Developing an Inclusive Curriculum Strategy: An Action Research Case

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Abstract

One of the changes that came with implementation of the White Paper 6 (2001) within the South African education system was that teachers had to develop and implement an inclusive curriculum. An inclusive curriculum is meant to empower all students with knowledge taking into account their socio-historical-cultural background as well as their abilities and needs to guarantee success for all. Drawing from Legitimation Code Theory and Freire's critical pedagogy, this critical participatory action research, the researcher worked with the professional learning group of teachers in a secondary school to brainstorm, reflect and adjust curriculum planning, delivery, and assessment processes to make them more inclusive. Data was collected during the four phases of action research i.e., planning, action, observation, and reflection. It was then analysed through group interpretative meetings with a professional learning group. A meta-analysis of the action research process was conducted through thematic content analysis post action research process by the researcher. The study has revealed that the key elements of developing an inclusive curriculum at the planning, delivery and assessment stages of the curriculum development are significant. The study makes further assertions that developing an inclusive curriculum goes beyond the technical aspects of pedagogical content knowledge but the underlying relational mechanisms acting covertly on the curriculum development process. The study makes recommendation to teachers regarding fundamental principles of developing, delivering, and assessing an inclusive curriculum.

Key words: curriculum, inclusive curriculum, action research, professional learning group, critical pedagogy

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Introduction

Curriculum development has become a focal point in South African education since the advent of the new political dispensation. The pronouncements by the then ministers of education professors Bengu and Kader Ashmal; Mrs, Naledi Pandor, and Angie Motshekga culminated into curriculum 2005, RNCS, and then lately CAPS. This process has resulted in rapid changes which sometimes presented challenges to curriculum development at the school level. The changes which were mostly administrative and bureaucratic have influenced how curriculum development is conceptualized and understood by teachers. Many teachers have lamented the restrictive and imposition of curriculum changes which are characterized by less teacher's participation an involvement. However, the sentiments of teachers have brought to the fore the need for a grassroots curriculum process that is democratic and teacher-led. Teachers believe that their role in curriculum development process especially at the school level cannot be underestimated. Be that as it may, there are also skeptics about the ability of teachers to effectively develop curriculum at the school level. Various ways have been employed to raise the skills of teacher in curriculum development, however, the successes and pitfalls regarding this process have not been well documented. Therefore, this paper analysis the action research contribution to the process of skilling teachers in curriculum development. In this paper, it is argued that action research provides an appropriate platform for teachers to develop their curriculum development practices. The following research question guided the enquiry process:

What is the role of action research in enhancing the curriculum development skills of teachers?

Literature Review

The Notion of Inclusive Curriculum and Curriculum Development

Bunbury (2020) characterizes an inclusive curriculum as the curriculum that departs from a social model of inclusion than the medical approach. Inclusive curriculum takes into account the diversity of students and seeks to respond to the needs of all students, it is proactive and make reasonable adjustments

to the educative process. Bunbury (2020) also identifies several aspects as constituents of inclusive curriculum i.e. curriculum that embraces diversity in support and learning, flexible in teaching and assessment and apply principle of differentiation and adjustment.

Conversely, Stentiford and Koutsouris (2022) define inclusive curriculum as the curriculum which focuses on including the identification of knowledge students wish to learn, the pedagogical strategies of delivery and the actual content that should be delivered. The process of teaching and learning, the tasks involved in accomplishing this, as well as the assessment approaches to be involved are critical attributes to design of an inclusive curriculum. Smuckers (2022:6) highlights the principles and rational for designing inclusive curriculum as:

> Addresses discrimination by removing barriers to student access and learning; meets the needs of all students through equity and equal opportunity; and encompasses content, pedagogy, and assessment methods, including access to equitable learning experience.

Smuckers (2022:7) goes further to identify the defining characteristics of inclusive curriculum as *firstly*, welcoming in that it allows students to be who they really are i.e their social identities. *Secondly*, accessible in that all student can access the learning material and are in the position to engage with it. *Thirdly*, challenging in that it presents the students with an opportunity to grow and discover new knowledge. *Fourthly*, intentional in the sense that it is goal oriented as it anticipates student's needs, experiences and expectations. *Fifthly*, it is flexible and can be adjusted from time to time to respond to the needs of students and the conditions needed for effective teaching and learning. Lastly, inclusive curriculum is authentic as in takes into account the student's context and their background i.e it is culturally relevant.

