

CHAPTER 9

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS, MAIN CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study has looked at how eight Swazi primary school teachers implemented the CA programme. In particular, it focussed on how they were able or unable to use assessment as a resource in devising teaching strategies that furthered and, where necessary, remedied the cognitive development of their learners. An expectation within the CA programme was that this ability would be a result of an inner-directed rather than other-directed professional development process initiated by themselves. However, the evidence presented indicates that they lacked the knowledge and skills to do this. The assessment tasks and strategies they used were aimed primarily at measuring the learners' familiarity with subject content. Teachers seemed unaware that they needed to interpret lesson aims, infer concepts from them and then decide on appropriate teaching and assessment strategies that could help them meet the requirements of these officially pre-determined aims. Also, learners' responses to given tasks were not used as a resource to encourage them to think more deeply and critically about what they were learning. Corrective action was not taken as a means to attend to individual learners' conceptual shortcomings. Teachers made no effort to identify the misconceptions that led to learners giving wrong answers. They were quick to provide correct answers for learners to copy into their books as substitutes for incorrect ones. In short, teachers failed to grasp the expanded professional role (Hoyle & John, 1995) expected of them by the CA programme.

The stance that teachers adopted towards official curriculum guidance documents, generally, made them treat suggestions as doctrine. They hardly reflected on what was given when faced with the opportunity of having to choose whether or not to use the assessment tasks and exercises in the guidance documents with which they had to work. Their attitude to these texts made working with the CA programme ineffective.

From the evidence, it is clear that they had no understanding of CA and could not develop it without a deliberate and focussed intervention process by policy mediators.

The evidence in this study highlighted the challenges of changing a work culture for Swazi primary school teachers. This, in the view of Pinar et al. (1995), requires a change of socialization, as it is not only a process that requires an ability to use procedures promoted by policy, but is one that should enable an understanding of how those procedures can facilitate learners' cognitive development and, in turn, teachers' reflective abilities and teaching strategy adaptation. For this study, the view implied that it was only when the teachers understood how the assessment exercises provided by the Curriculum Centre helped them fulfil the set aims of lessons that the behavioural assumptions underpinning the CA programme as a curriculum policy tool could be satisfied. However, the evidence shows that they were uncritical in their work and made no effort, in general, to reflect on the lesson structure or, in particular, assessment exercises given so as to determine their suitability to the lesson aims. Because of this, lessons and exercises could not be changed to ensure that learners were supported to fulfil the set aims by being engaged in processes that facilitated an understanding of why certain answers were deemed correct or incorrect. A more detailed account of these findings is provided in the next few pages.

Chapter 6 indicates the extent to which teachers did not consider it important to look critically at assessment tasks or exercises suggested by official documents, and establish whether they would or would not help facilitate meeting the set lesson aims. Even though many of these exercises were inappropriate to these aims, and could not help meet the goals of the CA programme, without exception, teachers who participated in the study unquestioningly used them in their lessons and seemed unaware that they were expected to determine their appropriateness to the aims of lessons. Without such consciousness, they saw no need for the professional agency required by the CA programme (Giddens, 1990). As a result, assessment, as illustrated in the chapter, could not function as an instrument to inform and contribute to the improvement of learning and teaching.

Teachers saw their role primarily as functionaries or implementers of what was suggested in the curriculum guides. Assessment exercises were used simply to ensure that learners could recognise correct answers from the subject content. The ability to recognise answers was used as an indicator of successful teaching, with teachers mistaking recognition for a realisation of concepts (Bernstein, 1990).

Chapter 7 provides evidence to illustrate the extent to which teachers' were unaware of the implications of the CA programme to their role. From the accounts they gave of their practices, it was possible to conclude that they did not realise that they were expected to be involved in a self-initiated professional development process that would enable them to further the learners' cognitive development. The narrow definition of their responsibility as CA practitioners prevented them from using assessment as research that could provide data on the basis of which strategies for facilitating learners' cognitive development could be devised continuously through the school year. Consequently, failure to use assessment in this manner hindered the professional development that the CA programme was intended for.

The workshop that was intended to help teachers implement the programme, concentrated on how classrooms could be organised to promote the ideals of CA and the design of different kinds of assessment items. Officials from the Curriculum Centre did not demonstrate how they could infer concepts from the lesson aims, or subject suggested exercises to critical scrutiny so as to understand how to teach and assess in a manner that would be deemed effective when judged against these aims and reasons for introducing the CA programme. There was an assumption that teachers knew what to do. However, evidence collected from their lessons indicated that they needed professional help in this regard. They had no grasp of the concept underpinning the programme, nor had they been socialized to think and behave in ways relevant to its expectations. They functioned on the basis of routine and common-sense, unaware that their strategies were bound to what Bernstein (1990) calls 'recognition rules'. Informed by this evidence, the argument in this chapter is that without such appropriate professional support, the ideals of the CA programme will remain political rhetoric that is not understood by teachers.

