

The Challenges that Secondary School Teachers Experience in Practicing Philosophies of Teaching and Learning in Their Classrooms in South Africa

Bianca Williams & Celestin Mayombe

Bianca Williams, M.Ed., North-West University, South Africa

Celestin Mayombe, Dr., North-West University, South Africa

Abstract

Philosophies of teaching and learning are significant because they outline the roles and duties of teachers in improving learners' academic performance and progress. Secondary school teachers attempt to adopt philosophies of teaching and learning that promote effective learning. However, studies show that they face challenges in practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in their classrooms due to diverse factors. Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to establish the challenges secondary school teachers experience in practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in their classrooms. The study used a qualitative research approach and a multiple case-study design to understand the participants' perspectives. The study population consisted of 43 Grade 10-12 secondary school teachers within a circuit of the Buffalo City Metro (BCM) District in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The sample size consisted of 12 teachers. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants based on set criteria. The researchers used semi-structured and focus group interviews to collect data from participants. The study used thematic analysis methods to analyze data. The findings revealed that the lack of resources (instructional materials, access to technology, and supportive learning environments) and the different intellectual levels of learners as challenges that teachers experience when practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in classrooms. The authors conclude that the challenges resulted in teachers finding it difficult to develop learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, competencies, and communication skills that are fundamental for their success in the real world of work.

Keywords: challenges, critical-thinking skills, secondary school, South Africa, teaching and learning philosophies, teachers

Introduction

Philosophies of teaching and learning are significant because they outline the roles and duties of teachers in improving learners' academic performance and progress. If teachers have adequate knowledge of philosophies of teaching and learning applicable to secondary school learners and do not face challenges in practicing them, the outcome

will result in learners' acquisition of skills, competencies and creativity, hence their success (Leng, 2020, p. 4).

Nevertheless, practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in classrooms at the secondary school level cannot happen without challenges on the side of teachers and learners due to various factors. In this regard, the present paper examines the challenges secondary school teachers experience in practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in their classrooms. It uses the case studies of teachers of Grades 10-12 learners in Eastern Cape, South Africa. The paper's main argument is that teachers will struggle to practice relevant philosophies of teaching and learning if there are no conducive environments at schools.

Background of the study

Great teaching and learning are defined as those that help learners acquire skills and knowledge in the field of study and lead to improved progress. While a teacher's content knowledge is highly recommended, the quality of teaching and learning approaches also impacts learning outcomes. The quality of teaching and learning is informed by the teacher's beliefs or philosophies. Teachers must adopt a particular teaching and learning philosophy, have purposes to achieve, and have their roles in the teaching and learning process (Leng, 2020, p. 4; Moate & Cox, 2015, p. 382; Uchenna & Ironkwe, 2021, p. 239). To achieve positive outcomes, secondary school teachers attempt to adopt philosophies of teaching and learning that promote learner engagement in the classroom.

However, studies revealed that secondary school teachers were presented with challenges in attempting to use any philosophies of teaching and learning in their classrooms (Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015; Yazon & Ang-Manaig, 2018; Wright, 2020, p. 446; Uchenna & Ironkwe, 2021, p. 239). In the context of Belgium, De Wever et al. (2016, p. 179) reported that secondary school teachers were presented with many challenges in attempting to use a more learner-centered approach. As a result, teachers found it difficult to address the individual needs of the learners. In some sub-Saharan African countries, teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of these philosophies, training in soft skills, and instructional materials (Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015, p. 126). Similarly, in the context of Asia, Amini and Yazdkhasty (2018, p. 105) indicated that the lack of knowledge about philosophies of teaching and learning is on the side of the teachers.

A very few studies focused on potential challenges hindering secondary school teachers from using philosophies of teaching and learning in classrooms. To fill the knowledge gap, this study focused on examining the challenges that secondary school teachers experience in practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in their classrooms. The study was confined to examining the way Grades 10-12 teachers practice philosophies of teaching and learning in classrooms in the Buffalo City Metro District of Eastern Cape, South Africa.

