Perspectives in Education 2014: 32(1)
ISSN 0258-2236

http://www.perspectives-in-education.com

Teachers' conceptions of standards in South African Basic Education and Training: A case study

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In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education and Training (DBE) is responsible for primary and secondary education (Grades R-12). In an effort to improve educational standards in literacy, numeracy and mathematics, especially in the Foundation Phase (FP) levels of education, the DBE has developed several initiatives and campaigns. To monitor the standards and set targets, the department administers high-stakes standardised tests similar to those conducted in the United States of America (USA) at elementary and secondary schools. In spite of these efforts, the national low performance levels of Grades R-12 remain a grave social concern. This study investigated the conceptions of standards from a purposive sample of twenty elementary school teachers selected from three Cape Town schools, with the objective of establishing how their understandings of standards influenced their classroom pedagogical practices. Activity theory informed this research. Data were collected through focus group semi-structured interviews. Results showed that teachers perceived the disadvantaged contexts in which they function as limiting their pedagogical practices and availability of socio-cultural artefacts that they need, thus preventing them from achieving their objectives of maintaining good educational standards. Evidently, the lack of a clear definition of standards, and teachers' exclusion from participation in the standards-setting processes appear to restrict their understanding of standards and, by implication, their classroom practices and activities aimed at promoting standards. We conclude that a lack of clarity on the definition of standards for FP teachers has detrimental effects on their classroom practices as they function in diverse educational environments.

Keywords: *context, educational standards, artifacts, improvement, practices*

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Introduction and background

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), formerly known as the Department of Education (DoE), is responsible for the General Education and Training (GET) and Further Education and Training (FET) sectors. The GET includes Foundation Phase (FP), Intermediate Phase (IP) and Senior Phase (SP), which are primary, elementary and secondary (R-12) education bands. It is in the GET band that foundation skills of reading, writing and mathematics are emphasised. For this reason, Taylor, Fleisch and Shindler (2007: 37) contend that '[t]he single most important priority for the education and training system would be to improve the levels of literacy and mathematics of children graduating from our primary schools'.

The importance of acquiring literacy and numeracy skills by learners at the FP level cannot be overstated. Pandor (2008), the then Minister of Education, emphasised that literacy, numeracy and life skills are 'the building blocks upon which solid foundations for learning are built'. The importance of acquiring literacy and numeracy skills is also highlighted in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (DoE, 2002), which states that the most important task of the FP teacher is to enable and ensure that all learners can learn to read. Consequently, 40% of teaching time is to be allocated to this task in the FP.

In an effort to raise standards in numeracy and literacy in the GET public sector in general, and in the FP sector specifically, the DBE has and still engages in a number of educational reform initiatives and campaigns. For example, the Drop All and Read Campaign and a tool kit for schools are both aimed at improving the standard of reading among primary school learners. The Foundations of Learning Campaign is meant to create a national focus on improving basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy among all SA children. In addition, more than 10 000 public schools received story books written in all eleven South African official languages (Taylor, Fleisch & Shindler, 2007). Moreover, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED, 2006) developed a multipurpose national and provincial Literacy and Numeracy (LITNUM) strategy to enhance learners' literacy and numeracy skills.

In spite of these efforts, the poor performance of public school FP learners in these learning areas remains a grave social concern. For instance, the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) showed that South Africa, when compared with 40 countries, had the lowest reading literacy levels (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy & Foy, 2007). Similarly, poor Grade 3 systemic evaluation results of 2001, 2007 and 2011 confirmed this situation. Moreover, Reddy and van Rensburg (2011) reported that only 30% of South African schools perform reasonably well in mathematics, while a whopping 70% underperforms. Furthermore, the 2011 Annual National Assessment (ANA) results indicated that Grades 3 and 6 learners performed poorly in literacy and numeracy across the country with a national average of only 35% (Modisaotsile, 2012: 2). This perpetual poor learner performance led Fleisch (2007) to conclude that South African primary school education is in crisis.

