

Dynamics in the Personal and Professional Development of Life-orientation Teachers in South Africa, Gauteng Province

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ABSTRACT Worldwide schools are confronted with a myriad of contextual challenges such as teenage pregnancy, HIV and AIDS, poverty, substance abuse, child headed households, suicide, to mention a few. South Africa, a country that is yet to win the war against poverty and underdevelopment is not an exception. Life Orientation (LO) as a subject presents schools in South Africa with opportunities to empower young people with knowledge and life skills to make meaningful choices. Whilst the Department of Basic Education in South Africa has developed a clearly set LO curriculum, which has well-defined outcomes; it is not clear whether their training as LO teachers adequately equips them to deal with these multiple social issues affecting learners. The focus of this phenomenological study was to explore the dynamics in the Personal and Professional Development (PPD) of LO teachers in South Africa, in the Gauteng Province. Data were collected through nine individual interviews, two focus group interviews and two collages by participants from 14 districts within the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). The findings suggested that the PPD of LO teachers was impeded by the fact that it did not address issues such as their personal experiences, their attitudes towards LO, the LO curriculum delivery, and the complex roles they play in dealing with challenging issues. Based on these findings recommendations are made on how to best address these dynamics through their PPD and how to best support LO teachers to ensure meaningful teaching of LO.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

One of the major changes in the transformation of the South African educational system was the introduction of LO as a key and compulsory learning area in 2002 in the General Phase (Grade R–9) with the Further Education and Training Phase (FET- Grade 10-12) being phased in from 2006. The transformation meant that schools had to be concerned with the development of the whole person, placing personal and individual needs in a social context to encourage the acceptance of diversity and to promote the quality of life for all (DoE 2003). It further meant an end to the sole emphasis on academic achievement and a need to locate the current setting of teacher professional development within the teaching profession. This in turn fostered commitment to the values and principles espoused in the SA Constitution (DoE 2003; Ferguson and Roux 2003). These changes and transitions have challenged teachers as they struggle to manage the ‘new work order’ of conflicting expectations from learners, parents, society and government; curriculum reforms and

the restructuring in schools. Goodson (2000) asserts that teachers are faced not only with coping with the internal context of their work, but that they also have to endure negative criticism and publicity from the outside. The traditional support, respect and trust accorded to the teaching profession by parents, the community and society at large has dissipated. This has resulted in “contested realities” of the meaning of professionalism in their daily work (Goodson 2000: 1).

The transformation and curriculum changes referred to above have not only brought about a breakthrough in the education system, but have also presented the system with new challenges, such as the present complexities in the teaching profession, the inadequate training and development of teachers (Toddun 2000), a lack of proper amenities and of sufficient human and physical resources (Mashimbye 2000; Rooth 2005), the lack of research in the field (Mda and Mothata 2000), and learners’, educators’ and school principals’ perceptions of this learning area and its constituents (Makhoba 1999). LO teachers were suddenly expected to teach a subject they

had never been trained for, bringing to the fore a variety of difficulties for them. These difficulties were related to their limited understanding of the LO curriculum and their limited knowledge of the specific tools and practice skills needed for meaningful LO teaching.

It is important to acknowledge that whilst South Africa is in its fourth term of democracy it still faces transformational challenges, since transformation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is influenced by history and context. In this regard, the reality of the poorly resourced schools, under-qualified teachers and uncoordinated teacher professional development initiatives (Sedibe 2011) in South Africa, accompanied by the instability in the curriculum (DoE 2009, 2011); poses implementation challenges for LO teachers. Furthermore, the authors of the article argue that the infusion of 'personal development' and 'social development' areas of the Life Orientation curriculum in the teaching of all subjects will continue to present delivery challenges. This will further deprive LO of its rightful status in the curriculum and deny LO teachers the opportunity to meaningfully teach LO.

