

Reflections on curriculum and education system change

Pam Christie and Mareka Monyokolo

The chapters in this book provide insights into Jika iMfundo, a highly significant education development initiative that gives expression to the Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes' (PILO's) approach of working in partnership with education departments to build sustainable change. Given Jika iMfundo's focus on "curriculum coverage" and the findings of the different research chapters of this book, it seems appropriate to reflect on the curriculum in South Africa and why improvements in student learning outcomes have been so hard to achieve. While these reflections arise from the chapters of this book, they are not intended as a commentary on PILO's Theory of Change or the Jika iMfundo intervention. They are our own reflections on the national curriculum rather than on Jika iMfundo or PILO.

Problems with CAPS

What emerges across the different research chapters of this book are insights into a range of different impediments to achieving curriculum coverage that could result in quality learning outcomes:

- The "ceiling effect" on learning outcomes caused by assessment policies cutting across the CAPS curriculum to promote students at different levels of competency, making classrooms, in effect, multi-grade (Chapter 4, Schollar).
- The extremely poor state of curriculum management prior to the Jika iMfundo intervention, with teachers and HoDs often unsure, particularly, about monitoring curriculum coverage (Chapter 5, Maphalala et al.).
- The challenges of building professional internal accountability in schools that do not have organisational capacity and the need for more and differentiated professional

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development if teachers are to reflect on and improve their practices (Chapter 6, De Clercq et al.).

- The lack of support for HoDs and the demanding range of tasks they face in schools with little administrative support – except for “green” schools with existing organisational capacity and more resources (Chapter 7, Mthiyane et al.).
- The difficulties of teaching Senior Phase mathematics in classrooms with mixed levels of conceptual understanding, particularly when school organisational capacity is not strong, resources are limited and district policies not necessarily supportive (Chapter 8, Mkhwanazi et al.).
- The extraordinary difficulties facing districts with wide geographical spread, large numbers of schools and a lack of resources; and the challenges of working across historical and bureaucratic silos to support schools with curriculum management rather than monitoring them for compliance (Chapter 9, Mc Lennan et al.).
- The complexities of managing, monitoring and supporting curriculum implementation (coverage) at the school level. The strategies, modalities and ways of addressing teaching and learning problems that Principals and HoDs need to institutionalise are undoubtedly complex, demanding and daunting, but necessary for success (Chapter 3, Witten and Makole).

All of the chapters show that teachers and HoDs found problems with the pace and overload of the CAPS curriculum. Even where teachers and HoDs were positive about the systematic planning that *Jika iMfundo* tools facilitated and welcomed the transparency and role clarification they brought to curriculum monitoring, CAPS remained a problem for them.

It seems not unreasonable to conclude that there is a mismatch between the requirements of CAPS and the conditions in the majority of these schools. This view would be supported by an analysis of the ANA results showing that the majority of students do not have grade-appropriate mastery of literacy and numeracy or language and mathematics yet the Department of Education seems unwilling or unable to acknowledge these problems and adjust the curriculum accordingly. In attempting to understand why this might be so, we suggest that one possible reason lies in the nature of the curriculum development process itself and the form it has taken in the post-apartheid period.

The “normalised” curriculum development process after 1994

Looking across the history of curriculum change since 1994, it is apparent that this has been one of the most unsettled and uneasy of the many educational changes that have been introduced. The early commitment to Curriculum 2005 and outcomes-based education (OBE) set a trajectory of change which subsequent governments were reluctant to abandon yet unable to sustain. Within five years of being proclaimed, Curriculum 2005 was revisited and the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)

was adopted in 2000, still within an OBE framework. In 2009–2011, the RNCS was itself reviewed and streamlined into the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), with OBE finally dropped quietly in 2010. In spite of these curriculum changes – which themselves generated a level of “change fatigue” among teachers and schools – student performance on national and international tests has remained endemically low and also persistently unequal.

At least part of the reason for problems with the curriculum is to be found in the way curriculum development has been undertaken during this past period. Starting from the unrealistic aspirations of change evident in Curriculum 2005, the government has failed to shift the ground in the inevitable battles of the knowledge politics of the curriculum, to build an inspiring and achievable vision of how learning outcomes might be improved for the majority of students. Instead of developing a legitimate and transparent process for curriculum decision making involving a broad base of expertise, it has normalised an approach where decisions are taken without transparency and revisions take the place of needed redesign. Curriculum policies continue to favour historically privileged schools and communities and there is no urgency to move the focus of curriculum development towards the learning contexts of the majority of students.

