

Conceptions and Misconceptions of Tourism as a Subject in the South African School Curriculum

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Abstract

The post-apartheid government of South Africa has made various attempts to achieve fundamental transformation of the education system. In 1996 the Department of Education (DoE), now the Department of Basic Education, introduced the new subject of tourism as part of the formal school curriculum. Tourism was introduced as a school subject with a view to redressing past imbalances by contributing to social transformation (DoE 2003). The aim of this paper is to explore how tourism as a new subject has been received in schools. It critically investigates conceptions and misconceptions about tourism as a new subject introduced in the school curriculum. The empirical work took the form of a case study of secondary (FET phase) schools that had included tourism in their curricular offering. Data were collected through interviews. The findings indicate that most of the participants view tourism as a subject worth including in the school's curricular offering, believing that it exposes learners to a variety of career opportunities they were not exposed to in the past. At the same time, however, they all see tourism as having a low status within the curriculum as it is not an academic subject leading to university entrance. This places its existence at a crossroads as it is simultaneously regarded as important from the practical standpoint but unimportant from the academic one.

Keywords: tourism education, subject status, school curriculum

Introduction

When South Africa became a democratic country in 1994, various changes

were introduced, including changes in educational policy and curriculum framework. Specifically, to transform the education system, a review focusing on the structure of the curriculum, subject offerings and packages, human resource development and qualifications, became necessary (Department of Education 2003). In 1996, the then Department of Education (DoE) introduced tourism as a new subject in the school curriculum. This step was linked to a recognition of the tourism industry as one of the sectors with the most potential to contribute to economic development, the diversification of the economy, and the generation of foreign earnings (New Partnership for Africa's Development 2004; Inui, Wheeler & Lankford 2006; Thitthongkam & Walsh 2011). Tourism is regarded as South Africa's fastest growing industry and an important contributor to the Gross Domestic Product (Pan-African Investment Research Services 2010). Seen against this background, the introduction of tourism as a subject in schools was aimed at giving a helping hand to economic transformation in post-apartheid South Africa (Department of Education 2003).

The importance of tourism in the economy prompted the development of school curricula relevant to the support of the industry. In South Africa, the development of the tourism industry and, linked to that, tourism as a school subject, has become one of government's priorities for realising the goals of reducing unemployment and alleviating poverty (Bornman, Budlender, Vetten, Van der Westhuizen, Watson & Williams 2012). To sum up, tourism was introduced into the school curriculum in step with the growth of the tourism industry, and with a view to stimulating further growth by satisfying the anticipated demand for an increased workforce in the industry (Strietska-Ilina & Tessaring 2005).

The available literature suggests that tourism education supports an industry that offers increased employment opportunities. For example, Manyathi (2012) argued that tourism education has become popular because of the growth of the sector and the need for a larger workforce if the sector is to realise its potential to make a meaningful contribution to national economic development. Nkumane (2008) highlighted the point that teaching tourism in schools would help learners to get employment and thus contribute to alleviating the problem of unemployment. Hence, Earle (2008) claims that tourism is a sector better placed than most for contributing to government's objectives of job creation, economic growth and poverty relief in South Africa.

Conceptions and Misconceptions of Tourism as a School Subject

Tourism does not have a long history as a school subject (Page & Connel 2006; Walmsley 2009), having only recently received attention as a choice subject offered by a number of schools in the country post-1994. Not surprisingly, there has been an ongoing debate about its status following its introduction as a field of study (Tribe 2001; Leiper 2000). Tribe (2001), for example, maintained that tourism is not a unitary discipline, but consists of two distinct fields, the business aspect of tourism and its non-business aspect. For Tribe, the fact that tourism education originates from industry and initially focused on business aspects weakens its status as a discipline. This view is seconded by Geirsdottir (2008) who suggested that the relation of the discipline to its vocational field motivates teachers to privilege the needs of the industry, thereby weakening its status as a discipline. While some privilege the business aspect of tourism, others favour its more academic aspect. An emerging voice views tourism as a ‘threshold’ subject (Meyer & Land 2003), suggesting that it needs to integrate vocational and academic aspects the better to ensure career prospects and lifelong learning in the field of tourism. This paper is premised on the notion that the way in which schools view tourism informs their decisions about whether or not to include it in the curriculum. The aim of this paper is to investigate the conceptions (and possible misconceptions) underlying the reception of tourism into the school curriculum. The investigation was conducted by canvassing the views of various stakeholders connected in some or other capacity with tourism as a subject in the school curriculum.

