Accordingly, the provincial education department should arrange workshops on the interpretation and implementation of the new curriculum. It is worth mentioning here that there no amount of training will change teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning. Training should therefore aim at integrating their beliefs and concep-

tions to ensure that if there is any new knowledge to be learnt, teachers will construct it based on their tacit knowledge and it will make sense to them. Failure on the part of the DoE and curriculum planners to acknowledge teachers' conceptions of and beliefs about curriculum review will exacerbate the curriculum implementation problems that South Africa faces.

Furthermore, teachers' knowledge, skills and views of teaching and what learners need to learn should be addressed in both pre-service and in-service training programmes. Moreover, teachers should be empowered to execute altered practices. It should be noted here that teachers can be empowered if their conceptions and beliefs have been acknowledged.

In addition, contextual support is imperative in ensuring that the anticipated changes see the light of day. This may be possible of school management teams (SMTs) provide curriculum leadership by ensuring that teachers understand what is expected of them. Subject advisors can also play a supporting role by providing contextualised support in specific fields; they need to establish problem areas in curriculum review and address them.

Further, the provision of appropriate learning, teaching and support materials (LTSM) that are user friendly would help to facilitate successful implementation of the curriculum. Materials that communicate changes in the curriculum should be written in the easy language that would be accessible to all teachers.

Monitoring and support play an important role in ensuring that the anticipated curriculum is successfully implemented in the classrooms. The SMT and the subject advisors should monitor and provide consistent on-site support for teachers who struggle to implement the new curriculum. In this regard, monitoring involves taking the steps that are necessary to ensure that everything is on track, and that implementers understand what is expected of them and assist in ongoing decision making as regards the progress of the innovation. Curriculum innovations should be properly monitored so that information on the implementation progress can be collected. This information should be used to make decisions that will ensure the success of the implementation process.

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