The creation of curriculum is characterised as curriculum development. The process of developing curriculum involves different stages – i.e. situation analysis, setting objectives, determining content, creating learning experiences, implementing and evaluating curriculum (Makoelle 2016). There are basically two approaches to curriculum development, i.e administrative and grassroots model. The administrative model of curriculum assumes a centralised and bureaucratic approach and rely less on stakeholder participation. On the other hand, grassroots model departs from a premise

that curriculum development should be a bottom-up process that involves stakeholders. The research has shown that the latter approach has positive dividends for the process of inclusive curriculum development. Inclusive education is founded on principles of collaboration by stakeholders as a result, the development of an inclusive curriculum therefore, has to be participatory and involve all in the process of inclusion (Makoelle 2016). However, Yang and Li (2022:1) postulate that culture has an influence on curriculum development practices. They assert that 'the influence of culture on curriculum may not always be top-down, and cultural change can happen through a bottom-up approach, once the teacher is more conscious about the education system and dominant culture'. Johnson and Levitan (2020) aver that a collaborative curriculum development process is important as it emancipates stakeholders involved. The significance of a curriculum development process that takes into account the indigenous community cultures, values, and identities leads to a community-driven curriculum development process.

Curriculum Development in the South African Context

Since the birth of South African democracy in 1994, our schooling system has undergone massive curricula changes with a huge impact on teacher agency. In this paper, I will try to explore the historiography of the school curriculum in South Africa to highlight its impact on the role of teachers in curricula change. It will be argued here that the inherited legacy of the past meant that socio-cultural mediation tools needed for curricula change were not spread evenly as schools for blacks struggled to implement the new curriculum. This paper illustrates how teachers respond to curricula changes is historically conditioned and therefore should be understood as a product of history. In Bourdieu's (1990) terms curricula change can be viewed as 'structured structuring structure' to illustrate the complexity of such activities as simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the social world. Since the advent of the new educational dispensation the curriculum development process seems to have been decentralised. Lately, though, that there have been calls to decolonize curriculum is a clear demonstration that those whom curriculum is meant for, are not participating fully. In this case Van Jaarsveldt, De Vries & Kroukamp (2018) caution about striking a balance between decolonisation of curriculum and curriculum internationalization which may pose competing priorities for curriculum development.

Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) Knower Gazes

I am using Legitimation Code Theory (Maton 2013), in particular 'knower gazes' to illustrate how curricula changes shaped different teacher identities/ dispositions or 'knower gazes' over time. I am using this theory as a golden thread to hold my argument throughout this paper to make a strong argument for action research as a way of cultivating professional gaze needed for curriculum change in an unequal education context like ours. Bernstein (1971) argued vehemently that the potential for change in relations between social classes is intrinsic to human subjects acting within a field of relational struggles and power relations. The main tenant of this paper is to illustrate that it is through teacher agency that we can engage with inequalities and transform classroom practice and action research present an opportunity to achieve this end.

Using LCT (Maton 2013) curriculum change can be viewed as a 'field of social practice' with strongly bounded knowers with specialised modes of being, seeing and acting. Their dispositions (knower gazes) are based on different trajectories and experiences. This concept of gazes is inherited from Bernstein (2000) who described a 'gaze' as a particular mode of recognising and realising what counts as legitimate truth in a field of social practice. Building on both Bernstein and Bourdieu, Maton (2013) conceptualised different modes or kinds of gazes. These are as follows:

(1) *Born gaze* where legitimate knower is viewed to possess such gaze purely as a result of natural talent or innate abilities.

(2) *Social gaze* is determined largely by social category, like class, race, gender and sexuality.

(3) Cultivated gaze with bases of knowing based on dispositions that can be inculcated through interaction with more knowledgeable others over time.

(4) Trained is acquired through training in procedures or specialised principles.

