

TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL STANDARDS CURRICULUM AT THE RIVERBANK HIGH SCHOOL

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THE ISSUE

The Reform of Secondary Education (ROSE) curriculum was developed in Jamaica in the late 1990s to introduce a standard curriculum for Grades 7 to 9. The rationale was to address the quality of educational programs, access, and inequalities in the education system. However, lack of parental and community support, differences in student abilities, and the paucity of resources resulted in significant challenges in implementing the ROSE curriculum and led to poor student outcomes and teacher frustration. Educational stakeholders also attributed the poor student outcomes to the continued use of the behaviorists' "chalk and talk" approach to teaching. They expressed the need for a new curriculum based on student-centered approaches.

In response to the need for further reform, the National Standards Curriculum (NSC), theoretically underpinned by constructivism, was developed to improve educational outcomes by facilitating greater accountability at the school level, aligning assessment requirements for the secondary level, providing a general guide for teaching and learning, and preparing students for technological growth and social changes characterizing the 21st century.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper explored how teachers, essential stakeholders in the educational reform process, described their experiences implementing the NSC. It sought to ascertain what teachers viewed as challenges while implementing the curriculum as well as strengths they identified.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to explore the meanings behind teachers' experiences related to the implementation of the NSC. A phenomenological case study was undertaken involving a high school that utilized the NSC since its implementation in 2016. Criterion sampling was used to select teachers that possessed a minimum of two academic years' experience teaching the NSC at more than one grade level and individuals who best describe their experiences implementing the curriculum.

Sixteen teacher-participants were chosen from eight subject areas- Modern Languages, Mathematics, Science, Home Economics, History, Religious Education, Social Studies, and Geography. Six Heads of Department and the Dean of Studies were included among the teacher-participants because they served a dual role as both teachers of the curriculum and school administrators in overseeing its implementation and could therefore provide valuable insights.

Data were collected from semi-structured interviews of teachers and written, structured interviews of each Head of Department and the Dean of Studies. Using constant comparison, written interviews and interview transcripts were synthesized into themes that aligned with the purpose of the study.

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FINDINGS

The findings of the study, based on the emerging themes, are as follows:

1. CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY TEACHERS

Most teachers, including the Department Heads, described their overall experience implementing the NSC as challenging. There were four emerging themes.

Theme 1: Preparation for implementation

Only six of the sixteen teachers attended the training sessions organized by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information (MoEYI). The teachers contended that they could not fit the training sessions into their schedule because of the short notice. Those teachers who attended the MoEYI training sessions thought that the sessions would have been more beneficial if more time had been allotted for training. Although the school organized a training session to assist those teachers who missed the training conducted by the MoEYI, some teachers explained that they were uncomfortable with receiving the information 'second-hand' and said that questions about the curriculum remained unanswered.

Theme 2: Administrative support

A Curriculum Implementation Team (CIT) was created at the school to guide teachers towards the successful implementation of the NSC. However, only five of the sixteen teachers were able to affirm its existence, and they described their knowledge of the CIT's role in the implementation process as limited.

The teachers bemoaned the lack of administrative support to improve the implementation process and said the teachers bore the burden of figuring out how to implement the curriculum. They felt that workshops were needed to ensure that teachers' experience with the implementation process was more positive.

Theme 3: Teaching and learning resources

Fifteen of the sixteen teachers said they faced challenges with teaching and learning resources such as textbooks and information and communication technology (ICT) equipment. Most of the teachers said that the textbooks did not reflect the content of the NSC, pointing out that some of the required NSC topics were absent from some textbooks.

All the teachers spoke about a lack of adequate technological resources, which were critical to implementing the NSC. One teacher pointed out that a department that consisted of ten persons had only one multimedia projector. They also highlighted the need for functional computers and internet access in the classrooms.

Theme 4: Classrooms and class size

The teachers highlighted that overcrowding in classrooms made it challenging to facilitate cooperative learning as required by the NSC. The classrooms were small, with class sizes greater than forty students; teachers also felt it was challenging to move around the classrooms and facilitate group activities.



2. STRENGTHS OF THE NSC

Despite the challenges experienced, all sixteen teachers viewed the NSC as a good initiative and the following two areas of strength were highlighted:

• Teaching Strategies employed

All the teachers asserted that their experience with the NSC demonstrated that it is student-centered and provides students with an opportunity to work collaboratively. They also liked that the NSC integrates the content across subject areas, provides opportunities for differentiated learning and caters to students with different learning styles. Despite the lack of adequate ICT at the School, they felt that integrating ICT to enhance the delivery of the content was also a strength of the NSC.

• Holistic development of students

Some teachers expressed that if the NSC was implemented correctly, it would improve students' critical thinking and research skills as they 'explore things themselves' as encouraged in the NSC.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- CITs need to be activated in schools, tasked with evaluating the current state of implementation of the NSC and developing plans to guide the implementation process to ensure curriculum fidelity. Therefore, CIT leaders should be trained in curriculum development and implementation.
- Schools need to organize professional development workshops to ensure that teachers are equipped with the requisite skills to use student-centered teaching strategies stipulated in the NSC. Department-based workshops should be conducted to help teachers understand the subject-specific objectives of the NSC.
- Adequate resources such as textbooks and ICT tools are critical to the effective implementation of the NSC. Subsequently, special budgetary provisions should be made to ensure that teachers and students have access to these resources.
- It is essential that the MoEYI takes steps to reduce class sizes by reducing the Grade 7 intake numbers for each school. This would ensure that the ratio of teacher to students is appropriate to facilitate the productive use of student-centered activities in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

The NSC is an effort at reform aimed at moving the pedagogy utilized in the classroom from a teacher-centered to a constructivist one. This study was intended to explore teachers' experiences implementing the NSC. The findings showed that although the teachers who participated in the study viewed the NSC as a good initiative, they described their experiences implementing the curriculum as negative. Strong instructional leadership and professional development are required to address this issue. Delay or failure to institutionalize the NSC will fail to achieve the curriculum reform required to ensure that high school graduates are equipped to meet the expectations of the 21st century.