The "Integrated Curriculum" for Primary Schools in Lesotho: Where Is the 'Integration'?

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Abstract

In the era of reforms, the text of curriculum policy and its supporting documents provide a blueprint that drives the teaching and learning processes in the new directions envisaged by policymakers. One dominant narrative within new curriculum policies is 'integration.' However, education systems have embraced this narrative without much unpacking of what it means for the agents and their extant practices. The dominant narrative in Lesotho's 'new' curriculum suggests that it was designed to foster integration in the country's primary schools. This study sought to uncover evidence of integration and or lack thereof through the deconstruction of this narrative and by unpacking the curriculum discourse and its implications for practice. The paper uses Derrida's deconstruction theory to read and engage with the discourse on curriculum integration in these documents: Curriculum and Assessment Policy (2009), Guide to Continuous Assessment and Integrated Curriculum (Grade 1-7 syllabi). By deconstructing the integration narrative in these policy documents, the study's findings reveal contradictory messages about integration within the curriculum policy and its supporting documents. The policy advocates for a 'holistic view and treatment of issues', yet the syllabi promote compartmentalisation of subjects. The policy also espouses different integration models within the new curriculum. Therefore, this paper argues that the contradictory messages and the unclear integration model followed can lead to multiple interpretations by the implementing agents, which ultimately cripples the implementation at the classroom level. This deconstruction and unpacking of discourse may contribute to scholarship, curriculum evaluation and policy implementation during educational reforms.

Keywords: assessment, curriculum reform, curriculum, deconstruction, integrated curriculum, integration, policy

1. Introduction

1.1 Policy-practice Gap

> '*What is designed in ministries, debated among academics, incorporated into teacher training and school curricula, and taught at the classroom level is hardly the same thing'* [Schulte, 2018].

From the extract above, it is evident that discrepancies occur during the implementation of curriculum reforms. This gap between the planned and enacted curriculum has troubled policymakers for decades, and scholars have subsequently referred to it as the 'implementation gap' (Hudson et al., 2019). Due to this gap, educational policies rarely reach classrooms and fail to change extant practices (OECD, 2017). These shortcomings are often blamed on the implementing agents (Hill, 2006). With this focus, policymakers seemingly disregard the inadequacies of the messages embedded in the policies and their supporting documents.

This paper argues that implementation failure can no longer be reduced to the question of resistance or misunderstanding by agents. Inconsistencies within policy texts and the messages contained in those texts have great potential to influence the interpretation of policy readers. According to Russell and Bray (2013), educators are more likely to interpret policies in ways that diverge from the explicit policy intent when the policy is ambiguous. This paper explores the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) reform policy with its supporting documents to determine if they are aligned and promote what the policy narrative of integration envisages.

Prior studies affirm that policy implementation is problematic. As a result, conventional policy implementation research espoused theoretical explanations to describe this problem (Spillane et al., 2002). However, based on empirical findings, contemporary literature on policy implementation focuses on the interaction between reform policy, the agents and their context (Gawlik, 2015; Porter et al., 2015). Little research has been conducted to show how the texts of the policy and its supporting documents may enhance or constrain the agents' practices. Hence, the following sub-section provides the literature on critical aspects of this paper.

1.2 Integrated Curriculum within the Reform Context

1.2.1 Reform

An educational reform policy is designed to improve education quality by changing the institutional context in schools. As such, policymakers, who are the initiators of reform, are endlessly searching for a blueprint that would have an everlasting impact on the classroom (Gawlik, 2015). These reforms are laden with ideas of what would work best and challenge the school status quo. Scholars agree that turning these ideas into school reality is a complex process beyond the mere execution of policy prescriptions (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013; OECD, 2017). As a result, a gap continues to exist between policy design and execution at the school level (Chirwa et al., 2023).

