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Teachers and Teacher Education: Limitations and Possibilities of Attaining SDG 4 in South Africa

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Abstract: As we enter the last ten years leading to the realisation of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2030, African countries are still plagued with poverty and underdevelopment. For most children in Africa, the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 will remain elusive. Drawing from two interrelated empirical studies, one focusing on citizenship and social cohesion at high school level and the other on the implementation of assessment for learning at primary school level, it was found that not only are schools not equipped to provide the quality education as set out in SDG 4, but teachers need additional training to give expression to the ideals of SDG 4. In order for this to be adequately addressed, all interested stakeholders—government, business, and NGOs—need to be involved.

Keywords: assessment for learning; social cohesion; citizenship; sustainable development goals; teachers



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1. Introduction

More than twenty-five years into democracy and entering the final decade of the realisation of the SDGs, this paper reflects on the possibilities and limitations of attaining SDG 4, focusing on teachers in the context of South Africa.

In order to realise this laudable goal of equitable and quality education, a range of criteria need to be in place, most important of all being well-trained and suitably qualified teachers. However, to attain SDG 4 requires conducive teaching and learning environments characterised by, among other things, safe school spaces, running water and sanitation, and teaching and learning support material.

Drawing on data from two qualitative empirical studies, the findings illustrate the limitations and potentialities of attaining quality education—looking at both the affective and pedagogic dimensions of teaching—in countries wrestling to rid themselves of the legacies of past colonial and oppressive regimes. The article presents empirical data sourced from high school teachers in Quintile 1 and Quintile 5 urban and rural schools, and from foundation phase teachers in Quintile 1 and Quintile 2 rural schools. Quintiles represent the school poverty index, with Quintile 1 being the poorest and Quintile 5 being the least poor. The data highlight the kinds of challenges that need to be addressed and overcome in order to realise SDG 4.

2. Teachers and the Global Education Agenda: Framing Teachers and Their Work

This section presents a critical discussion of SDG 4 in the context of inequality, equity, and systemic challenges in education in the Global South, with a particular emphasis on the South African case. This section also discusses the notion of quality education as it relates to social cohesion, citizenship, and pedagogy.

2.1. Unpacking SDG 4

The focus on equitable and quality education and the role of teachers has a long policy trajectory in the development of the SDG for education. In particular, debates about the role of teachers in providing equitable and quality education can be traced to the UNESCO Position Paper on Education post-2015 and the Muscat Global Education Meeting (GEM) Agreement, which rightly emphasises a concern with teachers, teaching, and teacher education (see Sayed and Ahmed, 2015). Specifically, the policy recommendations in the UNESCO Position Paper [1] suggest a range of key aspects regarding teachers including “(a) recruiting and retaining well-trained and motivated teachers who use inclusive, gender-responsive, and participatory pedagogical approaches to ensure effective learning outcomes, (b) providing content that is relevant to all learners and to the context in which they live, (c) establishing learning environments that are safe, gender-responsive, inclusive and conducive to learning, and encompass mother tongue-based multilingual education, (d) ensuring that learners reach sufficient levels of knowledge and competencies according to national standards at each level, (e) strengthening capacities for learners to be innovative and creative, and to assimilate change in their society and the workplace and over their lifespans, and (f) strengthening the ways education contributes to peace, responsible citizenship, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue” [1] (p. 8). These ideals are carried over in the final SDG 4 goal and its ten associated targets, including target 4c, which commits to “by 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states” [2]. The framework for action for the implementation of SDG 4 notes that “... teachers and educators should be empowered, adequately recruited and remunerated, motivated, professionally qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient and effectively governed systems” [3].