Several reasons have been given to justify these low educational standards. Pandor (2008) cited language barriers in literacy, numeracy and life skills education and emphasised the importance of teacher quantity, quality and ability to teach. Other factors mentioned include poverty, a lack of adequate resources in schools, poor teacher training, teachers' classroom practices, overcrowded classrooms and a lack of parental support (Chisholm, 2004; Modisaotsile, 2012; Pendlebury, 2008). As will be shown later, since there is no universal clarity on the definition of standards (Coetzee & Le Roux, 2001), we suspect that this term is susceptible to different interpretations by teachers, thus affecting their classroom pedagogical practices.

The purpose of this research was to investigate conceptions of standards among FP teachers in three Cape Town public primary schools, with the objective of establishing how their understanding influenced their classroom practices. The research questions were: (i) What are FP teachers' conceptions of education standards? (ii) How does this understanding influence their teaching practices? In this study we argue that 'standards' may have a personal, political and public dimension which influences and informs how each teacher interprets and acts on them. We further argue that FP is the most critical stage of student development in which higher-quality education standards should be enforced more than in Grade 12, which is the final exit level from school. Thus, putting too much emphasis on quality standards in Grade 12 is too little too late.

Theoretical framework

Activity theory (AT) informed this research. In this theory, the unit of analysis is an activity (Leont'ev, 1974). Leont'ev describes an activity as composed of a subject (a person or group engaged in an activity), object (objective/goal), actions or practices which help to fulfill the object, and operations through which actions are carried out. In this study, teachers are subjects engaged in pedagogical actions or practices, using their socio-cultural and historical tools to improve educational standards in their classrooms.

Nardi (1996) describes actions as conscious and goal-oriented because individuals perform an action with a goal/objective in mind. She asserts that actions are driven by certain needs that are informed by certain purposes that people wish to achieve. Nardi (1996) further points out that different actions may be undertaken to meet the same goal. In this study, this might mean that teachers can perform different actions or practices and/or use a variety of activities to fulfill the same objective, which is improving standards.

The activity system consists of an object, actions and operation, and 'the activity itself is the context' (Nardi, 1996: 38). The phenomena that occur in an activity system, that is, the enactment (operation) of an activity (action) by people using artefacts in order to fulfill an object, is what constitutes context. According to Nardi (1996), artefacts may be physical tools or sign systems which are embedded

in people's cultures and histories. Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, also emphasised the historical-cultural significance of artefacts. Artefacts may include instruments, machines, signs, symbols and human language. Vygotsky perceives the function of artefacts as mediating human thought/meanings and behaviour among people through social interaction. Human cognitive experience is heavily shaped and influenced by artefacts, that is, tools and sign systems that humans use in their daily activities. In the context of teachers, their pedagogical classroom practices reflect and result from their own backgrounds or habitus. As such, their socio-historical and cultural contexts determine what and how they do things in their classrooms (their practices). The teachers' habitus may enhance or constrain their pedagogical actions and practices, thus limiting them from realising their objects which, in this case, is improving educational standards.

This study investigated how teachers' understanding of standards influenced and shaped the pedagogical practices they carried out in the classroom. As it deals with the way in which subjects (teachers) mediate learning using tools or artefacts (external devices) in order to fulfill an object (raising standards), we considered AT relevant to this study.

Literature review

Universally, the concept of 'standards' is used loosely without any clarity on its meaning. South Africa is not an exception as here, too, there seems to be no clear definition of this term (Coetzee & Le Roux, 2001). For instance, many South African official documents and curriculum policies make reference to standards, but none of them gives an in-depth definition of standards. The South African Schools Act of 1996 refers to the maintenance of comparable standards in schools. Similarly, the South African Quality Assurance (SAQA) document cited in Allais (2003: 16) mentions the need to deliver programmes 'to a standard' in terms of knowledge, skills and values. One of the principles of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) is to reach the minimum standards of knowledge and skills at each grade and in each subject (DoE, 2005), while the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) emphasises quality of outcomes to be achieved at the end of the learning process (DBE, 2011). All these definitions lack depth as they define standards in terms of knowledge, skills and intended learning outcomes, while the actual meaning of standards remains rather superficial and fluid. This situation might result in difficulty for teachers to establish a common understanding of standards.

