

Curriculum Change Implementation: Do Secondary School Principals Manage the Process?

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ABSTRACT This article reports on selected findings of a bigger qualitative multi-site case study of purposely selected secondary schools in the Moretele Area Office, North West Province. The study examined the perceptions and experiences of School Management Teams (SMTs) regarding their role in managing the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) as curriculum change. Only findings regarding principals are discussed in this article. Data were collected through semi-structured focus-group interviews. Findings suggest that: 1) principals have a limited understanding of what comprises their role of managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change; and, 2) principals experience a plethora of impediments in managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change. The article outlines the implications of these findings on school effectiveness and makes recommendations for improving the management of curriculum change implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the education system is inevitable when nations undergo political changes (Guskey 2002; Villegas-Reimers 2003). Similarly, the 1994 political change in South Africa culminated in changes in the school curriculum. A new curriculum, Curriculum 2005 (hereafter C2005), was launched in 1997 (Department of Education 2001a). This required a shift in emphasis from content and rote learning, to learning outcomes and the learner (Department of Education, 2001b). The nationwide implementation of C2005 began in 1998 with the Grade 1 class. Within two years of its inception, C2005 was found to be difficult for schools to implement. Some of the problems noted in the Report of the Ministerial Committee on C2005 included, amongst others: its skewed structure and design; poor quality and quantity of learning support materials; shortages of personnel and resources; and, inadequate orientation, training and development of teachers (Chisholm 2000). To address these challenges the Revised National Curriculum Statement and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) were introduced in 2004 and 2006, respectively (Department of Basic Education 2009). These new curricular, however, failed to address the inherent limitations of C2005 and bring desired results. Schools continued to be dogged by problems like: high learners' failure rate (Kgosana 2006; Serrao and Breytenbach 2008); inadequate resources (Ndou 2008); and

confusion amongst teachers regarding what they are expected to do in classrooms due to poor training and development (Kgosana 2006; Serrao and Breytenbach 2008; Department of Basic Education 2009). Schools beset by these problems are unlikely to achieve national and provincial benchmarks for learner achievement and are considered to be dysfunctional. Given the negative implications of these problems on school processes, learner achievement and effective school management, it was considered pertinent to investigate the role of School Management Teams (SMTs) in managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change.

The aim of this study was to establish SMTs perceptions and experiences in managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change. This article is, however, restricted to the role of school principals and it focuses on the following research questions:

- What comprises the principals' understanding of their role of managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change?
- What are the experiences of principals in managing the implementation of the NCS?

Literature Review

The centrality of principals in managing educational activities within schools is emphasised by several scholars (Briggs and Sommefeldt 2002; Botha 2004; Van Deventer and Kruger

2008). This includes facilitating curriculum implementation and associated reforms and instructional supervision which is considered their most important managerial function (Smit and Cronjé 1999; Van Deventer and Kruger 2008). The next section outlines what literature suggests as the principal's core tasks in managing the implementation of curriculum change.

Creating a Favourable Educational Environment

The successful implementation of a new curriculum depends on the school environment within which it is to be implemented. Ideally, such an environment should be characterised by goal focus, synergised communication, decentralised power, effective utilisation of resources, cohesiveness, adaptation, and sound morale (Kruger 2002). Modification of the school climate to reflect these attributes is the responsibility of the principal (Department of Education 2000c; Briggs and Sommefeldt 2002; Van Deventer and Kruger 2008). To create such a climate, principals, should first embrace and show commitment to the curriculum change, and not perceive it as an imposition from above to which they merely comply. Principals should also involve teachers in decision-making processes and provide them with relevant and adequate resources. This can heighten and help sustain teacher morale and commitment to reforms (Mulkeen et al. 2005).

Planning for Curriculum Change Implementation

Planning is a management task aimed to ensure that the organisation's purpose, mission, goals, and strategies are clearly understood by all the parties involved (Smit and Cronjé 1999). When planning for the implementation of curriculum change, principals should establish and decide on the human, financial, and physical resources that are requisite for effectiveness (Ornstein and Hunkins 1998; Marsh and Willis 1995). This means that principals should contextualise the planning process and ensure that the anticipated activities help address the unique circumstances of their individual schools. If implementation plans do not match the specific context of schools, curricular reforms are most likely to fail. Jansen (1998) attributes the failure of C2005 to the absence of a detailed plan that addressed

the unique context of under-resourced schools, among other factors.