Over the last few decades, a barrage of reform policies has reached schools but have rarely penetrated classrooms (Woulfin & Jones, 2020). In this regard, implementation scholars agree that the success of any reform depends not only on proper policy design but also on several

issues that come into play. For instance, sense-making scholars make a persuasive argument that the cognition of the implementing agents has a far-reaching impact on the implementation processes (Bandura, 1989; Nabavi, 2012; Shaked & Schechter, 2017).

Several studies establish the importance of teachers' cognitive engagement with curriculum reform. These studies argue that for implementation to succeed, teachers should understand what the policy envisages to construct a practical implementation approach in their classrooms (Jansen, 1998; Roychoudhury & Kahle, 1999; Spillane et al., 2002).

1.2.2 Debates on Curriculum Integration

For this paper, curriculum refers to an officially written document indicating interrelated sets of plans and the entire range of experiences concerned with unfolding the abilities of learners, which they complete under the guidance of a learning institution (Glatthorn et al., 2006; Breault & Marshall, 2010; Carl, 2009; Su, 2012). Among the different types of curricula, the planned and enacted curriculum will be considered in this paper. The planned curriculum appears in the state and locally produced documents, while the enacted curriculum is reflected in actual implementation (Alsubaie, 2015; Mitchell, 2016).

Integration refers to merging themes and values, an attempt to interrelate content with learning experiences and activities to meet student needs (Drake & Reid, 2018; Hunkins & Ornstein, 1988). It entails the horizontal relationships among various themes or topics in the different subject areas, making learning meaningful when content from one field is related to another (Drake, 1998; Fogarty & Stoehr, 1991).

How curricular content and experiences are organised reveals a curriculum approach. According to Beane et al. (1986), the curricula approach refers to a pattern of organisation employed in deciding on different aspects of a teaching-learning context. For this paper, the discussion is mainly on the subject area, broad field, and learner-centred approaches. The first two have standard features, and the last one differs considerably. The subject-area approach entails organising curriculum plans around separate subjects, emphasising mastery of skills. In a broad-field approach, two or more subjects are combined into a broader field domain (Beane *et al.*, 1986; Lewy, 1991). For example, literature, art, history and music may be combined to form a humanities programme. For the two approaches mentioned above, the subject matter is at heart. On the contrary, the learner-centred approach values learners' active engagement, and their voice in the learning process hence curriculum content is organised to address the learners' needs, abilities and interests (Shah, 2020; Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019).

1.2.3 Enacting Integrated Curriculum

The studies that investigate the implementation of an integrated curriculum paint a gloomy picture. For instance, scholars found that teachers are challenged by inadequate professional development, a lack of knowledge, skills and a deep understanding of integration (Fu & Sibert, 2017; Ibraimova, 2017). Integrated curriculum implementation entails equipping learners with skills that would enable them to solve real-life problems by using their knowledge from different disciplines (Corlu & Aydin, 2016).

The primary purpose of an integrated curriculum is to develop a holistic view of learning (Ibraimova, 2017). This curriculum is preferred over various curricula because of its nature. It is learner-centred and promotes learner engagement (Lam et al., 2013). It is considered the curriculum that prepares learners to face real-life challenges by equipping them with 21st-century skills (Dambudzo, 2015; Kahveci & Atalay, 2015).

Institutional and learners' appreciation of the integrated curriculum, fixed teaching schedule, facilitation of skills, curriculum management and the provision of feedback were the challenges in implementing the integrated curriculum (Shankar, 2014). Besides these, integrated curriculum implementation requires the use of participatory methods suitable only for small groups of learners (Kucharcikova & Tokarcikova, 2016). As a result, the assumption is that it is challenging for the instances where there are large groups of learners.

The proper and sustainable implementation of the integrated curriculum requires teachers to have a theoretical knowledge for curriculum integration, know their roles, and understand the curriculum (Park, 2008). The implementation is further affected by the availability of time for planning and compatibility of working hours (Fu & Sibert, 2017; Webster & Ryan, 2018).