Problem statement and study objectives

The concern in this paper is that some secondary school teachers do not practice philosophies of teaching and learning in their classrooms due to various challenges. Some of those challenges are the lack of knowledge of philosophies due to the lack of professional development training, the resources available to them, and the diversity of

learners in their classrooms (Mhlongo, 2019, p. 37; Mupa & Chinooneka, 2015, p. 126). The lack of knowledge of teaching and learning philosophies was demonstrated in the inadequate use of teaching strategies and approaches to help learners interact during the class sessions (Yazon & Ang-Manaig, 2018, p. 761). Using the context of South Africa, the purpose of the paper is to examine the challenges secondary school teachers experience in practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in their classrooms in Buffalo City Metro District. The objectives are as follows:

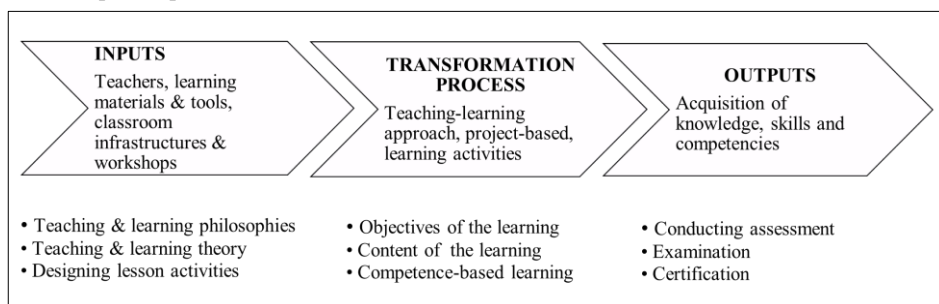
- To examine the impact of the lack of instructional resources on the practice of teaching and learning philosophies in the classrooms.
- To explore the views of teachers about mitigating challenges secondary school teachers experience in practicing teaching and learning philosophies.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that underpins the study was the social constructivist learning theory developed by Lev Vygotsky in 1968. It was a suitable theory for the study topic because it is a theory for teaching and learning (Akpan et al., 2020, p. 50). In 1968, Vygotsky envisioned that knowledge would be socially constructed using interaction with people in various contexts (Frederick-Jonah, 2022, p. 25). Elliott et al. (2000, p. 256) point out that constructivism is “an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner”. The social construction of learning highlights the importance of understanding the complex and dynamic relationship between individuals, culture, and learning to promote effective teaching and learning.

In the context of this paper, the strength of the social constructivist learning theory is that it places secondary school learners at the center of the learning process while allocating adequate resources to achieve their learning objectives and needs. It recognizes that learners construct knowledge through their interaction with others (Akpan et al., 2020, p. 49). While teachers are facilitators of knowledge, the interaction between learners, teachers, and materials results in establishing important connections and participating in activities that focus on their problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Figure 1 shows the connection between material resources and the application of teaching and learning philosophies for learners’ acquisition of knowledge and skills. All components should be integrated into a process.

Figure 1. The connection between material resources and the application of teaching and learning philosophies



Source: Authors’ own compilation and creativity

Below is the explanation of Figure 1.

Inputs (resources): As shown in Figure 1, schools have four types of inputs or resources: human resources (teachers and supporting staff), financial resources, material resources (infrastructure, technologies), and curriculum to be delivered to the learners. Firstly, the human resources entail qualified and skilled teachers in the subject field and philosophies of education (Gupta & Gupta, 2013). Secondly, material resources entail the availability of learning tools that match lesson activities, teaching equipment, and classroom infrastructures (including workshops) adapted to transmit the skills to learners.

Transformation process: This stage includes using an appropriate teaching and learning philosophy. The interaction between learners, teachers, and materials is a component of our learning process by which learners create knowledge (constructivism) and become capable of utilizing the skills in real-life situations. As Care and Anderson (2016) also point out, Figure 1 suggests that teachers need to use a suitable teaching and learning philosophy with instructional materials to motivate the engagement of the learners in their learning process.

