

Teaching a Grade Seven Life Orientation Learning Area in a Disadvantaged Diverse Primary School

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of the new democratic dispensation in 1994, there has been a drastic change in policy formulation in education with the aim of redressing the imbalances of the past. This policy formulation can to a certain extent affect teachers' teaching and learning activities and quality of education. The introduction of Life Orientation (LO) in schools is based on the belief that this unique compulsory learning area (LA) forms the foundation of holistic development of the learner, guided by learning outcomes which focus on personal, social, career and physical and recreational development. LO also focuses on the diversity of learners as human beings in their totality as the self in relation to society. The research therefore examined a teacher teaching LO in a classroom full of diverse learners. It attempts to provide information that can assist the government and relevant stakeholders to review the present policies in LO. This paper is therefore focussing on the teacher teaching a grade seven LO in the disadvantaged diverse primary school in the Gauteng province.

The research adopted a qualitative ethnographic design. The research indicated that the teacher was frustrated with the ever changing policies, the complex environments they are faced with, insufficient Learning Support Materials (LTSM) and an unsafe environment.

Key words: Teachers, disadvantaged area, grade seven, Learning Area and Life Orientation.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the inception of the new democratic country in 1994, there has been a drastic change in policy formulation with an aim of redressing the socio-economic, educational and political imbalance of the past. This to a certain extent affects teachers' activities and quality of education. This is the reason why I conducted this study together with my colleagues who did theirs in different schools (rural and urban) in the Gauteng province. The aim of this study is to provide the government with the findings that could assist in the improvement of a culture of teaching and learning in South African schools. I will start by discussing the contextual background of the school at which this study was conducted, as this will assist with the understanding of how teachers teach LO.

The context of the inquiry

Permission to conduct the research project was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education and district office. The principal of the school was approached and he agreed that his school will participate in the research. The research project was conducted in a grade seven Life Orientation classroom consisting of diverse learners, at a primary school located in a black middle class section of the township in the eastern part of Pretoria. The school is classified under Section 21 of the South African School Act (1995), the budget of such a school is allocated and controlled by the government. There were plus minus 900 learners at the school in 2005 and the numbers increase every year, as stated by the Deputy principal whilst orientating me within the school's buildings. About 90% of the learners live in the nearby informal settlement while some come from other provinces such as Kwa-Zulu Natal, Limpopo

and also Mozambique hence diversity of learners. Amazingly, these foreign learners do not experience any major language problems for a longer period as they are able to adapt and learn the official language which is English with ease with the help of teachers who assist them through code switching approach. Code switching approach in this context refers to where for example an English word or sentence is explained by somebody into the mother tongue of the learner in order to help him/her understand what you are teaching or talking about. In their classroom, some learners used the approach of code switching successfully to assist those who do not understand English. This approach has some disadvantages such as wasting a lot of time in a lesson and creating a lot of noise.

The school provides the learners with meals from the government's feeding scheme project, hence the high percentage of diverse learners from the poverty-stricken informal settlement. The food is cooked at school in a corrugated iron house (tinned house), on a big gas stove. While I visited the school, I was fortunate to meet the cook who showed me the type of food she cooks for the disadvantaged learners. The government's feeding scheme project is relevant to teacher's identity formation because if learners are well fed, there is that likelihood that they will concentrate and actively take part in class, thus making the teacher's work more enjoyable.

Due to high unemployment rate in this area, the residents experience high level of crime and violence, thus affecting the teaching and learning at the school. Cross (1999:4) states that "children cannot learn and teachers cannot teach in a place where they are not safe". One can see the importance of safety at schools as it assists in the smooth running of school activities.

It was further mentioned that most learners are orphaned and neglected resulting in insufficient parental involvement in school activities. This is evidenced by the fact that I was asked to take care

of a learner during my period of research at that school. This statement is strengthened by Dowling (1994:14), when saying that "a joint school-family approach focuses on the addressing of any problem in a dual context". This implies that consultation, sharing of ideas and co-operation at school and in the community at large is of vital importance for the betterment of teachers' identity formation and quality of education. That is not done at that particular school because of unemployment rate and also that the learners are staying alone as bread winners.

Problem statement

Previous study by Rooth (2005) and Prinsloo (2007) have investigated the implementation and investigation of the status of LO in South African schools, but little has been written about teachers teaching LO in disadvantaged primary schools consisting of diverse learners coming from different provinces with different cultures, languages and behaviours. The research problem is therefore the following:

How do teachers teach LO learning area in a disadvantaged diverse primary school?

The aim of the study

The aim of the study is to:
investigate how teachers teach Life Orientation (LO) classroom in a disadvantaged diverse primary school,
provide information that can assist the Department of Education, other teachers, parents and relevant stakeholders with regard to improvement plans.