While the inclusion of teachers and teacher education in the final SDG 4 reflects a victory for the policy advocacy, it is instructive to consider how the target regarding teachers is constructed. In particular, as the empirical findings below show, the notion of equity is underplayed in the conceptualisation of the target. In particular, our findings highlight the need for the provision of quality education by deploying qualified, competent teachers in hard-to-reach areas, such as rural contexts and contexts riddled with crime, violence, and abject poverty. Further, as we discuss below, the target fails to address the teacher competencies teachers need to teach in difficult and hard to reach schools and in societies emerging from protracted histories of conflict, segregation, division, and inequities, specifically the competencies teachers require to meaningfully engage marginalised and disadvantaged learners, providing them with epistemic access and with the skills and understandings to live peacefully together, exercising their citizenship rights. This is most pressing in an unequal education context such as South Africa, which is marked by the existence of two systems of education—privileged and marginalised [4,5]. This can partly be attributed to the fact that good teachers working in an enabling learning environment are clustered in the wealthier school sector, which, when added to the cultural capital of learners, create a double privilege [5].

Furthermore, the absence of the reference to continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers in all the global documents and SDG 4 goals and targets is striking. Recruiting “well-trained” teachers places the focus on initial teacher education, neglecting the significance that CPD can have in tackling the issue of, for example, unqualified and underqualified teachers that in addition present a potential teaching force, as this paper argues.

In the context of the global education teacher goals and targets, this paper turns its attention to how the inclusion of teachers post-2015 will be realised in highly unequal education contexts marked by long legacies of colonisation and racism. In particular, this paper speaks to the issue of social cohesion and citizenship that teachers enact in diverse spaces, and teacher pedagogy for meaningful epistemic access for learners in rural contexts in South Africa.

2.2. Teachers' Beliefs, Social Cohesion, and Citizenship

A number of policy directives have emphasised the importance of realising quality education systems, including Education for All, the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as localised South African education policies, such as the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 [6]. Quality education as enunciated in these policies is directly related to improved economic conditions, reduction in inequalities, as well as social cohesion. However, while many interventions to achieve quality education have been directed at improving the teaching and learning of cognitive elements such as numeracy and literacy, not enough emphasis is placed on the affective dimensions that may contribute equally to quality education.

Quality education is multidimensional and can be regarded as “an outcome or a property, or even a process” [7] (p. 2). It is also regarded as the worth of education [8] and is used interchangeably with concepts such as equity, effectiveness, and efficiency [9]. The Sustainable Development Goal Target 4c notes that “teachers are a fundamental condition for guaranteeing quality education” [2]. Positioning all teachers as providers of quality education and equitable learning experiences undermines how teachers' beliefs, teacher positionality, and teacher agency, individual or collective, impact their teaching. More importantly, what the SDG 4 fails to acknowledge is the impact of teacher beliefs on classroom practices.

Beliefs, defined as “an explanatory principle for practice”, are both real and profound [10] (p. 16). The beliefs that teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgements and affect their behaviour in the school environment [11–13]. Thus, mechanisms to change or improve teachers' classroom practices will require a change in teacher beliefs [14,15]. This has implications for how teachers are professionally developed throughout their careers. The importance of acknowledging teachers' beliefs and putting in place professional development programmes that consistently and effectively empower teachers to be more reflexive is crucial in highly unequal and post-conflict settings such as South Africa. A long history of separate development, social division, and legally enforced discrimination, particularly in education, requires robust and rigorous teacher professional development programmes to align teachers' beliefs with the values of citizenship and social cohesion, and in doing so, align their beliefs with global policy mandates.

Social cohesion and the values of citizenship should be at the core of teaching and learning in a democratic context [13,16]. This is because schools “are assigned the task of producing ‘good citizens’, ensuring that when children grow up and leave school . . . they are prepared to practise the civic virtues most valued in their respective societies” [17]. In a liberal mode of education, which is the prevailing mode of Western education systems, these values are underpinned by democracy, which argues for inclusivity, mutual respect, and equality. However, recent studies that investigated teachers' pedagogical practices in South African schools demonstrate that the legacies of apartheid in terms of how teachers were trained as well as the effects of Christian National Education and Bantu Education still linger in the current system, to the detriment of learners [13,16]. Furthermore, the sub-optimal teaching and learning contexts that characterise most of the public schools in South Africa make it difficult to fully realise the values of citizenship and do little to promote social cohesion.