Challenges Faced By LO Teachers

The curriculum in SA schools requires qualified, competent, dedicated and caring teachers who are able to fulfil the various roles outlined in the Norms and Standards for Educators (DoE 2000), however teachers are further faced with various contextual challenges such as teenage pregnancy, HIV and AIDS, poverty, substance abuse, child-headed households and suicide that they are not trained to address. Even though these challenges are generally supposed to be addressed by other trained professionals within the school system such as psychologists and social workers, the reality in many South African schools is that such services are not available to the majority of schools and communities. This lack of services therefore leads to these issues being deemed to be LO teachers' work, creating large expectations on the part of the school and community of LO teachers. Unfortunately, this often results in LO teachers experiencing work overload. So it will not be surprising that those LO teachers who generally have a heart and passion for building resilience in children would burn out (Kwo and Intrator 2004).

The other concern is whether they have been appropriately equipped both personally and professionally to take on the added responsibilities.

One could say that LO teaching is not for the faint-hearted. It requires risk taking and fighting for the ideals that one hopes will enhance education and bring about social, economic, political and emotional change in the future generation of learners. While it is valuable to understand the socio-political, philosophical and constitutional reasons for the decision to include LO in the school curriculum, it is also important to understand the perspectives of LO teachers and to explore their personal and professional development. Given the complex nature of the issues covered in LO, the researchers argue that if LO teachers are to be supported in their effort to implement the curriculum in ways that are aligned with the National Curriculum Statement, then their development will need to acknowledge and address their personal and professional stories. This will be achieved by allowing them a voice as people with biographies and changing life circumstances, and not merely as repositories of skills and techniques. Furthermore, such support would alleviate the challenges faced by teachers in terms of the location and frequency of workshops as against their scarce resources of time and money (Kriek and Grayson 2009). As a way of addressing the above mentioned concerns, this paper aims at exploring the dynamics entailed in the personal and professional development (PPD) of LO teachers in the Gauteng Province.

Theoretical Perspective

The researchers were guided by the Bio-Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 2005) in understanding the dynamics entailed in the PPD of LO teachers. The Bio-Ecological theory of development posits that "development is a joint function of the person and all levels of their environment" (Lewthwaite 2006: 3). At a personal level, biological, personal and psychological attributes influence how LO teachers view their professional knowledge of the LO curriculum, their LO teaching skills, and their interest and motivation, as these are likely to influence their curriculum delivery. At an environmental level, it is valuable to consider the physical (that is, time constraints, resource inadequacy, space,

facilities), social, and cultural (that is, friends, family, school, neighbourhood, religion, belief systems, where they live) features of the LO teachers' immediate settings. In understanding these levels, teacher development programmes must acknowledge that to successfully deliver programmes that will contribute meaningfully to curriculum delivery, teachers' individuality and their uniqueness in a multi-system context is crucial to their professional development. The most intriguing aspect of the discussion is the fact that the environment in which LO teachers operate has become more turbulent, forcing them to adapt and modify themselves in a variety of contexts in order to continue to survive and prosper. Therefore, their development has become an important weapon in their professional armoury (Hussey 1998). The Bio- Ecological theory of development posits that "development is a joint function of the person and all levels of their environment" (Lewthwaite 2006: 3). This suggests that the development of individual LO teachers can be better understood if the context in which it takes place is considered. It also implies that changes in their development may be possible when patterns of social and organisational relationships change or the physical environment changes (Visser 2007). Furthermore, external environmental influences, life events and experiences such as the birth of a child, studying, divorce, the death of a close relative, etc., and influences within the organism such as adulthood, menopause, severe illness, etc., alter the relation between the person and the environment, thus creating a dynamic that may initiate developmental changes (Bronfenbrenner 2005). In understanding these levels, teacher development programmes must acknowledge that to successfully deliver programmes that will contribute meaningfully to curriculum delivery, teachers' individuality and their uniqueness in a multi-system context is crucial to their professional development.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Researching such a fairly new and complex social phenomenon as the PPD of LO teachers requires a paradigm that gives an exploratory, descriptive and contextual view. The research

followed a qualitative-phenomenological research design (Babbie and Mouton 2007). The aim was to explore the dynamics entailed in their PPD and how their personal and professional experiences as LO teachers contribute to the meaningful teaching of LO. An important characteristic of phenomenological research is that it offers a descriptive, reflective and engaged mode of enquiry. The research process seeks to understand the structure of experienced reality (lived experiences of LO teachers) so that one can appreciate and be more sensitive to those involved in these experiences.