Theoretical framework

The framework within which this research is based on is Vygotsky's, which is the socio-cultural (social interaction) theory. This theory plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition through mediation as Vygotsky (1978:57) states "every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level" i.e (first, between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child, (intra-psychological). This theory is therefore relevant to this study as it focuses on the social interaction between individuals within a complex society embroiled by various factors. It can be once more stated that in the context of a grade seven LO classroom with different learners where this study is conducted, the relevance of this theory is seen when teachers mediate and interact with the learners and parents either minimally or maximally during school activities such as parent , sports, learners' progress report and finance meetings.. Vygotsky (1978:91) further mentions that the educational process leads the child's cognitive development, but does not coincide with it. Vygotsky's theory is complementary to the work of Feurenstein (1980) and others as they also focus on social learning in the context of language learning in children. For example, if one responds to an instruction, this will represent a meaning originating from the interaction between individuals. Feurenstein (1980) adds that "mediated learning experiences are a very important condition for the development of the very unique human conditions ..."

It can be once more emphasised that the preceding theoretical framework is important and relevant to this study, as we are in the currently changing education system that needs constant positive interaction between the developing child and the experienced knowledgeable adult, who is capable of producing in the child the appropriate life and learning skills that will enable him/her to

gradually gain control over real life activities. This implies that mediation can be viewed as an important concept that has a positive connotation, as it leads in most cases to the successful mastery of tasks jointly done by the teacher, learner and parent. Mediation between individuals through diverse tools such as language, people and communication media, in complex levels of system such as families, schools and communities plays a significant role in the development of learners.

Research design and methodology

In this study I used a qualitative design because I wished to obtain a more detailed understanding of teachers teaching a grade seven LO classroom in a diverse primary school. This is supported by Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit (2004:3) when stating that qualitative studies are those "which aim for depth rather than quantity of understanding" .Ezzy (2002:45) adds that qualitative methods are those which "identify a person's understanding of the situation as something to be discovered rather than assumed". This means that one is given the opportunity to explore the events in detail and be closer to the context. I further employed ethnographic, narrative and interpretive research methods as tools of investigating, interpreting and analysing one grade seven diverse classroom, one LO teacher within one particular primary school.

Data collection methods

Data collection methods used were both ethnographic, observation and interviews. The reason for using more than one data collection technique is to attempt to obtain consistent results about teachers teaching in a grade seven LO classroom of a primary school as supported by Wathal & Jansen (1997:26) that "more than one

strategy of data collection is very important for conducting research". In this regard, a grade seven LO teacher was interviewed, classroom observations were also conducted more than once and records of what has been observed were kept, complemented by the shooting of photos and video, taping the school environment, learners, teachers and workers as it is part of the context of the school and the research study. These data were used in the proceeding section for the interpretation of the teacher teaching LO in the grade seven of the school in which this study was conducted.

Research question

This study is focused on teachers teaching a grade seven LO classroom of a disadvantaged diverse primary school, and the research question that guided this study is: How do teachers teach LO as a compulsory learning area (LA) in disadvantaged diverse primary schools? The underlying principle is that LO seems to be undermined by some schools ever since it became a compulsory LA as advocated by the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). The aim of this NCS is to develop the full potential of each learner as a citizen of a democratic society and this poses a problem to some LO teachers. My argument is that if teachers are not committed to teaching LO as a learning/subject area like other LAS to learners, how will learners actualise their holistic development? How will LO teachers enhance quality of teaching and learning? These types of questions and statements will emerge in the succeeding sections as they play a role in the teaching of LO in primary schools.

Findings

My findings during the study indicated that teaching LO was a problem to teachers as mentioned earlier in the previous sections.

The evidence was that classrooms were overcrowded with a teacher/pupil ratio of over 1:40 and that made it difficult to the teacher to attend to the learners' individual needs e.g. different learning problems and backgrounds. There were also insufficient Learner Teacher Support Materials (LTSM) and learners were disruptive, fighting thus creating unsafe school environment, factors that might also hamper a positive teaching and learning culture in schools. It was further shown that even when the teacher was attempting to carry out instructions according to the Government's policy documents, she was still facing frustrations as working conditions have not yet improved. On this note, teachers are still struggling to teach LO effectively in disadvantaged primary schools due to the above mentioned factors and many more others which need to be researched. The above findings are in line with what Mwamwenda (1990:225) noted in his local research when stating that, "pupils in developing countries perform below those in developed countries because of inadequate and poor facilities." This is also linked with The School Register of Needs Survey (Department of Education, 1997) stating that "in Northern Province (Limpopo) ...there was a shortage of 13,670 classrooms..." Czerniewics, Murray and Probyn (2000:99) add that "the average former Department of Education and Training (DET) schools are under-resourced." This means that teachers teaching LO in disadvantaged schools cannot function effectively with inadequate resources.

