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South African teachers' perspectives on support received in implementing curriculum changes

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South African education has experienced significant curricular reform since the mid-1990s, but its implementation has not matched expectations. This study explores teachers' perspectives on implementing these reforms in schools, with the aim of ascertaining the challenges they faced in the process, and the kind of support, guidance and professional development programmes they received from the Department of Basic Education to facilitate the changes. This article focuses on their experiences of the government-based Foundations for Learning Campaign in schools in the uThungulu district, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Teachers from grades One to Six teaching languages and Mathematics were targeted, and a sample of 20 was purposefully selected. Using an interpretive qualitative research approach, data was collected by means of in-depth interviews, with open-ended questions, and classified by themes. The findings revealed that teachers felt inadequately provided with sustainable professional development programmes, and had minimal meaningful opportunities for classroom support, guidance and monitoring to assist in implementing the changes required. This small-scale investigation offers a stepping-stone for further analysis of assistance being offered to teachers across the country in times of curriculum reform, and thereby contributes towards preparing the ground for a new and integrated framework offering much-needed effective, systematic, ongoing professional development programmes that translate into improved teaching practice and learning success.

Keywords: continuing professional development; curriculum implementation; curriculum reform; Foundations for Learning Campaign; monitoring; support

Introduction

The educational curriculum is vital to a society's success. Thus, within many developing countries around the world, the educational reform process is constantly undergoing change. In line with this, it is necessary to reflect on these reforms as similar challenges are experienced. South Africa has introduced substantial educational reform since the mid-1990s, but its efforts to implement new curricula have been problematic. Research indicates that many initiatives have failed to be effectively implemented and have been unsuccessful in accomplishing their objectives (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2002; Jansen & Christie, 1999; Lelliot, Mwakapenda, Doidge, Du Plessis, Mhlolo, Msimanga, Mundalamo, Nakedi & Bowie, 2009; Rogan, 2007; Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). Furthermore, recent studies (Maepa, 2017; Mbatha, 2016) indicate that in practice, teachers are still experiencing ongoing implementation challenges and are dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of professional development they receive from within their schools and from the Department of Basic Education. Despite their integral position within the education process, teachers have not traditionally had a voice in curriculum change, and their roles, challenges, personal experiences and perspectives are often ignored in South Africa and elsewhere (Fullan, 2007; Gokmenoglu & Clark, 2015; Kelly, 2009; Ramberg, 2014). Similarly, the available evidence indicates that reformers have tended to impose change onto teachers instead of involving them in the process (Avalos, 2011; Carl, 2012; Park & Sung, 2013).

Despite extensive research on national curriculum reform, understanding the way in which South African teachers have been supported in adapting and adjusting to curriculum change remains limited. In the light of repeated innovations over the years, and accompanying implementation challenges, it is useful to understand teachers' past experiences of reform alongside their reactions to changes occurring at present. Unless the difficulties that influence educators' implementation practices are properly understood, attempts at improving their responses to future curriculum change will not succeed. A few studies (Guskey, 2002; Park & Sung, 2013; Sabah, Fayez, Alshamrani & Mansour, 2014; Tshiredo, 2013) have examined the way in which teachers perceive curriculum has changed, and how their perceptions relate to the implementation of change in the classroom, but available research remains limited (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Gokmenoglu & Clark, 2015; Youngs, 2013) on ways in which educators can be continually supported for the reforms to be meaningfully implemented.

The purpose of this study has been to explore the perspectives of a small sample of teachers on the support they received in implementing curriculum changes; in particular, this study examined their experiences of the South African government-initiated Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC), officially launched in 2008, to provide support for teachers. The aim of this study is to ascertain the challenges experienced by the teachers in implementing curriculum changes, given the kind of classroom support, guidance and professional development programmes available to them within their schools; and externally through the government initiative designed to facilitate change.

Analytical Framework

To explore teachers' perspectives in implementing curriculum changes, a framework developed by Rogan and Grayson (2003) was selected and adapted for the purpose of this study, as it offered an applicable way to situate teachers' perspectives in context and to facilitate a systematic interpretation of the data. This theory of successful curriculum implementation and change is based on three major constructs, of which two are key to the analysis reported in this paper: first, support from outside agencies; and, second, capacity to support the innovation (the third construct, the profile of implementation, lies outside the scope of this paper, as it relates specifically to classroom practice).