The framework for the current curriculum reform in Lesotho ought to be CAP. This reform resulted from the weakness identified in the previous curriculum. This policy envisages integration, learner-centred, activity-based and participatory methodologies and a close link between instruction and assessment (MoET, 2009).

Considering the complex nature of integration, one may ask whether the messages within the policy and the guiding documents for implementation signify the policymakers' intentions. Are the messages congruent enough to enhance teachers' interpretation? In this regard, the following extract is appropriate to raise concerns regarding the messages passed from policymakers to teachers.

> *The notion of a direct relationship between signifier and signified is no longer tenable. Instead, we have infinite shifts in meaning relayed from one signifier to another [Guillemette & Cossette, 2006].*

This paper aims to deconstruct the integration narrative encapsulated in the relevant policy documents to determine its inherent meanings and implications for practice. Therefore, deconstruction as a frame of reference for this paper is discussed below (1.3.2). Recent research on implementing an integrated curriculum in Lesotho consistently demonstrated that the enactment of CAP is ineffective at the classroom level and that the agents do not understand the policy prescriptions (Ralebese et al., 2022; Ralebese, 2018; Selepe, 2016; Tafai, 2017). These studies concur with Spillane, Reiser and Reimer (2002), who indicated two decades ago that implementing agents do not always understand the policy messages as intended.

1.3 Research Questions, Significance of the Study and Theoretical Framework

1.3.1 Research Questions and Significance of the Study

In light of the literature above, the following questions become relevant: What message(s) are portrayed to the agents by the policy and supporting documents? What inhibits the agents'

expected understanding of the policy prescriptions?

With the above questions in mind, it becomes crucial to deconstruct the text from CAP and its supporting documents and determine its impact on agents' understanding and the impact thereof on implementation. This is necessary because CAP requires a radical change in the primary education discourse with three essential prescriptions for implementation: change in pedagogy, change in teachers' and learners' roles and a call for integration. As it is, 'Integration' appears to be the central narrative in this current reform, hence the name 'Integrated Curriculum' (IC).

Studies have explicitly focused on implementing this curriculum reform in Lesotho. To cite a few, Raselimo and Mahao (2015) identified the critical opportunities that CAP brings. Still, they hasten to emphasise that this policy contains serious threats that have great potential to hamper its implementation. Further research outlines teachers' concerns and debates regarding curriculum relevance (Raselimo, 2017; Tafai, 2017).

Furthermore, teachers' interpretation, enactment of the reform process and the principals' perspectives regarding the reform have also been explored (Ralebese, 2019; Ralebese, 2018; Raselimo & Wilmont, 2013; Selepe, 2016). These recent studies generally confirm that implementing the current reform largely remains rhetoric because it has rarely transformed teaching practice. These studies provide empirical evidence that the implementation of the new curriculum does not adhere to the policy intentions.

In light of the CAP prescriptions and the characteristics of the integrated curriculum based on literature (Dambudzo, 2015; Kahveci & Atalay, 2015; MoET, 2005; MoET, 2009), it was interesting to deconstruct 'integration' as portrayed in the policy and its supporting documents. This concern is rooted in Coburn's (2005) argument that policymakers impose reforms on agents, hoping that they would divorce their old habits from the proposed ones. However, often, new policies create dissonance in the extant practices of the agents. Importantly, this paper acknowledges that the policy text is subject to agents' interpretation. Therefore, this paper argues that much research has been done on what agents do (Cohen, 1990; Lefstein, 2008; Schechter et al., 2016), but the practicality of how the policy messages tend to constrain implementation has somehow remained in the 'black box'.

Reform implementation is subjective because it depends on individual agents' interpretations (Coburn, 2016). Therefore, agents may interpret new ideas as familiar, missing the fundamental issues in that reform (Gawlik, 2015). Moreover, Spillane, Reiser and Reimer (2002) reiterate that agents develop different meanings of the same messages as they interpret the policy and that these different interpretations predict the level of implementation. Therefore, the agents' interpretation of policy messages is crucial for implementation.