The assumption of the SDGs that teachers will always do good, and that those who come into the profession have the best intentions that are aligned with the principles of democracy, social cohesion, and citizenship, undermines the effect of the political, social, and cultural contexts in which schools are situated. The work of teachers is both intellectual as well as affective. Thus, it is imperative that professional development efforts are cognisant of this duality and respond to the professional development needs of teachers accordingly. Not acknowledging the affective dimension of schooling promotes very narrow understandings of education and undermines the power teachers wield, through schools, to perpetuate social inequalities. It also hampers the realisation of quality education.

2.3. Teachers and Pedagogy: Assessment for Learning (AfL)

One of the keys to realising quality teaching and learning for all could be the implementation of AfL. Alexander [18] (p. 59) defines pedagogy as “the observable act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values, evidence, and justifications. It is what one needs to know, and the skills one needs to command, in order to make and justify the many different kinds of decisions of which teaching is constituted”. Similarly, Westbrook et al. [19] (p. 8) argue that effective pedagogy refers to “those teaching and learning activities which make some observable change in students, leading to greater engagement and understanding and/or a measurable impact on student learning”. AfL, which adopts a learner-centred approach, satisfies these criteria as Dylan Wiliam asserts, “... there is now a strong body of theoretical and empirical work that suggests that integrating assessment with instruction may well have unprecedented power to increase student engagement and to improve learning outcomes” [20] (p. 13).

However, in the South African context, teachers appear to have limited knowledge and experience in using assessment effectively for improving learning and teaching [21–26]. Notwithstanding several initiatives in South Africa to: (i) improve the national curriculum, (ii) support teachers improve their content knowledge and classroom practice, and (iii) develop relevant resources for learners and teachers, there has been limited focus on improving teachers’ assessment practices [27–29]. Improving teacher competence for assessment for learning is key to realising education quality in South Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. This requires effective CPD for teachers to use assessment for improving teaching and learning in the classrooms effectively, which this paper considers below.

3. The South African Policy Context

In 1994, the new democratic government of South Africa abolished the nineteen education departments based on race and completely overhauled the education system. The old Christian National Education (CNE) system and syllabi were scrapped, and in 1996, the new education act was passed into law. The act prescribes both the content and manner of the teaching and learning relationship. Part of the preamble to the SA Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996, reads: “[T]his country requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people’s talents and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic well-being of society, protect and advance our diverse cultures and languages, uphold the rights of all learners, parents and educators ...” [6] (p. 5).

Since then, the school curriculum has undergone a few revisions, the latest, implemented by the current minister of basic education, Angie Motshekga, is the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) introduced in 2012. In the foreword to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement [30] Minister Angie Motshekga states, “The National Curriculum Statement Grades R–12 represents a policy statement for learning and teaching in South African schools ...” Under the heading ‘General aims of the South African curriculum’, it is stated: “Inclusivity should become a central part of the organisation, planning and teaching at each school. This can only happen if all teachers have a sound understanding of how to recognise and address barriers to learning, and how to plan for diversity” [30] (p. 5).

CAPS, which is a content-based and time-bound (pace set) curriculum, also reflects an increased emphasis on formal assessment, with common testing being introduced at each of the exit stages of an education phase, namely, Grade 3—foundation phase (FP), Grade 6—intermediate phase (IP) and Grade 9—senior phase (SP). Throughout the revisions, though, the policies of “inclusivity” and the “rights of all learners” were recognised. In addition, assessment for formative purposes was still core to teaching and learning but arguably accorded lesser importance.

4. Methodology

In examining the viability of attaining SDG 4 in the South African context, data from two interrelated empirical studies on teacher professional development by a research team at the Centre for International Teacher Education (CITE) are drawn upon to illustrate the limitations and potential of attaining quality education, examining both the pedagogic and affective dimensions of teaching. These two interrelated studies address the key research questions of teachers engaging learners in the teaching and learning process using learner-centred approaches and how they enable and equip learners with the skills and knowledge to function in a democratic society.

In the one study, conducted in 2018, Grade 3 Foundation Phase teachers from five rural primary schools attended six AfL workshops over a six-month period. Approximately eight months after the workshops, a purposive sample of ten of the teachers who had attended the workshops were observed teaching a lesson, after which a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of them. The teachers were selected on the basis of the way in which they interacted with the workshop facilitators during the workshops and during subsequent classroom support visits. The interviews were related to AfL issues in general, rather than focusing on the techniques and strategies used in a particular lesson. The interview questions included the teachers' views about AfL, what they felt were the advantages and disadvantages of using AfL, and how they saw their roles as teachers in realising their agential space.

