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The challenges and problems of implementing the curriculum and assessment policy statements: School managers' perspectives and experiences

Abstract

Worldwide, national educational authorities set curricular guidelines for schools to ensure implementation. Despite these measures, the translation of policies into school or classroom activities is rarely a smooth or complete process. South Africa has made significant and much-needed positive curriculum changes. However, effective curriculum implementation requires a sound understanding of the curriculum policy, adequate and varied resources and greater attention to contextual factors. Using the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative research design, the study explored the perspectives and experiences of school managers regarding the challenges and problems of implementing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements in the Intermediate Phase within the South African curriculum reform context. For the first research question, the thematically analysed data generated the findings which highlight a generally good understanding and positive outlook of the revised curriculum policy by the participants. In contrast, the findings for the second research question confirmed that inadequate resources such as a shortage of teachers and textbooks, overcrowded classrooms and other learning support materials impact teaching and learning and the process of curriculum implementation negatively. The study contributes to the important topic of curriculum reforms and curriculum implementation challenges and problems. The study recommends, among others, strategies needed for monitoring the implementation of the CAPS, placing individual school managers as change agents and adopting the three constructs of the theory of curriculum implementation for strengthening implementation.

Keywords: *curriculum and assessment policy statements, curriculum implementation, intermediate phase, education district offices, school management teams*



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1. Introduction

There is a growing interest in the role that teachers could and should play as curriculum developers and implementers based not on compliance with policies (Hall & McGinity, 2015), but on their understanding of school contexts, learners, the subject they teach and pedagogy

(Boschman, McKenney & Voogt, 2014; Lambert & Biddulph, 2015). As early as the 1980s, Leithwood (1981) highlighted three main categories of obstacles typically encountered during curriculum implementation, namely inadequate knowledge about innovation and use of skills in implementation, ineffective organisational control structures, and lack of or inadequate material resources. In some contexts, these barriers have been neglected by those attempting to facilitate implementation or have inadequately been addressed by them. Teachers' main concern is likely to be the extent to which resources and organisational arrangements are provided.

Usually, and frequently as a direct result of contestations, there is discontinuity or alteration of allocated teaching time, and reorganisation of subject contents (Benavot & Resh, 2001). One of the limits of strategies to promote implementation is the failure to consider the particular needs of teachers and schools. Curriculum reform models that do not consider school-level constraints can result in poor curriculum implementation. Policy-makers and curriculum developers have a responsibility to ensure greater alignment at national and district policy levels and that professional development and implementation support are advanced through multiple stakeholders (Penuel *et al.*, 2009). Evidence suggests that the support offered to schools by education district offices is unsatisfactory and inadequate and this impacts negatively on teacher development and their implementation of curriculum policies (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018).

Fullan (2009) argues that one of the key curriculum reform implementation problems is that strategies focus on schools as parts of the system, and thus do not address context. Some countries, including South Africa, deal with political and past injustices such as segregation, poverty, unequal educational provision, low education participation rates, poor learner retention and marginal pass rates, and preoccupation with the uncertainty of the future (Shay, 2015). The South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) regards adequate learning support materials (LSMs), well-resourced classrooms and regular professional development of teachers as essential for curriculum implementation and for the promotion of good teaching and learning (Czerniewicz, Murray & Probyn, 2000).

In the light of the issues presented in this introductory section and the related constraints, gaps and challenges presented in the literature section below, this study explored the views and experiences of School Management Teams (SMT) in order to understand the challenges and problems that impact the implementation of the CAPS in the Intermediate Phase. Furthermore, the constructs of the theory of curriculum implementation (Rogan & Grayson, 2003) guided the recommendations presented in the last section.

In the South African education context, the SMT consists of principals, deputy principals and heads of departments. The team is mainly responsible for the advancement of teaching and learning (Basson & Mestry, 2019). This study sought answers to the following questions:

- How do SMTs express their general understanding of the changes brought about by the CAPS?
- What are the perspectives and experiences of school management teams regarding the resource challenges and problems of and how do they impact the implementation of the CAPS?

