

A reflection on identified challenges facing South African teachers¹

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing crisis in South African education and constant curriculum changes puts strain on school teachers. This article focuses on the challenges confronting teachers in the South African schooling context. The methodology of grounded theory has great potential to contribute to our understanding of challenges within particular substantive contexts. In order to understand the key challenges experienced in South African schools, a qualitative research approach was employed as the best option for the collection of relevant data. Multiple case studies were undertaken, using semi-structured individual interviews with 12 heads of departments and six focus group interviews with teachers. Results revealed inter alia challenges such as curriculum change, medium of instruction, overcrowded classrooms, discipline and lack of resources. Implications for stakeholders regarding support and the implementation of any new curriculum were pointed out.

Keywords: curriculum change, discipline, grounded theory, lack of resources, learner performance, medium of instruction, overcrowded classrooms

INTRODUCTION

Countries worldwide have experienced challenges with and changes to their curriculum. Consequently, these challenges had an intense impact on the way curricula are conceptualised and implemented (Horsthemke et al., 2013). In America, large numbers of learners experience reading problems (Boyer & Burnette, 2008), while in sub-Saharan Africa, 774 million young people (over 15 years of age) and adults cannot read or write (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany, 2013). Across Africa, ministries of education are doing all they can to ensure that standards progressively improve (Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011). In South Africa, however, there is a long way to go: Business Tech (2015) notes that South Africa's Mathematics and Science education is among the worst in the world – that is, second last – according to global school rankings. In 2014, the *World Economic Forum Report* (Du Plooy, Henkeman & Nyoka, 2014) identified South Africa as one of the worst-performing countries in the field of education. In 2017, South Africa ranked 10th out of 15 for Grade 6 reading and 8th for Mathematics, when compared to low-income countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, even

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though this country has fewer pupils per teacher, better resources and more qualified teachers than other countries (Mail & Guardian, 2018). The 2018 international Institute for Management Development (IMD) world digital competitiveness ranking positioned South Africa 49th out of 63 economies – a drop from 47th place in 2017 (IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2018). Furthermore, South Africa dropped from 37th to 54th place for training and education, and ranked 60th for higher education achievements, which the IMD highlights as a significant overall weakness (IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2018). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) matric class of 2019 achieved a pass rate of 81.3%, up from 78.2% in 2018. But the number should be seen in context. In 2017, a total of 1 052 080 learners were enrolled in grade 10, yet only 409 906 learners eventually passed matric the previous year. The results show that 44.55% of matrics who passed did so with a grade high enough for admission to bachelor's degrees (South Africa's Education statistics 2020). Despite many positive developments in South Africa (SA), the education system and educational outcome face many challenges and require further improvement (Maarman & Lamont-Mbawuli, 2017). This is an indication that the problems confronting South African education is a reality, and that teachers, especially, face significant challenges.

Against this background, the aim of this research was to identify the specific challenges facing South African teachers, and to make recommendations on how to deal with those challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical framing using grounded theory

To achieve the outcome of this research, the researchers launched an open-minded inquiry into the nature of the challenges teachers face in South African schools by applying the methodology and principles of grounded theory. Grounded theory is one of three qualitative designs, namely, ethnographies, case studies and phenomenological studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Grounded theory is mainly used for the qualitative research approach, but may also be used for quantitative research (Walsh, 2014). Grounded theory has its origins in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss who believed that theory could emerge through qualitative data analysis. This research methodology uses inductive reasoning, in contrast to the hypothetico-deductive model of the scientific method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The latest reviews from South Africa advocate the possibilities and value which these grounded theory methods offer for management-related research (Burden & Roodt, 2007), career research, occupation studies (Martin & Barnard, 2013) and the social sciences (Ngulube, Mathiapa & Gumbo, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). These authors state that these methods are valuable because of the benefits of building theories from the bottom up, and for the fact that they work inductively, are less theory bound, are often conducted in local languages and can capture real-life experiences and narratives (Redman-Maclaren & Mills, 2015; Kolb, 2012; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007; Charmaz, 2006, 2014, 2017). According to Du Plessis and Van der Westhuizen (2018), there are distinct advantages for humanities and social science researchers in using grounded theory methods. In education, grounded theory research outputs will hopefully grow in number, with theoretical contributions becoming more valued and better integrated across focus areas.

Although alternative perspectives exist on grounded theory, as explained by Underwood and Dia Lima (2015), the researchers decided to adhere to the original approach proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The major difference between grounded theory and other research methods is its specific approach, which seeks to develop theory that is grounded in data which have been systematically gathered and analysed. The grounded theory approach works from the premise that initial data collection and preliminary analysis should precede the literature review.