Gazes are 'real' (causal powers) in critical realist terms with emergent properties, tendencies and effects – they can therefore enable or constrain professional agency. Such gazes are historically conditioned hence in the next

part I explore the historiography of teacher autonomy in South Africa to highlight the importance of action research in cultivating the professional gaze essential for curriculum development.

Apartheid Era and Teacher Agency

When the Nationalist Party came into power in 1948 the Christian Education Policy (CNEP) was established as the cornerstone of apartheid. As Enslin (1986: 140) observed, this was to ensure that education for blacks 'must of necessity be organized and administered by Whites …' and that, 'the blacks in their state of 'Cultural Infancy' need guidance of the superior White culture …'. Black teachers were prevented from acquiring knowledge of curriculum development as their education system was administered by whites. School inspectors (mainly white male officials) were tasked to monitor the compliance of schools with apartheid in almost all aspects of schooling, including curriculum and assessment (Jansen 1999). Jansen recalled that it was until the 1990s that we managed to get rid of the,

> *… centralised curriculum policy, which was variously described as racist, Eurocentric, sexist, authoritarian, prescriptive, unchanging, context blind and discriminatory* (1999: 4).

This was not uncontested terrain as progressive education forces emerged with alternative views. For instance, in the 1990s National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) generated 'policy options' for the African National Congress (ANC) which eventually took over as governor in 1994. However, considering asymmetrical relations of power in education, apartheid agenda remains intact and continues to reproduce education inequalities.

Using Maton's (2013) notion of 'gazes' we can therefore say curriculum development during the apartheid era was a manifestation of 'social gaze'. For one to express one's view on the curriculum one had to be a 'white-male official' – social gaze and this was exclusionary. The teacher's role was reduced to a technicist implementer of racist, sexist and exclusionary syllabus. Teacher education (both in-set and pre-set) was about training teachers to follow syllabus rather than critical academic engagement which is key in shaping teacher autonomy and agency. As Chisholm (1999) lamented, apartheid created schools that were under surveillance by white

inspectors and this undermined any thinking about the development of teacher professional agency.

Consequently, teachers acquired a 'trained gaze' (following procedures) during this period and were excluded from the domains of powerful curriculum knowledge (Muller 2010). As Kraak (1999: 23) put it,

> *... the teacher was subservient to the dictates of the state; tasks prescribed by an imposed syllabus.*

Post-apartheid Curriculum Reforms and Teacher Agency

With the birth of C2005 and the emergence of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) in 1996, teachers for the first time in the history of our education system were expected to engage with a curriculum discourse (Kraak 1999). This was indeed ... *completely foreign to their understanding and practices* (Jansen 1999: 7) as the curriculum was a sole prerogative of 'white male officials' during the apartheid years. While teachers were excluded in discussions and debates which led to the adoption of OBE, its implementation afforded the teachers more space towards operationalisation and delivery of the curriculum. All of sudden teachers were expected to develop their learning programmes. This created enormous pressure and anxiety amongst teachers and schools as they struggled to figure out their roles towards implementation of OBE (Jansen 1999; and Soudien & Baxen 1999). This was the manifestation of 'code clashes' Maton (2013) or 'hysteresis' (Bourdieu 1990) as the curriculum discourse demanded a different orientation to meaning. Bourdieu refers to the disjuncture between habitus and field as *hysteresis* and this indicates the disparity between the new opportunities associated with field change and agents whose habitus leaves them unable to recognise the values of new positions. In this case, progressive curriculum policies created space for teachers to exercise freedom (agency) in developing learning programmes but they were not able to recognise the values of this new position and therefore failed to implement the intended curriculum.

Following criticism from all walks of life, C2005 was revised and various changes were made, in particular around the curriculum design features (Harley & Wedekind 2004). Curriculum was streamlined and technocratic jargon was removed in the development of what was to be later called the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). However, as Msibi and Mchunu

(2012) noted, teachers again failed to implement the revised version of the curriculum even though much more effort were made in strengthening 'training' for the curriculum implementation. Once again, following another hail of criticism mainly from academics and politicians, the NCS had to be reviewed. Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motsekga announced the end of OBE and the introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). While CAPS is celebrated as a victory in bringing 'knowledge back' in the curriculum (Hoadley 2012) as the content is re-packaged, sequenced and paced for teachers the inadvertent upshot is that teacher autonomy is highly compromised (Msibi & Mchunu 2012).