Chapter 8 gives an account of how the researcher prompted teachers to think more about the expectations of CA. It reports on an unplanned intervention that occurred as part of the field-work in this study. In this chapter, the researcher makes it clear that upon realising that teachers spoke the language of CA while, in practice, having no sense of what to put in place to improve learning and their own professional expertise, she felt a need for a dialogue with each one of them, in which she provided cues to initiate the beginnings of a process of thinking about the implications of CA for their existing classroom practices. The data that emerged from this deliberate intervention clarified the extent to which teachers lacked understanding of the reflective processes that the CA programme expected to be part of the teaching and learning occurring daily in their classrooms. They struggled to grasp what these expectations implied to the ways they had to teach, assess and deal with learners' responses. The chapter concludes by emphasising the need for a tightly structured professional support process that can continue the reflective process that has been started by this study and help teachers translate their understanding into effective teaching and assessment strategies.

9.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ANALYTICAL TOOLS USED IN CONDUCTING THE STUDY

It could have been possible to try and understand teachers' assessment practices in implementing CA only in terms of, for example, Ball's (1994; 2001) suggestion that practice in the classroom should be looked at in relation to the context in which it occurs. He considers teachers' work as enmeshed in a matrix of power relations that regulate and determine how, as agents, they make decisions about their work. However, even though this view was important in understanding why teachers worked the way they did, following it would have narrowed the focus of the study and essentialised the impact of structural factors on teachers' decisions and choices. It could have resulted in overlooking what, for example, Giddens (1990) considers to be an important influence on human action, namely, agency. His and other authors' views that have influenced the design of this study helped me to capture the

complexities embedded in the data collected when analyzing it.

Through Giddens' theory on the impact of social structures and agency on human action, teachers' practice could be read as a reflection of the nature and scope of the agency they exercised as professionals. As a conceptual lens, theory provided a broad foundation for the investigation that occurred, and encouraged depth and clarity in examining the complex factors that informed their choice of assessment strategies. Teachers' assessment practices could not be explained as influenced by organizational structures, and the extent to which they, as agents for CA, took advantage of the opportunity for professional judgment and decision-making that the programme afforded them. As a structural capacity-building tool (cf. Schneider & Ingram, 1997) CA had to enhance their professional knowledge and skill.

Schneider and Ingram's (1997) work on the importance of understanding the behavioural assumptions of policy tools if their goals are to be achieved, made it possible for teachers' assessment practices to be described as devoid of critique, and mainly depended on tradition or common-sense. The void prevented an understanding of the behaviour or actions that had to be taken for CA to be implemented successfully. On the basis of the distinction that Gramsci (1971) makes between 'common-sense' and 'good sense', it was possible to draw the conclusion that the former was responsible for the taken-for-granted positions teachers held towards the CA programme. In short, Gramsci argues that adopting a particular culture or theory means adopting both its ways of thinking and behaving, and results in good sense, albeit acting without reflection and on the basis of what is expected or routine was due to common-sense. Employing this view, it was thus possible to illustrate that teachers' beliefs and attitudes, developed and reinforced by their own schooling and initial teacher education, influenced them to take for granted that the ways in which they taught, assessed and engaged with learners' responses was without fault.

Observing teachers in action allowed for a systematic recording of their practice. Later on, during the interviews, the researcher was able to understand these practices from their perspective. Through dialogue it was possible to initiate the beginnings of

some form of understanding of what was needed on their part, for the CA principles to work successfully. Teachers who were barely aware of what they needed to do when working with CA began to realise the shortcomings in the original ways of thinking about it that they had taken for granted as relevant. Conducting research in a flexible manner availed them of an opportunity to reflect on the challenge they faced (cf. Gitlin et al., 1988). As a result, they could at the end identify and examine the circumstances that contributed to the way they worked, and grasp how this was partly a consequence of the education they received. They appreciated the problems associated with the assumptions they held with regard to what teaching involved and what assessing their learners had to entail. Even though the study did not embrace the concept of educative research in the sense forwarded by Lather (1986) and Gitlin (1990), it was an adaptation of what they refer to as developmental research, teachers were still enabled to effectively identify gaps and distortions in their understanding of CA and why they viewed the purpose of teaching and assessment as they did. Drawing on the suggestion of Gitlin and Russell (1990:187), that “for research to be authentic, the relationship between what is said and the person(s) doing the talking must be made apparent”, for this study the challenge was to preserve the voices of the teachers whilst subjecting them to an educational process. With the help of their model, my probing and prompting strategies could be adapted and reshaped to enable teachers to help me establish clearly the reasons why they were unable to implement the CA programme. I could deal with the ‘dilemma’ of straddling between research for its own sake and research for development. Through the probes and prompts I managed to push teachers to explain their practice in a manner that allowed them to talk about what they took for granted.