The second study that this paper draws on investigated teachers' understandings and experiences of citizenship in South African high schools, conducted in 2016. The study also included students; however, the data for this paper only presents the responses from teachers and a principal. Eight teachers from four schools participated in the study. Disa High is a Quintile 1 school situated in a rural context, Protea High is a Quintile 5 school situated in a rural context, Lily High is a Quintile 1 school situated in an urban context, and Strelitzia High is a Quintile 5 school situated in an urban context. The study included teachers and principals from the Further Education and Training Phase, who volunteered to participate in the study, thus resulting in the study sample. The semi-structured interview schedule used in this study elicited their views on their experiences of their school environment, including issues of safety. It also included their understanding of citizenship, how teachers practice the values of citizenship in their classrooms, teachers' views on citizenship in the curriculum, information about school resources, information about CPD provided to teachers that help teachers develop the skills to teach in a socially cohesive manner, and also their views on how schools may go about producing good citizens.

Ethical clearance for both studies was obtained from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology as well as the Western Cape Education Department. All participants were assured of their and their schools' anonymity and informed that the data obtained would only be used for research purposes. The names and all participants and institutions were changed to protect their anonymity. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw their contributions at any point until the findings were presented, without any fear of repercussions. Both studies were located in the Western Cape Province of South Africa and focused on the pedagogies and learning strategies used by teachers in public schools.

In both studies, qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis identified common themes based on the research focus and which are reported in this paper. In particular, the analysis sought to understand the limits and constraints of teacher agency in realizing meaningful learning in disadvantaged schools and classrooms as a conduit to realizing quality education.

Trustworthiness of the qualitative data was established through credibility, dependability, and confirmability. In both studies, the data were presented to the respondents for feedback and to ensure accurate reporting. The findings of both studies were also discussed with researchers and other research students who form part of a professional

learning community for research conducted on and about the professional development of teachers.

5. Findings

This section discusses the findings of the two empirical studies conducted in South Africa, one relating to the affective dimension of teaching and the other focusing on teacher pedagogy. What these studies demonstrate overall is that both dimensions of teaching need to be developed in order to achieve the imperative of quality education.

5.1. Teachers, Citizenship, and Social Cohesion in South Africa

This section draws on empirical research from a study conducted in South Africa that included an investigation of teachers' practices and experiences in classrooms as they relate to the values of citizenship and social cohesion.

5.1.1. Teachers Do Not Always Promote Inclusive Classrooms

One of the teachers in the study noted that she openly promotes her own religion, including sexual bias, in the classroom, as demonstrated below:

"I will call a spade by name, I will tell them . . . One or two children will say it, I don't think it's right, because the Bible says it, but there's never, for example, if there's a boy in the class that we can see is not [interviewee makes hand gestures] they won't refer to him or be nasty to him." (Protea High, Female, White, Life Orientation and History Teacher, Rural, Q5).

In this instance, the teacher did not see her behaviour as being problematic or that she may, through her actions and behaviour, make the learner feel isolated. This lack of awareness of her discriminatory behaviour could result in undemocratic attitudes towards learners with differing sexual orientations being perpetuated in school and in broader society, thus undermining the realisation of the values of citizenship and social cohesion.

5.1.2. Teachers Do Not Always Respect Learners

A teacher from Strelitzia High noted that teachers often mistreat students through name-calling and insults as demonstrated below:

"There are some teachers that they dislike terribly because they just don't trust them. It's terrible, three teachers in the school I have constant complaints about . . . they will say nasty things, they will name, call you a *vetkop* [fathead], a *domkop* [stupid head], and you're stupid and things like that . . . So, if you call a child a name like that, you're going to get reaction, so I think it's the name-calling, you get so frustrated, so you just call the child a name. Awful letters from children, awful letters of what teachers say to them." (Strelitzia High, Urban, Quintile 5, Male, Coloured, Life Orientation Teacher).