'Support from outside agencies' refers to actions undertaken by organisations external to the schools, in this case by the national Department of Basic Education, which influences practice either through assistance or sanction. Within this construct, Rogan and Grayson (2003) include the following sub-constructs: teacher professional development, provision of physical resources, and monitoring. Of specific interest in this study are training workshops that form part of teacher professional development, and supervision and monitoring by circuit and district officials in the process of bringing about successful curriculum change.

The second construct, 'capacity to support the innovation,' refers to support available from within the schools themselves. It includes four key sub-constructs: physical resources; school ethos and management; teacher factors; and student factors. In this respect, this study delved into the following aspects: challenges experienced by teachers; supervision and monitoring by the staff management team; and school-based activities. This construct is generally concerned with factors that are most likely either to support or to hinder the actual implementation process. It therefore offers a means for identifying and understanding challenges, and for ascertaining the capacity of the school management team to provide the necessary support for change from within, given that schools differ in their capacity to implement new curricula successfully. Teachers play an integral role within this process, thus the support they receive from both outside and within the school environment influences the way in which they effect change.

Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC)

The decades since the ushering in of a democratic South Africa in 1994 have been tumultuous for school education in the country. Dramatic political changes saw education undergo massive, nationally and provincially mandated curriculum reforms in the 20 years that followed (Skovsmose & Valero, 2002). Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was introduced in

1997, followed by the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) in 2002, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) in 2007, and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) in 2012. In March 2008, the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor, officially launched the FFLC in an attempt to address "alarming and unacceptably low levels of literacy and numeracy scores" attained in the 2007 systemic evaluation (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2009).

The FFLC was inaugurated shortly after the introduction of the NCS as a national response to the low levels of literacy and numeracy in the General Education and Training (GET) band. According to the Department of Education, Republic of South Africa (2008b:4), the main purpose of the four-year campaign was to improve these skills in learners in the foundation and intermediate phases, so as to ensure that they acquire and sustain a solid foundation for learning across the system. It was reported that learners were unable to read, write and count at expected levels, or to execute tasks that demonstrate key skills associated with literacy and numeracy (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2008b:4). All primary schools were expected to raise learner performance in literacy and numeracy to an average standard not lower than 50%, thereby to achieve an improvement of between 15% and 20% in the four years of the campaign. Its culmination was to have been a national evaluation at the end of 2011, assessing the literacy and numeracy levels of Grade Three and Grade Six South African learners in order to determine the overall impact of its implementation (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2008b:4).

The Department of Education, Republic of South Africa (2008b:6–7) outlines the minimum expectations of the FFLC, stipulating that teaching of Literacy and Numeracy (languages and Mathematics) was to be improved by ensuring that all teachers in grades One to Three incorporate the teaching of reading and numeracy skills every day into their lessons. A list of basic learner teacher support materials was provided in the *Gazette* and each school had to ensure that every teacher had at least the basic minimum resources to facilitate the necessary changes. Teachers were expected to be members of district forums, which were to be established in each district, so that they could share ideas, experience and best practice in order to enhance their classroom practice and receive necessary support. All primary school learners would undergo annual national assessments (ANAs). The Department of Basic Education would thereby assist schools in attaining the goals of improving learner performance in the specified areas by providing the necessary resources, support, guidance and ongoing monitoring. However, according to the report on the ANA of 2011

(Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2011), Grade Three learners nationally performed at an average of 35% in literacy, and 28% in Numeracy, while the Grade Six national average performance in languages was 28% and that in Mathematics was 30%; thus the campaign would appear not to have achieved its intended outcomes.

The Department of Education, Republic of South Africa (2008b) has highlighted the fact that the FFLC purported to introduce new approaches to the teaching and learning of literacy skills and mathematical competencies in both foundation and intermediate phases. In response to the gap in the central design of the then recently introduced NCS (learning outcomes and assessments), the Department of Basic Education provided assessment frameworks for the foundation and intermediate phases in 2008 as part of the FFLC (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2008b). These frameworks (Department of Education, 2008a:1) served as a tool to assist teachers in their new planning, teaching and assessment practices, which differed from those required by their previous curriculum. Thus, teachers were to be equipped with new skills to improve learners' academic performance, on the principle that managing effective implementation of change demands the capacity for action, as well as substantial support.