According to Ndou (2008), the introduction of a new school curriculum necessitates a fresh look at time management to improve the quality of curriculum change implementation. Schools are expected to finalise planning for each year during the third and fourth terms of the preceding year (Department of Education 2000b). Thus, learner admission, teachers' work allocation, and the procurement and allocation of learning-teaching resources must be completed before the end of each year so that teaching and learning can start on the first day of schooling in the following year. The latter is, however, conditional upon finalisation of the school timetable which must be overseen by the principal or an assigned delegate.

Organising Teaching Workloads and Suitable Resources

The implementation of plans and related strategies becomes impossible without organising (Van Deventer and Kruger 2008). Principals are responsible for organising school activities in order to align teaching and learning with the vision of the school (Department of Education 2000c). They have oversight on the equitable allocation and distribution of work among teachers and must ensure that teachers are allocated subjects and class grades in accordance with their qualifications and experience. Failure to match teachers' allocated work to their qualifications and experience tends to impact negatively on their confidence and morale, and also engenders resistance. Principals are also responsible for the identification, procurement and allocation of requisite resources. This includes determining the overall costs of implementing the new curriculum and ensuring that the envisaged activities are within the approved budget. The Department of Education (1997) stresses that principals should guide the school governing bodies to establish a budget dedicated solely to improving curriculum change implementation.

Since the Department of Education has devolved the responsibility to select a suitable textbook to schools (Ndou 2008), principals together with SMTs must guide and support teachers to choose appropriate curricular materials. Curricular objectives are not likely to be achieved where schools fail to organise relevant and ade-

quate resources. Hence, lack of resources was identified as one of the key challenges that compromised C2005 (Potenza and Manyokolo, cited in Ndou 2008).

Leading the Implementation of Curriculum Change

The implementation of a new curriculum must be supervised (Ornstein and Hunkins 1998). Without supervision teachers are likely to emphasise what they know best, without being overly concerned about the new curriculum (Glatthorn 1997). This implies that principals and SMTs must lead and guide teachers about the correct content and method of implementing the new curriculum in classrooms. Consistent monitoring is also necessary to help determine the extent to which the teaching methods and strategies are applied. Monitoring can be done through classroom observations, moderating tests and examinations and looking at learners' work (Department of Education 2000a). Classroom observations in this instance are not done for teacher appraisal purposes, but to engage teachers in instructional dialogue about classroom practices (Glanz 2006).

Providing On-going Professional Development

A system and its associated activities can only be implemented fruitfully by those with a working knowledge thereof. Teachers are, therefore, expected to be up-to-date with curriculum-related developments. They should also possess appropriate knowledge, skills and attitude to be positive forces of change or the envisaged change is likely to fizzle out (Ramproop 2004). Principals should ensure that all teachers in their schools are kept abreast of curricular developments (Brunton and Associates 2003). The professional development provided to teachers should be linked to classroom realities, and also be relevant to their professional needs and those of the school. Teachers are more likely to respond positively to change if they are given additional support (Van der Merwe 2002).

Evaluating Curriculum Change Implementation

Effective evaluation helps principals establish whether the activities proceeded as planned and should continue unchanged; or a deviation

has happened, necessitating the adjustment of plans; or the situation has changed completely, making the formulation of new plans necessary (Smit and Cronjé 1999; Van Deventer and Kruger 2008). With regard to the implementation of the NCS, principals were expected to adopt a continuous evaluation system in ascertaining the extent to which teaching and learning objectives were attained. This can enable them to identify challenges that may impede curriculum change implementation and provide suitable solutions. Similarly, principals can identify effective teaching practices that deserve to be lauded and sustained.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach which facilitates understanding phenomena from the respondents' perspectives (McMillan and Schumacher 2006; Conrad and Serlin 2006) and enables the exploration of certain subtleties about the policy implementation process (Marshall and Rossman 1999) through face-to-face interactions with key informants in their own habitats. Six secondary schools were purposively sampled from a total of 23 in Moretele Area Office. The basis of sampling was the average learner achievement in the 2008 Grade 12 examinations. These were the first examinations set according to the NCS standards and written in all public secondary schools nationally. The sample included two schools from the top, median and, low performing school categories, respectively. It was assumed the variance in learner achievement could be related to the way curriculum change implementation was managed in the sampled schools.