Participant Sampling

The researchers made use of the purposeful sampling procedure in order to obtain the participants who could provide rich data for the study (Merriam 2002; Creswell 2007). A total of 20 participants voluntarily took part in the study. The participants were drawn from a diverse group of Life Orientation teachers in the Gauteng Province who met the criteria set such as their willingness to participate, their ability to speak English, or any of a group of African languages (Setswana Sepedi, Sesotho, Zulu and Xhosa), currently teaching LO in a school or holding a senior position at the GDE. These requirements served as inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Data Collection

Data were obtained through multiple qualitative data collection methods such as individual interviews, focus group interviews and collages. The critical question guiding this study was, "As a Life Orientation teacher what are your personal and professional development experiences?" The first data set of individual interviews was conducted with nine participants who comprised of seven Life Orientation teachers and two provincial Life Orientation coordinators. As a method of data triangulation, two focus groups of nine members in total and two individual collage discussions were carried out respectively. The fact that data collection took place at different times, in different places and with different persons added rigour, breadth and depth to the dynamics involved in the PPD of LO teachers in the Gauteng Province (Babbie and Mouton 2007).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed through inductive content analysis that enabled recurring themes and patterns of meaning to emerge. The researchers conducted inductive content analysis since they did not have *a priori codes*. The individual interviews and the focus group interviews that were conducted were transcribed verbatim, with the help of an independent transcriber. They personally verified the transcripts by going through them several times to verify their credibility. Once familiar with the transcripts, Tesch's method of data analysis, which implies open, descriptive coding techniques, was then employed (Creswell 2009). This phenomenological analysis process led to the identification of mutually exclusive themes and categories. Each interview transcript from the individual interviews, focus group interviews and collages underwent a process of individual data analysis to arrive at common categories and themes.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to undertake this research was obtained from both the Gauteng Department of Education and the ethics committee of the university in which the authors are employed. The researchers ensured that the ethical responsibilities associated with dignity, rights, safety and well-being of the participants were considered. Permission was also obtained from the school principals and participating teachers. Issues concerning voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, non-maleficence and the benefit of the research to the participants were discussed in detail with the participants before participation so as to allow them the opportunity to grant informed consent. Participants were clearly made aware of their right to withdraw from this study at any time, without explanation or prejudice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis led to the identification of five themes epitomising the dynamics to be addressed in the PPD of LO teachers in Gauteng. The themes were LO teachers' personal life experiences, attitudes towards LO, the LO curriculum, and the complex roles of LO teachers, and dealing with challenging social issues. The themes will be discussed singly below.

LO Teachers' Personal Life Experiences

The findings of this study showed that one common denominator among the participants was that their personal experiences in life (whether positive or negative) had influenced their perceptions as well as their teaching of LO. The LO teachers' personal life experiences had been influenced by their personal biographies, their parenting experiences with their own children, and experiencing life-changing situations. Their political views had also changed their worldviews and made them passionate about LO. In reflecting on how their personal lives had influenced them in teaching LO the participants necessarily reflected on various issues in their lives. Although it might be viewed as negative, Conny's difficult childhood made her resilient and changed her view of the learners she comes across in LO on a daily basis. During the interview she stated her experience as follows:

I had a very hard upbringing, you know a single parent, and um, no contact with dad, and we were very poor, I think I can relate to a lot of what many of our children are going through now.