Tourism in the South African School Curriculum

Tourism has been approved as a subject for inclusion in the school curriculum. It is offered as one of the three choice subjects that the learner can take to make up the required seven subjects stipulated by the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE 2005). Even though tourism is in the approved list of subjects offered, its status is adversely affected by its omission from the designated subjects list. The subjects not on the designated list will not qualify learners for admission to a Bachelor’s degree, unless combined with four designated subjects (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011). This raises doubts about the viability of tourism in the

curriculum because of the issue of points used by tertiary institutions to determine admission to particular university programmes. The Academic Points System outlined in the Central Application Office document (2010) states that as far as tertiary institutions in KwaZulu-Natal are concerned, points are awarded to all recognised subjects in the NCS, including non-designated ones, with the exception of Life Orientation. So schools appear to be misinterpreting higher education policy, at least as regards the points issue, since universities in KwaZulu-Natal award points for tourism as for other recognised subjects in the NCS. (It needs to be borne in mind, however, that awarding points for a school subject is a matter separate from whether that subject counts for admission to a degree programme; it may only be good for admission to a diploma or certificate programme.) The standing accorded a given school subject by universities' admission policies is important as it strongly influences schools' curriculum decisions. This implies that school subjects require a power base in university curricular offerings in order to achieve higher status in the school curriculum (Paechter 2000). It is against this backdrop that Inui *et al.* (2006) argues for a balanced approach between the vocational and academic aspects of tourism, with a view to its gaining recognition as a subject counting towards university admission for degree purposes.

In some higher education institutions in South Africa, tourism is offered as an academic discipline, counting towards qualifications at the certificate, diploma and degree levels. Consequently, the teaching of tourism in secondary schools would then be perceived as an advantage for learners interested in pursuing studies in tourism at the higher education level. Geldenhuys (2000) asserts that the tourism curriculum in the tertiary education setting should be regarded as an extension of the school curriculum, so that the subject as taught at school level gives learners an advantage for further studies. Still, as long as tourism remains a non-designated school subject, learners interested in pursuing degree studies at university level will have little incentive to choose it at school (Earle 2008), since, as noted above, tourism does not qualify learners for Bachelor's degree entrance. Consequently, obtaining a pass in secondary school tourism gives learners interested in studying tourism at degree level in a university no real advantage. This contradicts the claims by O'Mahony and Sillitoe (2001) who argue that one of the great advantages of tourism as a school subject is that it also has an impact on tourism training at the tertiary level.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis in this paper is underpinned by Rogers' (2003) innovation framework. Rogers' theory argues that the attributes and characteristics of the innovation itself are particularly important in determining the manner of its diffusion and the rate of its adoption. According to this framework, the attributes of the innovation include its nature and its advantages and also determine whether those who will implement it understand it. Rogers (2003) proposes four attributes that are necessary for reducing uncertainty about the innovation. According to him, the relative advantage of an innovation in terms of cost implications and general status is the strongest predictor of its success. The innovation (for example, a new subject in the school curriculum such as tourism) may be seen as providing better opportunities and outcomes than existing programmes, and these considerations could outweigh the innovation's perceived low status. Fullan (2001) emphasised the importance of the link between the proposed innovation and people's conceptions/misconceptions about it. In these terms, the perceived relative advantage of tourism as a school subject would be the determining factor in people's views about it.