From each school respondents considered to be information-rich were selected purposively. These were the principal, by virtue of being head of the SMT; one Head of Department with the highest number of years in that rank; and, one Senior Teacher with the highest number of years teaching Grade 12 including teaching the grade in 2008. Only data from the homogenous focus group of principals is referred to in this article. Homogeneity was assumed to enhance participants' free expression and the flow of ideas. One sitting of the focus group was deemed adequate to yield multiple perspectives about the phenomenon (Conrad and Serlin 2006) and to use time and money more economically than individual interviews (Ary et al. 2006).

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data. Responses were tape-recorded and noted on paper with prior permission of the participants (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). Tape recording ensured completeness of the verbal interactions and provided material for reliability checks while the notes helped to reformulate questions and to record nonverbal communication. This helped reduce possible inaccurate and incomplete data (Maxwell 1996), and facilitated data analysis. Data were analysed through Tesch's open coding method. This approach involved an inductive process of examining, selecting, categorising, comparing, synthesising and interpreting data for plausible explanations to address the principal aim of the study (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). Permission to conduct the study was obtained from Moretele Area Office Manager. The respondents were notified of their voluntary participation in the study, and that they could withdraw if they found reason to do so. They were also guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The two major themes that emerged from data analysis, and which are described in detail below, are:

- Principals' limited understanding of their role of managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change; and,
- Barriers in managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change.

Theme 1: Principals' Limited Understanding of Their Role

The majority of respondents displayed a limited understanding of what comprises their role of managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change. This was inferred from their descriptions of how they carry out associated functions in their respective schools. Emergent sub-themes in this regard were: 1) creating a favourable learning and teaching environment; 2) school-area office role ambiguity; and, 3) inadequate evaluation and supervision.

Creating a Favourable Learning and Teaching Environment

Surveyed principals were unanimous that it is their responsibility to create an environment that is conducive to the implementation of cur-

riculum change. They, however, differed regarding associated processes like the formulation and implementation of school policies and ownership of the implementation process. Although the majority of respondents stressed the importance of formulating an enabling policy, they could not outline the possible content of such a policy or how corrective measures would be taken when deviations were noted. Some of the scanty responses were:

My role is to come up with systems that will be in place in managing this new curriculum; and:

The issue of policies is very much important in assisting one to manage the NCS.

Interview data suggests that the majority of principals do not share decision-making on curriculum change implementation with teachers. Rather, they consider it a function centralised in their offices or which may be delegated to the Heads of Departments. None of the respondents confirmed the existence of curriculum development committees in their schools as required by the Department of Education (2000a). Such blatant exclusion of teachers from democratic structures is likely to engender resistance from teachers who may feel marginalised. The implementation of a new curriculum policy requires principals to work in democratic and participatory ways with teachers to build relationships and ensure efficient and effective use of resources and services (Department of Education 2000c).

School-District Office Role Ambiguity

Although the majority of principals wish to monopolise decision-making on curriculum implementation, they do not regard managing the implementation process as their responsibility. Rather, they consider it to be the responsibility of subject advisers and other district office personnel. This is consistent with findings from earlier studies where supervision of curriculum implementation in developing countries was considered the responsibility of non-school-based education officials (Department of Basic Education 2009; Mulkeen et al. 2005). Consequently, the majority of principals emphasised ensuring compliance with the NCS assessment policy only with regard to Grade 12 classes due to external bureaucratic pressure. One principal commented:

A major weakness with this system is that more emphasis on monitoring of compliance to

NCS requirements is on the Grade 12s because of the external CASS moderations done on quarterly basis in the APO and Province. The Grades 10 and 11s are being neglected. We do not have time to check if teachers comply there.

Contrary to official requirements, none of the respondents considered it their role to facilitate school-based teacher development. Such capacity building initiatives were reportedly always organised externally. The majority of principals indicated that teachers who pursued further studies focused on diverse fields according to their career growth ambitions and not necessarily to enhance their professional skills and knowledge of their subject areas. Their studies were, therefore, not necessarily benefiting curriculum change implementation in schools.