Outputs: This is an achievement of the learning objectives. The transformation process produces outputs or outcomes. Gupta and Gupta (2013, p. 52) state that, “The product results from the activities of the class, that is, from interactions between the teacher, the students, the resources and the constraints, via the method used”. Teachers and schools must mobilize the resources (inputs) and transform them to achieve the learning objectives.

Research design and methods

The researchers utilized a qualitative research approach in the form of a multiple-case study research design to understand the phenomenon explored from the perspective of the teachers. According to Tracy (2019, p. 61), a multiple-case study design is an in-depth analysis of an occasion or occurrence of a naturalistic phenomenon. In applying the multiple-case study design to this study, the researchers determined that the secondary school teachers who identified the challenges faced when practicing philosophies of teaching and learning were considered the “multiple cases” (Majid, 2018, p. 1).

Study population and sampling

The study population consisted of 43 secondary school teachers from Circuit Five within the Buffalo City Metro (BCM) District in the Eastern Cape. The researchers selected 3 schools within the district. The study included Grades 10-12 teachers only. The sample size consisted of 12 secondary school teachers. To avoid bias in the process of selecting the participants, 4 teachers were considered from each school to make a sample size of 12 participants for the semi-structured and focus group interviews.

The study used the purposive sampling method to select 12 teachers. Purposive sampling was used because it relies on the researcher’s own judgment to select suitable participants who hold information to meet the research objectives (Kumar, 2011, p. 207). Purposive sampling was appropriate for this study because the teachers were recruited based on selection criteria. The researchers narrowed the geographical area as proximity between the researchers and participants was necessary. It was important to recruit the best participants matching the study objectives that would suit the criteria set out.

Data collection and analysis

Firstly, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the 12 secondary school teachers. During the interview process, the researchers ensured that they collected reliable information, which was also cross-checked among participants (Adams, 2015, p. 504). Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with selected teachers and lasted from 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the probing questions. Secondly, two focus-group interviews were conducted with 5 teachers in each session. The data collected was used to complete that from semi-structured interviews. The responses from both types of interviews were recorded for accuracy purposes.

This study used the thematic analysis method to analyze the data from semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews. Kiger and Varpio (2020) define thematic analysis as an analytical-qualitative method used to understand experiences across a data set. The thematic analysis helped to identify themes from data that proved to be beneficial to address the research question of this study (Maguire & Delahun, 2017, p. 3353). After data collection, the researchers analyzed the meanings attached to the set of data and were able to use the analysis to determine various challenges teachers encountered in practicing philosophies of teaching and learning.

Biographic profile of the participants

The level of education and training of teachers is important to help them choose relevant teaching and learning philosophies to develop critical-thinking skills in learners. In this regard, the participant teachers were asked questions about their educational qualifications and the subjects they taught. The researchers were interested to know whether teachers’ academic qualifications were an advantage in having adequate knowledge of teaching and learning philosophies. Table 1 presents the biographical information of the participant teachers.

Table 1. Biographical information of the participants

<i>Participant code</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Qualifications</i>	<i>Subjects taught</i>
P1	Male	B.Ed. Honours	Computer Application Technology
P2	Female	B.Ed.	Mathematics
P3	Female	B.Ed.	Physical Sciences, Natural Sciences, Mathematics
P4	Male	Teacher’s Diploma	History, Afrikaans
P5	Male	PGCE	IsiXhosa
P6	Male	PGCE	Life Sciences, Natural Sciences, Technology
P7	Female	B.Ed. Honours	History
P8	Male	B.Ed.	Business Studies
P9	Male	M.Ed.	English, History
P10	Female	B.Ed.	Life Sciences
P11	Female	B.Ed.	Physical Sciences
P12	Female	B.Ed.	Business Studies

B.Ed. = Bachelor of Education; M.Ed. = Master of Education; PGCE = Postgraduate Certificate in Education

The analysis of qualifications in Table 1 suggests that the teachers with university degrees or specialized education training may possess a certain level of understanding of

various philosophies of teaching and learning. In other words, their educational training can be associated with knowledge of philosophies of teaching and learning required for the secondary school curriculum.