Despite initiatives by the national department to improve literacy and numeracy skills, studies (Hlomuka, 2014; Meier, 2011) reveal discontent and scepticism about the efficacy of the FFLC to ameliorate the conditions and performance of learners in literacy and numeracy.

Professional Teacher Development

It has been argued that failure to successfully implement the various curriculum reforms to date in South Africa result from the fact that attention has been focused on the educational change desired, and that training in the way in which curriculum change ought to be delivered and implemented has undergone neglect (Bantwini, 2009:169). Studies have acknowledged that curriculum change is inevitable (Fullan, 1989, 2007; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994), but the key element in its success is the development of the teachers. As Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991:315) correctly indicate, "Continuous development of all teachers is the cornerstone for meaning, improvement, and reform." Thus, as curriculum reforms continue, so also must the capacity to invest constantly in the adequate professional development of teachers to enable them to transform their teaching, and to adjust appropriately to the mandated reforms.

Despite the importance of professional development to accompany curriculum reforms,

evidence from South Africa and elsewhere points to its inadequacy (Fullan, 2007; Guskey, 2002; Rogan & Grayson, 2003). According to Lovat and Smith (2003:195), even the most well-adjusted individual or organisation requires additional constant support during a period of change. Rogan and Grayson (2003) emphasise the fact that, since teachers are responsible for implementing the change in the classroom, and should be supported in various ways.

Verspoor (1989) has recommended four crucial elements for achieving successful teacher training that supports curriculum reform: permanent and locally available in-service training; effective systems for teacher support, guidance, supervision and monitoring; adjustment of the content of teacher training to the teachers' own level of knowledge and experience; and encouragement of teachers' motivation and commitment. More recent studies (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Gibson & Brooks, 2012; Gokmenoglu & Clark, 2015; Ramberg, 2014) reveal that these elements are constrained by many challenges, and by dissatisfaction with the quality of teacher professional development and continuous support. One challenge lies in the design of sustainable and ongoing professional development activities, linked to classroom lessons that enhance instruction and are based on teachers' needs, rather than reliance on one-off workshops that use the lecture method. A further challenge lies in providing teachers with adequate time to collectively participate in these activities, and encouraging them to practise what they have learnt through the process and to translate their learning effectively into the classroom. Yet another challenge lies in establishing monitoring systems and providing quality support, both internally and externally, to create a cycle of continuous improvement. Collectively, these studies indicate that effective curriculum change require commitment to developing necessary capacity among teachers; they further highlight the complexity of the reform process.

Method

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative approach to obtain foundation and intermediate phase teachers' perspectives about implementing curriculum reform supported by the FFLC. The research provided an opportunity to understand, explain, explore, discover and clarify situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes and experiences of participants (Kumar, 2014:132), and yielded detailed description and in-depth understanding of their views about curriculum change and the kind of support, guidance and professional development programmes available to them to facilitate the changes.

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted as, being focused and discursive, they

allowed both researcher and participants to explore matters arising that related to the issue at hand. During the interview process, the researcher was not rigid, and allowed for much flexibility. She tried not to control the responses to a great extent due to the nature of participants interviewed, as some struggled to communicate fluently in English so that they would freely express themselves in their own way as much as possible. Furthermore, as the interviewer, in some cases it was necessary to follow up on interesting developments and challenges that surfaced so as to allow the interviewee to elaborate further on some pertinent issues. According to De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpont (2011:342), this method is useful in determining individuals' perceptions, opinions, and facts, and was therefore appropriate for the study. Interviews were based on a list of 10 questions (refer to Appendix A which indicates the core questions that guided the interview protocol). These were arranged from simple to complex and from broad to more specific, to allow participants to adjust gradually to the pattern of the interview. The participants were requested to describe the training workshops and professional development programmes that had supported the NCS curriculum reform, the challenges they had experienced during implementation of the change, and the kind of capacity to support the change that had been provided within the institution. Open-ended questions were included in the interview schedule, because these offer flexibility, allow the interviewer to probe if necessary, encourage cooperation and help to establish rapport, assist in assessing accurately what participants really believe, and place minimum restraint on participants' answers and expressions (De Vos et al., 2011:342).