Inadequate Evaluation and Supervision

The majority of respondents expressed the view that it was their responsibility to supervise and evaluate staff regarding the implementation of the NCS. Their notion of evaluation was, however, limited. They all considered learner performance as the ultimate tool of evaluating the successful implementation of the NCS. Some comments recorded in this regard include:

On monthly basis, as a staff, we analyse the performance of our learners. In this way, we can detect our strength and weakness and intervene where necessary; and,

We continuously evaluate the work of the learners in conjunction with what the teacher is doing. We can tell whether the teacher implements curriculum right or not right by learner performance.

Data suggests that the majority of respondents restrict teacher supervision to class visits and observations as tools for performance appraisal only, not indices for improving curriculum implementation. One principal remarked:

Generally it is difficult to conduct class visits except during IQMS. We don't have monitoring instruments for such. Besides, some HoDs and teachers see it as unnecessary duplication.

Without a clear understanding of their role of managing the implementation of curriculum change, principals are more likely to be ineffective in discharging broader instructional leadership responsibilities. In concurrence, Ornstein and Hunkins (1998) state that many educational changes have failed because those in charge of

implementation had little or distorted understanding of innovative programmes at hand. The limited understanding of their role is further exacerbated by the practical impediments principals encounter when managing the implementation of the NCS. These are outlined next.

Theme 2: Barriers in Managing the Implementation of the NCS as Curriculum Change

Data analysis evinces the following as barriers to the effective management of the implementation of the NCS in surveyed secondary schools: inadequate training of principals, and staff; lack of relevant resources; implementation of the teacher redeployment policy; unreasonable workload for principals; and lack of systemic support.

Inadequate Training of Principals, SMTs and Teachers

The majority of respondents indicated that they were inadequately trained to manage the implementation of the NCS. This is consistent with findings from related studies. Mulkeen et al. (2005) and Mestry and Grobler (2002) also found principals not to be properly trained for their assigned tasks. Chisholm (2000) attributes the incapacity of principals to their being marginalised during the initial training for C2005 hence they could not support teachers in the implementation process. An informative comment in this regard was:

I have never been trained on how to manage a curriculum. With the NCS, I only attended its advocacy campaign at the Area Project Office in 2007 and then some subject-based training workshops in 2008.

Such marginalisation and provision of limited training is against the view that all "curriculum stakeholders" should receive targeted training which includes clarity around roles (Chisholm 2000:16; Department of Basic Education 2009). It also results in principals being confused, frustrated and indecisive. The majority of respondents indicated that their management task was further compounded by the inadequate training of teachers for implementing the NCS which affected their morale and discipline. Two illustrative remarks in this regard were:

Given the fact that we are not trained you find it very difficult to manage educators on things that one does not know; and

Poor training makes teachers to bunk classes. They either go to a class late and leave early or just keep themselves busy with something other than teaching.

Lack of Relevant Resources

The majority of respondents cited lack of relevant resources as the main barrier to the effective implementation of the NCS. The main challenges in this regard were overcrowding; insufficient learning-teaching materials; and, staff shortages. It was reportedly common in the majority of surveyed schools to have overcrowded classrooms with three to four learners sharing a desk; absence of libraries and laboratories; multi-grade and out-of-field teaching. Such conditions made it difficult for teachers to observe OBE principles like giving learners individual attention, monitoring groups and conducting meaningful assessment. Practice-based subjects like Physical Sciences and Consumer Sciences were taught without the prescribed practical sessions or experiments. Such conditions are not conducive to teaching and learning as contemplated by OBE principles (Department of Education 2000a). Concurring, one principal commented:

What we do, putting two classes under one roof is disastrous to effective teaching and learning.

All respondents reported experiencing delayed delivery of textbooks supplied by the Department of Basic Education. In addition to quantity shortages, some textbooks were reportedly not covering all aspects of the prescribed syllabus. Such limitations are then addressed by photocopying sections from other books, sometimes with total disregard of copyright considerations. The failure of schools to acquire books that cover the syllabus comprehensively was attributed to inadequate training on the NCS. Teachers, reportedly prescribe books because of pressure from peers or book sellers, not their relevance or comprehensiveness.