In the context of grounded theory, data analysis consists of seeking out the ideas underlying actualities by looking for codes, then concepts and, finally, categories. During the first phase, the researcher compares data and continually asks questions about what is (and is not) understood. Categories, properties and dimensions within and among the data can be identified by applying a variety of systematic techniques (e.g., allocating numbers/codes to words or highlighting similar words in a specific colour) to examine the text as a whole or in part (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The next step, called axial coding, entails assembling the data in new configurations that allow for connections to be made between categories. Axial coding mainly consists of questioning and comparison, which feed into inductive and deductive thinking as the substrate of relating subcategories to categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Strauss and Corbin (2008) define selective coding (the final stage) as identifying and establishing the core category, systematically linking it to other categories, validating similarities and relationships between categories, and completing categories that require refinement and development. Only after the process of crucial integration (weaving and refining all the major categories into the selection of a core category) has been done, can grounded theory emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). A vital part of developing grounded theory is the use of theoretical (analytic) memos or private diarising activities on the part of the researcher(s). 'Memos are the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes/themes and relationships as they strike the analyst while coding' (Glaser & Strauss 1967: 90). Moss, Gibson and Dollarhide (2014), Allan (2003), Strauss and Corbin (1990), and Glaser (1978, 1992) strongly recommend writing such theoretical memos, meaning that when a researcher is struck by a notion during coding, s/he should break off at that point and jot down a memo to develop the idea.

The literature tends to favour an inductive approach and, rather than trying to force data into a preconceived mould, allows the data to dictate and shape the course of research. It is deliberately fused so that initial data analysis can be used to shape continuing data collection. This is intended to provide the researcher with opportunities to increase the 'density' and 'saturation' (no new information) of recurring categories and follow up on unexpected findings (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Johnson & Christensen, 2004: 30). The process continues until no new insights that shed light on relationships pertaining to the core idea are revealed. Only then can new theories be defined. Once a theory has been formulated, the process itself is complete and testing of the theory is not required to confirm its status as validly grounded (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Dey, 1993; Glaser, 1992).

The following sections focus on the methodology, data collection and analysis, discussion of the findings, literature review, and conclusion.

Empirical inquiry

Interpretivism focuses on human interpretations of the social world, and the significance of both the participants' and the researchers' interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon under study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). Interpretivism was deemed the most appropriate paradigm for this undertaking, as it is concerned with revealing multiple realities as opposed to searching for one objective reality (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013).

The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach based on a grounded theory research design, to interrogate the views of selected heads of departments (HODs) and teachers on the challenges they face in selected South African schools within the Gauteng Ekurhuleni North District. To this end, the researchers employed multiple case studies, which are designed to allow for in-depth analyses of various cases (Creswell, 2014).

Selection of participants

The researchers chose three urban and three township schools (each regarded as a case) to investigate the dynamics within different types of schools, and present evidence to ensure the validity of the results.

Purposive selection was done to conduct individual interviews with two HODs from each school (12 in total). The researchers also interviewed five to seven teachers in a focus group at each school: six focus group interviews were conducted (36 participants in total). All the participants had ten or more years of teaching experience. The right to privacy was secured by allocating a number and their subject or department to each research participant, who were subsequently identified as follows: in urban schools – US1, US2, US3; and in township schools – TS1, TS2, TS3. HODs were represented by a number and subject, for example, HOD1: Language department, HOD2: Mathematics department. Teachers in the focus group were represented as FG1, T1, T2, followed by 'Language teacher' or 'Mathematics teacher'. In this research, credibility and dependability were established by making use of two researchers. Ethical clearance was granted by the Department of Education (Gauteng) and the relevant higher education institution.

Table 1:
The profile of the HoDs (n = 12)

Urban school (US1)	Urban school (US2)	Urban school (US3)	Township school (TS1)	Township school (TS2)	Township school (TS3)
HOD1M Commerce 20–25 TE	HOD1F Arts 15–20 TE	HOD1F Social Sciences 20–25 TE	HOD1M Language 30–25 TE	HOD1M Mathematics 25–30 TE	HOD1F Language 25–30 TE
HOD2M Mathematics 15–20 TE	HOD2F Natural Sciences 15–20 TE	HOD2M Language 20–25 TE	HOD2M Mathematics 15–20 TE	HOD2F Language 10–15 TE	HOD2M Commerce 20–25 TE
2 M	2 F	1 M 1 F	2 M	1 M 1 F	1 M 1 F

Key: M = Male, F = Female, TE = teaching experience (in years)

As indicated in Table 1, seven males and five females were interviewed. No attempt was made to balance the genders because participation was voluntary and based on years of experience. A profile of the focus group participants is provided in Table 2.

Table 2:
Teachers as focus group participants (n = 36)

Urban school (US FG1)	Urban school (US FG2)	Urban school (US FG3)	Township school (TS FG1)	Township school (TS FG2)	Township school (TS FG3)
T1F Tourism 15–20 TE	T1F Mathematics 15–20 TE	T1F Geography 20–25 TE	T1F Business Economics 20–25 TE	T1F isiZulu 15–20 TE	T1F isiZulu 20–25 TE
T2M Mathematics 15–20 TE	T2F Life Sciences 20–25 TE	T2F English 30–35 TE	T2M Mathematics 15–20 TE	T2F English 10–15 TE	T2M Accounting 20–25 TE
T3F Life Orientation 30–35 TE	T3M Afrikaans 30–35 TE	T3F Mathematics 30–35 TE	T3M Social Sciences 10–15 TE	T3M Business Studies 25–30 TE	T3M Mathematics 30–35 TE

Urban school (US FG1)	Urban school (US FG2)	Urban school (US FG3)	Township school (TS FG1)	Township school (TS FG2)	Township school (TS FG3)
T4F Afrikaans 20–25 TE	T4M Natural Sciences 20–25 TE	T4F Economics 30–35 TE	T4F isiZulu 15–20 TE	T4F Accounting 25–30 TE	T4F Physical Science 30–35 TE
T5M Physical Science 20–25 TE	T5F Accounting 25–30 TE	T5F Life Science 20–25 TE	T5F Life Science 20–25 TE	T5F Social Sciences 15–20 TE	T5F Geography 20–25 TE
	T6F English 10–15 TE	T6M History 30–35 TE	T6F English 25–30 TE		T6F Technology 20–25 TE
	T7F Economics 20–25 TE				T7F Economics 20–25 TE
2 M 3 F	2 M 5 F	1 M 5 F	2 M 4 F	1 M 4 F	2 M 5 F

Table 2 shows that most teachers who participated in the research taught Language and Commerce, respectively.