From my observation and teaching experience of more than twenty years at different disadvantaged schools, it came to my realisation that most of such schools operate with inadequate teaching resources.

Discussions

Discussions based on observations Classroom

In the preceding paragraphs, a global view of the school context at which the study was conducted is presented. This gives us a picture of the type of primary school I was researching. I went straight to the class of Mrs Nobi, (a pseudonym) a class consisting of more than forty learners which is above the teacher/pupil ratio norm of 1:35. Most of the time during my classroom observation, I found the following undesirable learner behaviours: making noise, slumbering and sometimes fighting. For example, an undesirable behaviour was shown when one learner left his seat and joined another group where he hit a boy. The teacher of course with a sign of concern and portraying that role of being a parent, told him to stop doing that. This type of teacher behaviour is in line with what Reynolds (1996:14) says: "...learners see themselves as successful when taught by a caring and friendly teacher". This idea is further strengthened by Tauber (1995:225) who says that "teachers should be friendly...but not to be the learners' friends". In other words, irrespective of such difficult circumstances mentioned above, (e. g overcrowded classrooms and negative behaviours from learners). Mrs Nobi still shows an ability to discipline the learners as I have seen it being effective during my observation period, thus creating a conducive learning atmosphere. This teacher therefore has passion about her calling and commitment to teaching. Mrs Nobi's role as a teacher integrates well with the theoretical framework mentioned in the preceding section as she kept on portraying a mediation and pastoral role in her classroom.

I mentioned earlier that the learners are diverse as they come from different poverty stricken homes. This was evidenced by the fact that some learners received food from the feeding scheme of the Government. In addition they did not have grade seven LO text books and school uniform. This is a disadvantage on the side of the learners and it is not easy for teachers to teach learners under such poor conditions as learners bring problems with them to school on a daily basis because they lack basic necessities. This is confirmed by

Nxumalo (1993:59) when mentioning that "a number of teachers have developed negative attitudes over the years and have low morale because of severe material deprivation in schools". But at this school Mrs Nobi, (LO teacher) appeared to have not been discouraged, she improvised and cared for her learners. This means that as teachers, the fewer the resources we have, the more intensive they should be utilised.

Time-table

During the classroom observation I also noticed that LO time-table is a problem in the school as LO is not yet taken as a serious compulsory LA/subject area. I have also observed a similar problem in 2007 when I went to evaluate the University student teachers at other schools in Gauteng province during teaching practice/school experience. This poses a problem to dedicated and committed teachers as it will prevent them from finishing their LO syllabuses. Mrs Nobi had the same problem of unfinished grade seven LO syllabus as she repeatedly kept on mentioning that "LO does not have double periods as it used to be in the past". This means that the department of education need to be advised about the LO time-tabling at schools and workshop teachers once more on how to draw up learning programmes and work schedules. There were moments where Mrs Nobi requested that I should prepare and help in teaching her LO learners which I did more than once as it is my area of specialisation. I even invigilated her learners during June examination in 2005, when she was absent from school attending grade seven LO and Technology workshops. This is evidence of her being overloaded with having to teach many LAS (subjects). Despite the overload it shows a sense of commitment, sharing and teamwork. This is important in any teaching and learning situation as supported by Chrisman (2005:17) who states that "working together create a continual improvement cycle for instruction".

Discussions based on the interviews

When interviewing Mrs Nobi, she responded by repeating that she was overloaded with schoolwork and that stresses her as she cannot even further her studies even though she has a degree and teaching diploma, but still she consults with other teachers at other schools for sharing the subject knowledge. Sharing the subject knowledge is important as stated by Lewis & Allan (2005:44), that “cooperative working includes sharing resources and exchanging information”. This implies that working together strengthen collaborative teamwork among teachers, learners and community at large. During the interview Mrs Nobi even mentioned that “I feel like leaving the teaching profession and venture into business as I cannot cope with many changes any longer.” She also kept on blaming the Government for too much paper work and workshops conducted by inexperienced facilitators. This blame is also strengthened by Grey (1998:5) when stating that “teachers admit partly the responsibility...saying that the conditions they are forced to work in...are largely the government’s failure to address some of these conditions”. She further said that she has once requested one official from the Department to come and present a multi-level and multi-grade LO lesson in her classroom, but the response was the issuing of circulars.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the above discussions that teachers still face problems in the teaching of LO especially in disadvantaged diverse primary schools because of the policies from the Government and the type of complex environments they are faced with. On this note, it is the responsibility of the Government to once more attend to these type of environments i.e overcrowded classrooms, poverty, unsafe environment and also to amend some of their policies with an aim of improving the culture of teaching and learning in schools.

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