Consider, as a starting point, the extravagant claims of Minister Bengu, launching the introduction of Curriculum 2005 and releasing 2005 balloons from the steps of parliament in 1997:

In the classroom, things will be very different ... The passivity of the past will be replaced by the activity of the learners of the future. Learners will have greater self-esteem because they will be able to develop at their own pace. They will be trained to work effectively in groups and will learn the value of teamwork and how to take responsibility for their own learning. The exam-driven system will develop into one in which learners are assessed on an ongoing basis. Rote learning will make way for critical thinking, reasoning, reflection and action. Learners will know how to collect, gather and organise information and how to conduct research. Knowledge will be integrated, learning relevant and related to real life situations. In a learner-centred environment, the teacher becomes the facilitator, guided by learning programmes that allow him/her to be innovative and creative in designing programmes (Department of Education, 1997).

Clearly, this needs to be regarded as a political speech, not analysed as a policy statement. It may be better understood as an aspirational fantasy about the death of the old and the birth of the new, rather than an outline of principles for the redesign of an education system – a fantasy that the past would disappear without a trace, to be replaced in a single move by an idealised alternative. What is striking from the perspective of research on educational change is the ambitious scope and extent of transformation that was envisaged, along with the absence of detail on how to achieve

this through accompanying policies and teacher development measures – particularly given South Africa’s lack of experience in developing alternative approaches to the school curriculum under the rigid control of apartheid authorities.¹ Also strikingly absent is any connection to actually existing classrooms and what would be required to change them.

These absences may, in part, be explained by looking back to curriculum development approaches adopted at the time of political transition. In the early discussions about curriculum change and OBE within the mass democratic movement in 1990s, what was *also* envisaged was a national structure to be responsible for curriculum policy and development. As the African National Congress’s (ANC) “yellow book” stated, a National Institute for Curriculum Development (NICD) would have responsibility for the “development of syllabi, including supporting initiatives for adapting the curriculum to accommodate provincial and local needs” (ANC, 1994, p. 72). Moreover, curriculum policy and development would “be undertaken on a democratic and transparent basis.”²

As things progressed, the new national curriculum was not developed by a NICD and the process was not democratic or transparent. For whatever reasons, the new national curriculum was drafted *within* the new Department of Education before a national institute was mooted as policy and without other deliberative processes being put in place. Unlike the key issues of finance and governance, which were the topics of a national investigation for canvassing stakeholder interests and expertise, opportunities for broader debate on curricula were not provided.³ Within the new Department of Education (DoE), a set of new staff (including political appointees) sat alongside bureaucrats of the old order to undertake curriculum development as a project of the ministry and department, with *ad hoc* subject committees, established as needed, to bring expert advice. Under these conditions, it is perhaps not surprising that Curriculum 2005 had very little connection to actual conditions of schooling or practices of teaching for learning.

This “behind closed doors” approach is now the pattern of curriculum making in South Africa. In 2000, when the government acknowledged that Curriculum 2005 was problematic, the Minister of Education appointed a specialist review committee to decide on the framework of changes, with subject specialists then tasked with syllabus development. The result was the hybrid RNCS, designed to patch up the shortcomings of Curriculum 2005 without abandoning the symbolic shell of OBE. No doubt, there were political reasons for not abandoning OBE or opening broader discussions on curriculum redesign but the approach of using review committees and expert subcommittees instead of considering longer-term processes of curriculum redesign closed an opportunity for alternatives to be considered. When the shortcomings of the RNCS were evident, another review committee was set up to decide on the framework of CAPS, with specialist sub-committees to provide syllabus details. The result was that non-transparent and exclusivist processes of curriculum development have become

normalised, without consideration of longer-term ways of exploring curriculum problems and possibilities outside of departmental line functions and ministerial prerogative.

The curriculum development processes that have been normalised means that curriculum changes have been made without deliberation of alternatives; without informed debate on learning theories; without including language experts (and developing language policy separately from curriculum policy); without exploring different theories of curriculum design that might inform a national curriculum; without any means of connecting to existing conditions in schools; and without engaging deeply with the professional experience of teachers in a range of different – and difficult – contexts. Ironically, the government has continued the much-criticised apartheid practice of making decisions behind closed doors and involving limited numbers of selected experts. And, while every chapter in this collection mentions problems with the CAPS curriculum, the curriculum itself appears to have an untouchable status despite the fact that it fails most students and their schools.

The CAPS curriculum has little to offer in terms of vision and moral purpose. When it was introduced, the Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga, made the following call to arms:

Good schools do the basics right. The school starts and ends on time every school day. Teachers and learners arrive on time. Teachers are well prepared for all their lessons, are in class and teach every day. Teachers consult parents when learners are absent and parents support the teachers and their children. Learners work hard, do their homework and respect their teachers. The entire school focuses on learning and does everything in its power to support learners to do better. A good school also has a good Principal. The good Principal has a vision for his/her school and gets others to buy into that vision. He or she leads by example and encourages learners to always strive to do better (Motshekga, 2009).

This minimalist description of “good school practice” stands in striking comparison to the idealism of 1996. A more solid picture of mediocrity would be hard to find, to say nothing of the tacit acknowledgement that the quality of classroom experience remains tantalisingly beyond the reach of education authorities.