Some scholars define education standards as benchmarks against which learning outcomes are measured (Nel & Kistner, 2009), while others associate them with quality (Coetzee & Le Roux, 2001; Hunter, 1999). The latter assumes an overlap between quality and standards, which suggests that a decline in educational quality leads to a decline in education standards (Coetzee & Le Roux, 2011). These definitions resonate with that of Umalusi (2013: 7), the quality council (QC) which sets and

quality assures standards in the GET and FET sectors, namely that a standard is '[a] statement of level of quality or attainment required'. Undoubtedly, this definition falls short of being adequate.

Kivilu (2006) and McClaughlin and Shepard (1995) distinguish between content and performance standards. According to McClaughlin and Shepard (1995: xviii; xix), '[c]ontent standards are broad descriptions of the knowledge and skills students should acquire and be able to do in a particular subject area' and performance standards are 'the most specific concrete examples and explicit definitions of what students must know and be able to do to demonstrate mastery of the content standards'. In other words, performance standards can help to 'clarify and explain' content standards (McClaughlin & Shepard, 1995: 34). Put differently, standards are 'benchmarks that specify the levels of performance expected of a learner who has gone through a learning experience in a specific content (both knowledge and skills)' (Kivilu, 2006: 39). Hunter (1999) extends this typology by adding opportunity-to-learn or delivery standards that relate to contextual issues such as resources, conditions and desirable learning processes that provide equality of opportunity conducive for learning.

In his explanation of the process of standard setting in the South African education system, Kivilu (2006) mentions that educational standards are articulated in the Curriculum Statements in the form of broad national goals of education. Educators are then expected to translate them into classroom objectives and activities. Owing to the vagueness of these educational goals, Kivilu argues that it is likely that educators, especially those with poor teaching skills, become confused. This argument has serious implications for the FP teachers in this study who have to maintain high educational standards despite varying experiences, expertise and artefacts at their disposal.

Educational standards are often gauged through learner performance (Kivilu, 2006). For example, poor learner performance in high-stakes tests is often associated with low educational standards and vice versa. This perception seems to be common in the USA and South Africa and is based on the false assumption that continuous assessment reinforces high levels of quality teaching and scholarly achievement (Miller, 2001). For instance, poor learner performance in the USA elementary and secondary education prompted continuous achievement testing and standards-based education in this country (Jorgenson & Hoffman, 2003). Similarly, poor learner performance in national and international high-stakes tests (including poor national matriculation – Grade 12) resulted in the standards regime in South Africa. This is indicative of a false assumption about continuous assessment as reinforcing high-quality educational standards. Alluding to this false notion, Crouch (2008) stated that 'you can't fatten cattle by weighing them more often – you have to feed them'.

A connection is also assumed between educational standards and teacher proficiency. For instance, in the USA the perceived lowering of educational standards

led to heightened criticism against higher education for low-quality teacher production (Jorgenson & Hoffman, 2003; Yell, 2006; Ruiz, Kelsey & Slate, 2009). Consequently, there was urgency to raise teacher education standards in order to ensure high-quality graduates and to assure that elementary and secondary students obtained high-quality education from highly-qualified teachers (Anthes, 2002). We observe the same pattern in South Africa where high-stakes tests (e.g. matric exams, ANA and other international assessments) have become a yardstick by which teacher efficiency is gauged (Kivilu, 2006).

