

**TITLE: WHAT ARE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF
TEACHER-LED CURRICULUM INITIATIVES IN
RELATION TO CHANGE IN PRACTICE?**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Initiative

The transformation of education in South Africa has led to significant areas of curriculum change in public and independent schools. Since the establishment of a democracy in 1994, the post-apartheid policy changes that have occurred, have prompted Independent Schools to reassess their curricula and teaching practices so as to ensure that academic excellence is maintained with the implementation of the new curriculum. To understand the reason for this evaluation, it is important to consider the process of change within a national context.

Prior to 1990, the National Party was the sole participant in educational policy, underpinning its policies with apartheid ideology. After 1990, and the unbanning of anti-apartheid organisations, many institutions developed their own educational policies, in anticipation of the first democratic elections. In the early 1990s, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), was invited to the National Training Board (NTB), a conservative Afrikaans- dominated institution, to participate in policy debate. Out of this forum, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), based on a concept imported from New Zealand, resulted. Although some form of an education plan was slowly emerging, there

was still little clarity as to how schools fitted in to the framework. Various organisations devised strategies as to how education and training could be integrated into one unit. By 1993/4, the ANC, in consultation with COSATU, had developed a general framework for Life Long Learning. By 1994 the South African Qualifications Act (SAQA) and the NQF had made some ground in bringing the ministries of Labour and Education into a unified system, but lack of consultation and communication, and the legacy of apartheid leadership, stifled progress, causing the formal separation of Labour and Education in 1994.

This crisis in education did not lessen until the drafting of the White Paper on Education and Training (WPET) in March 1995; this was the first major step towards a national policy framework. The paper expressly noted that, if South Africa was to make fundamental changes to the existing educational system, it would have to take cognizance of what was happening in schools, colleges, technikons and universities. The document responded by placing the learners first. It also emphasized the participation of communities and stakeholders, and the need to develop equity, non-discrimination and respect for diversity. Life-long learning now opened the doors of education to everyone, irrespective of age.

Curriculum 2005(C2005) and Outcomes Based Education (OBE) emerged from the need, expressed in the WPET, to develop a relevant curriculum. This exacerbated the tension between equity and growth.

OBE was hastily packaged, teachers were inadequately trained and not familiar with the theoretical concepts underpinning OBE (much of which was highlighted in a paper delivered by Jansen (1997) prior to implementation), and international advisers lacked an understanding of the South African context. The lack of training for the school managers within the OBE model added to the problems that teachers experienced in the implementation process.

'The Call to Action' statement made by Professor Asmal in 1999, and the subsequent 'Tirisano' report, clearly indicated the pressure to implement a further plan of action. The minister highlighted the need to deal with the most urgent problems in education and, to this end, developed a five-year implementation plan. 'Tirisano' also made reference to the fact that implementation requires capacity, and therefore a framework for the reform of the public service so as to monitor and evaluate accountability was developed.

A first sign of the impact of 'Tirisano' was the report, 'A South African Curriculum for the 21st Century, 31 May 2000', (C21). This document was a directive to review Curriculum 2005 and OBE. It outlined steps to be taken in implementing the new curriculum, necessary key success factors, and structures for the new curriculum, placing it within the African Context.

Many experienced teachers were challenged to implement this new curriculum and to be innovative in their approach to the learning areas. This created tensions in many schools and challenged experienced teachers' practices, as many clung to the integrity of the historically specific subjects and experienced difficulty in integrating knowledge across the curriculum, especially with limited resources and inadequate materials.

International trends in school improvement research outline the need for experienced teachers to review their classroom practice and to improve the quality of their teaching and learning (Fullan, M and Hargreaves, A 1992). South African teachers are likewise being challenged to review their craft (White Paper 1, 1995 and Asmal, K. Tirisano: Call to Action). This call for quality improvement has focused research back into the classroom, and in-depth analyses of how best to teach for improved student grades have become a focus in school improvement research. This change in practice needs to be managed to ensure that all stakeholders buy into the envisaged change and that sustained implementation is achieved.