What Curriculum 2005 enabled and the curriculum revision process has sedimented, is a “business as usual” approach in former white schools. These schools were well resourced to take advantage of the freedoms offered by Curriculum 2005 and they are at ease with the “powerful knowledge” approach that has come to prevail in CAPS. This curriculum fit, together with the resourcing advantages enabled by the fees and governance arrangements of SASA, consolidates the hegemonic position of these schools as the most desirable – if unachievable – exemplars of “excellence”. What easily slips from sight is the multiple benefits that give a head start to students in these

schools with regard to the demands of the CAPS curriculum. Without these structural advantages, the majority of schools and students cannot compete on equal terms and indeed struggle to meet the demands of the curriculum.

Yet, a question to be asked is: can policies be considered excellent if their implementation in the majority of schools cannot be achieved and, worse still, reinforces failure in these schools? Using test scores as indicators of curriculum success, what is clear from extensive published research in South Africa is that student achievement is linked to the poverty rankings of their schools, to the apartheid departments that schools were formerly part of and to students' home languages. These systemic and recurring patterns provide a clear indication that past patterns of inequality continue to be produced and reproduced within and through the schooling system itself. While there may be a number of factors responsible for these inequalities, the curriculum itself must surely be included among these, at the very least, in terms of providing suitable opportunities for student learning and the demonstration of this in national test scores. The effects of cross-cutting assessment policies (leading, in effect, to multi-grade classrooms) need also to be considered. While schools and teachers are often held responsible for poor learning outcomes, reciprocal accountability surely requires that the education department and its curriculum and assessment policies are also seen as having some responsibility for inequitable student outcomes. It is important to recognise that there are limits to what can be achieved under current conditions in the majority of (fee free) schools – conditions that are well outlined in the chapters of this book.

Conversations about curriculum design and implementation are inextricably interwoven with conversations about teacher development (in-service) policy and practice. Curriculum (including assessment) and teacher development are two critical sides of the same coin. Teachers are key agents of any education change. They are particularly central to curriculum change and the related outcomes. Since the dawn of democracy, there has been very little, if any, concerted effort to address the challenges of teacher development in an integrated way. The teacher development landscape remains fragmented, uncoordinated, poorly conceptualised, unrelated to teacher needs and, consequently, there is enormous wastage of resources. A proper, clearly understood strategy for developing and supporting teachers to mediate the curriculum to meet the needs of the majority of students within their contexts would go a long way towards improving their educational outcomes.

Clearly, there are no simple solutions to the challenges of curriculum design and how it might be implemented for the benefit of the majority of students. Nonetheless, if the unequal patterns of performance on national testing are viewed as systemic problems related, in part at least, to the curriculum itself and other – at times, cross-cutting – government policies, it becomes possible to hold a different set of conversations about curriculum and assessment, and quality teaching and student learning. A number of topics suggest themselves immediately for these conversations:

- An urgent topic would be language of instruction. How might multiple languages be supported and resourced so that multilingualism is viewed as a strength not a problem? How might proficiency in languages, other than English, become a valued capability so that the hegemony of Anglonormativity (McKinney, 2017) is challenged?
- Another topic would be pedagogy itself which is currently a relatively silent partner in curriculum discussions.⁴ What would quality teaching look like in ordinary classrooms and schools that are resourced at the minimum “norms and standards” (fee free schools as opposed to fee paying)?
- How might a focus on learning be foregrounded in the curriculum instead of the current focus on content?
- How might assessment policies be properly aligned to the curriculum, rather than cutting across it?
- What might a South African curriculum look like if its primary goal were to advantage those who are most disadvantaged? What inclusive and transparent processes and resources would be required to develop such a curriculum?
- How might teacher professional development, resourced and delivered, strengthen quality teaching in these sorts of school contexts?
- What strategies might be put in place for differentiated and targeted teacher professional development to meet the demands of the curriculum and how might such strategies be resourced and implemented?

What we have suggested here is that a fundamental policy reorientation is needed to re-centre curriculum design and development on the learning needs of the majority of students in mainstream South African schools. Without some form of curriculum reorientation, education development projects that have curriculum management as their thrust are likely to be impeded.

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Notes

1. Private schools and NGOs had experimented with alternatives, but these were not systemic. Alternatives were certainly explored in adult education, particularly adult literacy programmes, and in trade unions and community organisations.
2. As an aside, not to be explored here, it was also envisaged that the NICD would play a quality assurance role in textbook evaluation and that “[t]he enforcement of a conflict of interest code and quality assurance procedures will prevent corrupt relationships and protect the public interest” (African National Congress, 1994, p. 75).
3. The National Education and Training Forum (NETF) had included a Curriculum Technical Sub-Committee and this was disbanded when the NETF process ended.
4. It would seem that in South Africa there are more studies of what Haberman (1991) terms “the pedagogy of poverty” than studies of what successful pedagogy might be in ordinary classrooms.