What the quotation above also demonstrates is how teachers abuse their power to bully learners at their school. This abuse of power suggests a lack of social cohesion at the schools and the absence of democratic values. Teachers in this instance demonstrate poor citizenship practices and are not mirroring the kind of schooling environment that enables the realisation of SDG 4 and quality education.

5.1.3. Lack of Resources Limits Teachers' Work in the Classroom

A teacher at Disa High reported that owing to a lack of textbooks, teachers are unable to teach effectively, causing anxieties to teachers as well as students.

"That's the whole thing, we can't give them homework, or make copies or whatever, because many times there is no paper, there's no ink at the school to make photocopies, so I think it actually has a negative impact on the learners themselves, because I can only do what I can do . . . So, we can't actually give homework to the child to learn during the exams. Everything has to happen in the class." (Disa High, Quintile 1, Rural, Life Orientation, Female Teacher).

The lack of textbooks and printing resources reported by teachers at Disa High suggests that teachers' teaching strategies, including how learners learn, are handicapped. This limitation has implications for quality teaching and learning, as both teachers and learners have their potential curtailed because of structural inefficiencies.

5.1.4. Unsafe School Contexts Negatively Impact the Realisation of Citizenship

The principal at Disa High, a remote rural school, noted, in the extract below, that teachers and students do not feel safe at school owing to a lack of school fencing.

"The students and teachers are not safe at school as a result of the fact that there is no fencing, which allows for free entrance of gangsters, and . . . the number of learners at the school that are involved in gangsterism and there is a number of them" (Disa High, Rural Quintile 1, Male, Principal, ID).

Optimal teaching and learning cannot occur when teachers and students are feeling unsafe and where there is a constant and imminent threat of violence. Teachers and students have a right to teach and learn in safe spaces. The lack of safety contradicts the values of citizenship and democracy [31,32].

The findings presented above relating to the empirical evidences of teachers' realities suggest a number of notable implications for the realization of SDG 4, that is, quality education, in South Africa.

First, the path to realising SDG 4 cannot be divorced from redressing the legacies of past political regimes. "Religion and education were synonymous during apartheid", promoting the agenda of "Christianity in all schooling institutions" [13] (p. 137). In a post-apartheid context, there have been policy mandates emphasising equality, inclusivity, and recognition of all religions and that CNE no longer forms part of the democratic dispensation. However, the practices of teachers in this study contradict the instructions and philosophy of these policy mandates. Thus, what this suggests is that teachers need to be professionally developed to teach in a post-apartheid context, particularly teachers who have received their initial teacher education prior to 1994. Teachers also need to be taught how to teach in a manner that is inclusive and that does not promote personal agendas that may be inconsistent with the values of citizenship and social cohesion.

Second, the quotation from the teacher at Strelitzia High suggests that teachers need to be trained to use their power effectively in the pursuit of democracy, citizenship, and social cohesion. Sayed et al. [16] argue that teachers are agents of social cohesion and have the ability to impart these values to students through their actions and interactions. Thus, professional development programmes aimed at addressing this are crucial to realising quality education.

Third, in South Africa, schools that were marginalised during apartheid have not been equally capacitated to the level of affluent public schools in the post-apartheid context [13,16]. Thus, these schools, particularly rural schools, remain under-resourced, which impacts the quality of teaching and learning experiences. In this instance, governmental stakeholders, who are primarily responsible for the provision of quality education in the country, need to be mobilised urgently to address this inefficiency as a conduit to realising SDG 4.

Fourth, quality education is as much about content as it is about form. The context in which teachers operate contributes to teaching experiences they create in the classroom. Cohen et al. [32] argue that when teachers and students feel safe, it contributes to a positive school climate and improves teaching and learning as a result. Many schools in South Africa, particularly in communities with high unemployment rates, high crime rates, and sub-optimal living conditions, operate in unsafe contexts [33], making the realisation of delivering quality education difficult. The challenging teaching and learning context of the majority of South African public schools disables the realisation of citizenship and suppresses efforts towards social cohesion.