The second attribute identified by Rogers (2003) is the compatibility of the innovation (its contextual suitability) with existing programmes in the school. To illustrate, if tourism as a subject is viewed as compatible with existing subjects in the school, uncertainty about its status and value would decrease and attitudes to its introduction could be expected to become more favourable. The third attribute suggested by Rogers is observability. Rogers argues that if members of the school community are able to foresee the results of the innovation, they are more likely to understand it, and to accept and adopt it, if what is foreseen is concluded to be beneficial. In this context, Fullan (2001) cautions against adopting innovations not preceded by a careful examination of whether they effectively address the needs of the community (the intended target). It is therefore important for a school not only to understand the nature of the innovation, but also to anticipate its impact on the community. Working in favour of a community's acceptance of an innovation is its acceptance of the need for change and its willingness to experiment with new ideas (Van Rooy 2005). The fourth attribute suggested by Rogers (2003) is complexity. In this regard, Rogers argues that the complexity of the innovation, together with the manner in which it is

introduced, will determine the level of acceptance by the target community. As a general principle, the more complex the innovation and the process of its introduction, the greater will be the risk of generating misconceptions and resistance. Using Rogers' framework, Chigona and Licker (2008) concluded that the likelihood of an innovation's being adopted depends partly on the attributes identified by Rogers.

Informed by this framework, the study reported in this paper is premised on the notion that the ways in which the stakeholders understand the nature and potential of tourism as an innovation in the school curriculum bear importantly both on its acceptance and effective implementation. The study addressed the question: What are curriculum decision-makers' conceptions and misconceptions regarding tourism as a school subject? In what ways do these influence their decision to include or not include tourism as a subject in the curriculum?

Research Design and Methodology

To address the research questions, data were collected from four high schools in the UThukela district of KwaZulu-Natal which have included tourism as a subject in grades 10-12. As the schools are located in an area declared by UNESCO as a world heritage site (UNESCO 2000), tourism in the vicinity of the selected schools is a thriving industry. To identify the four 'case schools' for the study, purposive sampling as suggested by Merriam (2009) was used. This involved using data obtained from the Uthukela District Examination Office. The schools under study present similar features in their curriculum: in addition to tourism, they all offer science, economic and management sciences and humanities. Busabusa¹, however, offers an additional stream of technical subjects. Two of the schools (Kwasakwa & Nawe) have tourism in all three grades of the FET phase. The other two schools, Kuzolunga and Busabusa, offer tourism in only two grades: at Kuzolunga in grades 11 and 12, and at Busabusa in grades 10 and 11. The numbers of learners taking tourism varied from school to school: at Kwasakwa, enrolment ranged from 9 to 35, at Kuzolunga from 10 to 35, at Nawe from 45 to 55 and at Busabusa from 13 to 32.

¹ Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the schools involved in the study

The persons interviewed at each of the schools included curriculum decision-makers and those with a vested interest in the subject and in curriculum-innovation matters. Accordingly, data were collected from the principal, the Head of Department for Tourism and the tourism teacher in each of the schools. In-depth interviews were conducted individually with a total of 12 participants from all four schools. This paper reports the findings of those interviews as they bear upon the participants' conceptions (and misconceptions) of tourism as a curricular subject on offer to learners.

Conceptions and Misconceptions of Tourism as a School Subject

As the views of the participants in this study suggest, their perspectives on the role and status of tourism as a school subject point to a paradox: on the one hand, tourism is regarded as an important subject inasmuch as it provides learners with vocational skills, inclusive of practical and occupational skills (Busby 2001), and, more importantly, with skills advantageous for securing employment, thereby alleviating the problems of unemployment and poverty in communities. On the other hand, as will be discussed in the section below, the status of tourism in the curriculum is perceived to be low.