Participants, Sampling and Setting

The target population comprised foundation and intermediate phase teachers in the GET band of South Africa's school system. A non-probability sampling strategy was employed, specifically adopting a purposive sampling approach, so as to deliberately select particular participants to enable the researcher to gather pertinent information to understand the central phenomenon, which in this case, is support received in the implementation of curriculum change. The study was conducted retrospectively after the end of the campaign in the uThungulu District, one of the 11 district municipalities in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in the Lower Umfolozi circuit, which is one of four in the district. A sample of five public primary schools from Richards Bay and a further five from Empangeni was selected, representing communities of different socio-economic status. Six of these schools were rural

(lacking basic amenities-sanitation, running water, electricity, proper infrastructure, teaching and learning resources and information and communication technology) from socio-economically deprived areas, while four were urban located in better affluent communities; two teachers were interviewed from each school (one from the foundation and one from the intermediate phase), giving a total of 20 in-depth interviews. Only teachers of Numeracy/Literacy and languages/Mathematics were deliberately selected on the basis of their fit with the purpose of the study, as these subjects were the focus of the FFLC. Prior to the interviews, each of the selected schools received a visit, and suitable dates and times for the interviews were scheduled in consultation with the deputy principal and the teachers involved.

Procedures and Data Collection

Interview procedures were followed as advised by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011:201). Each participant was informed of the nature of the interview, care was taken to be honest without risking the biasing of responses, and everything necessary was done to put the participant at ease. Before each interview, the process was explained (what happens in the interview and how, as well as the structure and organisation of the interview, and how responses would be recorded). Participants gave informed consent in the form of a signed consent form completed in advance of the interview. The interviews lasted about 45–60 minutes, enabling the participants to answer the questions in a convenient and peaceful atmosphere in their respective schools. The responses were recorded on audio-tape and were later transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysis.

Data Analysis

The study applied content analysis to the qualitative data collected during the interviews. This process entailed analysing the content of the interviews to identify the key issues emerging from the responses to the questions asked. First, the key issues were identified from the transcripts of the interview recordings; second, responses were classified by theme. Data were thematically coded under the following themes, which were guided by the research questions, the selected theoretical framework underpinning this study, and repetitive reading of the transcripts from the interview: 1) 'Support from outside agencies' - training workshops, professional development programmes to support teachers and supervision and monitoring by circuit and district officials; 2) 'capacity to support the innovation' - challenges experienced by teachers, supervision, and monitoring by the staff management team, and school-based activities.

Findings and Discussion

In line with the analytical framework selected, the findings are presented in terms of the two constructs outlined by Rogan and Grayson (2003): support from outside agencies (in this case, the Department of Basic Education) and the capacity to support innovation from within (in this case, the school itself). Participants identified by odd numbers represent foundation phase teachers; those identified by even numbers represent intermediate phase teachers.

Support from Outside Agencies

Training workshops

The majority (all but three) of the participants, in both foundation and intermediate phases, overwhelmingly expressed discontent about the quantity and quality of training workshops offered by the Department of Basic Education's FFLC to support the NCS curriculum change. Participant 6, for example, highlighted the view that there were too few such workshops and that they were not relevant: *"We only attended a one-day workshop for the Foundations for Learning Campaign at the beginning of the campaign, after that there were no workshops to help us to improve our teaching of mathematics or languages; if we want to improve our learner performance, the department needs to provide more workshops, but these workshops must also be relevant to what we are doing in the classroom."*

Participant 5 concurred, indicating that not much information was provided during the training workshop that could be incorporated into classroom practice: *"There was nothing new in those workshops. We just collected little material, which didn't say much about what to do, supplied by the facilitators for our schools, and were told all the necessary policy documents and guidelines would be ready next year; that was all."* Rogan and Grayson (2003) emphasise that, for curriculum implementation to succeed, effective training of teachers is necessary to enable them to understand clearly what the changes entail and how best they can be put into practice. Furthermore, research from both developing and developed countries including South Africa (Carl, 2012), Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010) and South Korea (Park & Sung, 2013) indicates that teachers can implement curriculum changes successfully only if they have adequate and suitable training directed towards their classroom practice.

Prior to and after the implementation of the FFLC, no further in-service training was provided. The participants clearly felt that the single training workshop they attended was too short, merely involving a few hours of contact time, with no follow-up sessions. These issues relating to training workshops supporting South African curriculum reform are not new; they have been spelt out in

previous studies (Dada, Dipholo, Hoadley, Khembo, Muller & Volmink, 2009; Department of Education, 2000, 2001, 2002; Jansen, 1997; Jansen & Christie, 1999) that highlight the lack of relevant, in-depth, and quality training. The findings of the study suggest, however, that even after the introduction of the FFLC in 2008, they remain a challenge not yet sufficiently addressed and an ongoing cause for concern.