However, it is important to highlight that in a context where large numbers of teachers struggle with content knowledge, clear guidelines with explicit depth and breadth of content knowledge to be covered cannot be undervalued. While CAPS might be seen as tramping on teacher autonomy by specifying content (Msibi & Mchunu 2012) it is my view that this is justifiable but as a temporal mechanism to ensure epistemological access for all while efforts are made to empower teachers.

To maximise benefits of curriculum, change much more emphasis should be put on teacher development. What can be deduced from this history is that while there has been much focus on curriculum change in post-1994, this was not coupled with initiatives towards teacher development. It is through the *cultivation of professional agency/gaze* that we can reclaim teacher autonomy and action research presents us with an opportunity to achieve this goal.

Relevance of Freire's Approach to Curriculum Development to SA Context

In Freire's conception of teaching and learning the concept of 'emancipation' take the central stage. What it means is that the teacher and the learner have a curriculum either hidden or overt as a tool to foster change and transformation. The curriculum may serve as a tool for empowerment or constrain on part of both the teacher and student agency. In Freire's critical consciousness both the teacher and the learner have to engage with the status quo by questioning the colonizing forms of knowledge and practices. In their work Mahmoudi, Khoshnood and Babaei (2014) highlight the significance of curriculum planning as part of Freire's notion of critical pedagogy. Similarly,

Sinwell (2022) postulates that Freire's approach to teaching and learning is geared towards democratization and the attainment of social justice which is critical for curriculum development and the delivery process. In support of this line of argument, Botman (2016) avers that Freire's perspective is critical for teachers in the South African context given the injustices and the inflexible curriculum practices of the past apartheid education era. The intersection between the notion of equity and inclusion and critical pedagogy presents a platform for enhancing social justice and redress past exclusive curriculum practices.

Context of the Study

During the past apartheid era the role of teachers in curriculum development was the one of mere implementers of curriculum framework. The new educational dispensation came with more responsibility on part of the teachers to be the custodians of the curriculum development at the classroom and subject levels. This renewed approach to curriculum development came with challenges as teachers where not trained in curriculum development. Workshops were predominantly used to cascade the curriculum which often teacher regarded as not enough to make an impact on their knowledge to develop curriculum at their level. This study was conducted in a school where teachers thought it was now time to take matters of curriculum development close to the factory floor which in this case is the classroom. Action research becomes the vehicle thought which these group of teachers research their curriculum development practices and draw some evidence-based conclusions. According to Nawab (2021) action research is known to be an effective vehicle for teacher professional development even in schools situated in rural or remote contexts.

Methodology

Participatory Action Research Design

The study adopted Participatory Action Research (PAR). Fifteen teachers formed a community of inquiry to research their own curriculum development practices at the classroom level. According to Dumitru (2012) a community of inquiry is a group of practitioners from same or different fields who work together to develop their knowledge or practice based on

common interest. It is based on collaboration, democratic and assumes a dialogical relationship and transparent communication about goals and aims in order to change or improve practice or knowledge for the better. In this study fifteen teachers formed a community of inquiry and they were conveniently selected i.e if they showed the willingness to take part in the study. This study took place in a selected school where teachers felt they needed to improve their curriculum development practices.

Data Collection

The PAR process started with the establishment of the research group. The research agreed to have rotating secretarial and chairperson roles, elected whenever there was a need. This is done in order to deal with power relations between the researcher and co-participants (Struminska-Kutra & Scholl 2022). The study adopted the PAR process by Kemmis and Mactaggart (2007). It is central to how the enquiry process was conducted. The process followed the following PAR stages (see figure 1).

Figure 1: PAR Cycle

The study followed the following phases.