Data collection

The first researcher began with a general research problem (classically in the format of grounded theory): 'As HODs/teachers of this school, what are the main challenges you face during teaching?' The interviews, which lasted approximately 60 minutes, were audiotaped.

During the interviews, the first researcher made notes (memos) to identify key words and capture follow-up questions to glean additional information (Moss et al., 2014; Green et al., 2007). Having successfully collected the data by transcribing the interviews, both researchers commenced open coding on their own, which entailed reading each line, sentence, paragraph, etc. to answer the questions: 'What is this about?' and 'What is being referenced here?' Next, key words and phrases were highlighted (in bold below) and data were broken down, examined, compared, conceptualised and categorised. Both researchers analysed the data on their own, then compared their interpretations, for the sake of trustworthiness.

Once the data had been open coded, the researchers commenced axial coding. This involved reassembling the data obtained to identify a central phenomenon. To this end, connections between the categories were identified.

FINDINGS

In writing memos to connect themes and patterns, there was neither a need for additional coding and categorising nor for data collection. Table 3 summarises the themes identified from the data analysis.

Table 3:
Main themes identified by the participants

HODs	Teachers
Curriculum change	Workload

HODs	Teachers
Poor learner performance	Dropout rate
Dropout rate	Poor learner performance
Quality of learners	Progressed learners
Medium of instruction	Medium of instruction
Overcrowded classrooms	Poor subject content foundations
Discipline	Low standards
Lack of resources	Overcrowded classes
	Discipline
	Technology
	Lack of resources
	Underqualified teachers

*Table 4:
Consolidated themes and categories*

Themes	Categories
Curriculum change	Implementation of CAPS Workload Little time for teaching and learning
Learner performance	Quality of learners Skills needed Dropout rate Poor subject content Low standards and mark adjustments Underqualified teachers
Medium of instruction	Learners do not understand English Language influences all subjects
Overcrowded classrooms	Overcrowding as a contributing factor in learner performance Teacher-learner ratio
Discipline	Learners are not disciplined Learners lack commitment Learners have too many rights
Lack of resources	Need of resources for the curriculum to be implemented effectively Technology Access to internet Training for teachers and learners

Table 4 consolidates the themes and supporting categories identified from the data obtained from the interviews with the HODs and teachers, as indicated in Table 3. These challenges are of equal weight and importance and are intimately linked. The presentation and analysis of the empirical findings reflect the participants' experiences of the challenges confronting teachers in South African schools and is supported by verbatim quotations. The discussion of challenges identified by both groups of participants were combined.

Individual interviews with HODs

A main challenge that HODs mentioned was **curriculum change**. In their view, a few grey areas still need to be refined as the **Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)** had not been thoroughly researched. Among their reservations was the **quality of the learners** CAPS was producing. They testified as follows:

We cannot cope wa [you] understand, these changes are coming too fast too quick and yet educators are not properly trained to handle such. (Social Science teacher, TS1HOD2)

The CAPS does not even prepare learners for university level hence [we have a] lot of [...] failures in the universities. We have a lot of learners [...] for them to be qualified for the courses that they do, they have to go for bridging course[s] first, that's the problem with the CAPS. (Creative Arts, Tourism and Consumer Studies teacher, TS3HOD1)

Focus group interviews with the teachers

The first challenge mentioned during the focus group interviews was **workload**. The participants commented that the CAPS content is dense, and the time allocated is insufficient to cover the workload:

The CAPS expect[s] a lot from kids, especially the Grade 12s, because if you check, within a term, they are supposed to have written about how many tests, for example in all learning areas [at] a time, is it seven excluding the SBAs (schools-based assessment), and all of us as Grade 12 educators we expect to see our work up to date, so there is a lot, really. Maybe we need to reduce the number of SBAs in Grade 12. (History teacher, FG6US3)

The topics are congested into [a] small [amount of] time. Let me say, in Maths I have to teach Grade 8 Maths and I have to teach algebraic equations, go na le (there is) 'expand' [...], factorisation [...], multiplication [...], addition [...], division, then they all fall under algebraic expression. What about [if] they break it down: for another grade they do this, and [i]n another grade they do this, maybe if they divide it in[to]: Grade 8 do this and Grade 9 is the continuation of algebraic equation on certain concepts. There are some content congestions, it's a policy that has content congestion. (Mathematics teacher, FG1TS1)

The teachers indicated that the DBE is more concerned with the number of learners passing than the **quality** of the passes and does everything in its power to make sure that more learners pass.

