

THE TEACHER'S INFLUENCE IN CURRICULUM POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

BY FRANCIS NDLOVU

LECTURER: FACULTY OF ATRS AND EDUCATION: ZIMBABWE OPEN
UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This paper looks at the role played by teachers in curriculum policy effectuation. Teachers / educators are the major pillars in the teaching and learning process. Without doubt the most important person in the practice curriculum is the teacher. With their knowledge, experience and competencies teachers are central to any curriculum policy improvement effort, they are responsible for introducing the curriculum in the classroom and outside education companies spend countless hours developing curriculum it is the teacher who knew best what the curriculum should look like. After, all they work directly with the students who are meant to benefit from the curriculum. The key to getting teachers committed to an innovation is to enhance their knowledge of the new policy or programme. Therefore policymakers should no longer assume that curriculum implementation is a process that directly translates into classroom reality. Teachers are the ones who ultimately decide the fate of any educational enterprise. Consequently, teachers' attitudes, feelings and perceptions should not be devalued before the launching of any innovation.

Key terms

Teachers, influence, policy, curriculum, implementation

Introduction

Even though large sums of money are spent on implementing new curriculum, several of these efforts have failed. According to Sarason (1990), the main reason for the failure is the lack of understanding of the culture of the school by both experts and educators externally and internally. Successful implementation requires understanding the traditions, the roles and responsibilities of individuals in the school system. Teachers know their students better than others involved in the curriculum process. While the state often dictates the skills covered by the curriculum, a teacher can provide insight into the types of materials, activities and specific skills that need to be included. Teachers from multiple levels may collaborate to identify skills students need at each level and ensure that the curriculum adequately prepares students to advance to the next level.

What is policy

Policy is a statement of guidelines which governs how a group of people should behave on given circumstances. Policy can also be described as a statement of rules which give direction and influence behaviour in given circumstances. Dye (1981:38) says, "Public policy is what the government chooses to do or finds worthy to do". In the light of this definition, education policy gives certain guidelines or rules about those involved in the planning, decision making and implementation and other activities about how education administrators should behave in given circumstances. The objective of having a policy is to give direction to those given the task of managing certain activities. Where there are no guidelines, confusion abounds. Policy also gives a sense of confidence to those who are assigned work tasks. At the national level, existing educational policies affect all or several schools in a given country. In Zimbabwe, most national policies are issued out by the Permanent Secretary of Education after consulting the lawmakers and senior administrators in government. Once a policy is made, it is communicated to the various organisations of the education system for implementation. Curriculum policies are also made through this process.

What is a Curriculum Policy

Walker, (1990:303) says, "Curriculum policy is simply a settled, coherent plan or course of action with respect to curriculum matters". While nothing prevents us from speaking of the curriculum policies of a single teacher in a single classroom, we customarily speak of policy only when the jurisdiction is much larger. This usage distinguishes between situations in which those involved can meet face to face and situations in which such intimacy is logistically impossible and decisions must be delegated to representatives. In this project, the word policy is used to cover the latter situation only. The real and curriculum planning and action that takes place in schools and classrooms is described in other terms.

The Functions of Policy in Curriculum Matters

Walker (1990:3-4) gives a list of functions of policy in curriculum matters. These include inter alia:

- To coordinate the curricula of schools and classrooms throughout some jurisdiction. The standardization facilities transfer of students from one school or classroom to another, simplifies school management (for instance, entrance and graduation requirements, scheduling and testing), makes possible a greater uniformity in the training and certification of educational personnel, and lends a degree of common meaning to the credentials students earn upon completion of each stage of schooling.
- Curriculum policy also serves a cultural function. It offers people the opportunity to express shared values. A decision that all children should be taught practical subjects affirms the value that society attaches to these subjects as a panacea to social and economic ills.
- Politically, policy functions as a means of achieving concerted action on a large scale in the face of divergent interests and opinions. Political scientists speak of this process as the conversion of demands and supports into decisions and actions (Easton, 1965). In times when national well-being seems threatened and people call for action from the schools, policy provides a means of converting political demands into actions that can be debated and, if supported implemented.
- Finally, policy performs the important economic function of allocating scarce educational resources among competing curricula priorities in accordance with a plan. A policy that requires every student to study English, Science, Mathematics, one practical subject and making all other subjects elective, effectively allocates an array of educational resources among these subjects, including teacher time and qualifications, student time and curriculum materials.