Overall, this study suggests that the SDGs are hard to realise, owing to the political, cultural, and social context in which teachers operate. It also suggests that continuous pro-

Professional development is key to realising quality education. Awareness of the deficiencies that teachers possess gives direction to the kinds of interventions required to pursue the goal of quality education.

5.2. Teachers' Pedagogic Shift towards Assessment for Learning (AfL) in the Western Cape Province

This section draws on interview data derived from a purposive sample of ten foundation phase teachers who participated in a series of AfL training workshops. All the teachers in this research project expressed the view that employing AfL to improve teaching and learning was beneficial and thus had positive views about it. The following extracts capture the teachers' positive views of AfL as a pedagogic tool to enhance teaching and learning:

"With these [AfL] tools you will have a different perspective of teaching, you will want to teach again." (Ms Porter, 2018)

"It also helps us with teaching and learning because all the learners in the class get a chance to speak . . ." (Ms Randall, 2018)

"You do AfL throughout the day. Mostly, it is the observations that you do . . . A teacher's observations play a very important role, especially when you work one-on-one with your children, and especially in your group work." (Ms Moyo, 2018)

These quotations point to teachers perceiving AfL in a positive light, as it motivates the teachers (Porter) and facilitates effective teaching and learning in their classrooms, enabling them to reach all the learners in their classrooms (Randall, Moyo). In unpacking these positive views of AfL, three key themes are discussed, namely: (i) AfL facilitates classroom discipline; (ii) the factors that limited the implementation of AfL; and (iii) the need for a more inclusive AfL CPD programme. The three themes draw on teacher comments gleaned from individual teacher interviews.

5.2.1. AfL Facilitates Classroom Discipline

An unexpected outcome of the AfL programme, identified by almost all teachers, was the general impression that the learners in the classes of teachers who are familiar and comfortable with, and are implementing AfL, were more well behaved than their peers. The following extracts point to improved discipline when applying AfL:

"And also the discipline . . . I think for the school we can have the proper learning at the school and also the discipline . . . If ever [you are] using the strategies you will get a disciplined class . . ." (Randall, 2018)

"It [AfL] makes the learners very disciplined." (Nakedi, 2018)

The two quotations, both by Grade 3 teachers from two different quintile (1 and 2) schools in two different townships, underline the positive effect that AfL had in the classes, and on classroom management, in particular. The following example illustrates the positive effect AfL can have on discipline: During a lesson, the class teacher was called to the principal's office, and she asked the student teacher to oversee the class while she was gone. Within minutes, the noise level in the class had risen and the student teacher found it difficult to quieten the learners. She walked to the front of the class, picked up a tennis ball—an AfL tool—and called for silence as she had the ball and hence should be given a hearing. There was immediate silence, she was able to speak to the class without raising her voice and the class remained quiet until the class teacher returned. Significantly, the student had not attended the AfL workshops, but had observed the class teacher applying this technique.

5.2.2. Factors Limiting the AfL Pedagogy to Improve Teaching and Learning

While the section above notes the positive ways in which individual teachers viewed and experienced AfL approaches to enhance their pedagogy, the widespread diffusion of such an approach in schools was limited by several school-level factors.

Staff Deployment Affects Effective Implementation

One contextual factor that affected the diffusion and efficacy of AfL to improve teaching and learning was how schools organised their work and teaching, and in particular how staff were utilised and deployed in the schools to meet curriculum needs. In a particular case, which is illustrative of how some schools organise work, the three teachers at one of the schools—Kojack, Mabile, and Nakedi—were all moved at the start of the new academic year to teaching Grade 2 by school management, and replaced by different Grade 3 teachers who had not been exposed to AfL. The teachers noted that the internal organisation of teacher allocation by the school impacted their use of AfL. Although the three teachers were still applying some of the AfL techniques and strategies in their classes, since they were not given the support by management or colleagues—who were not au fait with AfL—and were not able to use the AfL lesson planning template for support, their enthusiasm would predictably start waning, ultimately leading to the teachers abandoning AfL. One of the three teachers noted:

“The lesson plan of AFLA (Assessment for Learning in Africa) is a little work. They [school management] want a lesson plan that consists of every information with more detail. That lesson plan of AFLA is a little work, that’s why we are using the old lesson plan. The principal noticed that lesson plan of AFLA is brief, brief, brief now they say they want a lesson plan with more detail [i.e., the official, school lesson plan].” (Kojack, 2018)

Lack of Resources Impacts Effective Implementation

An associated factor regarding lesson plans, especially within poorer schools, is a lack of resources. As mundane as it may sound, in poorer schools, teachers have to consider the cost of printing. One of the teachers raised the issue that using the AfL lesson plan template would imply using more paper and ink:

“The challenge is more paper . . . you gonna have five lessons [i.e., lesson plans] per week [Foundation phase teachers at this school used one lesson plan per subject per week] . . . now most use the papers . . . the papers and the ink.” (Nakedi, 2018)

At another school, Ms Porter’s AfL equipment had been stolen at the end of the year, and she lamented that she would have to replace them from her own pocket, as the principal claimed that the school did not have the funds to finance their replacement.

What emerges from these two accounts are the effects lack of resources have on the effective implementation of AfL in poorer schools. On the one hand, teachers have to consider the amount of printing they are allowed to use in the normal carrying out of their function as teachers, and on the other, a lack of funds stymies the teacher in accessing the equipment she feels she requires to carry out her function as a teacher implementing AfL effectively.

In both cases, the lack of resources and the lack of support from school management led to a drop in the efficacy with which the teachers could apply AfL. In the first case, one finds school management being inflexible in the way in which teachers are expected to prepare lessons—and the perceived additional cost of alternative/additional lesson preparation sheets. In the second, a lack of funds/resources and management’s reluctance to replace lost equipment led to a teacher’s loss of enthusiasm in implementing AfL.

Lack of Continuity Hinders Effective Implementation

Third, an issue that was of concern regarding the effective implementation of AfL at the schools was the lack of continuity across the grades. The teachers who participated in the research expressed their concern that the AfL programme was not part of a systematic, whole-school improvement effort. Many of the teachers felt that it would have been more effective had the teachers of the whole school been exposed to AfL, thus allowing for continuity in the implementation of AfL. Some of the teachers’ comments in this regard are:

“I have recommended it [AfL] for the whole school because now the Grade 3 child does it but when it comes to Grade 4 it stops so I have recommended it . . . so that the child continues with it” (Wilson, 2018).

“More special for the intermediate phase, you see, it’s gonna be the challenge because of the . . . changing of the classes [from Grade 3 to Grade 4], you see . . . ” (Randall, 2018).

The teachers felt that it would have been more effective for the learners had the programme been implemented in the whole phase—or even in the whole school—to allow for continuity. For the Grade 3 learners, this would be an even greater challenge, as they would also have to deal with the transition to intermediate phase, which is characterised as being more regimented; learners more often sit in rows rather than groups, lessons are more teacher-centred, and more emphasis is placed on individual learning.

The concern raised by the teachers is valid for a number of reasons, the most compelling being continuity both for learners and teachers. With AfL only being implemented in one of the grades, the learners would have to adapt to a different learning approach in the next grade, and the advantages of the AfL approach would be lost. Not only could this be detrimental to the learners, but it could serve as a demotivating factor for the teachers, especially since there is no support from colleagues who are not familiar with the approach.

From the findings presented above, it can be seen that the teachers who had been introduced to AfL felt positive about the approach. They recognised the benefits both for teaching and learning. As such, most of them were seen to be drawing their learners into the teaching and learning space.

An unexpected outcome of the introduction of AfL in the classes was an improvement in classroom management and discipline. This phenomenon of improved discipline in classes utilising AfL is significant in the context of South African schooling, where issues of classroom discipline are a constant concern.

What also emerged from the data was that, despite the teachers’ positive views of AfL, this was not without its challenges, which has implications for the realisation of SDG 4. Owing to various contextual factors, the teachers experienced challenges in implementing AfL.

Firstly, the way in which schools utilise their staff from one year to the next has implications for any form of staff developmental programme. This suggests that whatever CPD programme is introduced, demands that the particularities of the school be considered and be adapted to suit the needs of the school.