In the section to follow, a brief overview of curriculum policy reforms, issues and challenges is provided from an international perspective. This is followed by a description of the methodology context in which this study was undertaken. The findings of the study are presented and discussed in the fourth section, while the fifth section considers the implications of the main findings and provides conclusions and recommendations that relate to strengthening the CAPS implementation.

2. Global perspectives on curriculum reform implementation

Problems and contestations pertaining to curriculum reform, some of which are reported in the section above, point to, for example, the importance of educational decentralisation, the result of which in some contexts is the increase in discretion of local school officials (Benavot & Resh, 2010).

The key challenges regarding curriculum implementation in the United States' Midwestern school districts are resistance to change; short training duration and training that focus on technicalities; and inconsistent support from both school districts and school management (Shilling, 2013).

In Ghana, a study of pre-school teachers found that 67% of the teachers agreed that they did not understand the early childhood curriculum; 90.3% agreed that the school had insufficient teaching and learning materials to support implementation; 72.5% agreed that the class sizes were too large; and 74.1% agreed that they had received no in-service training on the early childhood curriculum. Furthermore, the findings indicate that pre-school teachers have not fully grasped the early childhood curriculum, thus experiencing problems regarding its content (Ntumi, 2016).

Some major achievements were reported in China in respect of the eighth round of national curriculum reforms through a review of the contexts, processes and outcomes of implementation. These included improved the motivation of learners to study, improved academic quality, changes from the traditional, knowledge-focused teaching mode towards a quality-oriented method, and facilitation of teachers' professional growth. However, some of the problems reported with the implementation are that teachers had a superficial understanding of new teaching approaches. They had limited resources for schools and professional support for teachers was unsatisfactory (Hongbiao, 2013).

School leaders and teachers, in a study of an elementary school in a Chicago Midwestern district, argued that they did not simply reject, resist or conform as they struggled to understand the dynamics of the curriculum innovation for teaching and learning and general classroom practice in addition to concerns on increased instructional time (Dulude, Spillane & Dumay, 2017). A case study in Scotland revealed, among others, vagueness of crucial exemplars and assessment criteria, the high-stakes examination climate, as well as the timing, quantity and quality of collaboration (Simmons & MacLean, 2018).

In a study that explored the curriculum implementation challenges of Zimbabwean primary school teachers, all participants reported that the teacher-pupil ratio was too high – 1:56 for Grades 1 – 2 and 1:45 for Grades 3 – 4, versus the official ratios of 1:20 and 1:40, which “forced” teachers to use the lecture method. Education managers, echoing the teachers' plight, reported that, in most cases, there was a shortage of textbooks, and the textbooks were delivered far later than the commencement of terms. In addition, teachers were burdened with the shortage of specialist teachers (Ngwenya, 2019).

In the Finnish context, the National Agency for Education plays a pivotal role connecting the Ministry of Education, government, local educational authorities, parents and schools for successful curriculum reform implementation. On municipal and school levels, local authorities and other education providers are mandated to prepare annual teaching plans together with school leaders and teachers, where they cumulatively determine how to institute the local curricula. Key issues of the plans are communicated with learners and their parents or guardians before implementation (Tian & Risku, 2019).

With respect to South Africa, and according to Bertram (2019), the curriculum policies implemented in post-apartheid South Africa include Outcomes Based Education (OBE), the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the current Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). In this author's view, the OBE was considered "radical and constructive, with teaching content not specified", while the NCS was regarded as more structured, with clear content topics and less confusing terminology. CAPS is commended for a clear content framework and assessment tasks. For Chisholm *et al.* (2015), both the reviewers who defended and criticised OBE did so on the basis of training, time frames, learning materials and provincial support. The CAPS comprises a single, comprehensive and concise policy, which represents a statement for learning and teaching (RSA, Department of Basic Education, 2019). The CAPS Intermediate Phase is designed for the education phases from Grade 4 to Grade 6. Like all the other previous curriculum policies, the CAPS is not perfect, but it is viewed positively by many education officials and teachers (Green & Condy, 2016). The CAPS is also considered to be more structured than previous South African curricula (Russell, Sirota & Ahmed, 2019).