To acquire the expanded notion of professionalism (Hoyle & John, 1995) advocated by the CA programme, Slattery’s (1995) and Hargreaves’ (1995; 2003) concepts of an empowering curriculum, and Habermas’ (1984) work on critical or communicative rationality, enabled me to argue that teachers needed to have been exposed to a collaborative process aimed at developing their understanding of the programme through consensus reached by deliberation. The view convinced me that it was important for the study to reflect on and assess the nature of interaction processes that

teachers were involved in at the CA workshop, and that were part of the professional support they received to enable them to implement the CA programme. The analysis of the data collected from this workshop lent unwavering support to Habermas' argument that understanding is a prerequisite for following principles, and explanation that people achieve it if communication is rational and leads to consensus. The lack of critical engagement between officials and teachers about classroom organisation for CA, and emphasis on the mastery of the skills or procedures for developing assessment items, failed to produce rational discussions that could have enhanced teachers' understanding of the requirements of the CA programme.

The findings in the study provide confirmation of, amongst other arguments, Pinar et al.'s (1995) concept of curriculum understanding. They highlight that the effective implementation of any curriculum programme requires a mindset that provides the possibility of generating different interpretations and views of a situation which impact on a plan of action. Such planning should ask questions of feasibility, instead of prioritising the mastery of routine procedures. In the case of this study, drawing on the concept made it reasonable to conclude that teachers were unable to reflect and display critical understanding of, first, the CA principles, second, the context for its implementation and, third, an appreciation of what was embodied and meaningful to classroom practice as a means to fulfil the requirements of the programme. This was because of the inadequate support they received. They could make principled intellectual judgments only if they were enabled to consider underlying principles of the CA programme as teleological devices (Nozick, 1995) on which to base their teaching and assessment strategies.

Could it be that different conceptual analytical tools and design would have produced other kinds of data in the teachers' classrooms, and in a much more interesting manner? I doubt it because none of the literature and research approaches used for this study were given absolute power in collecting, reading and interpreting data. The researcher was able to remain open to new or unexpected ideas and occurrences as they emerged in the field and adapted her conceptual focus and data-collecting

strategies and analysis accordingly. How the study was designed and carried out, as outlined in detail in chapter 5, testifies to this.

9.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research design highlights challenges of conducting research for an academic qualification. When involved in a study for this purpose, the researcher is faced with time and financial constraints that set limits on what she can do in the field and afterwards. In a period of three years, the first year is generally spent refining a proposal and doing preliminary reading around the problem, the second is often used for fieldwork, which cannot be extended to the third because by that time the student is expected to have completed his or her work. Because of these constraints, as researcher, I thus had no other choice but mainly to rely on triangulating the collected data to ensure its validity and reliability. Neither was there time to consult with the reach population when the analysis was finalised, so as to verify my interpretation, because they had all taken transfers from their schools and moved to Mbabane to be nearer their families.

9.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The findings of the study indicate that unless teacher training programmes, both pre-service and in-service, offer adequate opportunities to change teachers' beliefs and attitudes, and promote 'new' teacher professionalism in the country, it will be difficult to witness the efficiency and quality that is intended by the education system. The study has demonstrated that teachers' lack of reflection on their practice affected the curriculum choices they made. They lacked knowledge of how to engage with the needs of the learners. Their professional capacity in the country made it difficult for them to read meaning or reflect on what happened during lessons.

It is clear from the evidence in the study that, to effectively achieve the goals of CA, principles underlying it have to be properly understood. However, evidence also shows that neither do policy mediators and designers of curriculum documents

understand what the programme is about. The confusion with the programme seemed to be not only with teachers, but also, and more so, with them. The in-service professional support they provided to teachers overlooked the importance of encouraging them to reflect on their taken-for-granted concepts of worthwhile teaching and assessment practices, and establishing through discussion amongst themselves and with officials the extent to which the ways in which they taught, assessed and thought of these would serve the ideals of the newly introduced CA programme. Thus, if inset programmes or workshops continue to be designed and conducted as the workshop I observed, teachers' professional and intellectual responsibilities as required by CA will continue to be compromised.