Increasing pressures on South African Independent Schools to maintain high standards and meet national benchmarks to become accredited service providers as stipulated by the National Qualifications Framework and Umalusi, the board for ensuring the provision of quality education in Independent Schools, led to the emergence of various

curriculum development initiatives. An initiative, in the province of Gauteng, called the Gauteng Independent Schools' Curriculum Development Initiative (GISCDI), will form the basis of this research.

1.2 Details of the GISCDI

The **Gauteng Independent Schools' Curriculum Development Initiative (GISCDI)**, commenced in 2000. Heads of the Independent Schools in this region were frustrated with the Common Entrance tests required for Senior School¹ admission in independent schools and were concerned about maintaining standards whilst implementing the new and untested curriculum (C2005). A group of four heads from Central Gauteng Independent Preparatory Schools met informally to discuss how best they could ensure that the quality of education they were expected to deliver could be met during this phase of national curriculum change. They came to a decision that a curriculum development process in English and Mathematics needed to be initiated and that the grade seven teachers themselves, should spearhead it, since they were responsible for implementing the curriculum and were thus sensitive to its needs. Further discussions revealed a need for a formal benchmarking assessment in these core learning areas to compare standards across schools in the region. These informal discussions led to the first Head of Independent Schools' Breakfast, at which these ideas were presented. All the heads present at this meeting

¹ Reasons for frustration were due to pressure on preparatory schools to write different entrance tests for different senior schools, grade seven teachers were concentrating their teaching on these entrance tests, and the tests placed too much pressure on teachers and students to perform well.

supported the new initiative and Grade Seven teachers were then approached to convene the first meetings in Mathematics and English. An executive committee of Heads of schools was elected that would oversee the process and meet regularly to monitor the implementation of the initiative. This executive committee developed a rationale for the process and a code of conduct for compliance by participating heads of schools. This would guard against public dissemination of the results, or the advertising of a school's results for marketing purposes.

The first meetings in Mathematics and English were held early in 2000, led by teacher co-ordinators, who had been selected by the Heads. It became apparent that many teachers were not happy with the structure and content of common assessments being administered by schools at the time, and generally they felt isolated, threatened and challenged in their understanding and implementation of C2005. These meetings of grade seven English and Mathematics teachers led to a process of discussion, deliberation and reflection on their classroom practice.

Senior school teachers were consulted about their expectations of the skills and knowledge required by grade seven students moving into senior school. The teachers then worked collaboratively to develop detailed skills lists in both learning areas, and produced a curriculum outline to be used in conjunction with the Revised National Curriculum Statement at grade seven levels.

Two meetings were held each term, and the benefits of collegiality added to the overwhelming success of the initiative. The teachers networked and communication amongst schools grew rapidly.

The maintenance of standards was then addressed, and it was decided that, to assess the success of their teaching and learning in Mathematics and English, schools would benefit from a formal benchmark assessment, which had initially been suggested by the Heads Executive Committee. The information could be used for diagnostic purposes - to identify strengths and weaknesses so as to further develop the process².

The result of this collaborative initiative was the implementation of the annual Benchmark Assessment. Teachers volunteer to be on assessment teams, they set the assessment papers and plan the memorandums collaboratively. All schools complete the assessments on the same day and marking is done at a central venue. The results of the assessment are confidential, and schools are able to compare their averages with the regional average. The assessments are seen to be formative in nature and emphasise areas for teacher and school development.

² These assessments are developed as ends to a mean and not as a means to an end, as the schools had previously experienced.

The graphical display of results in each section of the assessment highlights areas of strength, or concern, for teachers and schools. These common areas are then used for teacher development. A teacher co-ordinator facilitates the meetings and organises workshops to develop teacher skills and materials.

Once the 'curriculum' in Mathematics and English was in place, teachers realised the need for the introduction of a student portfolio in both these learning areas. A series of workshops was planned at which teachers worked collaboratively to develop the framework for the portfolio, as well as accompanying rubrics to assess the work presented in these portfolios.

In 2002, the English Benchmark Assessment results isolated visual literacy as an area of concern. The co-ordinating teacher co-opted a colleague to help her plan and develop a workshop on Visual Literacy. At this workshop the teachers worked together to design a Visual Literacy workbook, which was made available to schools as an aid for teachers. The benefit of this collaborative learning was seen in the 2003 results; the Visual Literacy scores were 20% higher than in the previous year, and the responses by the students indicated that their competence in this area far exceeded the norms required.