Contrary to Conny's story, Rebone was brought up within a healthy family environment where she had all the support she needed. For her, family values and the African collective nature of the family system in which she was brought up helped her to perceive LO in a positive way. Her experiences were recorded as:

I think I was brought up in a family where I didn't see my parents' fighting. That's number one... Whatever I needed, my father gave it to me and my mother and they were very supportive. We used to live in a family of about 10 people, even though we were the only 2 children. The rest were outsiders and my father would treat us normal, all of us. So maybe that is why I learned from there that you should help other people.

The above quote shows that the participant enjoyed social support which her parents and extended family could provide. This engendered positive values that one needs to be helpful and relates to LO in that LO teachers are the first line of social support in schools.

It was interesting for us to observe that both participants with opposite upbringing experiences used these as their stepping stones in engagement with learners. Generalising about find-

ings such as these, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004) states that teachers' conversations with learners and parents are shaped by their own autobiographical stories and by the broader cultural and historical narratives that inform their identities, their values, and their sense of place in the world. These replays of childhood experiences in families and in school are powerful forces in defining the quality and trajectory of teacher-learner dialogues in LO.

Going through critical personal incidents with far-reaching life-changing experiences invariably made an impact on how participants viewed LO. Some of the participants cited life experiences as influential of their attitudes. Ramabolo, for instance, had gone through a critical personal incident, which shaped his attitude. He stated his experience as follows:

Mam, you are right, there was a force that drove me to teach life orientation. Three years back, uh, my daughter was raped, at home, yes, at home, I come from Limpopo,... really it was difficult for me to cope, I thought maybe the issue of rape usually happens in Gauteng,... I realised, that okay right, we don't know the faces of those two boys who raped her, It's either maybe now she's HIV positive, no from then, that's why now, I've learned that okay now, I'm patient enough that I can deal with any problem, ...You know, those were the forces that drove me actually to find myself loving LO.

Stating her passion for LO, a focus group participant's (FG2P3) worldview emerged:

For me especially when we were talking about diversity, I spent some time working with missionaries, living in different houses, eating different foods and being exposed to different cultures and everything. For me, that life experience empowers you to be a more, I don't know, how you view life experiences and how they impact on you. Also being a single parent I can understand where some of the children come from. How they perceive themselves.

In her collage, Liz's personal experiences were reflected in quotes such as "against all odds", which she shares as a way she has been able to go through all the personal and professional challenges faced. She also expressed that all her life she has found herself "living for others", an experience that has led to self fulfilment in her current position at school as an LO Head of Department.

It is in the context of the above stories that the researchers concur with Syrjälä and Estola

(1999) as they argue that LO teachers cannot separate their personal from their professional selves as their work narrative identities are continuously reconstructed stories based on their life experiences. This can be viewed through what Bronfenbrenner (2005) in his Bio-Ecological theory refers to as the nested systems. Van Deventer (2008) further states that it is only through taking stock of the current state of affairs and being active advocates for the rightful place of LO in schools that the relevant stakeholders can drive the agenda to persuade policy makers of the long-term benefits of LO. These experiences were considered as important, as they posed new roles and responsibilities for LO teachers, thus "shaping their roles in new directions" (de Leon-Carillo 2007: 198). LO teachers' self images of themselves and their roles in society were formed through these experiences. These images of the self tended to determine how LO teachers conceptualised, experienced and behaved in their LO classes (de Leon-Carillo 2007) which can be viewed through what Bronfenbrenner (2005) in his Bio-Ecological theory refers to as the nested systems.

Attitudes towards LO

In seeking to understand their development, LO teachers' responses ranged from the most positive to the most negative attitudes, creating a divided reality of the challenges faced in the learning area. These attitudes were based not only on their professional development, but included their personal views, opinions, beliefs, thoughts and experiences of teaching LO. Sebonelo was of the opinion that LO was "a holistic learning area, where learners can learn a little bit of everything". It would also appear that LO teachers received both positive and negative feedbacks from learners and colleagues regarding their attitudes towards LO. For instance, focus group participant (FG2P1) expressed her experience of the attitude towards LO by learners as varied in saying "Some of the learners see it not as a serious subject and others do enjoy it". However, another focus group participant (FG2P4) experience of attitudes was negative as she thought that "the children are very negative towards life orientation because the other teachers have that perception that life orientation is just not really a subject". This was further evidenced by Ramabolo's opinion about the role of

principals' in the attitude changes towards LO. He stated that:

What normally happens, if I'm teaching life sciences, for whole year 3rd period and I need periods to make up the teaching time, they will add on with life orientation to make up for it. So it is now regarded as an add-on learning area and not as a stand-alone learning area.