Determining the need to improve curriculum development practices: The research group started by determining the objectives of the project. This was done by agreeing on research questions. The overarching research question was: *How can curriculum development practices be enhanced through action research?*

Determining current curriculum development practice and developing an improvement strategy: The research team started by reviewing the current micro-curriculum development practices a, the review was based on the following questions;

> *What do we do when we develop curriculum and why use and why?*
> *Which alternative ways can curriculum development be enhanced?*

The analysis of curriculum development practices was analysed into the following phases of a curriculum development: Situation analysis, determining content, creating learning experiences, implementing and evaluating curriculum.

The research team then agreed to use their current curriculum documents such as learning programmes, lessons and assessment tools to analyse their current curriculum development processes.

Identifying the area of improvement and collecting evidence: The research group identified areas that needed improvement about how they developed the curriculum. It was agreed that teachers would observe one another for three consecutive lessons to evaluate the implementation and delivery of the curriculum. Teachers also did the peer review of their newly developed curriculum documents such as learning programmes, lessons and assessment types and tools. The group met twice a week to reflect on the inquiry process and make some group interpretative reflections and conclusions.

Analysis of Data

Data was analysed at two levels. *First*, the analysis with the participants through group interpretative meetings. During these meetings all the data

collected through each stage of PAR was reflected upon and the participants made their own conclusions. For instance, questions such as: what have we learners from PAR in terms of curriculum development process? How have PAR helped us develop an inclusive curriculum? During these reflective discussions agreements were made on simple majority and differing views were recorded.

Second, after the PAR group interpretative analysis process was finalized and teachers have made their conclusions, the researcher then requested all the data that was generated from the action research process to evaluate the role action research has played in the teacher's ability and skills to develop the curriculum. Data was composed of minutes of meetings from their action research activities, documents such as learning programmes, lessons and assessment types and tools. Focus group interviews were held with teachers who participated in the action research process. The following question was asked to stimulate a conversation with teachers: do you think action research has changed your views and practices about curriculum development? Follow-up questions were asked when more information was needed. The analysis of data was inductiveand thematic and focused on harvesting the themes from the data. Thomas (2003:1) describe inductive analysis's as 'allowing research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies'. According to Braun & Clarke (2012:1) thematic analysis is a systematic analysis method of identifying, organising, and providing insights into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. The themes were then supported with quotes from the focus group interviews.

Trustworthiness

In order to maintain the trustworthiness of the study multiple sources of data were used (Lennie 2006). The process of member check was conducted in order to verify the accuracy and correctness of the data.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical considerations were followed such as ensuring the anonymity of the school and participants, the signing of the consent forms by participants and getting permission from the principal and school management team.

Findings

The findings in this section are discussed according to the themes that emerged from the data analysis. The findings are stated and supported by a direct quote from data.

Theme: Action Research and Teacher Power

The study has demonstrated that developing a curriculum through action research has a profound influence on teacher power. The collective effort on curriculum development enhances the role of teachers in making choices and decisions about the curriculum. For instance, one of the teachers alluded,

> *Going through action research has taught me that the development of curriculum is an empowering process if it is done collaboratively as teachers develop a sense of improved consciousness knowing that they are in charge of their knowledge.*

The study indicates that teachers become aware of how to manage their power through shared values of curriculum development principles and practices. For instance, one of the teachers highlighted 'You become central to the extent to which curriculum is implemented and evaluated within the context of exercising our shared responsibilities as teachers'.

The implication of the teacher collaboration seems to also enhance the teacher's development of a shared understanding of the notion of inclusive curriculum, its constituent elements and how it could be developed. For instance, reflecting on PAR process one of the teachers indicated:

> *At least we have developed a shared understanding as to what an inclusive curriculum is, i.e it is emancipatory for both teacher and student, interactive and seeks to widen the participation of all students in the learning process.*

Theme: Action Research and Pedagogical Choices

The study has demonstrated that curriculum development through action research enables teachers to enhance their ability to make pedagogical choices as a collective. These choices include their ability to collectively determine pedagogical methodological and pedagogical content knowledge choices and practices resulting in a collaborative and cooperative pedagogical conscious-

ness. The following extract is a clear testimony to this assumption,

> *Our curriculum development practices have been enhanced especially where one would have not felt confident. For example, taking initiative one has become bold because you have the support and the backing of your colleagues.*

The interdependence of teachers through action research seems to culminate in the strengthening of curriculum pedagogical content knowledge for instance, asked about how their knowledge of the subjects have been affected by taking part in the action research one of the teachers cited 'I have learned from my colleagues and thus have improved my ability to facilitate the teaching and learning of my subject knowledge, even in areas that I felt less confident in the past'.