This study sought to uncover evidence of integration and or lack thereof through the deconstruction of this narrative and by unpacking both curriculum discourse and practice. This was, therefore, to foster awareness of policy issues that could affect the implementation of an integrated curriculum. The results could help evaluate the newly implemented curriculum and revise the documents that guide curriculum reform in schools.

1.3.2 Theoretical Framework

Deconstruction theory by Jacques Derrida is built to challenge the dominant belief that texts or words have a single and stable meaning. It also challenges the notion that the author has an autonomous interpretation. It, therefore, claims that a text has no fixed meaning (Rolfe, 2004). Through critical reading, deconstruction offers alternative ways to interpret language. Considering the text from CAP and other documents guiding the implementation of curriculum reform in Lesotho, what is written is subject to interpretation by the readers.

According to deconstructionists, the meaning of a text depends on the readers as they communicate with the text. Therefore, the writer cannot give an interpretation of their text but the reader (Mendie & Udofia, 2020). Each reader or critic can derive their unique meaning through interaction with the text. In this case, the readers of policy documents can make interpretations that differ from those of the policymakers.

Deconstructionists also argue that each text has multiple meanings embedded in it, which are discovered by reading the text closely (Mogashoa, 2014). Therefore, according to deconstructionists, language cannot always express reality. It is essential to consider how language has been used rather than what has been said in the text. It is important to note that the language used to prescribe a change in the policy documents may have multiple meanings that may be removed from the reality envisaged by policymakers.

Deconstruction deals with the identification of contradictions of logic within a text, exploring those assumptions that are often not considered with caution or not acknowledged in traditional readings. It is a careful reading of factors that influence what is written and the reasons thereof (Mogashoa, 2014). Due to the multiplicity of meanings inherent within a text, contradictions are likely to be found when cautiously engaging with the text.

Deconstruction challenges the 'taken-for-granted ways of seeing and thinking about the world' (Niesche, 2014). This theory allows researcher to go beyond the superficial meanings of the words used in policy documents. Therefore, in this study, deconstruction will uncover possible meanings, interpretations and even contradictions within policy documents that prescribe 'integration' as a new narrative for the new curriculum in Lesotho.

The following section discusses the methodology used in this exploration.

2. Method

2.1 Research Approach and Sampling

This paper followed a qualitative approach to deconstruct the 'integration' narrative using document analysis. According to MoET (2009), integration is at the heart of the current curriculum reform in Lesotho. Document analysis entails a systematic review or evaluation of documents to draw meaning, obtain understanding, and discover insights relevant to the problem investigated (Bowen, 2009). So, Curriculum and Assessment Policy 2009, Guide to Continuous Assessment and the primary school syllabi (Grades 1-7) were purposely selected

to obtain rich data in exploring curriculum discourse. These documents are the guiding tools for implementing curriculum reform in Lesotho; they provide the curriculum content, envisaged pedagogy, and teachers' and learners' roles in classroom practices.

Document analysis was a suitable method for deconstructing the narrative, 'integration' because it allows for reviewing information on the documents to determine the meaning and comprehension of the concept under investigation. The process began with the analysis of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy document to establish its content concerning the integration narrative. In addition, the literature review provided helpful information in determining the evidence for integration in all documents guiding the reform. The content of each document was explored in line with how literature defines integration, its purpose, approaches and nature. This multifaceted exploration provided the framework for the deconstruction of integration.

Other data was drawn from literature about integration and from the Guide to Continuous Assessment document. In addition, the scheme of work format, lesson plan format, and timetables were also examined. As Bowen (2009) attests, the results obtained through the analysis of documents like these could be used to track changes and for development purposes.

