



Enhancing Curriculum Implementation in Nkowankowa Circuit Secondary Schools: A Qualitative Analysis of Educators' Perceptions in Limpopo-South Africa

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Abstract

Curriculum implementation in South Africa, particularly in Limpopo Province has many challenges that ultimately affect the quality of education. This study sought to address educators' perceptions on curriculum implementation in Nkowankowa Circuit secondary schools. Qualitative methods were employed where 16 educators from all eight public schools in Nkowankowa Circuit were purposively sampled on the basis of knowledge and experience on curriculum issues. Face-to-face interviews were conducted to collect data on educator's perceptions on curriculum implementation. Data collected were analysed by means of thematic data analysis method. The study was conducted from an interpretivist point of view. Findings revealed that proper monitoring enforces effective curriculum implementation, which will improve academic performance. Provision of extra classes also boosts learners' academic performance. Lack of necessary resources seem to hamper effective implementation. Managing and monitoring curriculum implementation by School Management Teams (SMTs) ensures proper implementation and compliance to policy and improves academic performance. In conclusion, the researcher advanced recommendations that could be implemented at school and circuit level to assist improve implementation of curriculum which will ultimately uplift quality of education and academic performance in schools.

Keywords: *Academic Performance, Curriculum, Experiences, Monitoring, Perceptions*

A. Introduction

Many countries around the world including South Africa are continually revising their curricula to be responsive of the changing world. The South African education system has also experienced curriculum changes since the dawn of democracy. The quest for changing school curricula by the South African government was based on two main imperatives, namely, the scale of the change in the world and the demands of the 21st century, which require learners to be exposed to different and higher-level skills and knowledge than those previously offered by the South African curricula (Munje & Maarman, 2017). To date, we have seen the birth of Curriculum 2005 (C2005) in 1998 which focused on Outcomes Based Education (OBE), followed by the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) which ultimately gave birth to Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012. All these changes and reviews were necessary to align the South African education system with the constitutional mandate and to improve academic performance of learners, and to ensure that children can acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that

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are meaningful to their own lives, which will ultimately improve the quality of lives of South Africans.

Previous studies indicate that curriculum policy implementation tends to be hampered by inadequate training of educators, lack of physical and human resources and too much paperwork. Molapo and Pillay (2018) highlight that education in South Africa is politicised where curriculum implementation takes a back seat to institutional and individual political machinations. Other studies conducted in Hong Kong (Cheung & Wong, 2012) and Korea (Park & Sung, 2013) and in South Africa (Bantwini, 2010) indicate that educator workload has a significant impact in curriculum implementation. Limpopo Province is one of the rural provinces in South Africa characterised by insufficient physical resources, high educator workload and insufficient trained educators. Despite all these challenges faced by the province, other schools in Limpopo Province particularly in Nkowankowa Circuit succeed in implementing curriculum effectively and remains the top achieving schools beyond these challenges.

Sethusha (2015) alludes that learner performance in public examinations has become an issue of common interest to researchers all over the world. Munje and Maarman (2017) assert that the continuous under-performance of learners, particularly in previously disadvantaged schools, has prompted many more research studies investigating these existing patterns of poor performance. Many reasons of under-performance by schools have been advanced by literature. For instance, Bayat, Rena and Louw (2014) conclude that poor performance by schools is sophisticated and heterogeneous. It is evident that the government is continuously improving legislation, policies, procedures, strategies and allocating funds to improve the quality of education in South Africa. Kyei and Nemaorani (2014) accentuate that despite the attempts by South African government to make education accessible to all, there is still a high failure rate (over 30%) and low retention rate (44%) of high school students in South Africa, especially in Limpopo Province. This study will attempt to analyse educators' perceptions on curriculum implementation in Nkowankowa circuit secondary schools.

The researcher decided to undertake this study after realising that secondary schools in Nkowankowa Circuit of Limpopo Province, which are from the same community with almost similar contextual factors, perform differently academically, with underperforming, average performing and good performing schools from the same circuit. It is said that education is the most essential part of South Africa's national development as it transforms individuals (Bajinath 2018). Challenges in secondary school education system may lead to challenges in transitioning from secondary education to tertiary schooling system and the working environment (Mbandlwa 2020; Mlachita & Moeletsi 2019). Therefore, the researcher believes that secondary school education is very important for the future of South Africa because secondary education decides whether learners will further their studies for career world or not. Limpopo Province is not performing well in National Senior Certificate (NCS) in South Africa since 2018. Statistics indicate that in 2018, Limpopo Province registered a 69, 4% pass rate which ranked it the last out of nine provinces. The rationale of this study was to analyse educators' perceptions on curriculum implementation in Nkowankowa Circuit secondary schools in Limpopo Province.