His opinion was supported by other participants who felt that LO was still being undermined and not taken seriously because they argue that it is not examinable. This was evident in Rebhone's statement that:

It means that some people are still undermining life orientation they don't take it as seriously as it should be ... some teachers were complaining that in their schools the principals don't recognise life orientation. They say it is not examinable.

In agreement with the above statements, Celia's statements in the collage clearly portrayed that the attitude of teachers, parents and learners to LO was negative. The statement such as '*oh, you are only a LO teacher*' was a usual occurrence amongst colleagues. They saw it as a '*waste of time*' and '*unimportant*'. This for her was a challenge as she felt that as an LO teacher there is '*need to prove yourself that you are not dumb*' as they were seen as '*a man of no importance*'.

The above statements were in congruence with the research results by (Rooth 2005; Christiaans 2006) who argued that LO was often the last subject to be placed on the timetable, and was treated as an add-on to the other subjects. This substantiated the suspicion that at a majority of schools principals and teachers think that LO can be taught by any teacher, which would explain why there is a continuous migration of teachers in the learning area. This lack of accumulated work experience in the area is a clear indication of systemic attitudes towards the learning area (de Souza Barros and Elia 1998).

Some participants also felt there was an uneasy relationship between them and their colleagues. Whilst some colleagues were supportive and wanted to learn more about the subject, others viewed it as an unimportant subject. Due to their poor training or their lack of training in the learning area, LO teachers might be easily intimidated by their colleagues, who might believe that they don't know what they are doing. Their PPD is therefore imperative (Van Deventer 2008).

Whilst teachers are free to hold their own opinions of LO, it is the legal responsibility of the principals to change their negative attitudes towards LO and to ensure the proper implementation of the learning area, as they are the most influential people in the life of the school. Their leadership is a critical factor in the school's capacity to change (Newmann et al. 2001). This situation calls for a pressing need for the PPD of LO teachers in Gauteng (Bhana et al. 2006; Christiaans 2006; Prinsloo 2007).

LO Curriculum Delivery

Upon review of the interviews it became apparent that LO teachers were aware of what the LO curriculum consists of. Although they put this in different ways, participants were in agreement and understood the fundamental definition and scope of LO as set out in the policy document (DoE 2002: 4).

It was also interesting to observe how the two participants from the Department of Education quoted the meaning of LO directly from the policy document without giving their personal interpretation or understanding of it. In her collage Celia depicted her understanding of what LO consists of as '*life-skills*' that prepared learners for a '*holistic lifestyle*'. She further viewed it as a '*book of life that is important for LO teachers to know*'. In addition to its being a '*life skill*', Liziwe's collage depicted LO as a '*mind map of the different subsystems represented in the lives of learners*'. She further referred to it as a '*miracle in the mundane*' that gave learners '*balance*'.

However, it was interesting to note that participants could not really give details of what is currently included in their professional development as LO teachers. Most of them therefore preferred to talk about what they thought should be included rather than what is currently taking place in their PPD. When referring to what should be included in the future development as LO teachers, their responses were imprecise. Although the subject was introduced eight years ago, there were still visible challenges in the implementation of LO in many schools. These varied from internal struggles such as the lack of recognition by the principals, timetabling, constant LO teacher migration and lack of subject specialisation by LO teachers, to external reasons such as LO being in its infancy within the

NCS, with the result that teachers are still finding their feet in it. Alluding to internal struggles within schools, Puleng said:

You find that you go back to the schools, when you come back you are overwhelmed, you want to implement, but because of the resources and the red tape, you know, it's difficult, ... it's difficult and sometimes it can be overwhelming and discouraging.