Tourism as an Important Subject in the Curriculum

The available literature (e.g. Marshall 2005) suggests that the tourism industry plays a major role as a lead contributor to the economy of South Africa. In the light of that, Le Grange and Beets (2005) argue that the inclusion of tourism as a curricular subject could be of direct benefit to the economy, as well as of indirect benefit by reducing the high unemployment rate through the creation of new career opportunities. This view is supported by Page (2005) who notes that many governments see tourism as offering new employment opportunities in a growing sector of their economies. Participants' understanding of tourism as an important school subject could be influenced by the location of their schools around a world heritage site. So, for example, participants viewed as valuable the potential of tourism to create employment opportunities in the area in which the schools are located; nevertheless, a more global understanding of the subject as a gateway to

career opportunities in the tourism industry in general predominated. In this regard, principals, HODs and teachers were of one mind. To illustrate, one participant stated:

We have included tourism in our curriculum because it is an engaging subject that exposes learners to employment and also career opportunities if it is taught at school (Principal: Kwasakwasa).

The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism declared in 1996 that education and training in tourism had become imperative to provide knowledge about and for the tourism industry. This imperative was recognised by participants in this study; as one principal put it:

There are also new opportunities to venture into new careers that were not known to us as a black community ... through teaching tourism we believe they will be known to us and our learners can follow those careers in the tourism industry (Principal: Kuzolunga).

Furthermore, principals strongly argued that teaching tourism in schools would make learners aware of job and career opportunities in the tourism industry, whether local or farther afield. As one teacher explained:

There are career prospects for learners in this area since it is surrounded by many hotels and there are many tourists who are visiting the area so learners do have opportunities to follow careers in the tourism industry. Learners can follow many careers in tourism or start their own small businesses (Tourism teacher: Nawe).

These views tie in with claims by the South African government (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism 1996) that the majority of South Africans have never seriously enough considered the tourism industry's potential in terms of employment opportunities, one of which would be learners starting up their own small-tourism related businesses after leaving school. On the basis of this perspective, the teaching of tourism in the schools surveyed is viewed as a priority as the respondents believe that the study of tourism will lead to employment opportunities in the tourism industry as well

Conceptions and Misconceptions of Tourism as a School Subject

as to entrepreneurial opportunities. This outlook tallies with the argument by Lewis (2005) that the aim of tourism as a school subject is to prepare learners for joining the work force or becoming self-employed.

Second, linked to the above, the participants in this study also viewed tourism as a subject providing vocational and practical skills yielding immediate benefits for the learners and community. In this perspective, tourism is conceived as a subject that is practical and teaches learners vocational competencies such as occupational and business skills (Braun & Hollick 2006) at an early stage of their schooling. Steynberg, Slabbert and Saayman (2002) claim that a number of countries, including South Africa, have included tourism in the curriculum of secondary schools to equip learners with a range of desired skills, both those occupationally specific to the tourism and hospitality industries and others having a wider application. Under the former head one may point to technical skills such as effective communication and competent customer service; under the latter, one would highlight information-processing skills, critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, and creativity. Explaining the reasons for her school's decision to include tourism in the curriculum, one HOD stated:

We wanted to give learners some skills and knowledge about the tourism industry then they can educate the community about tourism and treating tourists because we have many tourists coming to the area I think we are achieving that by giving learners some skills to work in the tourism industry (HOD: Kwasakwasa).

A teacher from another school agreed:

Tourism is not only a theoretical subject but provides skills at school level. We expected learners to take advantage of this subject and start their own businesses immediately after matric with skills acquired in the subject. This is about tourism developing entrepreneurial skills (Tourism teacher: Kuzolunga).

The findings of the study suggest that stakeholders share a belief that the tourism curriculum focuses on developing skills relevant to the tourism industry's needs. Backing up this belief is the research of Airey (2005) and Breytenbach (2010) whose conclusion is that most of the content in the

tourism curriculum is geared to developing skills that groom students for employment in the tourism industry. These are practical skills such as tour planning, checking procedures, and bookings. On the more theoretical side, the curriculum surveys the basic concepts of the industry and seeks to impart knowledge about it. Germane here is Busby's contention (2001) that tourism programmes should develop skills and competencies required by different facets of the industry in order to offer graduates a range of employment opportunities.