Educational standards function within a specific context and they are influenced by historical, political and socio-cultural changes. This implies that they are flexible and dynamic (Coetzee & Le Roux, 2001). Proponents of standards argue that they foster and establish the principle of equality of treatment and expectations (Hunter, 1999: 2). However, educationally, their credibility could be questioned due to the vast inequality in terms of achievement of outcomes in different social contexts. Consequently, North American detractors often contend that educational standards are exclusionary and not healthy for schools in multicultural societies (Aronowitz, 1996). The same could be said about South Africa where the literacy and numeracy crisis in the FP is more acute in poor and rural than affluent and urban schools (Modisaotsile, 2012: 2; Chisholm, 2004: 11).

In our opinion, standards refer to the expectations or value judgements that a society places on education. Thus, our view is that standards are social constructs that determine the esteem (high/low) that society places on education, depending on the variables the society uses to make those judgements (e.g. high student pass rates, teacher qualifications, employment rates). Obviously, if these variables are low, the society is likely to view the educational standards as low and vice versa.

Research methodology

This article is based on a qualitative case study which was conducted with a purposeful sample of 20 FP teachers drawn from three public township schools in the Western Cape. The sample consisted of five teachers from School A, seven from School B and eight from School C. All three schools were classified as quintile 1 schools. According to the quintile system, schools are categorised from 1-5 according to the parents' income, unemployment rate and level of education (Kanjee & Chudgar, 2009). Quintile 1 consists of the poorest schools, while quintile 5 constitutes economically advantages schools. Quintile 1 schools receive higher state support than their quintile 5 counterparts (Kanjee & Chudgar, 2009). The selection of the three schools was based on their quintile 1 classification. Such schools are often associated with lower education standards (Modisaotsile, 2012: 2). For the purpose of this article, we wanted to gain insight into how FP teachers in quintile 1 schools understood education standards in such impoverished academic environments.

All the participants were females ranging between the ages of 25 and 59. Their FP teaching experiences spanned two to 35 years. Two of the teachers had two years' teaching experience, five had ten years, four had 15 and nine had more than 30 years' teaching experience, respectively. Regarding their academic qualifications, of the 20 teachers, four had a four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree, six had a two-year honours degree, while 10 had matric (Grade 12). All the teachers had professional qualifications and the majority of them (18) had obtained their qualifications from the former colleges of education. These colleges were phased out in the late 1990s when the then Minister of Education, Prof. Kader Asmal, made teacher education the responsibility of universities. Of the 18 teachers who received their primary school teachers' qualification at the colleges, 15 held a three-year Junior Primary Teachers' Diploma (JPTD), while another three qualified with a two-year Primary Teachers' Certificate (PTC). Eighteen of the 20 teachers were isiXhosa speakers and two spoke Afrikaans as home language.

Data presented in this article are based on focus group interviews with the 20 teachers. Each focus group consisted of approximately six to seven teachers. The interviews were used to elicit information regarding their understandings of education standards and the ways in which their conceptions of education standards influenced their classroom pedagogical practices. Data were analysed qualitatively into different broad themes and categories which aimed at addressing the research questions of the study using the highlighting and colour-coding approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

Ethical considerations with regard to participants' permission to participate in the study, respect and confidentiality (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2005; Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004) were adhered to during data collection. Permission to conduct research in the schools was granted by the WCED and permission was sought from teachers before they were interviewed.

Research findings

Two themes emerged from the data analysis, namely, education standards and the curriculum policy, and education standards and teacher practices. These themes are presented below.