Implementation of Teacher Redeployment Policy

In terms of the Education Labour Relations Council's Resolution 2 of 2003, commonly re-

ferred to as the redeployment policy, principals should oversee the process of transferring teachers between schools in accordance with their curricular needs and for redressing imbalances in the distribution of teaching posts. The majority of respondents maintained that the implementation of this process is often haphazard and not properly coordinated from the Area Office. It is reportedly fraught with delays in the physical relocation of teachers on the transfer list; demoralises affected teachers; leads to teacher shortages; and, culminates in instability in schools. One principal remarked thus:

Our timetable and work allocation have never been stable. This confuses our teachers and learners

The implementation of the redeployment policy creates conditions that militate against effective management of curriculum change implementation. This process often results in job insecurity, low morale, frustration, and disillusionment among teachers (Ramproop 2004; Motala and Pampallis 2002). It also causes the exodus of quality teachers from the education system (Jansen 2008), leaving inexperienced teachers to grapple with demands of the new curriculum.

Unreasonable Workload for Principals

Data analysis suggests that the majority of respondents consider their general administrative and teaching responsibilities as taking up much of their time and leaving little or no time for management tasks related to curriculum implementation. A notable comment made in this regard was:

I teach four classes. My attention is divided between managing and teaching the new curriculum. Whenever I have time, I am more worried about lagging behind in the class than management issues. This is because if my learners fail, my subordinates will take me for a non-performer.

In addition, the majority of respondents expressed a concern that "poorly coordinated" District and Area Office activities erode their time for managing the NCS implementation. An apt remark was:

We are called to meetings and workshops all the times. Sometimes the different divisions in the District or AO can call us to meetings at the same time.

This empirical revelation is consistent with literature findings. Caldwell (2002); and Budhal

(2000), cited in Botha (2004), found that the advent of the new curriculum made the workload of school principals more unmanageable leaving them no time for, and an understanding of, their instructional leadership role. Similarly, Jansen (1998) also warned that OBE would multiply the administrative burdens placed on teachers and SMTs.

Lack of District Office Support

The majority of respondents indicated that they do not get the needed support from the Area and District Offices regarding managing the implementation of the NCS. One participant lamented:

They [officials] don't visit schools. They always allege lack of transport, especially the subject advisory. Sometimes you can see two subject advisors in a year...

This is consistent with the observation of Mulkeen et al. (2005) that officials from district and area offices tend to "visit a school intermittently or not at all." It suggests principals get no systemic support and follow-through from education authorities with regard to managing curriculum change implementation (Wiles and Bondi 1989).

CONCLUSION

The study explored the perceptions and experiences of principals about their role of managing the implementation of the NCS as curriculum change. In spite of demonstrating a limited understanding of what their role entails, the majority of respondents identified barriers to the effective discharge of their responsibilities, both within and external to their schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made to improve the role of principals in managing curriculum change implementation:

Provide Relevant Intensive Training to Principals: Emphasis in the continuous professional development of principals should embrace management of the curriculum. Short programmes that address specific issues regarding curriculum change implementation in general and the NCS in particular, must be provided. As an incentive, these could be credit-bearing towards

formal qualifications and be offered in association with reputable Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Such training may include aspects like identification of relevant learning teaching materials and their procurement. The attendance of seminars and workshops on managing curriculum change implementation, and sharing best practices with peers from other provinces needs to be encouraged and maintained.

Careful Implementation of Teacher Redeployment Policy: The redeployment process needs to be properly coordinated and aligned to the school year such that it results in minimal disruptions. The redeployment of teachers on transfer lists should be finalised swiftly and they must commence duties in new schools at the beginning of the school year.

Review of Management Practices: Principals need to reconsider their management practices and prioritise managing the implementation of curriculum change over other routine administrative tasks. They can reduce their heavy workloads by delegating some of their routine administrative tasks to senior teachers and HODs. Those HODs assigned supervisory responsibilities should be consistently supported and monitored.

Retrain Relevant Area Office Personnel: The units responsible for continuous professional development must be trained on how to support principals in managing the implementation of the NCS. These units should be provided with necessary resources that can enable them to provide on-site support to schools.

In closing, it needs to be noted that the findings of the study are tentative due to some limitations of the study. A purposeful sample was used and the study was delimited to schools in a small area that is mainly rural. Findings could possibly have been different if the study was comparative and extended to other Area Offices with schools in urban areas. Nonetheless, the study provided findings that can serve as the basis for improving the management of curriculum change implementation in future.

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