Most South African teachers rely on textbooks for acquiring content knowledge (Bantwini, 2010). The problem is that, often, teachers do not know who have developed the learning materials and they are not motivated to teach using them (Mpungose, 2020: 3). Furthermore, the lack of and the unequal distribution of resources (Russel, *et al.*, 2019) as well as other contextual factors such as poor infrastructure, class size, lack of equipment, and time constraints (Green & Condy, 2016; Mpungose, 2020) impact negatively on effective curriculum implementation. Teacher, school and systemic factors (Andrews, Walton & Osman, 2019; Russell *et al.*, 2019) also constrain curriculum implementation. Moreover, the anticipated support in some cases was not forthcoming and in others the support from the DBE was inadequate (Ramnarain, 2016). Thus, the availability of resources is crucial for successful curriculum implementation (Grobler, Moloji & Thakhordas, 2017).

Other findings from the South African Western Cape education districts highlighted additional barriers to curriculum implementation – including teachers' lack of adequate content knowledge, teachers' high workload and limited time available for professional development training (Nguyen *et al.*, 2017). The pressure to cover topics in the syllabus and lack of school time for research impact negatively on implementation (Ramnarain, 2016). One of the key implications for successful curriculum reform and implementation is the provision of opportunities for teachers to be partners in developing and addressing educational reform policies and challenges. Teachers have to be provided with guidance and support regarding curriculum reform matters. However, this does not mean that policymakers should, for example, design workbooks for teachers and learners, as this reduces the work of teachers to technicians, and does not contribute to multi-skilling and increasing the autonomy of teachers (Msibi & Mchunu, 2013). Improved implementation also requires greater attention, as systemic and institutional factors present in different combinations, depending on contexts (Chisholm *et al.*, 2000).

In main, the literature reviewed presents a variety of factors that impinge on the smooth implementation of curricula (including CAPS), namely the short duration of, and poor-quality training, limited teaching and learning resources for schools and inconsistent, inadequate and unsatisfactory support and monitoring by both school managements and education districts.

3. Methodology

This study is a qualitative research study. It was interpretively orientated, with the purpose of discovering how participants understand the CAPS, as well as their perspectives and experiences of the challenges and problems regarding the CAPS implementation. The interpretive approach is concerned with understanding phenomena from participants' subjective experiences, in this case through interviews (Creswell, Hanson, Clark & Morales 2014). In qualitative research, the participants' views and experience help researchers to develop an understanding of phenomena under investigation (Kornbluh, 2015). This study focused on exploring participants' perspectives and experiences of the CAPS, which could contribute to understanding of curriculum reforms, implementation challenges, and problems (Cope, 2014).

This study was conducted at nine township primary schools in three South African provinces: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo. The three provinces were selected on the basis that they were part of another bigger project in which the researcher was involved concerning the strengthening of university partnerships with provincial education departments in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. The study employed purposive sampling, which is a key principle underlying qualitative research. Although three provinces might be regarded as a small sample, the aim was to obtain richness of data. Convenience sampling used to select sites and participants for the research tend to collect in-depth data which could provide substantive information for answering research questions (Forman *et al.*, 2008). Researchers using convenience sampling find participants who meet the required criteria and then select those respond to the request for participation (Robinson, 2013). This study intended to explore how the selected school managers could share their understanding, perspectives and experiences of the CAPS policy and implementation matters. The assumption is that this would not only offer managers an opportunity for reflection, but also increase their and the researchers' understanding of the implementation issues and challenges, as well as the rationale for recommending specific strategies.