The generally positive assessment of the curriculum was however accompanied by reservations and doubts. Some of the interviewees seemed unsure whether it really equips learners with the skills necessary for a successful career in the tourism industry. Their uncertainties were evident in such statements as:

Tourism content is not clear, to be honest I am not much sure of its content in that way I am not really sure if learners who are doing tourism as a subject are armed with necessary skills for the world of work (Principal: Busabusa).

Yes, we are told that the subject provides skills but we have not seen any of our learners acquiring those skills or maybe demonstrating them in any way (Principal: Kwasakwasa).

Again, although participants viewed tourism as a subject that would open up a range of new career opportunities for learners, concern was expressed about the lack of specific information regarding the location of such careers in the industry (see Lui 2006). In this connection, one principal commented:

There are career prospects in different sectors of the economy, although I am not sure exactly as to what are specific careers but I know that learners can follow many careers because they are all related to tourism (Principal: Kwasakwasa).

The principals in particular felt that there is a need to establish more precisely whether learners are actually being taught the skills required by their potential employers. But this may not be easy to do as, in the view of some scholars, the content of tourism as a field of study is a contested terrain (Ernwarti 2003; Cervera-Taulet & Ruiz-Molina 2008). At the same time, one

should bear in mind Chigona and Licker's caution (2008) that not all innovations can be expected to yield immediate results.

While stakeholders interviewed for this enquiry displayed a degree of ambivalence about tourism as a school subject, particularly in relation to its curricular content, they appear to be unanimous in agreeing that its status in the hierarchy of school subjects is low.

The Low Status of Tourism as a Subject in the Curriculum

Although participants believe that tourism is an important curricular subject at school level because of its potential for improving learners' prospects of employment, they also acknowledge its low status in the school curriculum. The main reason for this is the fact that tourism is vocationally aligned and not a pure academic subject. In the minds of teachers, learners, parents and the public, a principal determinant of a subject's perceived value is whether it counts for admission to a degree programme at a university. As most universities do not offer tourism as a major subject, and as it does not count for admission to university degree programmes, its standing as a school subject inevitably suffers. Even though the National Curriculum Statement grants tourism recognition as a school subject, the fact that it is not on the designated list undermines its standing. As a result, schools tend not to prioritise it, parents tend to regard it as unimportant, and so, in their turn, do teachers and learners. So its relegation to a low status is hardly avoidable. A teacher explained the devaluing of tourism in these terms:

The management and colleagues in the school always send negative comments about tourism. They also feel that it doesn't help learners who want to be admitted to a bachelors [degree] because in the NCS it doesn't count for points. They think it overloads the curriculum unnecessarily (Tourism teacher: Kwasakwasa).

The low status of tourism as a school subject is also a concern for the tourism industry which has questioned the exclusion of tourism from the designated list of subjects (NewstalkZB 2010). At the same time stakeholders within the schools mistakenly assume that subjects not on the designated list are not

recognised for admission to any programmes at the tertiary level. Thus an HOD declared:

I am now not sure if we need to take this subject seriously it gives no points at the university (HOD: Kuzolunga).

Exacerbating the situation is the reported view of district officials who regard tourism as unimportant and have urged its removal from the school curriculum. The attitude of district officials² towards tourism, based, it seems, on a misconception, confronts schools that have included tourism in the curriculum with a dilemma. Certainly, the participants in this study felt discouraged by the district officials' attitude; they reported district officials who visited their schools to review performance as having recommended the dropping of tourism from the curricular offering. As one HOD explained:

District officials have proposed the exclusion of tourism...as the school is too small to have more than two streams...take out one less important subject like tourism so that learners can focus on sciences and accounting (HOD: Kuzolunga).