Education standards and the national curriculum policy

Of the 20 participants, 17 defined education standards in terms of adherence to the new national curriculum policy, the CAPS. This policy provides guidelines which determine learner progression, achievement and good quality of teaching and learning. Teachers claimed that adherence to the CAPS guidelines was a means of maintaining good standards. They perceived any deviation from the curriculum policy requirements as lowering of educational standards without considering whether this

adherence facilitated meaningful learning. For example, Teacher 3 in School A had this to say about the 'set education standards':

> *I cannot do my own thing … I must plan …. I must follow my daily programme … if you follow CAPS, you will achieve good standards.*

This excerpt which illustrates strict adherence to the 'prescriptive' policy has serious implications for the expectations placed on teachers to implement standards. It may be indicative of the teacher's lack of creativity and expertise. Conversely, it may illustrate that the prescribed standards limit teacher creativity (*I cannot do my own thing*) with regard to exploring innovative ways of facilitating meaningful learning. While the former perception raises questions about the teachers' (in)ability to implement standards and to formulate appropriate pedagogical activities, the latter raises questions about the teachers' understanding of the policy as related to its purpose, content and implementation. Both perceptions have serious implications for the provision of intervention and assistance to teachers with regard to implementing standards in their classrooms.

Kivilu (2006) notes that the vagueness embedded in the national curriculum goals poses a threat for teachers, particularly those with inadequate teaching skills, in understanding the policy and translating it into appropriate classroom activities. Failure to understand or interpret the policy correctly may inadvertently result in inappropriate classroom activities and in the decline of standards. Thus, it comes as no surprise that such teachers may prefer to cling to the curriculum policy and not dare deviate from it, as shown in the excerpt above.

Twelve participants claimed that CAPS assumed equality of education standards for all South African learners. They questioned this uniformity, given the vast differences in school contexts and in learner performance across racial, language and socio-economic backgrounds. Their concern was that the DBE expected schools to produce the same quality standards on learners' performance in the national evaluation tests, as shown in Teacher 4's comment below:

> *Another thing that we can add is that the education planners they must also consider the environment or the background of particular learners, the area where they are … they cannot expect the Khayelitsha learners to be able to perform as, emm, areas the learners from the model C school because there is a two advantages there. Number 1 – the number of learners in the class; the parents there are fully involved because they understand the education. Our parents in our environment … most I … I would say 80% of them they … they … not … ehh … well educated.*

Other teachers felt that the CAPS disregarded contextual issues such as poverty, overcrowded classrooms, language and literacy problems and a lack of teaching resources. They pointed out that poverty was not only a challenge with regard to learners' physical and epistemological access to meaningful learning, but it was one of the factors that led to high drop-out rates of FP learners. Raising her concerns

about the impact of poverty on learning, Teacher 5 in School A expressed herself thus:

> *Some of them [learners] eat here (at school) and they eat tomorrow again. Can you expect effective learning from that child?*

In a way, the concerns expressed above seem to demonstrate the teachers' awareness of the subjectivity of standards when applied to different socio-economic contexts. The implications of disregarding contextual diversity in the discourse on standards are huge, as these differences may drastically affect the education standards, depending on the context in which they are implemented. To expect the standards to apply similarly in diverse contexts may place those teachers, parents and learners in disadvantaged contexts in an unfavourable position.

In the discussion of the AT, the significance of the subject's (teacher's) socio-historical and cultural context and its effect on reaching one's objectives were highlighted. Owing to their disadvantaged educational context, FP teachers in this study may find it difficult to implement effective pedagogical practices and, by extension, to achieve their objectives of maintaining good educational standards. For example, a lack of resources and overcrowding, which they mentioned, may constrain them from attaining good educational standards. Hence, the notion of standards fostering equality has no place in these teachers' situation.

Intricately related to the above is the assumption that teachers in disadvantaged schools produce low educational standards. More often than not, this perception affects these teachers' personal and professional esteem negatively (Modisaotsile, 2012: 2). What exacerbates the situation is that learners in disadvantaged schools in general perform poorly compared to their counterparts in affluent schools (Modisaotsile, 2012) due to the factors mentioned earlier. According to some of the participants in this study, the uniformity of education standards causes authorities to undermine and undervalue their efforts and the hard work they perform under adverse conditions. Teacher 1 in School B expressed her view as follows:

> *… and they think we don't do our best, and they ask: 'What are you doing?' They don't appreciate our work, and we really try our best.*

In relation to the above, the question of education standards appears to divide teachers without considering the different conditions and contexts in which they work. Set standards may be unfair if they are used uniformly to judge the functionality of individuals in different social contexts (Hunter, 1999: 3). According to the AT, the habitus is central to human thought processes. In other words, the teachers' socio-cultural and historical contexts shape and inform the classroom pedagogical practices they carry out to maintain good educational standards. Thus, as was mentioned earlier, standards are inextricably linked with the habitus in which they are applied. This has serious implications for teachers and those involved with setting and evaluating education standards.