The Teacher's influence in Curriculum Policy Implementation

The classroom teacher can be viewed as one of the key curriculum policy implementers. Whitaker et al (1979) stress this point by identifying three situations that influenced teachers as they implemented a curriculum policy. Whitaker (1979) list them as:

- Prescriptions – what we must do.
- Expectations – what we have to take into account.
- Predilections – what we would like to do.

According to Whitaker (1979) the “prescription” is the natural curriculum and the syllabus from the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU). While the “prescription” plan is central guidance, the way most teachers operate is more determined by what they think they should do than what they know they must do.

Taylor (1987:9) defines curriculum as,

A plan for providing sets of learning opportunities for persons to be educated. Plans have no impact until they are set in motion: thus learning opportunities remain only opportunities until learners become engaged with opportunities.

Thus, the expected position and behaviour of a teacher in curriculum policy implementation and development is emphasized as one of mediating between learner and his / her environment in order to facilitate learning. Without instruction, which Taylor et al (1981:9) define as, “the actual engagement of learners with planned learning opportunities” the curriculum has no impact. It remains unutilized like a building plan that has no builder to translate it into the intended reality as a definite structure. The Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture’s Circular Number 2 of (2001” 6 item 4:3:5) prescribes that, “Every Secondary School child beginning January 2001 must be taught at least one practical subject”. According to Taylor’s assertion, this policy is like a building plan that needs to be translated into a definite structure through implementation. The builder in this case is the teacher. This project wanted to find out whether teachers were in a position of implementing the policy as prescribed or they had other ideas.

Hall, Wallace and Dossett (1973:25) postulate that, “the implementation of a curriculum at a local or micro-level is in the last instance brought about by teachers”. They went on to identify three key variables which conceptualise the progressive actions of individuals who are the implementers, which are namely, stages of concern, levels of use and curriculum configurations.

Stages of concern pertain to feelings, perceptions, motivations and attitudes which individuals experience in connection with the use of a curriculum. Seven stages of concern are distinguished, namely, “awareness, informational, personal, management consequences, collaboration and refocusing” Hall (1979:110). A high measure of implementation means that an individual has progressed to the point where concerns about informational, personal and management aspects of a curriculum have been replaced by a concern about the impact of the curriculum on the pupils.

Level of use focus on the mastery of a curriculum practice by a user. Eight levels are highlighted by (Hall, 1979). These are non-use, orientation, mechanical use, routine, refinement, integration and renewal. A beginner would normally implement a curriculum at the level of mechanical use which means that he user is primarily engaged in a stepwise attempt to master the task required

to use the curriculum often resulting in disjointed and superficial use (Loucks, Newlover and Hall, 1975:5). Effective use of a curriculum really occurs at the routine level and higher.

“Innovation configurations refer to the variations or different patters of a curriculum which occur when it is put into practice by users” (Hall and Loucks, 1978:231). It is important to determine which configurations deviate to such an extent that it is no longer acceptable. Hall and Loucks (1978) emphasise that a checklist should be used to enumerate components of a curriculum and their variations so that an evaluator can construct a structured interviews schedule which can be used to assess the levels of use by an individual user. Such evaluation data can be used to plan supportive and facilitative events or actions (interventions) to promote implementation Hall, Zigarmi and Hord (1979) ordered such actions in the form of taxonomy. The so-called intervention taxonomy. The different intervention levels of the taxonomy are policy, game plan, strategy, tactic and incident. The components of the game plan are developing supportive organizational arrangements, training, providing consultation and reinforcement, monitoring and evaluation, external communication and dissemination (Hall, Hord, 1984).

The fundamental idea behind this conceptualization of implementation is growth in an individual user (teacher). This growth is slow and gradually moving from one stage to the next as obstacles are overcome. In the case of teachers, these obstacles are lack of knowledge and skill required, negative feelings about a curriculum and its implementation, the unavailability of particular resources and the nature of the existing organization of classrooms and schools. Out of the obstacles listed above, this project was specifically interested in the obstacle that deals with teachers’ feelings about a curriculum. It raised questions on teachers’ attitudes towards the practical subjects in Zimbabwe’s secondary schools in order to assist policymakers, administrators and education managers understand teachers’ expectations about these subjects.

Conclusion

Teachers’ perceptions towards a vocational oriented curriculum policy seem to be shaped by a number of factors as shown by the evidence from authorities. This evidence in this chapter highlighted the significant role played by teachers in the implementation. Thus, it was very important to understand their feelings towards the policy of teaching all secondary school pupils practical subjects.

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