Secondly, in the lower quintile schools (highly impoverished schools) the lack of resources and facilities could impact the efficacy of the programme and how it is implemented.

Thirdly, for any CPD programme to be implemented successfully, there has to be consistency and support. None of the schools were consistent in the application of AfL beyond the grade in which it was being implemented—except where the teachers progressed with the learners, but then only to Grade 3 (in two of the six schools). There was no extrinsic motivation for the teachers to continue with AfL practices as the learners would find themselves in “conventional” classes the following year. The teachers in the study expressed their concern that AfL was only applied in certain classes in the foundation phase, while they felt that its implementation would be more effective if it were to be done throughout the school. In this way, maximum benefit would be derived from the programme, as identified by Wiliam and Thompson [34].

6. Conclusions

The findings presented above relating to the empirical evidence of teachers’ realities point to a number of notable implications for the realisation of SDG 4, that is, quality education, in South Africa.

First, the path to realising SDG 4, particularly the commitment to education systems, starts with qualified and competent teachers. However, these cannot be divorced from redressing the legacies of past political and colonial regimes in a country like South Africa. In the post-apartheid context, there have been numerous policy mandates emphasising equality, inclusivity, and recognition of all cultures and religions. The introduction of Curriculum 2005 and subsequent curriculum revisions have also emphasised the utilisation of assessment to facilitate learning. However, some of the practices of the teachers in the two

studies and their comments are contrary to the instructions and philosophy of the policy mandates. What this suggests is that teachers need to be professionally developed further to teach in a post-apartheid context. Teachers also need to learn how to teach in a manner that is inclusive and that does not promote personal agendas, which may be inconsistent with the values of citizenship and social cohesion. Teachers need to be trained to use their power effectively to give expression to the policy mandates. Thus, professional development programmes aimed at addressing this are crucial towards realising quality education.

Second, in South Africa, schools that were marginalised during apartheid have still not been equally capacitated to the level of affluent public schools in the post-apartheid context. Thus, these schools, particularly those in rural settings, remain under-resourced, which serves as a barrier to the effective delivery of quality teaching and learning experiences.

Third, the South African case illustrates that quality education is as much about content as it is about form. The context in which teachers operate contributes to the teaching experiences they create in the classroom. Many schools in South Africa, particularly in communities with high unemployment rates, high crime rates, and suboptimal living conditions, operate in unsafe contexts, making the realisation of delivering quality education difficult. This suggests that for the delivery of quality education to be effected, the socio-economic challenges of those communities should necessarily also be addressed.

Fourth, the way in which schools utilise their staff from one year to the next has implications for any form of staff developmental programme. This suggests that wherever a CPD programme is to be introduced, it is imperative that the particularities of the school be considered and the programme be adapted to suit the needs of the school. In addition, for any CPD programme to be implemented successfully, there has to be consistency and support on the part of all the role players, especially peers and management.

Fifth, South African empirical studies reveal that teachers' beliefs and values matter in the way they teach, the way in which they relate to and interact with learners, how they relate to their peers, and how they work towards realising the goals of equity in and through education. This suggests that any reform efforts in Africa, and possibly globally, need to take cognisance of the beliefs and values teachers hold.

Sixth, the two interrelated studies of teacher professional development in South Africa speak to how teachers are able to realise their agency for change in contexts where there is a broad range of expectations thrust on them, suggesting that the global education agenda runs the real risk of overstating the potential of schools and their teachers to effect broad social transformation. Teacher agency, as envisaged in the global education agenda, is not a realistic possibility, nor is agency possible when faced with multiple and conflicting demands in highly unequal societies scarred by legacies of oppression. Yet, the paper also points to the possibilities of progressive change in the classrooms when teachers are professionally supported, empowered, and working within structures and systems that affirm their agency.

What this paper reveals is both the limitations and possibilities of realising quality education in a still highly stratified and unequal society such as South Africa. As much as the South African education policy seems to resonate with SDG 4, the inequities with which teachers and learners in both privileged and marginalised contexts are confronted in South Africa point to the need for serious and drastic interventions from government, national, and international stakeholders in education to realise the goal of equitable and quality education for all.

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