Suri (2011:1) asserts that "informed decisions about sampling are critical to improving the quality of research synthesis". Thus, a researcher must select people he or she considers "knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena the researcher is investigating" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Marshall (1996) argues that convenience sampling is the least rigorous method and involves the most accessible participants. The problem is that because of the convenience of, for example, time, effort, and location; this may result in poor-quality data and lack of intellectual credibility. Based on the participants' knowledge of previous curriculum policies, a sample of eighteen members of the SMT – heads of department (HoDs) and school principals (Principals) – was considered capable of providing the required knowledge of the research topic and the experience of the CAPS training and implementation. Collecting information from a smaller sample allowed for the detailed evaluation of a limited number of diverse responses, rather than trying to deal with more general impressions and perspectives of these themes (Forman *et al.*, 2008).

Some of the well-known disadvantages of questionnaires as a method of data collection revolve around low response rates, little or no contact between the researcher and the participants and incomplete questionnaires (Jones *et al.*, 2008). In this study, data were collected using one-on-one semi-structured interviews and predefined questions. One-on-one interviews are theme-oriented and not person-oriented (Kvale, 1983). Although structured interviews are considered to be useful in eliminating the possible variability of questions and promoting standardisation – among other advantages – due to this type of interview being problem- and not person-centred, building rapport between researcher and participant can be compromised. These interviews can also limit the breadth of discussions (Segal *et al.*, 2006). Semi-structured interviews are useful for probing, asking open-ended questions and seeking to know the independent thinking of particular individuals in a group who are involved in a particular programme which can be evaluated, as well as for a specific category of individuals involved in a programme (Adams, 2015). The use of semi-structured interviews also promotes opportunities for co-creation of knowledge and understanding between researcher and participant during data collection (Mojtahed *et al.*, 2014).

The interviews revolved around the SMTs' understanding of the changes brought about by the CAPS and resource issues and how these impact teaching, learning and implementation of the CAPS. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse, organise, describe and report findings in themes. Some of its advantages is that it can be used across a range of epistemologies and research questions and its usefulness for analysis of perspectives of different participants (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The data were coded, described and interpreted in light of the themes developed in advance (Creswell *et al.*, 2007). The themes emerged from the researchers' theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study and establishing the themes – among other advantages – assists researchers to assess the methodological choices made by other researchers (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Credibility was enhanced by the researcher verifying the research findings with the participants, thereby enhancing their interpretation and representation by the researcher. An important step in qualitative research that substantially enhances credibility is member checking, where data are returned to participants to confirm its accuracy. This ensures that data were interpreted accurately. Researchers are expected to maintain ethical standards, which involves the use of various strategies including the obtaining of ethics approval, treating participants with respect, maintaining confidentiality of information and participants, and fulfilling commitments to participants and their organisations (Myers & Newman, 2007). Ethical clearance was obtained for this study and permission to conduct the research was granted by the relevant provincial education departments. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study and the procedures for data collection, and ethical matters and guidelines were discussed. Participants were asked to sign letters of consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any stage.

4. Findings and discussion

The overarching themes under which the findings were consolidated is the Understanding of the key changes brought about by the CAPS and Resources.

4.1 Understanding the key changes brought about by the CAPS

The participants' responses to this broad theme focused on curriculum design issues such as the terminology or concepts, curriculum scope, coverage, content, teaching and assessment approaches and principles.

The first research question investigated participants' expression of their understanding of the CAPS. Overall, the SMT members welcomed the CAPS which, in their view, is "much simpler". The CAPS documents are regarded as more user-friendly than their NCS counterparts, mainly due to the number of subject-specific policy documents that had to be cross-referenced in the NCS (a minimum of four). This issue alone meant that lesson preparation became complicated and unwieldy for teachers (Grussendorf, Booyse & Burroughs, 2014). The view that the previous curriculum policies were too complicated and that the CAPS was much clearer, were shared by all participants, mainly with specific reference to terminology. HoD 1 maintained that the previous curriculum policy – specifically the NCS, contained too many terms compared to the CAPS and offered the following justification:

The reduction in terminology contributes to a focus on learning itself, meaning that teachers and learners don't have to pay a lot of attention dealing with understanding the many terms. With CAPS, teachers find time to focus on teaching. Furthermore, the terms are simplified and easily understood by everyone.

