

CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT AND THE MARATHON TO MATRIC

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Since the publication of the 2018 matric results, a lot has been written about those performing outstandingly well in their final exams and the national pass rate of 78.2%. All this was done for good reason and we congratulate everybody on their personal success. At the same time, we must not forget those 400 000 young South Africans who enrolled in Grade 1 in 2007 but never ‘arrived’ at Matric 2018. Thus, it is worth looking at the Marathon of basic education, instead of the finishing sprint.

The right to basic education is grounded in section 29 of the Constitution. This right must be provided for, regardless of the availability of resources. Despite this, and according to the latest report by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) on the Annual National Assessment (the 2014 ANA Report) only three out of five Grade 3 learners achieved 50% or better in Mathematics and their home language. The 2014 ANA Report assessed the performance of learners from Grade 1 to 6 and 9, in the field of numeracy and literacy, using a standardised test. Amongst Grade 9 learners, only 3% of them reached this level in mathematics, and 48% did so in their home language. Even in the Matric 2018 mathematics results, only 21.7% of learners achieved 50% or higher.

Indeed, the realisation of the right to quality education faces several obstacles. These include poor infrastructure (for example, pit latrines, which have led to the death of learners) and a lack of teaching resources. While these shortcomings are of a very material nature, there seem to be further malfunctions in the educational system, which are harder to grasp - namely curriculum implementation and management. This article aims to raise awareness: all role-players in the system of support structures need to be aware of their task of curriculum delivery, not only those interacting with the learners directly.

In March 2016, the DBE and the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) in the Presidency appointed JET Education Services, a non-governmental organisation, to conduct a new evaluation of the implementation process of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). The DBE published CAPS - which are the policy documents guiding educators on all aspects (topics, assessment, etc.) of the subjects listed in the National Curriculum - for Grades R to 12 in 2012. The aim was to assess to what extent the Curriculum was implemented and what aspects required strengthening (CAPS Evaluation Report). This CAPS Evaluation Report was based on 24 case studies conducted in 12 primary and 12 secondary schools in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga and was released in May 2017.

According to the CAPS Evaluation Report, the implementation of the new Curriculum is widely inefficient. Five main obstacles were highlighted in the implementation process, namely: poor initial education of teachers (IET), the appointment of inappropriate candidates for posts, ineffective continuing professional development (CPD), poor use of time in schools and ineffective instructional leadership practices.

Apart from IET, the problems mentioned can be seen as secondary effects of weak instructional leadership practice, since school principals, Head of Departments (HoDs) and subject advisors are meant to solve them. However, instructional leadership activities were found to be complied with in a superficial manner. Generally, the CAPS Evaluation Report testified to a *“widespread culture characterised by a lack of respect of educators for their leaders and a feeling of helplessness”*. HoDs and principals feel particularly helpless when it comes to holding teachers accountable. On the other hand, the CAPS Evaluation Report discovered a frequent *“poor regard in which teachers are held by district officials”*.

Such a culture results in teachers assessing their records of Curriculum coverage alone, while simultaneously worsening the reciprocal accountability between teachers and support structures, including principals and HoDs. The CAPS evaluation Report confirmed that poor time management is a critical issue amongst teachers, with the simple absence of a teacher as its worst form. All these aspects have a negative impact on Curriculum management. Due to the cumulative character of the Curriculum, if key objects are not taught thoroughly during the foundational phase, there will be long-lasting and negative effects on a learner’s journey through the education system. This might be one of the reasons why the percentage of those scoring more than 50% in the 2014 Annual National Assessment declined between Grade 3 and Grade 9.

In 2014, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, in partnership with the Programme for Improving Learning Outcomes (PILO), launched the *Jika iMfundo Campaign*. This campaign at its core attempts to improve educational outcomes by focusing on improving the quality of Curriculum coverage and management. This innovative and collaborative campaign, funded by the National Education Collaboration Trust, began as a pilot project in the education districts of Pinetown and King Cetshwayo from 2015 to 2017 and it is scheduled to be rolled out in all districts of KwaZulu-Natal from 2018 to 2021.

The *Jika iMfundo Campaign* interventions targeted different key actors in the process of Curriculum coverage. Though most of them are not in the classroom, they are all part of a chain that is meant to support and ensure the quality of education. To improve these

structures, *Jika iMfundo* addressed all levels of the system simultaneously. Teachers were provided with concrete Curriculum Planners and Trackers that were used to assess Curriculum coverage. Consequently, they were enabled and could have informed and evidence-based discussions with their HoDs. In turn, HoDs were trained to help teachers to improve their lessons and to hold them accountable. To make change sustainable, subject advisors were equipped to support HoDs, and principals received coaching in how to institutionalise support and accountability for teachers

The approach seems to be by far more promising than blaming individuals for their performance. At best, it makes continuing professional training (CPD) a part of the daily routine in schools and improves the accountability between and professionalism of educational stakeholders.

It would be naïve to expect miraculous improvements of learner's results within a short time. However, the campaign has the potential to provide the necessary momentum to change a small but far-reaching deficit in parts of the educational system. The full implementation of the programme in all districts of KwaZulu-Natal now has to prove its ability to be replicated, to keep up the momentum and improve learners' constitutional right to education. Otherwise, it will be difficult for the government to address the problem of accountability and culture through mere legislative means.

Thanks to intervention programmes such as *Jika iMfundo*, we hope to see more learners arriving at the finish line, with more pupils writing and passing their Matric in the future.