It is difficult for teachers to adapt to curriculum reform in haste, and without appropriate training and support. Fullan (2007) emphasises the need for curriculum reformers to understand that successful implementation depends on the quality of training and support for teachers, and on the introduction of the innovation at a rate and scope that suits those teachers implementing it. Teacher training for curriculum change ought not merely be a once-off event, but an ongoing process that enables teachers to change their practice effectively.

Professional development programmes to support teachers

The participants unanimously stated that there had been virtually no ongoing support and professional development programmes since the launch of the FFLC. They suggested that professional development experiences might assist them in gaining proficiency in teaching languages and Mathematics, and suggested that they would be likely to enhance their content knowledge.

More than three-quarters of participants' reflections in both phases on the FFLC were negative on account of insufficient assistance with accommodating the many curriculum reforms they had experienced. They were tired of constant change: *"The Department makes too many changes to the Curriculum; we are not ready for another change; all of these changes confuse us, we need time to adjust and adapt, and we need help to do this"* (Participant 4). They viewed the assistance offered as inadequate to develop real understanding: *"The workshops didn't really prepare us to implement this campaign, a half day workshop is not enough, and we do not clearly understand all the changes we now have to implement in the classroom"* (Participant 9). The workshops did not address the real classroom conditions: *"We have limited resources and too many learners in our classrooms, it is not even practical to accomplish those milestones; in the end I have to figure out what to do, there are just no programmes there to help us"* (Participant 7). These comments support several other studies around the world that have reported failures with curriculum renewal and implementation, because curriculum leaders have not provided adequate professional development opportunities for teachers (Carl, 2012; Fullan, 2007; Gokmenoglu & Clark, 2015; Kelly, 2009).

Many curriculum planners seem to assume that because teachers already have qualifications, expertise and experience, they are able to implement curriculum changes independently, and that ongoing professional development programmes are unnecessary.

All participants also affirmed that no continuous professional development programmes were in place to support and encourage them to deal with the pressures of teaching languages and mathematical skills. They complained about the shortage of subject specialists and circuit/district officials: *“I have been teaching Mathematics for over five years in this school, and to date no subject advisor has visited our school to offer support, assistance or any guidance”* (Participant 14).

Furthermore, almost all the participants in both phases viewed ongoing professional development programmes as the best strategy, and a necessary one, to assist them in coping and improving. They believed that these programmes ought to be regular and not once-off, facilitated by specialists and, most important, relevant to actual classroom practice. Their opinions support previous research. Kelly (2009:138), for instance, writing with regard to United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America (USA), argues that “there can be no curriculum development without teacher development, as the teacher has a vital role to ensure successful education of a high quality to learners.”

Supervision and monitoring by circuit and district officials

South Africa’s Department of Education (2008b:22) has explicitly stipulated that both circuit and district support would be critical for the success of the FFLC. The policy stated that officials would visit all schools within the district at least once a term for monitoring and guidance, with more frequent visits to schools requiring stronger support, and that they would assist all schools to improve performance by working towards agreed targets in relation to both Mathematics and languages. All the participants in the sample confirmed that, since the implementation of the FFLC, no subject specialists or circuit and district officials had visited their schools to supervise and monitor the campaign. Their comments suggest that failure of the FFLC to achieve its objectives could have stemmed from failure at the circuit and district levels to provide the regular support stipulated by the policy.

With regard to the ANA part of the FFLC, three-quarters of the participants, across both phases, reported that the assessments increased their administrative duties at the expense of teaching time and added to their workload. For example, Participant 18 stated, *“We have to*

administer the tests in the classrooms; once that is completed we have to mark all these tests, then we have to record these marks and keep our own class records and this is not enough [...]. We then have to record these on a prescribed template before we send them to the district offices; this is too much work and takes a lot of our time.” All the participants believed that the additional administrative work was fruitless, and that it failed to assist them to improve their classroom practice because no individualised support or timely feedback was provided. According to Participant 11, for instance: *“We have received no further information from the district that we can use to help our learners to improve their performance in Literacy and Numeracy skills, even though most of them perform very poorly in these subjects. We only receive the composite ANA results from the district many months later. This doesn’t even make a difference to us.”*