All the participants considered the CAPS to be a "better curriculum" for teaching and learning compared to all the previous policies, and cited various reasons expressed in the following assertions:

CAPS lifted the burden and workload off the teacher's shoulders because it came with clear guidelines for lesson preparation and planning (Principal 2).

The first change I realised is that CAPS offloaded most of the lesson preparation from the educator and this is time saving for educators (HoD 3).

CAPS is straightforward and to the point and the teachers know exactly what to teach (Principal 7).

Additionally, the principals in particular generally stressed that, compared to previous curriculum policies, teachers remarked that, with the CAPS, there is a "huge" difference regarding facilitation of learning. The CAPS was commended specifically on the basis of promotion of the principles of learner centeredness and inclusivity:

To me CAPS looks at the learners differently in terms of preparing them for achievement. It deals with the child as a whole, with the learner as an individual and a person who is different than the other, and it deals with learners from different environments. I would say it is learner-centred (Principal 5).

This view was shared by Principal 8 who maintained that:

CAPS promote learner-centeredness and learner activity, is very useful in the sense that it provides opportunities for learners to be actively involved in classrooms and is inclusive of physically disadvantaged learners.

All participants were critical of OBE and welcomed the content-driven approach followed by the CAPS. This is in line with all the evaluation teams in Grussendorf *et al.*'s study (2014), which agreed that the design principle of the CAPS had shifted from outcomes-based in the NCS to content-driven, with a shift to a syllabus-type curriculum based on a theoretical framing and a teacher-centred approach. Regarding teaching content, Principal 3 complained that the previous curriculum policies were full of learning outcomes rather than guiding teachers to focus on the content. HoD 9 stated a view supported by all the SMT members regarding the importance of teaching content: *"In CAPS we have the content, the actual content that we are supposed to teach."* Expressing the problem of the lack of content in OBE, HoD 4 complained that

previously, it got to a point where teachers were told to come up with relevant topics and the problem was that township schools would come up with different topics compared to the teachers in the rural areas.

In summing up the OBE challenges, HoD 5 argued that *"OBE was a complete disaster"*.

Principal 4 considered the linking of work from one grade to another as a noteworthy benefit offered by the CAPS: *"For instance, in the Intermediate Phase, the contents in a specific Grade 5 subject is the continuation of the work that has been covered in Grade 4."* In the view of Principal 7, CAPS clearly outlined topics and sub-topics to teach and as such *"teachers are not left with too much interpretation of the content as laid out in the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP)"*. In this regard, all the principals argued that the *"schedules"* in the previous curriculum policies were *"too comprehensive, complicated, vague, not user-friendly and had many terms and explanations thereof"*. The principals confirmed that, previously, teachers were expected to produce work schedules, and confirmed that CAPS provided the ATP, a statement which HoD 5 affirmed as follows: *"If teachers follow it, they can't go wrong"*.

The HoDs also welcomed and considered the language used in the ATPs to be content-specific and not vague, and suggested that this offers relief teachers because, as argued by HoD 7: *"Teachers do not have to spend time on designing work schedules and constructing lessons."* HoDs further expressed relief in their observation that assessment guidelines offered by the CAPS are clear and as also how changes in terms of teaching and learning content were structured in the CAPS. These two considerations are captured in a statement by HoD 8:

In CAPS we follow weekly teaching plans while in the NCS we followed chapters. This means, with the previous curriculum policy, the focus was on the whole curriculum, and the teaching and learning and tests focused on covering the whole syllabus. In CAPS, each term has its own tests and, in the learners' books, there are classroom activities. The formal assessment tasks correlate with the record sheets kept by teachers. CAPS provides clear guidelines for assessing the learners as well as guidelines on how to record the assessment activities.

A key understanding expressed by HoD 7 in relation to the process of teaching and learning is that the CAPS promotes continuous assessment. Principal 6 argued:

The main advantage of continuous assessment is that absent or sick learners still get an opportunity to be assessed, even if they missed one or two assessment activities.