These learners are progressed until they reach Grade 12, then in Grade 12 there are no results because from the beginning they didn't understand the work of Grade 8. (isiZulu teacher, FG1TS1)

Another contributing factor [to the] high failure rate in Grade 12 is progressed learners. Learners are progressed, at the end of the day they blame the teachers, the HODs, whoever, but they are the one[s] who are causing all these problems. (Mathematics teacher, FG5US2)

From these comments, it is clear that progressed learners do not have the **subject content** foundation required to pass Grade 12.

Teachers also mentioned **poor subject content foundations**, complaining that learners did not acquire the requisite basics during the Foundation Phase, and could thus not perform well in Grade 12. They explained that CAPS mainly focuses on assessment, rather than teaching and learning. There is **little time for teaching and learning**, with too much time being allocated to assessment. Learners are often assessed without enough knowledge.

In Mathematics Grade 8 and 9, learners don't have the knowledge of what they are learning about. [...] you talk about fractions and you assume that the learners know what [a] fraction is, how to add or subtract fractions, only to find that they don't have any idea of what is happening there. They come from Grade 7, 6, 5 without any knowledge. (Mathematics teacher, TS3FG3)

The learners here must be prepared as early as Grade 1. We must groom them as early as Grade 1, so that even if our workload is equal in Grade 12 we don't feel the stress because we receive prepared learners. (Accounting teacher, FG5US2)

The teachers identified **low standards** as a concern, admitting that South Africa is known for very low educational standards. They indicated that CAPS produces learners who cannot attend university – although they passed, they only obtained 30%. They were also concerned about the **mark adjustments and condonation** of Mathematics learners who earned 20% and less. They suggested that, from Grade 10, the pass percentage should be 50%, as is evident from these comments:

The performance of Grade 12s in general is very low. You can find that the school may get [a] 98% pass rate, but the average mark is actually 30%. Its quantity not quality. And we can rectify this, maybe in Grade 10. If we can make sure that the learners who are going to Grade 11, pass with 50%. (Geography teacher, FG3TS3)

Then the concept of our pass mark, I think that one is a big challenge. I don't understand how developers develop a curriculum, make sure that the pass rate is 30% and [if] you go to university it is 50%. So, they are simply saying an African child is supposed to get a matric certificate and never go to university. So how, then, are we going to develop new engineers? (Physical Science teacher, FG4US1)

Furthermore, the participants indicated that they would do away with **technology**. They felt that it was useless for the government to issue learners with tablets, without providing the necessary accompanying resources. For example, learners could not use the tablets to do research, because there was no **access to the internet**. The tablets were intended to be used in conjunction with **smart boards**, but only a **few educators went for training on this technology**, and the rest could not use it. As this participant stated:

I would do away with the tablets, [the] smart board is okay, but the tablet? Remember, our children are coming from disadvantaged community[ies] and they become excited when they carry those tablets [...]. I find it not fair for us to give those children the tablets knowing very well that these children who were supposed to be carrying those tablets are not using those tablets at school. They are not carrying their tablets around, you see, they leave them at home, and use them at [in]appropriate time[s] [...], they misuse them most the time [...]. What I would say to that, [is] they must stop them because of the limited resources. (Economics teacher, FG3TS3)

Underqualified teachers present a challenge, with the participants indicating that new topics were regularly being added in certain subjects, while teachers are not equipped to teach those topics. Even new teachers coming from universities were not thoroughly trained, as these participants explained:

... in relation to the CAPS and the curriculum, we have new topics, like for example, there is a topic that carries ± 20 marks in Geography map work, [...] which most educators [...] are still learning also. It's a new topic, the GIS part, and it requires software to be included in schools, it requires practical work [...] we need practical equipment to educate learners using it, we only do the crash theoretical course. [...] I would try to implement, like let's say paper GIS to show how are layers implemented in

Geography when we do land survey. [...] for learners it becomes just a classroom experience, they never have enough time to go out and view it, it's only interested educators who will go through that, so most educators will just brush it off and say 'no, I'm not going to teach this because I was never trained for this'. (Social Sciences teacher, FG1TS1)

I think the training programme should be [implemented] at universities, the way they train teachers, so that these youngsters coming to the profession now are trained [...]. As my colleague said earlier, these kids who come from universities have no clue as to what is really happening, because whatever they are taught there and the method of teaching are totally different from reality. So, I suppose the idea is that this training programme must be [in place] in the universities first. (Tourism teacher, FG4US1)

Combined challenges identified from both individual interviews and focus group interviews

HODs referred to **learner performance** and the **implementation of the CAPS**, indicating that the strongest emphasis was on **learners acquiring skills** so that they could become productive members of society. Many learners were unable to cope at university and **dropped out** during their first year. As one of the participants commented:

These learners that we are producing, how many of them drop [out] during [their] first year at university level? [...] What is the reason? They are not prepared, we just throw them [in the deep end] like that, they are raw. (Mathematics teacher, US3HOD1)

The participating teachers also highlighted **poor learner performance** and mentioned that **learners lack commitment** to their school work. They rely on the DBE to push them from one grade to the next. They are lazy to read a paragraph so, to avoid failing, the teachers read with them and analyse texts word for word, explaining the meaning and breaking down words for them. Several participants voiced their opinions in this respect:

We are spoon-feeding these learners and [that] doesn't take them anywhere. Once you can leave these learners and say 'do these on your own', they won't do it. Even in Grade 12, you must teach them as if you are teaching Grade 8s, you know? (Business Studies teacher, FG4US2)

The teachers also complained that the CAPS learners are unable to cope at university and **drop out** during their first year:

Its quality versus quantity on my side, the CAPS or maybe the education of nowadays it focuses on quantity, quality is not important anymore, that's why we are going for low pass rate percentage[s], then [what] the learner knows, is not important. (English teacher, FG1TS1)

The CAPS does not prepare them for tertiary institutions. Our learners are struggling when they get to university. (Life Sciences teacher, FG4US2)

Another identified challenge was the **medium of instruction**. Township school HODs complained that **learners do not understand English** – a fact which affected other subjects as well and contributed to poor learner performance. Because of the widespread use of English in further education and in the job market, those learners whose language of instruction is not English will often select English as their first additional language. They commented that even learners who could read, **still do not understand the language**, and are unable to interpret or analyse questions on their own. In this regard, some participants commented:

I think one of the contributing factors can be that they are doing English as a First Additional language and they can't construct sentences, they can't read properly. With the CAPS we are still experiencing that learners are not reading with understanding [...], you know you could tell that language is a barrier and, if a learner experiences problems in terms of language and other subjects are being taught in English, [it] definitely is going to become [a] very serious problem. (English teacher, TS2HOD1)

... medium of instruction, which is English. Some learners cannot understand the language itself and another problem is writing and reading. You find a learner in Grade 12 can't even spell a simple word, [or do] sentence construction in Grade 12, those are the challenges that we have. Because of the language barrier, the content subjects also suffer. (Technology teacher, TS3HOD1)

The teachers likewise complained that learners do not understand English, which affected their other subjects and contributed to their poor performance. Here are some of the participants' opinions:

Educators are sometimes tempted to cross the line, to switch so that learners can understand, but you can imagine, they must first understand English and then they can deal with the syllabus. Maths literacy is purely English: first you must understand English then you must learn to do the calculations, so English is a big challenge. (Mathematics teacher, FG1TS1)

First of all, [there is a] language barrier, because our learners cannot express themselves in English and they lack some of...it's not that they do not have the content, or they cannot understand the question, it's just that the problem is the language, they cannot understand what is asked there. (Life Sciences teacher, FG6US3)

The next challenge mentioned by both groups was **overcrowded classes**. Only participants from township schools complained about **overcrowding as a contributing factor in Grade 12 learner performance**. Overcrowded classes make it difficult for teachers to give individual attention to learners. As three of the participants stated:

Our classes are overcrowded, if we were given [a] limited number of learners, I think the CAPS [would] be of [...] benefit to learners, even the results would be of a very high standard. But the challenges that we have in class, overcrowding, it's the one factor that is disturbing education in class. They can't perform to their ability. (English teacher, TS1HOD1).

Overcrowding is my biggest challenge. Mathematics is a subject that needs individual attention every now and then, therefore it is not possible. Overcrowding leads to [a] high failure rate and also causes disciplin[ary] problems. (Mathematics teacher, TS2HOD2)

The size of the classroom... in most cases you find that learners are overcrowded, it leads to poor performance because learners don't get individual attention. (Life Sciences teacher, FG1TS1)

Discipline was also identified as a challenge. Most participants complained that the **learners are not disciplined**. They intentionally do not do their work, because they know there will be no repercussions. They do not respect their teachers, who become demoralised. In this regard, the participants explained:

One other thing... it's not the CAPS related but it's a general thing, nobody seems to come out clearly in terms of discipline, what is [it] that that we need to do, to see to it that our challenges at schools are minimised, because giving tasks and learners not performing... it's because of the fact that they know there is no consequence for [their] action, and yet because this education is learner-centred, the child is never wrong. (Social Sciences teacher, TS1HOD2)

Challenge number one, you know what, our learners are not disciplined. They know that teachers cannot go beyond a certain limit, they know their rights. This thing of rights, the learner[s] practise those even in our classroom. If I send him out, it's also a problem, you know? It's against the law. They are getting out of hand and sometimes they kill the spirit of the teacher. (Life Sciences teacher, US1HOD1)

You see, the constitution does not allow us to use corporal punishment, not that we want to do it, but there are no [...] other effective methods to discipline these kids. They know they are protected even more than the teachers themselves, hence it compromises us on [the] delivery of our duties, especially on discipline. (Mathematics teacher, FG6US3)

A lack of resources was also mentioned, with the participants complaining that the **CAPS requires resources for the curriculum to be implemented effectively**:

Our schools are not resourced and they are not well equipped. Resources di batlega gagolo neh [are extremely important]. You know one other thing is that we need working libraries, and also computer labs. (Social Sciences teacher, TS1HOD2)

Our school does not have a laboratory, so we make use of a small class. As in when we need to do experiments, particularly in Physical Science, we do a show of experiments, learners are not engaged in doing that, because we don't have a lab. A teacher is actually standing in front of a learner, demonstrating, and the opposite is supposed to be true. (Physical Science teacher, US2HOD2)

What I see is the CAPS wasn't made for [...] South African conditions, especially [...] where a primary school in a rural area and urban area is not the same. It is not meant for under-resourced schools. (Afrikaans teacher, FG4US1)

In isiZulu [...] they have listening comprehension, at times we don't need to read for the learners, at times you can play a radio and they listen to what... we don't have all these things. (isiZulu teacher, FG3TS3)

DATA INTERPRETATION

An extended exposition of a theory would be premature, as the theory has to be verified first. Subsequently, a literature review was undertaken, to consider the extent to which established studies and theoretical insights either support or refute the researchers' grounded theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review focuses on the seven core themes identified in the empirical investigation in the researcher's grounded theory (see Table 4).