There is a challenge of learner academic performance in South African public schools, especially in Limpopo Province. Currently, a large amount of the country's budget is assigned to education and numerous intervention strategies are implemented to improve the quality of academic performance in public schools. Despite the numerous intervention strategies, the country is still not experiencing satisfactory quality performance of learners in secondary schools, especially previously disadvantaged schools. Numerous studies relating to learners' academic performance (Farooq,

Chaudhry, Shafiq & Berhanu 2011; Ahmadi, Lukman & Ajibola, 2015; Kye & Nemaorani, 2014; Letsoalo, Maoto, Masha & Lesaona, 2017) have been conducted where various reasons for underperformance such as lack of support by stakeholders, inadequate infrastructure leading to overcrowding etc. have been advanced. Not much research on this problem has been conducted in Nkowankowa Circuit. Therefore, this problem needs to be researched to find out educators' perception on curriculum implementation in Nkowankowa Circuit secondary schools; seeing that Nkowankowa Circuit has high achieving, average achieving and under-achieving secondary schools, with almost similar physical and human resources. The main research question for this study is what are the educators' perceptions on curriculum implementation in Nkowankowa circuit secondary schools in Limpopo Province?

B. Literature Review

Over the years, scholars around the world have been trying to define curriculum. Fleisch, Gultig, Stephanie and Makaringe (2019) view curriculum as more than the government's document that profile subjects to be taught in schools which include how lessons learned within subjects contribute to the realisation of the broad educational goals. Du Preez and Simmonds (2014) concur that curriculum is an artefact to be implemented at classroom level and it is likened and identified with subjects and content appearing in written documents provided by schools and the government. In the same vein, Themane (2011) defines curriculum as a written document that systematically describes planned ventures such as goals, objectives content, learning activities, evaluation procedures and so forth. Curriculum must have objectives and outcomes, and it must be able to transform learners to participate in the broader society.

Lalor (2017) argues that curriculum is made up of many layers and can be described as such. Formal curriculum includes everything that learners at a particular grade must know and be able to do and value. Operational curriculum is seen as that formal curriculum that is rephrased into a plan of action. Taught curriculum is operational curriculum when it is delivered in the classroom. Assessed curriculum will include all that is contained and written by learners in formal assessments. Learned curriculum, according to Lalor (2017), will include what learners gain and grasp in them and walk away understanding as an outcome of their experiences through learning. It is noted that precise definition of what curriculum is has not yet been established and this indicates the dynamic nature of curriculum (Du Preez & Simmonds 2014). Countries around the world and South Africa in particular have proven the dynamism of curriculum by continuously changing and amending their curriculum and other education reforms so that it remains relevant, and to respond to the needs of the modern society. In the context of this study, the concept curriculum is defined as formal document that is produced by the government containing all the formal content knowledge relevant to specific age and grade, to be taught by teachers in classrooms on a formal basis and formal times allocated, and to be assessed formally and informally to ascertain whether the goals and objectives of the curriculum have been achieved. To the researcher, curriculum is all the formal content and skills that educators must teach and learners learn at a specific grade which include all tasks to be completed within a specific period and the administration of such. This content and skills become a policy and must be implemented as directed. A learner needs to master core curriculum for a certain grade before proceeding with core curriculum for the next grade. Hence, core curriculum is important because it lays out common intellectual foundation for the next content to be grasped.

C. Methods

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was used for this research study. A qualitative approach refers to an in-depth study using face-to-face or observation techniques to collect data from people in their natural setting (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). This study adopted a case study design. In a case study, researchers do an in-depth analysis of a case, often a programme, an activity or a process involving one or more individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study was a multiple case study because a number of different cases were combined in this single study

Population and Sampling

A population refers to a group of people or individuals as well as objects or items where participants or participants are taken for measurement (Okeke & Van Wyk, 2017). The population of this study were secondary schools in Nkowankowa Circuit of Mopani West District, Limpopo Province. Sampling is the process of selecting participants or a sample from a bigger group or a population, which will be used as a basis for predicting the study's outcome (Okeke & Van Wyk, 2017). Nkowankowa Circuit was purposefully sampled for this study. All eight secondary schools were studied. Purposive sampling technique was also used to sample participants, who were educators implementing curriculum policy at FET phase and SMT members. One educator and one SMT member per school were interviewed. The total number of participants in this study were 16.