In general, principals also welcomed the elimination of assessment standards and learning outcomes from previous policies and considered this as a major change. Principal 7's statement summarises this view:

Furthermore, the previous curriculum policies focused much on the unpacking of assessments standards – which was time-consuming. The learning outcomes were too broad and very confusing to teachers. With CAPS, the outcomes are specific and direct.

To Principal 4, the main difference between the NCS and the CAPS was that, with the CAPS, the final assessment was not primarily based on exams but included other assessment tasks such as projects. The problem, according to Principal 9 was that

learners tend not to take all assessment tasks seriously, knowing that they are unlikely to fail, because the final mark is calculated in the basis of a combination of continuous tasks and the exam mark.

One of the key challenges raised by HoDs is that, despite the subject-specific guidelines provided in the CAPS, there was no clear and detailed presentation on assessment types, methods and tasks. The HoDs argued that a variety of assessment types assist with the monitoring of learner progress, establishing individual learner potential and development. These views are aligned with Harris and Graham's assertion that emphasises the interaction between teaching, learning and assessment, resources and contextual factors (2019).

In the section below, the findings presented revolve mainly around the resources or lack thereof, and the impact on the implementation of the CAPS, with a focus on teachers as a human resource and textbooks as teaching, assessment and learning support materials.

4.2 Resources

In general, all the participants confirmed the views presented by the various authors cited in the two preceding sections, who argue that the lack of and inadequate resources negatively impact teaching and learning innovation and activities, implementation and effective monitoring. The findings presented in this section refer to specific sub-themes, namely teacher shortages, textbooks, curriculum content, teaching, and learning and assessment.

The statement expressed by Principal 9 identifies a dire situation resulting from the shortage of teachers versus the increasing learner enrolment numbers:

For a school to be a fully-fledged primary school, it has to offer education from Grade R to Grade 7. In 2013, we phased in Grade 5, in 2014 Grade 6 and in 2015 Grade 7. So, we are now a fully-fledged primary school but we don't have enough resources. However, the department expects us to utilise the available teachers for the additional three grades phased in, and the number of teachers is inadequate. The other problem is that the learner enrolment keeps increasing, but the number of educators does not.

All the principals and HoDs confirmed the argument that teacher shortage is especially critical in the Intermediate Phase, because this where learners specialise in different subjects. When asked about strategies employed by schools to address the problem, some of the principals stated that they “*have to make do with what they have*”. Of great concern was the confirmation by HoD 9 that student teachers are sometimes used to assume the responsibilities of permanent teachers while they are involved in teaching practice:

If there is a shortage of teachers, we end up using the student teachers because without them, there are subjects that might end up not being taught till mid-year. We are surviving because of the student teachers – they help fill up the shortage. We know that we are not supposed to do that.

When the participants were asked about the top of their wish list regarding resources, all agreed that the provision of adequate teachers would definitely enhance the implementation of the CAPS. On a related question, namely the teacher-learner ratio, Principal 3 stated that

some of the classes are overcrowded, especially in the Intermediate Phase, and our school spent the whole six months without a teacher who is on sick leave and is responsible for three subjects. Government has not replaced that teacher.

Principal 6 disclosed that that he was responsible for teaching four subjects in addition to his main role of managing the school with a teacher-learner ratio of 1:45 in some grades. The same principal complained about a related problem, arguing that when the allocation of teachers is considered, this is done on the basis of learner enrolment only, disregarding the issue of the number of subjects to be taught.

The teacher-learner ratio at the selected schools varied from 1:45 to 1:55-59 and, in some, 1:63. HoD 7 stated that Grades 4 and 7 are problematic due to the high numbers of learners, i.e. 63 in Grade 4 and 59 in Grade 7. This HoD argued that having more learners means more teaching and lack of attention for individual learners. At one school with overcrowded classrooms, HoD 2 reported: “*I teach 80 learners in one class which is two classes in one and this is due to a shortage of classrooms*”. HoD 8 brought a different angle to the teacher-learner ratio problem and confirmed, “*We do have enough teachers but, because of the classroom shortage, there are two teachers in one class*”.