Education standards and teacher practices

Concerning the teacher practices, the analysed data illustrated that the teachers' understanding of education standards had an influence on how they interacted with their learners in the classroom. Their responses revealed their knowledge and understanding of FP children's learning, as shown by Teacher 2's utterance:

> *Whatever I wanted to do with ... ehh .... whatever I'm doing in the classroom, I must challenge the kids, the level of the kids must be high, they must be ... the kids are not in the same level but each and every time whatever I am doing there, the main important thing is to challenge them which is though they learn through play but that play is planned, they want concrete objects ... to play and have fun.*

Teacher 2's statement seems to suggest that her conception of children's learning relate to pedagogical strategies that recognise the child's cognitive, social, emotional and affective aspects of development. For instance, she demonstrated her theoretical knowledge of the need to scaffold and challenge young learners to think. In our opinion, critical thinking skills should be seen as integral in the standards discourse. This understanding seems to have influenced how, in an effort to maintain good standards, Teacher 2 used experiences and creativity at her disposal to integrate theory with classroom activities. Granted, such creativity can be possible only if the teacher understands the process of interpreting broad national goals and reformulating them into appropriate objectives and pedagogical practices. Teachers with limited teaching skills may face challenges in accomplishing this task.

Some of the teachers acknowledged the importance of teachers' subject content knowledge as one of the key aspects of maintaining good education standards, as reflected in the words of Teacher 6's from School B:

> *If you do not know what you teach in a classroom, that will become a problem for you and the learners ... the standards will drop.*

This utterance highlights the importance of content standards alluded to earlier in the literature review (Kivilu, 2006; McClaughlin & Shepard, 1995). Undoubtedly, a teacher with weak content knowledge may grapple with mediating learning effectively, let alone aligning it with classroom activities that will help learners attain or exceed set education standards. Similarly, teachers' inadequate pedagogical content knowledge may adversely affect learners' content and performance standards. This situation highlights a need for intervention in situations where teachers encounter challenges with interpreting and implementing standards effectively and where learners fail to meet or exceed set standards.

Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their confusion about the meaning of standards, which they associated with exclusion and the lack of consultation of teachers and parents in standards-setting processes. These concerns raise serious questions regarding the role of teachers in curriculum development and the

implementation of standards, as reflected in the statement made by Teacher 7 from School B below:

> *The people in the parliament are politicians ... they say: 'Teachers, come and implement this' ... So we become implementers of something that we do not even know.*

Teachers also voiced concerns with inadequate teacher training in the new curriculum (CAPS). These concerns reflect a tension between the curriculum guidelines as determinants of good education standards and teacher practices as mediation tools towards attaining these standards. The tension might be exacerbated by the roles they are expected to play in the classroom (e.g. as curriculum designers, materials developers, assessors) as stipulated in the national curriculum policy (DoE, 2002) and the lack of support in their actual practices aimed at improving education standards.

Moss and Schutz (2001) stress the significance of diversity and inclusion in the democratic process of developing consensual educational standards. Yet, the findings of this study reveal the opposite. As reflected in the teachers' utterances above, involvement of teachers and other education stakeholders in standard setting is non-existent. Yet, as was noted earlier, standards function and are influenced by historical, political and socio-cultural forces within communities. Hence, teachers and communities at large can contribute immensely to the development of standards relevant to their contexts. The AT stresses that human cognitive development occurs through social interaction. As parents are primary socialising agents, the interaction that occurs between children and them cannot be overstated. Therefore, as part of the communities, parents should be at the centre of the discourse on standards. Exclusion of stakeholders is detrimental to the process of maintaining good educational standards and might possibly have adversely affected the teachers' objectives of attaining good standards in the FP learners' literacy and numeracy skills.