Curriculum change in South Africa

Throughout the 1980s, South Africa was characterised by resistance to the injustices of apartheid, however, rapid transformation was generated by riots in 1976 (DoE, 2002). After the first democratic election in 1994, the National Education and Training Forum began the process of syllabus revision (DoE, 2002). Curriculum 2005 (C2005) was introduced in 1998 with an outcomes-based education (OBE) approach to redress the imbalances of the past (DoE, 2002). It was developed on a national level and teachers only became involved when receiving training (Arend, 2005). Despite the fact that teachers were excluded from participating in the curriculum development process, they had to implement it. There were many new

concepts for teachers and learners to digest, and teachers did not know exactly what was required of them, because the system required hours of administration on their part (Naidoo, 2011). As a result of numerous challenges, C2005 was modified and gave rise to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Reyneke, Meyer and Nel (2010) remark that inadequate teacher training led to poor understanding of the curriculum, most teachers lacked resources and support materials, standards and moderation were poor, and illiterate learners entered the system, thereby adding to teachers' already heavy workload. As a result of challenges experienced with NCS, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was introduced in 2012 in Grade 10.

CAPS-related workshops did not adequately prepare teachers for the challenges of the classroom, but only ensured that they understand the policy (Moodley, 2013). Teachers are not being properly trained to implement CAPS, nor are conditions favourable for implementation, due to insufficient resources, unqualified teachers and a lack of support from the DBE (Maharajh, Nkosi & Mkhize, 2016). Du Plessis and Marais (2015) note that there is a significant amount of work for teachers and learners to do, and the lack of resources has not been addressed, leading to a higher failure rate and poor performance in languages and Mathematics. Another challenge is the rapid pace of teaching required by the curriculum (Phasha, Bipath & Beckmann, 2016). CAPS is too heavy on content, and teachers struggle to cover the immense level of content in class, thus overburdening learners with homework (Goetze, 2016). Consequently, in 2018, there was another call for public comment after ongoing complaints from educational leaders about the content overload as well as the added burden of SBA (DBE, 2018).

As noted from the empirical data, criticism was raised on the topic of curriculum change. Essentially, the DBE has to react to complaints in terms of inadequate teacher training and poor understanding of the curriculum, supported by literature.

Learner performance

Education is considered extremely important throughout the world, but still no two countries approach it in the same way – some are better at it than others (*MBC Times*, 2013). In a comparison of academic performance in 57 countries, learners in Finland came out on top overall (Wilde, 2015) – and only the top ten per cent of college graduates in Finland are allowed to enter the teaching profession (US DoE, 2011). Moreover, teachers in Finland have assistants who have been trained to assist struggling learners (Hendrickson, 2015).

Conversely, 1% of teachers in England are Advanced Skills Teachers, meaning they produce excellent outcomes with learners, possess excellent subject knowledge and are able to advise on best practices; they can plan both operationally and strategically to ensure successful learning, are highly skilled at assessing and evaluating; and mentor and support other teachers, including coaching and training both in their own schools and in other settings (Brighouse & Woods, 2013). This means that 99% of teachers are not sufficiently equipped to produce skilled learners. Learners need knowledgeable and skilful teachers who are trained in effective strategies, to teach academic knowledge and skills aimed at improving performance (Maimuna, 2016). Ideally, teachers should make use of recent and relevant teaching materials in the teaching and learning process (Ige, 2016).

In addition, learners in the United Kingdom (UK) struggle to perform Mathematics tasks with higher cognitive demands, such as taking real-world situations and translating them into mathematical terms (OECD, 2012). Research reveals that better teachers lead to better learner performance, and better performance leads to higher learner motivation (British Council, 2015). Maarman and Lamont-Mbawuli (2017) concur that motivation is an important factor and that learners should display the willingness to participate in motivating exercises or programmes implemented either inside or outside the school. Most

learners in Scotland in primary schools achieve an average of 70% in numeracy, but in secondary schools only about 40% achieve high standards. However, in reading, both primary and secondary learners laudably perform at around 80% (OECD, 2015).

Zimbabwe has the highest literacy rate in Africa. From 2009 to 2016, learner performance dropped to 'low' and later 'unacceptable', ranging between 19 and 29% (Nyoni, Nyoni & Bonga, 2017). In that country, the ratio of qualified teachers to learners is 1:42 in primary schools and 1:31 in secondary schools (Higherlife Foundation, 2016).

Maemeko, Nkengbeza and Ntabi (2017) report that low academic achievement among Grade 12 learners in Namibia has become stressful and frustrating to all stakeholders.