There was also ambiguity of the verbs used in the lesson aims that were in the curriculum guidance documents. It is reasonable to conclude that because of shortcomings on the part of the designers, teachers were not properly guided by the language used in the aims of the lessons they were expected to teach.

Therefore, the challenge for the Swazi education system is how to restructure the current professional socialization processes for teachers and introduce teacher education programmes that expose them to processes that enable them to base their practices on 'good-sense'. Teachers need to acquire both skills and theoretical capacities to diagnose their work situations and devise strategies that effectively deal with needs within these situations. INSET programmes should provoke teachers to reflect seriously on the purpose of CA and be helped to creatively identify ways in which they can be sensitive to every learner's circumstances in the effort to promote a measure of cognitive development for all, despite the varied abilities they have to engage. They should be helped to understand what is involved in making teaching transformative and what is essential in bringing about the envisaged change in thinking and ways of behaving on the part of learners. Teachers have to understand what is meant by the idea that learning is not only about accumulating factual details but promoting the cognitive development of learners.

There is no way teachers could be the professionals required by the CA programme if they are given lesson plans. The programme has brought about a change from a system that restricted their creativity to one that allows self-initiated professional decision-making in the classroom. Therefore, government should invest in more useful professional capacity-building programmes, rather than the production of manuals that spell out how to act in the classrooms. Providing detailed lesson structures is a dangerous alternative to improving teachers' capacity.

9.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

For meaningful and effective capacity building strategies to prepare for the implementation of the CA programme, the priority is for policy makers to clarify the principles of CA to officials who interact with teachers. From the data collected from the workshop, it became clear that they needed clarity on what is essential to this programme in terms of concepts and practice. It is only when they themselves have acquired this conceptual clarity that they can effectively support teachers in working with CA in their classrooms. Not only will such intervention help them as teacher educators, it will also be invaluable to the designing of curriculum documents that correctly guide teachers.

The study further recommends that, in preparing teachers to implement the programme, the idea of teachers as researchers in their classrooms be encouraged to create an intelligent profession that can transform classroom practice and begin the process of developing the kind of workforce required in what Hargreaves (2003) refers to as 'the knowledge society'. The idea of teachers as researchers will promote the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and, subsequently, broaden their chances of being innovative in schools as their workplaces.

The study indicated that classroom teaching in Swazi primary schools is a lonely endeavour. There is no evidence that teachers shared or talked to each other about the CA programme. They need to be encouraged to build structures that facilitate collaborative professional learning within schools. Promoting such collegiality could

help in providing a support structure to improve classroom performance and thus respond to the requirements of the new programme.

Teachers need to work together in sharing experiences on how to develop assessment strategies, plan and execute remedial activities. As Tschannen-Moran (1998) asserts, when teachers have group discussions as professionals they provide each other with information on teaching, assessment and give each other advice on strategies that could be used in the classroom. As each one of them reports on how he / she works in the classroom, the others give professional feedback that helps a great deal in confirming whether one is still on the right track. Staff collaboration is a way of increasing efficacy amongst teachers. It is in such collaboration groups that teachers can also devise ways to cater for lack of resources while still achieving what they wish to in their classrooms. One should be aware that teachers could effectively plan their work as a group only when they know more about assessment principles and practices. They need to internalise the principles and practices that underpin CA to constructively guide their conversations. Problems of uncertainty that emanate from not being confident about responsibilities evident in the study could be reduced and they could confidently begin to become part of the discussions of the academic researchers in the university and colleges.

Academic researchers should not only speak to each other but should also involve the teachers on whom they normally research. Currently, teachers are the object of discussion, left out and not contributing to it. A tradition of curriculum debates and critique has to be established within the teaching profession in Swaziland. Bringing teachers into these discussions could prove useful as the nature of their questions are normally not based on either practice or theory. Rather, the intersection of the two makes them of particular interest (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Teachers might help in pointing to the real issues that need the attention of academic researchers with regard to teaching and learning as required by policy. Being part of the discussions would also ensure that they extend their curriculum literacy. Of course, this will require certain skills if it is to be done effectively. It is crucial that future teacher

education programmes encourage teachers to deliberately document, analyse and reflect on their efforts in the classroom.

Teacher colleges and in-service programmes should be sites to acquire professional competence. At the moment this is absent (cf. chapter 2). A well thought-out and coordinated system of preparing teachers in Swaziland, based on principles embedded in innovation, would be invaluable for educational provision in general.