In 2003, the English results reflected that the teaching of poetry needed attention. The 2004 meetings focused on this aspect of teacher

development. Two workshops were held and a poetry workbook is presently being developed.

The teachers who participate in this formative process, go back to their schools and integrate their learning into their classroom practice. They also provide feedback and share teaching ideas and methodologies with their colleagues. This sharing of innovations, resources, teaching styles and assessments ensures that the process of change remains dynamic and that the outcomes are disseminated within the participating schools.

The positive feedback from participating teachers has initiated the formation of informal curriculum networks in Afrikaans, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences and Design & Technology learning areas. Teachers have volunteered to organise and co-ordinate curriculum meetings at least once per term.

1.3 Aim of the Research

The aim of the research is to do an inter-institutional study of the teacher-led curriculum development and benchmarking initiative evident in independent schools in Gauteng (GISCDI). The purpose of the study is to reflect on practice and supply written accounts of actual teacher perceptions of change in classroom practice. This will allow the participants to reflect on their actions and explain why they believe the GISCDI is successful or not.

The study aims to identify how and why the initiative facilitates change in teaching.

The assumption that will be investigated, which emerges from both anecdotal evidence and current, existing research literature, is that successful innovations work at two levels: the teacher as a professional and the deepening of professional knowledge by using data to drive change. The study aims to investigate the extent to which this initiative adds new insights into processes of change.

The study aims to generate an understanding of how the processes and mechanisms of this initiative impact on the lives of teachers and learners, and it will provide detailed explanations of reflection of practice leading to events of change in actual classroom practices, pedagogy and curriculum implementation. It ambitiously attempts to access the different methodologies the teachers implemented in their classrooms, after the teacher-led curriculum interventions were presented to them.

1.4 Research Question

WHAT ARE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER-LED CURRICULUM INITIATIVES, IN RELATION TO CHANGE IN PRACTICE?

This research will be undertaken in independent preparatory schools in Gauteng.

Sub-questions

- What perceptions do participating teachers' have that teacher-led curriculum initiatives are changing practice?
- What factors are contributing to the success of the teacher-led curriculum initiatives?
- Have teacher-led curriculum initiatives been a catalyst for teacher development and school improvement?

1.5 Rationale

The proposed study of this initiative will be worthwhile and of importance to teachers, heads of schools and policy developers for various reasons.

It will contribute to educational change in privileged independent schools, as the teachers who volunteer to be part of the initiative will be enabled with the necessary support, to possibly become teacher leaders. They will have opportunities to lead curriculum development within their schools, and with their colleagues, in a collaborative way. All

the Heads of the schools committed to participating in the GISCDI process, publicly share in a reciprocally trusting relationship with the teachers who represent their schools. The information gathered will contribute to the improvement of teacher morale and the quality of working life. Teachers will be able reflect on their current practice and use the strategies to improve the teaching and learning that occurs within their classrooms, which would, in turn, improve quality.

This inter-school, bottom-up initiative will be investigated to understand why the teachers involved in the process have or have not changed their classroom practices, and their perceptions of the actual changes they have made will be explored and reported on in the research.

This information will enhance the understanding of change mechanisms that are happening in these classrooms. Teachers' responses to semi-structured interviews will provide invaluable information about why and how teachers implemented new strategies into their classroom practice.

Heads of schools and school governors will be introduced to a different type of curriculum development and they will be able to evaluate this powerful, post-modern strategy for school improvement. The opportunities to rebuild schools as learning communities will be highlighted and collegiality within and between schools will improve. The success of the initiative will hopefully encourage more heads to entrust their teachers with curriculum development and change in

classroom practice, for the benefit of the students, teachers and the school.

Policy developers will be made aware of the benefits of internal, self-regulated quality improvement strategies. The information that is gathered in this study could provide a basis for current school improvement practices in South Africa, as it would emphasise the importance of teacher-led curriculum initiatives in quality improvement. The generalizations about teacher-leadership need to be understood within the privileged independent school context and may not apply to other South African schools.