As noted, South Africa is underperforming in terms of education (Jacobsohn, 2017; Du Plooy et al., 2014). According to Spaul (2017), most learners acquire learning deficits early on in primary school, and then carry these with them as they progress through the higher levels. Davis (2017) warns that, in 2016, the true Grade 12 pass rate would only be 40.2% (not 72.5%), if poor-performing learners who had been removed from the system, were accounted for. Business Tech (2017) concurs with those statistics, since the dropout rate was not taken into account. The official pass rate has since increased to 75.1% in 2017. Performance depends, to a large extent, on the number of teachers, their quality, their devotion to duty and their effectiveness on the job (Ahmad, 2016).

Empirical analysis shows that poor learner performance, a lack of skills, commitment and motivation are concerns for South African teachers. What is more is that learners are not equipped for tertiary training. The literature review confirms that learners need skilled teachers to teach academic knowledge and skills aimed at enhancing learner performance.

Overcrowded classrooms

Overcrowding, which is determined by the average number of learners per teacher, is one of the most serious problems confronting South Africa, especially in rural or township schools, because it affects curriculum delivery. Class size is strongly related to learner performance (Bakasa, 2011). Overcrowded classrooms negatively influence learners' academic performance (Fakude, 2012), as the teacher cannot pay full attention to every learner (Omwirhiren & Anderson, 2016).

Indeed, overcrowded classrooms are a problem world-wide. The learner-teacher ratio in Tanzania is at an average of 52:1 and as high as 72:1 in some regions (Nyandwi, 2014). In Pakistan, the average number of learners in most classes ranges from 70-120 (Khan & Mohammad, 2012). In contrast, Finland is a top-performing country academically, with small class sizes: its learner-teacher ratio is 15:1. Likewise, Curro Holdings, South Africa's largest private school operator, has a 15:1 ratio across its network of 110 schools, but the ratio in government schools exceeds 40:1 (Business Tech, 2016).

Unfortunately, there is no effective teaching and learning in large classes, and the classroom environment becomes unproductive (Business Tech, 2016). Thus, learners in larger classes display negative learning behaviours, such as not responding to the teacher's questions and expecting the teacher to provide the answers (Epri, 2016). Teachers in overcrowded classes cannot give learners individual attention and, as a result, some may fall behind (Marais, 2016). Besides, in schools that cannot afford more teachers or increase the number of classrooms, classes are sometimes overcrowded to the point where learners learn under trees, forcing teachers to spend more time on classroom management than on teaching, to the detriment of learner performance (Higherlife Foundation, 2016). Overcrowded classrooms undermine learner performance, effective teaching and discipline (Matshipi, Mulaudzi & Mashau, 2017; Van Zyl,

2016). Larger classes are noisier and more difficult to control (Marais, 2016), causing teachers to spend more time on disciplining learners than on teaching.

As noted by the participants, overcrowded classrooms are a reality and teachers have to make the best of the situation. A contributing factor is the progression of learners. Moreover, it creates discipline problems and has a negative influence on learner performance. This is confirmed by literature: overcrowded classes lead to unproductive teaching and discipline problems, depriving learners of individual attention.

Discipline

Modern-day scholars tend to focus on indiscipline among learners and its effects on learning outcomes and scholastic progress. Some suggest that disciplinary policies simply do not have the desired effect (Stanley, 2014; Schoonover, 2009), while others assert that even suspension does not prevent learners' future misbehaviour (Nichols, 2004). In fact, the Schools Act (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996a) makes it clear that corporal punishment may no longer be used in public and independent schools, which means that teachers should thus find creative means of disciplining learners. According to the constitution (RSA, 1996b), everyone has the right not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way.

Disruptive behaviour amongst learners is eliminated if there is good discipline at school. Hence, the implementation of effective disciplinary measures is key for any learner on the journey to adulthood (Stanley, 2014). Disruptive behaviour in South African schools has been reported widely, and is said to include learners arming themselves with dangerous weapons, learner-on-learner violence, learner-on-educator violence, vandalism, theft, and the possession of prohibited substances (e.g., drugs and alcohol) (Mestry & Khumalo 2012). Bad behaviour is often a form of attention-seeking. In most homes, especially in rural villages, many learners live with their grandparents, have working parents, head households themselves, or have to deal with domestic violence (Mestry & Khumalo, 2012). Indeed, schools should provide learners with the educational foundation to build successful, independent lives – at the most basic level, classroom disruptions interfere with learner achievement (Kelly, 2019).

Disciplinary codes provide learners with acknowledged consequences for misbehaviour. **Effective classroom management** should include the dissemination and use of a code of discipline (Kelly, 2019). Discipline in schools can include educators or administrators stopping fights before they begin, or dealing with hostile students in a classroom setting. However, effective discipline begins with the implementation of school-wide housekeeping policies that all teachers must follow.

The consensus among participants regarding discipline confirms that respect between teachers and learners is important. They were in agreement that learners know their rights. Our literature control verified that if a school is effectively disciplined, learners' and teachers' academic performance will be highly rated.

Medium of instruction

Howie (2013) found that learners' English proficiency was a strong predictor of performance. English is the medium of instruction in the majority of South African schools, while the majority of rural and township schools offer it as a second language – a fact that is not taken into consideration when setting national question papers. Most schools offer English First Language with second language learners, which impacts negatively on their performance in other subjects (News24, 2015).