Participants argued that subject advisors/specialists or circuit and district officials should have been supervising and monitoring the campaign together with the ANA and should at least have attempted to assist schools to improve their performance. The responses indicate that FFLC practice seems to have diverged from the ANA guide, according to which (Department of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa, 2012:4) departmental officials were to: make informed decisions about which schools required urgent attention in terms of providing necessary resources to improve learner performance in these subjects; provide teachers with essential data about the capabilities of learners in each grade, thereby helping them to decide how to plan their teaching programmes; inform individual teachers about how close or far they were to realising their teaching goals; inspire them to realign their teaching strategies towards accomplishing such goals; and assist school management teams to select and implement school-based interventions for improving learner performance in languages and Mathematics.

Participants’ responses relating to external supervision and monitoring of the FFLC coupled with the ANA indicate a disjunct between the FFLC policy and its management and implementation. Thus, this shortcoming can be attributed to the resources supplied by the Department to carry out the FFLC: first, the shortage of subject advisors/specialists or circuit and district officials to supervise and monitor the many schools in their care; second, insufficient knowledge and expertise among subject advisors/specialists or circuit and district officials to offer the support required for successful curriculum change at the classroom level and to translate teaching and learning into languages and Mathematics excellence.

Capacity to Support the Innovation

Over the space of some two decades, South Africa has introduced several different curriculum reforms, but research has repeatedly shown that these reforms have not translated successfully into classroom practice because of the lack of capacity to support the innovations (Du Plessis, 2013; Jansen & Christie, 1999; Kruss, 2009). This generated many implementation challenges for teachers.

Pedagogical content knowledge and classroom practice

Three-quarters of the participants reported that they struggled to offer the necessary support and assistance to many learners who had difficulty coping with Mathematics and languages. Participant 7 highlighted issues related to relevant pedagogical strategies: *“The teaching methodologies I am using in the classroom is not making a difference. Too many learners are struggling with the basics in literacy and numeracy; many learners can’t even read, write and count properly; sometimes I’m not sure what practices to use to improve my teaching of literacy and numeracy. These milestones in the FFLC are good but how do we use them in the classroom.”*

Furthermore, three-quarters of all the participants in the study agreed that they had not developed substantial pedagogical content knowledge to improve their basic language and mathematics teaching; they viewed this as a challenge, especially in the context of curriculum change. This finding supports the large-scale longitudinal study conducted by Ball, Hill and Bass (2005) among US teachers, which confirmed that a robust knowledge level enables educators to assess their learners’ level of mathematical understanding, provide the necessary support and assistance to those who are struggling, and use their knowledge to make vital decisions concerning mathematical tasks, classroom resources and teaching and learning strategies.

Only three participants included in the study felt that they were coping and doing what they could to give of their best, but this was through their own additional initiatives, resourcefulness, and research abilities, and not a result of the support they received from within their school. The reasonable implication is that the FFLC, as implemented, was not able to build sufficiently on teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge and skills to enable them to improve learner performance in Literacy and Numeracy to an adequate degree. The participants’ responses were, in effect, a plea for additional support from within their schools, properly aligned to the specific challenges they were experiencing.

Class size

Competence in Literacy and Numeracy is integral to effective learning in all subjects and across all years of schooling, and it is crucial for learners to develop such competence, based on their individual needs, especially in the foundation phase. However, this is difficult in overcrowded classrooms (Muthusamy, 2015). Almost all the participants encountered many problems associated with large classes: *“I am unable to provide individual attention to learners especially those who are struggling ...”* (Participant 2). Participant 10 gave further detail about difficulties in offering the necessary personal attention: *“I experience difficulty in motivating all learners to learn when there are too many of them; I only can teach a small number of learners with care. It takes too much of time to do individual reading and to provide individual feedback.”* Participant 14 added the problem of limited physical space: *“It is very difficult for both learners and the teacher to move around freely because there is so little space; those who are seated close to one another in a classroom experience difficulty focusing on the lessons, and this then leads to less learning.”* These findings confirm those in an earlier South African study by Marais (2016) that teachers in overcrowded classrooms find it hard to provide conducive and productive teaching and learning classroom environments.