Data from the documents and literature were entered into the matrix table (analysis tool) to deconstruct the term integration. Then, I used a direct content analysis approach and triangulated the findings from the various documents sampled for this paper. This is the analysis approach whereby initial codes are guided by theory or relevant findings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Firstly, I selected a key concept for the curriculum 'integration'; then, I determined the definitions of this term about curriculum reform and development and discussed the findings guided by prior research and the deconstruction theory. The meanings of relevant terms were carefully scrutinised to obtain salient meanings and what those meanings may imply.

Due to the nature of the sample for this study, documents are available to the public; hence, I sought permission from the Ministry of Education & Training. So, the documents used were well-referenced in this paper.

3. Findings and Discussions

Curriculum and Assessment Policy advocates for a '*holistic view and treatment of issues…school life should thus be integrated with community life and that of the learner…*'. This definition is consistent with Beane's (1997) conceptualisation of integration, which indicates that themes are based on the lived and experienced life. Notably, the policy expects community life to be intertwined with classroom learning. However, according to Raselimo and Mahao (2015), achieving this policy intention depends on teachers' interpretations and their respective contexts. This lends credence to the multiplicity of interpretations that can emerge from policy texts.

The curriculum developers noted '… *holistic view and treatment of issues*…' while working with the Grades 1-4 syllabi. For these grades, they organised content into themes: 'Knowing

oneself and relating to others', 'My Health and Safety', 'Understanding and Sustaining the Environment' and 'Survival and Self-reliance' (MoET, 2013a, p. 4; MoET, 2013b, p. 4; MoET, 2013c, p. 4; MoET, 2014: iii). This thematic organisation seems to mirror some characteristics of a web-based curriculum integration model. That is, a model whereby an entire group of disciplines is viewed individually and given a specific theme (Fogarty & Stoehr, 1991).

3.1 "Holistic view and treatment of issues" yet Promoting Compartmentalisation of the Subjects

Despite the emphasis on eliminating subject compartmentalisation, the syllabus extract below shows that the curriculum developers' perspective changed for Grades 5, 6 and 7. The content and experiences are organised into learning areas (Grades 5 & 6) and subjects (Grade 7).

> *Whereas the Grade 1-4 syllabi are each made up of four units structured around thematic principles, Grade 5is does (sic) not divided into units but is presented according to the 5 Learning Areas: 'Linguistic and Literary', 'Numerical and Mathematical', 'Personal, Spiritual and Social', 'Scientific and Technological' and Creativity and Entrepreneurial' Learning Areas.* [MoET, 2015:5]

The content of the syllabi from Grade 5 to Grade 6 is organised into learning areas. These learning areas are 'groups of traditional subjects'. The policy expectation is for integration to occur within these 'groups of traditional subjects. The Grade 5 syllabus is intended to help learners transition from the previous grades. Introducing learning areas in these grades seemingly dilutes the preceding integration in Grades 1 to 4. This works directly against the envisaged integration because it represents a transition from the integrated curriculum studied in the previous grades.

The content organisation into learning areas indirectly mimics the subject approach of the previous curriculum. Raselimo and Mahao (2015) warned against this organisation and showed that it likely encourages teachers to specialise in learning areas. This notion of learning areas has great potential to work against the envisaged integration.

3.2 Various Integration Models within the Curriculum

Furthermore, the policymakers seem to be aware of the possible multiple interpretations that could result from this as implied. The statement below encourages teachers to equate 'learning areas' to 'subjects'. They added that:

> *Teachers of Grade 5, who have previously taught according to the subject-based timetable, should not find the transition to a timetable constructed according to Learning Areas too different to what they are used to.* [MoET, 2015:5]

They further seem to be aware of the consequences borne from this curriculum content organisation regarding the methodology envisaged by the policy:

> *However, they (Grade 5 teachers) should be prepared to adopt the more practical, learner-centred approach, allowing pupils to learn actively rather than passively 'receive' teaching.*

It seems, therefore, that the way the curriculum is organised does not meet the envisaged standard of the intended integration. The above segments reveal two different models. The Grade 1 -4 syllabi have some characteristics of the webbed model. Content is organised into four themes, and secondly, the Fragmented model – Grades 5, 6, 7 [use of timetable/ daily schedule shows a distinct time slot for each subject]. Moreover, another integration model evident from Grade 5 is the 'integrated model'. The integrated model blends the overlapping disciplines by examining skills, concepts and attitudes (MoET, 2009: vi).