Summary

The previous section incorporated the analysis of the findings of this study. In this section, only the salient points of the findings are highlighted. The findings revealed that some teachers' conceptions of standards were informed by their own understanding of the CAPS policy, while others related standards to the theories of FP children's learning. Owing to the limited understanding of the concept of standards, probably emanating from exclusion of teachers from standards-setting processes and a lack of clarity on the definition of 'standards', other teachers used their own creativity and experiences to reformulate standards into classroom practices. To a certain extent, the teachers showed an understanding of the relationship between education standards and appropriate pedagogical practices. However, due to the varying conceptions of standards, the activities they carried out to reach their objectives of maintaining standards varied considerably depending on their personal, political and public understandings of standards. This situation is in line with Nardi's (1996) assertion that different actions may be undertaken to meet the same goal.

This study was conducted in three quintile 1 schools with a history of poverty, overcrowding, a lack of resources and low parental involvement. What came out strongly from FP teachers was the degree to which historical, socio-cultural and political factors constrained their objectives of maintaining high educational standards. Nardi (1996: 38) explains that the activity itself is the context. In other words, the context in which FP teachers function determines and informs the action/s (or activities) and operations that they, as subjects, undertake to fulfill their object, using artefacts available in that context. Thus, their practices should be understood as such.

While not much can be done overnight to change the plight of disadvantaged school contexts, something can be done to support the efforts of attaining good standards by teachers and parents who function in these environments. Morrow (2007) argues that teacher education should prioritise formal elements of teaching which include skills of organising learning systematically. These skills comprise programme design, assessment strategies and the ability to provide constructive feedback. To improve contextual challenges in this study, we recommend that teachers be equipped with knowledge and skills that enable them to organise learning effectively in any context, including disadvantaged contexts (Morrow, 2007). In addition, we recommend that teachers liberate themselves from the confines of prescribed standards by collectively developing tools and artefacts that are appropriate for their and their learners' socio-cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This research has revealed a lack of clarity on the definition of standards for FP teachers, which has serious implications for whether it is possible for them to understand, interpret and implement standards effectively. It has also highlighted the complexity of the role that teachers are expected to play in the context of standards implementation and their exclusion from standards-setting processes. Furthermore, the inflexible nature of the policy standards has been revealed, with regard to how it constrains teacher creativity and how it fails to respond to different contexts. These issues have serious implications for FP teachers as, instead of enabling them to enhance education standards, they could lead to a further decline of standards in the FP levels.

The other issue relates to the assumption raised in the CAPS document about equality of educational standards for all South African learners, which we consider controversial. In a democratic and diverse country such as South Africa, we acknowledge that the concept of standards cannot be expected to be understood, interpreted and implemented the same way by teachers and parents. As education does not occur in a vacuum (Save the Children, 2010: 26), the context and conditions under which teachers work influence their pedagogical practices which, in turn, determine learners' epistemological access and success in education (Hill, Baxen,

Craig & Namakula, 2012: 246). Thus, even with the inclusion of stakeholders and training of teachers on standards, diversity in the FP teachers' interpretation of standards and pedagogical practices should not be perceived as a weakness in the attainment of standards, but as an appropriate response to the diverse contexts.

The findings of this study provide rich information and have far-reaching implications for how FP teachers understand education standards in their own teaching contexts. Such an understanding could shed light on how schools and teachers could contribute to the development of good education standards in their own practice. There is a need to replicate this study with both advantaged and disadvantaged schools, and with a bigger sample, as valuable data might be obtained from such rich and diverse contexts.

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