A poor foundation in English creates a challenging learning environment (Gbayange, 2014). If learners are fluent in English from an early age, it improves their academic performance (Nyandwi, 2014), as does effective communication skills (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012). In fact, learners perform poorly because of their lack of English competence, which limits their chances of progressing to tertiary education (Nyandwi, 2014).

When learners learn in a language that is not their mother tongue, they are not always able to interpret a question correctly in the examination, thus diminishing their chances of providing the correct answer (Dhurumraj, 2013). Learners who interact using English tend to understand it better and do well in examinations (Reche et al., 2012). In rural and township schools, although the medium of instruction is English, learners mainly speak in the vernacular, with many opting not to participate in class, for fear of being unable to express themselves properly. Research conducted in Namibia also identified English as medium of instruction as a factor contributing to poor learner performance (Nkadi, 2015). Consequently, learners cannot perform well in other subjects if their command of English is poor (Arsad, Buniyamin & Manan, 2014). To perform well, they should have mastered reading, writing, speaking and listening (Moshia, 2014).

Empirical data revealed that language can be a barrier to learning. The relationship between teachers and learners with the same mother tongue also differs from that between teachers and learners where the teacher's cultural background and mother tongue differ from those of the learners. Cultivating from literature, the medium of instruction may have a negative influence on learners' academic performance.

Lack of resources

Rural schools generally have inferior and fewer resources than their urban counterparts (UN, 2013). The Eastern Cape remains the worst-performing province, with a 63.3% pass rate in 2016, which is attributed to poor school infrastructure, and a lack of materials and resources (Jacobsohn, 2017). A lack of resources affects the effectiveness of a teacher's lessons (Reche et al., 2012). Indeed, the resources available to enhance the learning process is a vital factor in determining learners' ability to learn (Department for International Development, 2011). By the time they are in Grade 3, learners in under-resourced schools tend to be years behind their peers (Equal Education, 2015).

Epri (2016) asserts that learners are handicapped (educationally speaking) if they attend schools with a paucity of learning materials. Teachers at those schools have low expectations of their learners and, when the learners realise that, they perform poorly (Ali et al., 2013). By contrast, adequate resources enhance academic performance (Jacobsohn, 2017: 1) or maintain it (Nyandwi, 2014). Most public schools in South Africa lack proper laboratory facilities, making learning difficult (Dhurumraj, 2013). Nyandwi (2014) adds that resources are needed to transfer knowledge and facts as well as to keep learners interested in a subject requiring laboratory work. Dhurumraj (2013) confirms that the success of theoretical and practical lessons depends on the availability of resources. However, even with qualified teachers in well-resourced schools, if insufficient time is allocated to complete the syllabus, learner performance will be sub-standard.

Empirical analysis shows that many schools are lacking the necessary resources. The challenge is to be creative with the resources that are available. It was confirmed by literature that adequate resources may enrich learner's academic performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Every country needs a structure that promotes good teaching, and attracts and retains the best teachers, principals and management teams. These stakeholders need to perform their roles effectively to establish an environment that is conducive to learning. Subject knowledge alone is not enough to ensure effective teaching and learning, or to improve learner performance in the absence of resources. Textbooks, which are crucial if effective teaching and learning are to take place, should be informative and interesting. Learners should be encouraged to read more, to improve their language skills.

The researchers make the following recommendations (for each identified challenge), in light of the research on which this article is based:

- It is recommended that the DBE should slow down on curriculum change and should build from one curriculum to the next, taking the best elements of the earlier curriculum and building them into the new curriculum, rather than introducing an entirely new curriculum each time there is a change in the Minister of Education. The DBE's skilled facilitators should present more workshops. Crash courses do not prepare teachers sufficiently to be able to implement the curriculum successfully.
- Learners should be regularly motivated. Educated members of each community, artists, police, entrepreneurs and other professionals should visit schools to motivate learners once a month. If learners are motivated regularly, it will help them to make informed decisions about their career choices, and to be more knowledgeable about the options available to them. To ensure that teachers are competent to teach, there should be an assessment every three years for each phase.
- It is further recommended that the first 30 minutes of every day be an English reading period to enhance learners' reading skills. In examinations, all other subjects are assessed in English; improved English proficiency will thus better learner performance.
- Schools and teachers must create workable solutions to make the best of overcrowded classrooms, such as to establish clear rules and expectations and to take advantage of ability grouping.
- Teachers must communicate more with parents to report absenteeism, late coming, homework not done, disruptive behaviour and missing of classes on a daily basis.
- Better resources should be provided for all schools, especially disadvantaged ones. Each district should ensure that its schools have working libraries, and science/computer laboratories. The availability of resources is critical for the successful implementation of the curriculum.

The consensus among the study participants was that educators face common challenges in the classroom, of which the DBE should take note. The literature review served to conclusively verify the grounded theory used here.

The challenges identified at this point can be broadly categorised as contextual in nature and a number of practical and theoretical lessons can be drawn from the findings. These include suggestions which may be of value to the DBE, as indicated in the recommendations. The contribution which this article makes to theory is twofold: firstly, having been verified (against data and literature), the theory can be used by other researchers; and, secondly, the practical implication is that the DBE can use it to minimise the challenges facing local teachers. In the end, all stakeholders in education should work together to improve the performance of learners in South African schools.

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