Her statement was supported by Celia's collage where she alluded to LO teachers in schools being viewed as "a man of no importance" and LO being "disrespected" and LO teachers "silenced" by others in the school.

Although Lewthwaite (2006) contends that teachers are at the centre of any successful implementation effort as they are charged with the mandate to deliver curricula, a majority of the LO teachers reported that they did not have the qualifications in LO and thus felt incompetent to teach the subject. These findings corresponded with earlier research by Rooth (2005), Christiaans (2006), Prinsloo (2007) and Van Deventer (2008) which shows that the majority of LO teachers are not fully qualified to teach LO.

When referring to LO being its infancy and confronted by external implementation challenges within the NCS, Kate stated that:

Now with the education transformation and change being so radical, I think our curriculum is in its infancy. The baby is just out with the bathwater. We are crawling; we are unable to walk before we crawl. Let's put it this way. We have one of the most sophisticated curricula, we have a Rolls Royce. So if we have a Rolls Royce, if you ask people what is this part, what is that part, what is this, what is that, technically we understand it, it's a lot to come to terms with but let's say we've got the best, it's the ideal.

In support of Kate's statement and taking into consideration the facts that our education system is currently undergoing rapid transition and that LO is a newly introduced learning area, Rooth (2005), Prinsloo (2007) and Van Deventer (2009) contend that it would be unrealistic for us to expect to have thoroughly trained LO teachers. This essentially means that locating the level of qualifications and expertise for LO teachers is rather complex as being qualified as competent in this area has a different meaning, ranging from having attended a day's course on HIV and AIDS, to a two hour workshop, to being an

ex-Guidance teacher (Rooth 2005; Van Deventer 2009). To address their incompetency in the subject, LO teachers must recognise that their development is their responsibility and build a personal as well as a professional capacity for improvement. One critical dynamic that they will have to consider in their PPD is the expert skills in the presentation of all areas of LO (Magano 2011). Shumba et al. (2011: 1) succinctly captured the above arguments in saying "no matter how well intentioned the services are, they are as good as the people who implement them".

The Complex Roles of LO Teachers

One problem mentioned in numerous interviews was the multiple and complex roles played by LO teachers in attempting to cover the unique five-fold composition of the LO curriculum. Their roles ranged from that of teachers to advisors, counsellors, sports coach, advocates, and parents. All of these roles play an important function, yet they could easily be in conflict when faced with challenging contexts. Whilst on the one hand LO teachers have to be classroom managers who maintain discipline among learners, on the other hand they are expected to be counsellors who show compassion, empathy and care. Yet again, LO teachers are expected to be parents who love and who understand learners' challenges. The multiplicity of these roles was lucidly captured by Rebhone who viewed her role as that of:

A mother, a policewoman, a nurse. Anything you can name it.

Confirming the fact that although all teachers are expected to deal with the challenges learners bring to school (as stated in the Norms and Standards of Educators, DoE 2000), schools expect LO teachers in particular to handle such issues at school. Participant 3 in focus group 2 (FG2P3) said:

In our school, we have to deal with it. There are three of us and we have to make a plan, or work out a workshop.

This complexity was clearly captured in a study by Abdal-Haqq (1996) who contends that compared with other subject teachers, what LO teachers are expected to know and do has increased in amount and complexity. This complexity has demanded of them that they acquire new skills and knowledge, and has foregrounded the need for LO teachers to receive PPD as an

essential part of their work (Corcoran 1995). According to Mulholland and Wallace (1996) despite the provision of various development workshops for LO teachers both at school and district levels, there is a continued acknowledgement of the complex amalgam of factors impeding effective LO delivery in many educational jurisdictions. What makes the role of LO teachers more complex is their implicit function in the school. This is reflected in Lilly's statement:

I think, you know, we have a role indirectly with the children, but I think we have a bigger role in, in, allowing our views to permeate the whole staff...you have to be a disciplinarian but at the same time, you have to be open and flexible.