Theme: Action Research and Curriculum Ideology

The study has found that South African teachers have a collective consciousness to deal with the past curriculum development practices. Dealing with the past seem harder if teachers attempt as individuals to make sense of past curriculum development practices. It became evident in the study that micro curriculum development offers teachers the platform to challenge past regimes of curriculum practices and develop a progressive and democratic framework of curriculum development which may lead to curriculum regime change. This was attested by the following extract by one of the teachers,

> *Working together in curriculum development through action research have developed our interpersonal relationships which allow us to challenge any form of curriculum ideology that seeks to colonise our thinking. We are vigilant of suspicious, constraining and limiting curriculum development practices.*

Theme: Action Research and Curriculum Pedagogical Identity

The study has shown that a collective consciousness developed by teachers in collaborative curriculum development processes enhances their pedagogical identity. This means they develop common values, beliefs and concept-

tions about the curriculum which then shape their pedagogical identity which in turn influences the curriculum development practices they would privylege. The following statement attests to this.

> *Since our joint action research curriculum development processes one was able to refine one's understanding and beliefs about curriculum development. We have understood that one's pedagogical identity is influenced by our collective consciousness and the effort to improve one another.*

Theme: Action Research and Curriculum Praxis

The study has shown that through action research teachers were able to evaluate one another on how progressive their teaching and learning practices were in order to enhance both their emancipation and that of their learners. They were able to assess the extent which their practices were disempowering to learners. For instance, in reflecting on the use of curriculum as enabling or disabling one teacher alluded 'Researching our curriculum development and curriculum delivery practices have provided a platform where we can challenge the excessive use of authority; we learn to balance between emancipating and disempowering practices'.

The study further demonstrated that teachers have learned to listen to the voices of learners. Asked about how they have learned to use curriculum as an enabling tool for their learners one of the teachers cited:

> *In the curriculum development process the mere fact that we created space for learners to voice their expectations, this challenged how we did things and thus stimulated an enabling curriculum development process for the learners.*

Discussion and Findings

Curriculum development is a tool for power as it places the curriculum developer at the centre of determining which knowledge and epistemological practices become privileged (Botha 2018). In this study teachers were able to come to a share understanding about the meaning and enactment of the notion of inclusive curriculum which is very critical for curriculum delivery (Makoelle 2016; Smuckers 2022). Through action research teachers can

learn to manage this power especially if a culture of progressivism is to be attained within the curriculum development process (Avison, Baskerville & Myers 2007). As Yang & Li (2022) put it, the bottom-up process of curriculum development may transform the curriculum development culture and make it more inclusive and democratic which are significant for the delivery of an inclusive curriculum. Action research ensures that decisions about curriculum development are made at grassroots level because teachers are at the centre of the process of curriculum delivery.

The notion of pedagogical choices is at the heart of curriculum development and thus through action research the scope of choices is widened to provide teachers with a broad base from which to draw (Van Der Merwe & Bekker 2013). The reflective nature of action research creates a stimulating environment to analyse potential constraining and enabling regimes of the curriculum development process thus contributing not only for democratic, open and less restrictive curriculum development process to teachers but also to their learners (Roose, Bie & Roets 2014). Action research assists teachers in shaping the collective consciousness which in turn shapes their curriculum development identity. Action research enables curriculum praxis which creates a progressive and democratic development process.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The curriculum development process is a daunting task and based on the findings of this study it is sufficient to recommend that communities of inquiry into curriculum development be established in schools to probe the curriculum development practices to improve the process at the school level. Given the history of non-involvement of South African teachers in curriculum development processes, action research can be a better way to facilitate the curriculum development process.

While this study cannot make a claim that action research can solve all curriculum development challenges teachers face in their schools it however lays the basis for further discussion about the role of teachers in researching and reflecting on their curriculum development practices.

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