As already indicated, LSMs are crucial for curriculum implementation. According to Ms Motshega, the South African Minister of Basic Education (2009), the useful role of textbooks and other LSM needs to be communicated to teachers and teachers should be encouraged to use nationally approved textbooks and teacher’s guides for both planning and teaching in order to ensure that the curriculum is covered within a year. Teachers must also be offered a range of high-quality textbooks to suit their contexts and needs and all learners should have their own textbooks for each subject.

Given the social contexts of the schools under study and, other than the general commendations expressed by participants on the specific teaching and learning matters presented above in relation to the CAPS, participants were largely concerned about a lack of and inadequate resources. In the main, the participants focused on shortages of teachers and textbooks and overcrowded classrooms as the main barriers to effective teaching and learning and CAPS implementation. The other most common complaint pertained to the delay in the delivery of textbooks and the impact thereof on the stipulated time for teaching the prescribed contents. Although resources meant textbooks in terms of teaching and learning materials, Principal 5 emphasised the need also for computers and functional computer laboratories:

There are two computer labs, but the online one is not operating. The other one has 25 computers to be used by 1 372 learners. Schools need computer laboratories for science.

According to the participants, most textbooks are CAPS-compliant, and the terminology and content relevant. Regarding the problem of textbook shortages in some schools, Principal 1 suggested that “schools have a responsibility to encourage school managers and teachers to become lifelong learners and compare information from different books”. The general views were that some textbooks were good and had clear content, while others lacked some of the required content, and some were unclear and not as user-friendly as expected. Moreover, the participants agreed with the statement that the availability of quality LSMs was affected by five main elements: the budget, provisioning processes, evaluation and selection of materials, the language of teaching and learning, and historical inequalities (Chisholm *et al.*, 2005).

Although there was general agreement concerning the benefit of schools using textbooks from various publishers, HoD 3 raised concerns about the scope and level of contents and activities, bemoaning the discrepancies between the various textbooks, and that some books did not “cover every aspect of the policy document”. According to HoD 1, schools used different textbooks, and school clusters helped to influence decisions and suggestions on the choice thereof. At one school, it was suggested by HoD 6 that, if the government made funds available, schools could buy books from different publishers and ensure that these gaps were closed. At another school, a complaint was made by HoD 2 that schools were expected to make requisitions, but in the end, they were not issued the textbooks of their choice: “If they (the province) don’t find the textbooks you want, they give anything that’s available.” In addition, the rationale behind the province giving schools requisition forms to fill in was questioned. HoD 2 put it as follows:

Textbooks are allocated to schools on the basis of the allocation of the previous year. The process of allocation is slow and can go up to mid-year despite the fact that schools confirm that they place orders during requisition time. In some cases, the department relies on old enrolment numbers.

A major problem experienced was that learners and parents did not take care of textbooks provided free of charge, which resulted in schools buying books every year, with much wastage as a result. Schools also reported challenges with LSMs relating mainly to insufficient textbooks, as not all learners had workbooks and textbooks. As the participants put it:

They use the previous year’s textbooks. We had sixty learners in the classroom last year and this year we have eighty learners, but the deficit was not added. The workbooks are enough but the textbooks are not enough ... Learner transfers from other schools due to family problems, etc. are not considered when allocations are made.

According to HoD 3, in some cases, teachers find themselves having to make copies for learners.

On the alignment of textbooks and the CAPS, HoD 4 stated:

Some of the textbooks go hand in hand with the policy document ... and are good and easy to follow, (but others) do not cover some of the details and aspects present in the policy document. Therefore, focusing on one textbook might cause a huge problem.

HoD 1 complained about the discrepancy found in the CAPS document and some of the textbooks: “*some of the topics in the policy document are not covered in all textbooks*”. With regard to other materials, the importance of teacher guides was noted by Principal 2: “*If you haven't ordered the teacher guides you will not have it. In our schools we usually buy one teacher guide so that if one is misplaced there is an extra copy.*”

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The aim of this study was to investigate school managers' perceptions and experiences of the CAPS, with a view to understanding which aspects could be targeted for improvement, and to assist by offering recommendations for strengthening the implementation of the revised South African curriculum policy. The study shed light on SMTs' perceptions, experiences and understanding of the changes brought about by the CAPS, and a number of key resource challenges and problems were highlighted and connected to how these undermined teaching, learning and effective implementation of the CAPS.