These challenges ranged in depth and complexity, as teachers found themselves not professionally equipped to handle issues such as pregnant teenagers, orphaned and poverty-stricken children, child-headed households, issues of sexual abuse, and having to counsel HIV-positive learners – all of this as part of their daily school activity (du Toit et al. 2007). Extrapolating from the responses of the LO teachers in the research, it is evident that schools and teachers are in transition as they struggle to manage the challenges of the complex “new work order” of conflicting expectations, curriculum reforms and restructuring, which results in contested realities of the meaning of professionalism confronting them in their daily work (Day et al. 2000: 1). In dealing with the above challenge, the researchers concur with Cooner and Tochtermann (2004) that unfortunately traditional teacher preparation programmes do not offer a great deal of support to professionals who encounter the kinds of problems that characterise the lives of today's children. This suggests that Higher Education Institutions could productively review their initial programmes of education and training for LO teachers. All of the participants in this study criticised the failure of the Department of Education to prepare them to deal with the complexities they come across on a daily basis.

During the interviews they spoke about this lack of preparation in three ways. Firstly, they claimed that their NCS training did not offer a conceptual framework for envisioning the crucial role they are currently expected to play in schools by helping children and their families to navigate life each day. This was noted in Martha's statement who said:

For me both RNCS and NCS addressed the “what to teach LO, but the training didn't go into the content and ‘how’ to address these challenging topics in the content with learners.

Secondly, they described having been exposed to training in which no central value was put on the crucial importance and complexity of the LO curriculum content. Alluding to this challenge, Sebonelo stated that:

You know what; the gap is in the content. When the training was done by national, there was no content given to teachers. So you were just given an assessment and they say what on earth is this, what are assessments about, how do I go about life orientation. They couldn't unpack it and couldn't find the content.

Lastly, they claimed that their training never gave them tools and techniques, the practical guidance that was helpful in addressing the daily challenges learners bring to school. Martha was all-embracing in talking of the challenges LO teachers face. Her opinion was:

I have observed challenges beginner teachers face in teaching LO topics such as sexuality, bullying, violence, acceptance, HIV/AIDS impact and parental death, dealing with children from child headed households and poverty

In her collage, Celia viewed the LO teachers' complex roles as the “hidden truths” and the “book of life”, whilst Liz referred to addressing the challenges as having to perform a “miracle in the mundane” and having to have a “heart of gold” to be able to fulfill these complex roles. Liziwe added:

I have had learners in my class that say to me, mam I'm pregnant what can I do... the youngest was thirteen.

This was corroborated by Puleng in saying:

Having to stomach all these pregnant girls because we do have pregnant learners, we do have mothers in our classes, you know

Looking at the above mentioned quotes, these LO teachers felt ill prepared to face what many considered as the “most vulnerable” part of their work - to equip learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society” (DoE 2002: 4).

Dealing with Challenging Social Issues

When referring to challenging social issues, one is not referring to a single issue but to a

broad range of different issues. Among the many issues contained in the many lists of social issues covered in the literature (Donald et al. 2005), LO teachers identified the social challenges they are faced with on a daily basis, such as poverty, HIV and AIDS, teenage pregnancy, rape, domestic violence, drug and substance abuse, child-headed households, lack of parental involvement and family disintegration. Martha was all-embracing in talking of the challenges LO teachers face. Her opinion was:

I have observed challenges beginner teachers face in teaching LO topics such as sexuality, bullying, violence, acceptance, HIV/AIDS impact and parental death, dealing with children from child headed households and poverty

This was corroborated by Liziwe who said:

The majority of teachers battle with sexual education, I think that's just the way we were brought up you know it's harsh... but at time the sexuality education is very embarrassing and they leave that for last.

Even though sexuality education and HIV education were initiated by the Department of Education to address the above issues, many LO teachers found it challenging and overwhelming to deal with these aspects of the curriculum content in class due to various reasons ranging from cultural and religious beliefs to lack of knowledge and training on how to address such issues in class.