All except three of the participants in the study said they had not been adhering to the changed curriculum during the FFLC because the overcrowded classrooms had not allowed them time to adjust their classroom practice appropriately. In addition, they had had difficulty in assessing, keeping track of, and recording learner progress and achievement according to the changes in the curriculum in the key areas of reading, writing and numeracy, as is done every term. Finally, all except two of the participants reported feeling frustrated because the demands on their time, combined with the lack of support they received, meant that the changes proposed by the curriculum reform could be implemented at a superficial level only.

Availability and accessibility of learner teacher support material

According to the FFLC policy (Department of Education, Republic of South Africa, 2008b:6), every teacher must have sufficient resources to ensure the effective teaching and learning of Literacy and Numeracy, including wall charts, number and phonic friezes, writing materials, suitable apparatus for teaching concepts, textbooks, reading series, and workbooks. However, the great majority of participants reported that, owing to lack

of funds, their schools were unable to purchase many of the stipulated resources needed to make the campaign effective. Just three stated that, thanks to higher school fees paid by learners, their schools had tried to buy the necessary resources and thereby had the capacity to support the curriculum reform with appropriate materials.

Overcrowding made the situation worse. Participant 9 elaborated on the effect that inadequate resources had on other learners: “Sometimes a group of 10 learners share one abacus, since each learner is unable to have their own; while the activity is in progress, the other learners lose consideration and become disruptive.” Participant 8 explained the detrimental effects on learning: “There are also so few readers, therefore learners have to share these readers, and they only use them during instruction time, due to a shortage, they are not allowed to take these readers home to practise.” This kind of scenario emphasises the ways in which classroom conditions hinder effective teaching and learning. These findings are consistent with others from both Uganda and South Africa (Altinyelken, 2010; Muthusamy, 2015; Tshiredo, 2013), which also report that inadequate learning materials limit effective curriculum change.

Supervision and monitoring by the staff management team

Three-quarters of the participants were dissatisfied with the level of supervision and monitoring they received at school, and described it as generally administrative in nature. However, the frequency of their own administrative submissions varied considerably: half said that they had submitted preparation files at the beginning of each week, a quarter had done so once a fortnight, a fifth had done so once a month, and one admitted to having done so only at the beginning of each term. Half stated that assessment records, assessment plans, mark schedules and tests were checked and stamped by the staff management team, while the other half said that the staff management team had assisted only in administering the ANA, but had offered no other kind of support. It was clear that the level of monitoring and supervision by the staff management teams differed widely among the schools in the study.

All the participants in the intermediate phase highlighted the fact that the heads of department (HoDs) oversaw teachers from specific grades inclusive of all the subjects irrespective of their area of specialisation, which meant that these HoDs could not provide all the teachers they supervised with the necessary content support to enact the curriculum reform effectively. The foundation phase teachers had similar experiences with supervision and monitoring from overburdened HoDs: “The Head of Department is a full-time

educator who has a class of her own with many learners and is expected to teach, just like the rest of us; she doesn't have enough time to give us the help and support we need” (Participant 19).

Thus, the teachers in the study clearly felt that the role of the staff management teams in their schools in relation to the curriculum reform was typically administrative. They viewed the supervision and monitoring as superficial and lacking the depth and breadth to assist with improving the quality of learner academic achievement, since so much staff management time was spent on administrative duties. The FFLC, however, required the school management team to shoulder the responsibilities of sound management of curriculum change implementation, managing these changes continuously, and thereby providing the necessary support to their teachers (Department of Education, 2001).

School-based activities

All the participants in the study stated that the only form of school-based activity in place to support them was the phase meeting. However, they differed when it came to the frequency and purpose of these meetings. A quarter of participants across both phases reported that these meetings were held fortnightly, with the purpose of discussing and reviewing activities over the two-week period so as to maintain uniformity and pace within the same grade. However, nearly two-thirds of the participants indicated that their phase meetings were held only once a month, and addressed planning, organising, and administrative issues (such as the assessment plan, activities planned for the month, due dates, classroom discipline, and preparation for the ANAs); thus limited only to these aspects of their teaching and learning work in general. Three of the participants reported having phase meetings only once a term, mainly addressing issues related to planning for the term, and focusing on learning programmes, work schedules and lesson plans.

Although all the participants in the study confirmed that phase meetings were held, and that they did receive some kind of support, assistance and guidance from the staff management team, these meetings generally lasted no more than 30 minutes. The teachers reported that no time was set aside for school-based activities that could translate into classroom practice designed specifically to assist with improving the low levels of basic skills among learners, which was the ultimate aim of the campaign.