The findings highlight numerous developments and challenges with the CAPS implementation. In general, the findings of this study confirm the value of the content-driven approach of the CAPS, which is aligned with the views of Grussendorf *et al.* (2014) about the shift in the focus in the CAPS to a syllabus-type curriculum embedded in a theoretical framing with a teacher-centred approach and methodology. The study also raised critical issues on the former OBE, with participants arguing against the OBE principles that learners should construct knowledge drawing from a variety of resources and that the learners be expected to take more responsibility for their own learning. This was in consideration that the majority of South African school learners are primarily from poor socio-political school contexts (Czerniewicz, Murray & Probyn, 2000). Regarding teaching content, the main finding was captured in Principal 8's statement that “*the previous policy was full of learning outcomes rather than guiding the teacher to focus on the content*”. Comparing the previous South African curriculum policy – the NCS specifically – and the argument that lesson preparation was “*complicated and unwieldy*” for teachers (Grussendorf *et al.*, 2014), the participants in this study argued that the CAPS is a better curriculum and is much clearer and this is with specific reference to terminology.

A further affirmation from HoD 2 was that, compared to previous curriculum policies, there was “*a huge difference regarding inclusivity and learner-centredness in the facilitation of learning*” provided by the CAPS. Regarding assessment, the study confirmed that school managers welcomed the clear assessment guidelines and the guidelines on how to record assessment activities, and the sentiment expressed was that the CAPS promoted continuous assessment. Despite this assertion, the study raised a concern about the lack of clear training on assessment approaches, methods and tasks and a full explanation on how these could assist in the monitoring of learner progress and the assessment of individual learner potential and development. This finding confirmed Simmons and MacLean's (2018) argument about the “*vagueness of crucial exemplars and assessment criteria*”.

This study's findings on resources resonate with a number of national and international studies, particularly those of Harris and Graham (2019) and Al-Busaid *et al.* (2021). These two studies confirm that curriculum development and curriculum implementation are complex processes and require a firm understanding of learners, factors related to teachers, the subject, pedagogy, resources, institutional constraints and contextual factors. This study would add to

the literature on curriculum reforms and implementation in the specific South African contexts. Firstly, it highlighted the need for further research on strategies needed for strengthening the implementation of the CAPS, particularly in township schools. Secondly, it is important that in planning the much-needed professional support for teachers, two guiding principles need to be adhered to, namely, the importance of context and sustainability.

The main limitation of this study is the small sample in only three of the nine provinces. It is also not possible to generalise from the sample of school managers in this study, as they do not represent the managers of all the schools in the three provinces. However, these findings provide useful pointers for exploring the CAPS implementation challenges and problems on a wider scale.

The findings of this research have implications, not only for the implementation of national curricula, but for curriculum policy reform, which places individual school managers as agents of change who help devise and support the implementation of policies. Furthermore, the three major constructs of Rogan and Grayson's theory of curriculum implementation – profile of implementation, capacity to support change and support from various external agencies (2003) can be used as a guide to profile implementation on the basis of practice and context. These authors also consider it important to determine the capacity needed to support the implementation of the curriculum change and to understand the support factors and barriers related to physical resources, teachers, learner and school-related factors.

Finally, the authors recommend that the role external agencies and their interaction with schools in order to support curriculum implementation must be explored. This study presents an opportunity for a consideration of future larger-scale studies on other issues arising from the CAPS implementation and teachers' and learners' perspectives in order to strengthen implementation, enhance experiences and address challenges and problems.

In conclusion, some of the key recommendations for the improvement of practice include strengthened collaboration between education policymakers and school management teams (Simmons & MacLean, 2018); consistent and high-quality training and support of school managers by education district offices; regular monitoring (Shilling, 2013); and the development of strategies that address school context issues (Fullan, 2009).

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