

Implementing the Curriculum Reforms at Kagamuga Primary School, Mt Hagen, Western Highlands Province.

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Abstract

The old curriculum model used before the curriculum reforms were introduced was based on instructionist-objectivist approach. A predominant view of this model is that students know nothing about the world and it is the teacher who is the possessor of knowledge and “deposits” intellectual money; the learner is a passive recipient of knowledge. That has been the learning culture in the classrooms in PNG.

In the past model it was seen that the curriculum was not culturally relevant thus alienating the student learning from the cultural context. The subjects were compartmentalized, segmented and taught without reference to other subjects. Teachers’ guides and pupils’ books had every thing prepared for the teacher. The teacher did not need to prepare anything, causing a lack of initiative and creativity in the development of school based curriculum.

However, what is described above is changing now as the reform curriculum sits on another opposing learning view. The current reform is emanating from constructivist learning view and has elements of humanistic and mastery learning, which, at the end of the same spectrum has Outcomes based learning approach. The Outcomes based learning approach is an educational innovation of doing the ‘old job’ but in a new way. The basic concept underlying the outcomes based learning is to give life skills to the children who will later use these skills in life. This curriculum model will definitely change the learning and teaching practices in PNG.

All educational innovations have their limitations. There can be difficulties, challenges, problems and uncertainties. These are normal processes of change but one has to be open-minded and willing to experiment with new ideas to perfect practice. In the past curriculum model, teachers were highly dependent on prepared materials and resources but this is changing. The new curriculum model is giving teachers freedom and flexibility. Teachers can now become curriculum developers. Assessment is not only pen and paper test but a gives teachers the opportunity to consider a variety of methods to use. There is flexibility in planning, programming, timetabling, teaching, learning, assessing and content selection. Learning is more culturally relevant, meaningful to PNGs changing social, political, economic and educational environment and context.

Introduction

Primary school teachers are basically generalist teachers and that has been the practice for the primary education in PNG for many years. In generalist teaching a teacher is required to teach all subjects. Primary school teachers are aware of generalist teaching practice. It is not a new approach.

In the past curriculum model subjects were taught without reference to others. For example, English had separate smaller subjects such as listening and reading comprehension and these were taught as subjects on their own. With a rigid timetable, a teacher taught up to about 12 separate lessons per day and up to about 50 lessons per week, which is quite too much.

My experience as a generalist teacher using the reform curriculum

I would like to share my experiences as a generalist teacher using the reform curriculum. My discussion will focus on the integration approach, which I use most of the time in my teaching.

I find integration approach as holistic learning; learning is whole, meaningful and satisfying both to the teacher and the learner. It is learner friendly and teacher friendly. It satisfies the humanistic educational philosophy.

Integration teaching approach supports the Papua New Guinea traditional learning (informal learning) style. Papua New Guineans learn holistically to understand the physical and the spiritual world, they are not separate. Integration from my experience in the formal learning situation is that it is meaningful to the students, and connections and relationship of concepts studied is clear in many other subjects. It sets are good learning foundation for the students.

Integrated learning program as I see it is an open approach, not controlled. There is a lot of flexibility, both on the students' part and the teacher as well.

On the teachers part the teacher controls the time not teacher becoming the slave of time as in the past practice. I am able to manipulate the time to get the maximum learning for the students.

Planning and programming is flexible and open. It gives the teacher the freedom to decide according to the curriculum statement and guide, and what to plan and insert in the program unlike in the past where I had to move on to cover what is in the books, and seen as a sin if the curriculum is not covered. The teacher is the curriculum writer himself/herself.

Through my experience I have noticed that it makes me think and I work hard much of my time. I have to do a lot of careful thinking and planning. I do little direct instructing and allow children to work on their own. This allows for full student participation, investigation, exploring and finding answers for themselves. Frequently, I act as a facilitator. And this is interesting to see the students form and construct ideas about what they see, discover, and opinions formed by students about issues and things in life.

One example is the theme on Mothers' Day. The mothers of children in my class were invited and each student had to read a short poem and present each mother with a card. The day was exciting and emotional for many mothers and me too. Prior to the day we had an enriching learning week ending the theme with the special gathering with mothers. I learnt from the students and them from me and it was very satisfying.

The other thing I would like to mention is the assessment. I do not need to plan a pen and paper test each time. I use a variety of assessment methods such as a checklist or presentation or report or anecdotal notes or simple observation and assist students where necessary. I find this interesting because of the positive attitude in the children. For children, testing simply means pass and fail, fail means **no future**. This is to me is a huge psychological stress for the students, maybe a defeat on our students in the schools because that has been the assessment culture in our education system for many years.

One interesting thing I noted is that students have different talents and abilities and if balanced assessment methods are used students can display their skills to the best of their ability and the teacher can be very surprised. I am humbled by what students are able to perform when different assessments methods are used. For example I tasked students according to set criteria for students to construct four different tunes of the same song lyrics and it was unbelievable to hear them singing the same song in 4 different tunes.

Getting to know the students is an important aspect of assisting learning. The integration approach has enabled me to understand my children better. The major factor is the supervision aspect, which gets me closer to the students. It dawned on me, though I learnt about it in the college that if children are given the chance they could do great things but the methodology of the previous curriculum model prevented that. Most of the time teachers dominate learning and children are passive recipients.

In the past practice as affected by the curriculum model and its methodology the children are not given the opportunity to learn, they get everything from the teacher. For me the major strength in the reform curriculum is giving the student opportunity to construct knowledge.

With the integration approach it is getting the students to think, create, perform, explore, investigate, and discover. It educates me to say that children come to the classrooms with knowledge and previous experience and if those experiences are properly provided for children can do many things that will surprise their teachers.

I have realised, though teaching for many years that students know much before they come to school and if a conducive learning opportunity is provided students can do many unexpected things. For example, at school we celebrated the World Environment Day, the week's work was planned around the theme. Students presented seminars, poems, essays, songs, games and other activities. One poem about a dog moved me have tears in my eyes. I was moved because of how the student felt about a dog and expressed it

beautifully in his words. I see now that teachers need to see students in the class as capable as the teacher to construct knowledge about the world.

I have also noted that students who are not good in one area, say, mathematics can excel in other areas of learning such as writing poems or investigation or painting, or sports or creative activity or public speaking or playing a musical instrument.

Limitations

I have shared some positives about generalist teaching in the reform curriculum. In the past generalist teaching was easier because subjects were taught separately and textbooks and pupils books were ready for the teacher to pick up and plan from them. Though I will discuss the limitations, I do not see them as barrier to try out the reform curriculum.

From my experience there is difficulty in the Mathematics content selection when integration takes place. Mathematics has to be taught well at the early stages and I really cannot find suitable linkages to link with other subjects. I see that basic mathematics must be properly taught before student can master mathematical concepts as they are promoted through the grades. There are suggested programs about mathematics integration in books but there are still difficulties in that area.

Another important difficulty is the lack of resources to back up teachers' knowledge on subjects.

There is a huge need to in-service teachers yet and to slowly transform the teachers view to accept the reform curriculum, which is based on Outcome based curriculum model and generalist teaching included.

Conclusion

In conclusion there are difficulties, but there are also good things about the reform curriculum, especially in generalist teaching. If it can work in several schools then it can for other schools too. It is good to count the strengths of the reform curriculum and use those positives to address the problems and challenges. Most importantly, let us be positive give time to the reform curriculum before any judgment can be made.