With tourism as a subject devalued at the university level, the district level and school-management level, can one blame learners and their parents for not taking it seriously. Liu (2006) has noted the constraints on choosing tourism as a school subject and making it a career choice; these constraints affect teachers, learners and parents alike. After all, as Lewis (2005) contends, schools and other stakeholders tend to value those subjects they regard as important, particularly for entry to university degree programmes, and vocational subjects such as tourism fall outside the valued list.

Conclusion and Implications

This study focused on conceptions and misconceptions regarding tourism as an option relatively recently authorised for inclusion in school curricula in

² District officials refers to all officials employed at the district level of the department of Basic Education to support and monitor the implementation of the curriculum

South Africa. Aiming to explore school curriculum decision-makers' conceptions and misconceptions regarding tourism and how these influence their decisions whether or not to include it as a subject in the curriculum, the study canvassed the views of the principal stakeholders in four KwaZulu-Natal secondary schools in which tourism forms part of the curricular offering. All four schools are located in an area where the tourism industry is well developed. Participants' views as reported in the study suggest that the status and value of tourism as a subject in the curriculum lay bare a paradox, for tourism is simultaneously viewed as having value and as having low status, and this contradiction poses a threat to its viability and to its continuance in the school curriculum.

The view that tourism is a subject with value is based on the perception that it opens up career opportunities for learners which were not available to all in the past. It is also seen as a subject offering immediate benefits as the skills taught in tourism could enable learners to find employment even while still at school. Breytenbach (2010) contends that the tourism curriculum should focus on providing skills that prepare learners for career prospects and the workplace. As a vocationally oriented subject, tourism should equip learners with the kinds of occupational and business skills that would render them employable in the tourism industry after they leave school (Stumpf & Niebuhr 2012; Braun & Hollick 2006).

A conflicting view about tourism that emerged from the data is that it is a low-status subject in the curriculum. The fact that schools strongly opt for academic subjects, which offer access to degree programmes in universities, at the expense of vocational subjects, which do not, has had the effect of reducing the status of tourism. Making the situation worse is the antagonistic attitude to tourism on the part of district officials who are urging its removal from the curriculum on the grounds that it overloads the curriculum and that it does not count for admission to a degree track at universities. The mistaken conclusion to which this fact has given rise is that tourism therefore offers learners no real future. This misperception has been noted by Mihalič (2005) who states that negative perceptions about tourism have led teachers in secondary schools to resist its inclusion in the curriculum.

Applying Rogers' (2003) innovation theory to the tourism issue, one could say that curriculum planners in the schools surveyed have fallen foul of the attribute of complexity inasmuch as they have given too much weight to tourism's vocational orientation and too little to its academic component.

They also appear to have fallen foul of the attribute of compatibility which stipulates that a proposed innovation should be compatible, that is, contextually appropriate, in relation to the school's existing programmes. Given the high value the four schools surveyed set on academic subjects giving access to Bachelor degree studies at tertiary level, it may be that they did not give as much thought as they ought to have done to the question of how suitable a match tourism would be in relation to the rest of the curricular offerings. Another of the attributes in Rogers' (2003) model is that of observability, which stresses the importance of anticipating the results of a proposed innovation. According to the findings of this study, the inclusion of tourism in the curriculum was not preceded by an 'impact assessment', as it were.

It may be that the schools' past failure to take into account the factors to which Rogers ascribes importance in his innovation theory is the main reason for the reservations and uncertainties now being expressed with regard to the place and the future of tourism in the school curriculum. From remarks passed by some of the interviewees, it appears that tourism as a curricular subject in the schools surveyed has arrived at a crossroads. This should be a matter of concern for various directorates (curriculum advisory, human resources, planning, and assessment among others) in the Department of Basic Education; at the same time it should be a spur to the Department to participate more actively, and over a longer period of time, in the process of introducing new subjects into the school curriculum. Such participation should include advocacy strategies and should seek to provide a fuller understanding of the new subject prior to its introduction into the school curriculum than has been the case hitherto.

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Conceptions and Misconceptions of Tourism as a School Subject

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Conceptions and Misconceptions of Tourism as a School Subject

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