Instrumentation and Data Collection Techniques

For this study, standardised open-ended interviews and discussions were used to collect data from educators. In a standardised open-ended interview, a set of open-ended questions are asked in a specific order and exactly as worded (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Accordingly, interviews enabled the researcher to understand the participants' experiences of curriculum implementation and its influence on learner academic performance. Official documents were studied. Official documents refer to anything written, recorded or photographed by the schools.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Qualitative data analysis is a process of organising data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among categories, then draw conclusions from the collected data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). In qualitative data analysis, the collected data is synthesised inductively to generate generalisation. In this study, interviews were recorded in audio tapes. The audio tapes were transcribed, then data were examined for key issues raised by participants in response to each topic raised. From the key issues, patterns were noted and data were categorised and discussed accordingly.

D. Findings and Discussion

Participants from six schools; school B, school C, school D, school E, school G and school H rated their school performance as fluctuating but above average while participants from school A and school F rated their performance as below average. This was also confirmed by looking at the documented previous years' NSC results for all the schools in the circuit. Participants from all good performing schools perceive their performance to be attributed to extra lessons that they offer to their learners outside the normal schools hours. Morning, afternoon and Saturday classes are compulsory to attend by all learners at their schools. Other

contributing factors were also mentioned by another participant. One participant from good performing school responded as follows:

Participant B1 said: "I think job done by educators and their time given to learners because, for example in our school, we have afternoon classes, we have morning classes..."

This was also reiterated by another participant who is a principal at the best performing school, when he said that learners are offered lessons even after formal school time. The participant said:

Participant D1: "Commitment of teachers...I always see them (teachers) remaining with children..."

Participants in the two underperforming schools, which is school A and school F, perceive their underperformance as being attributed by lack of parental support. When one participant was asked, the response was:

Participant A1 "Lack of participation by other stakeholders like for example, parents because in most cases when we invite parents, the turn up is very low... Education is a societal issue; it is not educators alone who must be actively involved but even parents are very important for them to assist..."

This was also indicated by another participant from another underperforming school by saying:

Participant F2 "... they (parents) don't follow their children's education even, even when we need support, we don't get the adequate support, mmm, lack of support."

However, the best performing school D, which is located in a village, indicated that their good performance is as a result of good parental support they receive as a school. One participant at this school indicated that:

Participant D2 "...most of our parents in our local are, they are very supportive...they always make sure that they are available..."

Another reason cited for by participants in the underperforming schools is lack of resources such as LTSM. This has an effect on how curriculum is implemented at their schools because learners are unable to continue reading on their own when they are at home. One participant responded as follows:

Participant A2 "...Infrastructure, eeh, not necessarily infrastructure I am talking about the things of textbook issues, unavailability of textbooks...subjects contributed unfairly to these learners because you find that they are only taught in class and they do not have apparatus to actually pursue their education when they are at home..."

Another participant from school F, another underperforming school indicated that lack of LTSM is also a challenge in their school. The response was:

Participant F2 "...we are running short of teaching aids, not enough LTSM or nothing at all in Maths and Physics..."

The good performing schools also mentioned inadequate LTSM in their schools. One participant said:

Participant H2 "...like the imbalance there in terms of materials, materials as in LTSM. You find that school I has more resources than school B in the same circuit...I feel that we must be level where we strike a balance in our schools in the circuit."

This was also again indicated by another participant at another good performing school. The response was:

Participant G2 "...the challenge is basically in form of...to be specific, like textbooks, LTSM yes..."

Although School F indicated lack of resources such as LTSM as one of the contributing factors for their underperformance, the participants at that school pointed out their major challenge as understaffing because of the process of restructuring and redeployment (R&R) which has an adverse effect on their school's curriculum implementation. When probed, one participant who is a principal responded as follows:

Participant F1 "... because of R & R ...we had excess educators that have been moved out of the school, then we remain being eight and the subjects that we are supposed to cater it was ten, so it means three educators were teaching two subjects in matric, which means they would not concentrate...even now it is worse we are seven..."

Understaffing was also confirmed by another participant at that underperforming school as a challenge. The participant said:

Participant F2 "...we are always understaffed although we are trying by all means to get funding..."

The theme, AP highlighted the fact that schools as organisations have different capacities which can be influenced by their own contextual factors in which schools find themselves. School A, B and D are from rural villages surrounding Nkowankowa Township, with school A and B located in the same village. However, school B and D are the best performing school in the circuit with school C in the township being the worst performing school.