Looking at the above list of the learners' challenges, which LO teachers have to address, it becomes obvious that the gender of the teacher is a matter of concern. Writing about gender distribution in the general South African teaching field, Armstrong (2009) found that 64% of the teaching workforce is female. The author argues that the shortage of male teachers is equivalent to a shortage of role models for adolescent boys in schools. LO has been seen as a predominantly feminine field due to the content of the learning area. The entire responsibility to address topics dealt with in LO such as social and emotional issues has been put upon female teachers. In agreement with Armstrong, Ngcobo (2008) and Van der Berg (2008) argue that fields such as LO are prone to be dominated by women because of the country's history, politics and culture, which bestowed the responsibility of dealing with HIV, sexuality and other sensitive topics upon female teachers.

Notwithstanding that the participants came from different contexts, it was obvious that all of the participants experienced similar contextual challenges. The researchers observed that in addition to the health issues stated above, contextual challenges were related to socio-economic issues and educational issues. One of the major socio-economic challenges reported by teachers was the lack of parental involvement in their children's education. Poor parental involvement was aptly captured by Lilly in the interview when she said:

I think the biggest concern is the, um, lack of parent involvement in children's lives, I think that so many parents are busy just surviving or have different careers or are so self-absorbed that the time factors that they give to the children is greatly reduced

The above theme is evident of the soaring need to firstly understand what Celia in her collage referred to as 'hidden truths' that LO teachers need to address as stated by the curriculum. Additionally, it is evident that there is a need for personal and professional development programmes of LO teachers that would enable them to understand content to meaningfully address the challenges they come across in their classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the complex nature of the issues covered in LO, the research has made us realise that in the current South African context, where the practice of psychology and the availability of psychologists and registered school counsellors is still a luxury afforded by only a minority, this role is filled by the LO teachers in most schools, who have not had even basic training in the field. LO teachers' roles are bound to be diverse, complex and yet individually rich and rewarding, and therefore cannot be delimited by a general curriculum.

Whilst the curriculum has its role as a guiding policy for classroom teaching, it is important to become conscious of the reality of LO as going far beyond the normal classroom curriculum based on textbooks. Human lives extend far beyond paper and policy, and unless LO teachers are empowered to voice their thoughts, feelings, ideas, values and beliefs, they will never be able to afford their learners to do so, thus the purpose of introducing LO will never be attained.

This role goes beyond the call of duty. It calls for the heart and soul of the teachers involved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research, the following are recommended:

In planning LO teachers' professional development programmes, it is imperative that the GDE should take into consideration their personal development needs such as their life experiences and their perceived attitudes towards life issues so as to address these contextual challenges, as against the generic programmes currently offered by the GDE. It is also recommended that the current service providers (both internal and external) responsible for the professional development of LO teachers address the teachers' curriculum needs. The service providers should ensure that their training addresses issues having to do with the LO teachers' content knowledge, and the implementation challenges they are currently facing to ensure meaningful teaching.

In helping LO teachers to manage their complex roles and to deal with the challenging social issues that are brought to them, collaborative set of relationships among different stakeholders such as social workers, psychologists, legal departments, etc. is recommended. This is intended to ensure the holistic development of the LO learner and to prevent compassion fatigue by LO teachers. The collaboration should be able to offer support and intervention programmes to LO teachers dealing with matters beyond their scope of practice. This could be implemented through fostering the establishment of networks or convening regular cluster meetings where various stakeholders could be invited to address LO teachers about the challenges they are currently facing in their particular contexts.

Members of the school management team as leaders should be actively involved in the LO programme through ensuring that LO teachers hold monthly departmental development talks and seminars. During these sessions, teachers of other subjects, parents and community members can be invited to participate, so that they begin to understand the role of LO in the school curriculum and kind of challenges LO teachers are faced with. This will also help the school management to understand the covert curricu-

lum issues that LO teachers deal with and thus ensure that the learning area receives its rightful status within the schools and the community at large.

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