Findings from a cross-sectional study on best practice in teachers' professional development in the USA (Desimone & Garet, 2015) affirms that activities within a school require alignment with lessons and should incorporate support, guidance and practice so as to provide teachers with substantive opportunities to integrate their know-

ledge into their classroom practice instead of being left to carry the burden on their own. In addition, research on curriculum reform conducted in a case study of South Korean elementary school teachers (Park & Sung, 2013) reveals that effective curriculum implementation depends heavily upon communication, constant collaboration, sustained peer support and ongoing support programmes offered within the institution. Collectively, these two studies argue that successful implementation of curriculum change requires school-based activities to respond to teachers' needs through regular briefings, meetings, ongoing workshops and collaborative discussion sessions related to the realities of classroom practice.

Conclusion

The study revealed that participating teachers were dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of the training workshops offered in practice by the FFLC to support curriculum reform, as well as with the lack of continuous teacher professional development. The workshops were too short and insubstantial to equip staff to deal effectively with the changes that they needed to make in class and to improve learner performance. The participants experienced none of the envisaged external supervision, monitoring or support from Department of Basic Education subject advisors/specialists and circuit/district officials in implementing the curriculum changes required. In addition, staff management teams within the schools were unable to supply the necessary assistance; the only school-based activities to support them were phase meetings that focused on administrative aspects of their work rather than providing a platform to integrate curriculum changes into daily classroom practice.

The small-scale qualitative study reported here applied two key constructs from the framework of Rogan and Grayson (2003) to investigate the implementation of the FFLC initiative. It focused on a relatively narrow sample of teachers, who were involved in applying curriculum reform, with the support of the FFLC as implemented in a single circuit of a district in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The findings, therefore, do not allow for broader generalisation. Nevertheless, they yield important points to consider when designing and implementing support for teachers as facilitators of successful learning, especially at times of curriculum change.

These findings highlight the fact that the burden of curriculum reform cannot be borne by teachers alone, even though they are the key agents of such change. The study also highlights the necessity of considering how best existing as well as change-specific systems can be put into practice on the ground to support, guide, monitor and develop teachers in ways that enable them to

succeed in implementing change initiatives and improving learning. Participants' responses reveal that raising the levels of support from outside agencies, such as the Department of Basic Education, and expanding internal capacity to support the innovation (in this case, the school itself) could strengthen the base of overall support sufficiently to enable better teaching and learning to take place. Further attention therefore needs to be paid in public schools to the provision of systematic, meaningful and sustained professional development activities in particular, by the Department of Basic Education, as well as by schools themselves. Finally, the study emphasises how important it is for schools to be able to provide opportunities for staff management teams and teaching staff to participate in collaborative initiatives to shape their understanding of how curriculum reform can be transformed and translated in both classroom and management practice.

The findings of the study, by highlighting critical issues raised by teachers themselves about the levels of support on offer to them, contribute meaningfully to the debate concerning effective ways to strength capacity to effect successful curriculum reform in the South African context. Further research, based on these and other issues, can assist in guiding and designing a new and integrated framework for effective and ongoing professional development programmes that translate into successful teaching and learning practice.

Note

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. How were you informed about the Foundations for Learning Campaign?
2. What information did you have before attending the FFLC workshop?
3. Who facilitated the FFLC workshop, how long did these workshops last and what was your role as a teacher?
4. Do you think this initiative taken by the Department of Basic Education to launch the Foundations for Learning Campaign was necessary? Substantiate.
5. As a foundation or intermediate phase educator were you adequately prepared to facilitate the implementation of the Foundations for Learning Campaign effectively and efficiently? Substantiate.
6. What are the challenges that you are faced with in your school with regards to facilitating the implementation of the Foundations for Learning Campaign in the classroom?
7. How often have Subject advisors/specialists, Circuit and District officials visited your school/s and how have they assisted with the implementation of the Foundations for Learning Campaign?
8. What kind of support, assistance and guidance has been provided by Staff Management Team in schools regarding the implementation of the Foundations for Learning Campaign?
9. What kind of school-based activities are provided to assist educators in the implementation of the Foundations for Learning Campaign?
10. What professional development programmes are in place in your school to assist educators to overcome challenges of implementing the Foundations for Learning Campaign thereof in classrooms?

NB: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS/SUGGESTIONS