It has come to light that these two underperforming schools have challenges that are unique to their environment, which other surrounding schools may not be experiencing to an extent they are experiencing it. Some of their challenges are similar to challenges in good performing schools. However, other schools are more capacitated to overcome such challenges effectively than the two underperforming schools. Rogan and Grayson's theory of curriculum implementation, as discussed earlier, highlighted that schools are not the same, and that any curriculum innovation or reform must consider the diversity of schools instead of neglecting existing diversity when complex and comprehensive system changes take place. Because of the schools' uniqueness, these underperforming schools experience implementation challenges and it is evident in their academic performance that they may not be ready to cope with these new reforms because other challenges need to be addressed and solved first for smooth implementation of the curriculum

Brief summary of findings from face-to-face interviews seeking to understand educators' perceptions on curriculum implementation in Nkowankowa Circuit secondary schools will be given. Data used for this study were gathered through face-to-face interviews conducted by the researcher at different schools. The interviews were recorded in audio tapes, then transcribed by the researcher. Audio and electronic copy of responses have been made. Face-to-face interviews were done when South Africa was on level one lockdown under strict COVID-19 measures. The

researcher noticed the willingness of participants to be part of the study. The researcher also noticed that participants understand the importance of good quality education of learners, they seem aware of what needs to be done to improve the status quo at their respective school to improve the circuit, district, province and South Africa's education. Although some of the working conditions still need intervention, it was clear that educators understand that they need to make the best out of challenging by having positive outlook of their contextual factors. Ultimately, thriving at work amidst challenges is a mental state which is very much related to employee attitudes, behaviour and performance (Yang & Li 2021).

The researcher also observed that good leadership qualities that foster good team spirit are key to the smooth running of schools. Muteswa (2016) affirms that good leaders with good leadership qualities ensure that their organisations have clear directions to be followed by employees so that the vision of the organisation will be attained. Most schools that are good performing in the circuit do so with minimal resources such as lack of classrooms and understaffing. However, the researcher could easily notice the orderly manner in which these schools are run the moment one enters the premises. Good leaders motivate and support their staff members and that boost the staff morale. Mughal (2019) asserts that good organisational support can ensure a positive significant impact on employee performance which will ultimately motivate them to push themselves to perform better. Happy staff members will always go to extra lengths to boost the academic performance of their learners and the school to build a good image of their schools.

The good performing schools mostly attribute their success to dedicated educators with some participants adding learner commitment. However, the underperforming schools attribute their failures to lack of commitment by learners. The researcher, being a teacher herself, believes that as educators we need to self-introspect, especially in worst case scenarios. Educators need to be honest with themselves by also looking deeply at how they implement the curriculum because there is always room for improvement. More importantly, educators also need to have the right frame of mind where their attitudes, values and beliefs are inclined towards betterment of learners' lives through provision of quality education.

The researcher also noticed the circuit manager's efforts to support all schools in the circuit, especially the secondary schools and that participants were aware and appreciate the support that they receive from their circuit manger. Forson, Ofosu-Dwamena, Opoku and Adjavon (2021) expound that motivation and support are vital for the success of organisations and fuel performance and lead to satisfied employees. It also came into light that the twinning of schools is done at a circuit level, with the circuit manager taking a lead on it. School holiday classes are also conducted at a circuit level for all learners at the eight public secondary schools. Moreover, this is an effort towards making sure that no school is left behind, but because there are different dynamics in each school; we find that other schools in the same circuit are best performing schools while other schools underperform.

E. Conclusion

The findings have been presented, analysed and discussed to understand educators' perceptions on curriculum implementation in Nkowankowa Circuit, Limpopo Province. Noted similarities and differences in the research findings were also briefly discussed. Educators realise that how they implement curriculum has an impact on academic performance and that schools are different. Therefore, more work need to be done by stakeholders to fine tune educators'

attitudes, beliefs and values towards effective curriculum implementation. The modern era in which schools find themselves calls for change on how things are done. Lack of resources, pandemics, child-headed families etc. are new realities where curriculum must be implemented in; so, educators should have a positive outlook within these new realities. This means their attitudes, beliefs and values should change with the changing times. It is important for school managers to seek out strategies and best approaches to teaching and learning in the modern era because educators are expected to implement curriculum effectively to improve academic performance of their learners and schools. Managers need to understand that some individual educators attitudes should be worked upon and that schools also cannot be at the same level of readiness to implement new reforms because of contextual factors that make their circumstances unique

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