From Grade 5, curriculum developers require the teachers to make connections 'where possible'. These words may de-emphasise the notion of integration and encourage compartmentalised teaching as teachers may find it challenging to draw content across learning areas (Raselimo & Mahao, 2015). This statement is based on the flawed assumption that collegiality and collaboration are guaranteed in school.

> *… Where possible, teachers are encouraged to make connections between different learning areas and teach complementary concepts together rather than as independent entities…'.*

The Guide to Continuous Assessment is another official document that supports the new curriculum. This document states a 'strong link between curriculum and assessment' should exist. Furthermore, it prescribes that '*feedback from assessment should inform teaching'*. The underlying assumption here is that teachers have the competencies to link assessment with teaching and learning and they can use the assessment's feedback to improve learning.

Furthermore, the Grade 7 syllabus is very explicit in its subject approach. For instance,

> '*The Grade 7 curriculum promotes this strong understanding and connection between concepts and content from different subjects. Though organised in subjects, Grade 7 (sic) still draws content, skills, values and attitudes from five curriculum aspects…in Grade 7, subjects gradually emerge from the learning areas. The subjects that emerge at this level are English, Sesotho, Mathematics, Science and Technology, and Social Sciences…'.*

In this Grade, the notion of integration seems to be fading even though the expectation is for 'connections' between different subjects. The rationale given is that learners are prepared for secondary school learning. This rationale, however, has the potential to work against the proposed benefit of integration, as explained in the policy.

4. Conclusion

This study sought to deconstruct integration as the common curriculum narrative that drives the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy (CAP) in Lesotho. The study used Derrida's deconstruction theory to unpack the content of CAP and its supporting documents.

Firstly, the curriculum policy overemphasises 'integration' as an overarching concept. In

support of Grades 1 to 4, the syllabi appear to be integrated; however, from Grade 5, the syllabi sharply shift from the integrated approach and make bold statements that 'learning areas' are adopted to mark the 'transition from integrated curriculum'. The notion of integration finally disappears in Grade 7. In these grades, integration is left in the hands of the teachers. The statements contained in these curriculum documents (CAP and syllabi) have inherent contradictions that have the potential to render the notion of integration to be mere rhetoric. When teachers encounter divergent policy messages, they experience confusion and conflict due to difficulty interpreting them (Hodge & Stosich, 2022; Marais & Wessels, 2020)

Furthermore, the variety of integration models (the webbed, integrated and fragmented) within a curriculum on its own stirs up confusion for the reader. As a result, this may give rise to multiple interpretations, ultimately undermining such narratives as integration. The argument raised by this paper is that the inconsistent and ambiguous policy explanations of integration across the syllabi may lead to inaccurate interpretations by teachers in different grades. According to Russell and Bray (2013), ambiguous policy messages compel teachers to construct interpretations that stray from policy intentions.

The deconstruction theory helped reveal the inherent contradictions in these policy documents. This includes compartmentalized curriculum content organisation and the level of integration, which to a certain extent mimic the old curriculum and further defeats the notion of integration. The study, therefore recommends that the policymakers and the responsible bodies in curriculum development, across the various phases, integrate content following a specific model throughout the curriculum to enhance effective implementation. Furthermore, it is necessary for them to ensure the coherence of statements within the policy and its supporting documents. In a nutshell, these could minimize confusion and conflicts and aid common interpretations that align with the policy intentions.

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I declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Obtained.

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