Findings

Table 2 presents the challenges teachers experience in practicing teaching philosophies in classrooms. The researchers used data gathered from respondents to develop sub-themes, which were categorized into main themes that were used to answer the research question.

Table 2. Challenges teachers experience in practicing teaching philosophies in classrooms

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
1. Challenges teachers experience	1.1. Lack of resources for subjects
	1.2. Uneven intellectual levels of learners
2. Mitigation of challenges	2.1. Relevant platforms to access information
	2.2. Mixing learners in a classroom

Theme 1. Challenges teachers experience

Applying philosophies of teaching and learning in the classroom can be challenging for both the teachers and the learners. The challenges teachers face can affect their job performance and satisfaction. Under this theme, teachers mentioned the lack of resources for delivering a lesson and the differing intellectual levels of learners, hence experiencing challenges in practicing philosophies of teaching and learning.

Sub-theme 1.1. Lack of resources

The lack of resources entailed didactic materials such as textbooks, teaching aids for different subjects, and so forth. Eleven of the twelve participants identified the lack of resources as a challenge preventing teachers from successfully implementing a philosophy of teaching and learning. A teacher (P11) explained the challenge as follows:

I teach physical sciences in a poor-resourced school. I do not have access to any lab equipment to do practicals or demonstrations for my learners. The lack of resources makes it challenging for me to apply philosophies of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Another teacher (P8) said:

My school does not have enough textbooks to distribute to all learners. I find it challenging to implement philosophies of teaching and learning in the classroom because learners do not have access to resources due to overcrowding in the classroom.

The analysis of the quotes reveals that finding appropriate tools and materials for teaching philosophy can be difficult, especially when the number of textbooks or educational resources is constrained. Teachers viewed constructivism as the main philosophy of teaching and learning to assist them in determining how to develop problem-solving skills in learners. However, in the absence of the tools and assistance they need, teachers find it difficult to cater to the different needs of their pupils and design

the kind of individualized learning experiences that are fundamental to constructivist methods.

Sub-theme 1.2. Uneven intellectual levels of learners

During the interviews, teachers mentioned that the intellectual capacities of the learners presented a considerable challenge in applying teaching and learning philosophies. The teacher (P12) said:

I believe that not all learners acquire knowledge at the same level. This has an impact on the effectiveness of applying philosophies of teaching and learning. Learners who possess a lower intellectual level usually lack some basic cognitive skills. This means I need to alter my philosophy to accommodate these learners, which becomes a time-consuming task.

Another teacher (P5) highlighted:

The intellectual levels of learners differ. This poses a challenge because it affects the pace of learning in the classroom and the degree of understanding. I find it difficult to implement my philosophy because the various intellectual levels of my learners cause them to become demotivated.

The analysis of the quotes reveals that teachers find it challenging to practice philosophies of teaching and learning when learners' intellectual levels differ. This means that teachers had to gather knowledge about additional philosophies that would suit the needs of various groups of learners. When learners' intellectual levels differ, teachers find it difficult to apply teaching and learning philosophies. This meant that teachers had to learn about additional philosophies that would meet the needs of various groups of learners.

Theme 2. Mitigation of challenges

Overcoming challenges requires one to be innovative and creative in one's approach. In this connection, teachers suggested that having relevant platforms to access information and mixing learners in a classroom could be a solution to mitigate the challenges.

Sub-theme 2.1. Relevant platforms to access information

During interviews, teachers were of the view that useful platforms for information access can be extremely helpful in overcoming obstacles to the implementation of philosophy. These platforms could assist learners to overcome challenges and improve their comprehension and engagement with philosophical ideas. A teacher (P10) explained the mitigation strategies as follows:

Teachers and learners can access social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. This can provide them with opportunities to engage in discussions about subject-related content or to share valuable resources.

The teacher (P9) mentioned:

Teachers and learners can use tools such as search engines to find a wide range of information relating to their subject content. It provides advanced and current

information that will assist learners and teachers in problem-solving and decision-making.

The analysis of the quotes reveals that there was no idea about mitigating the challenges of a lack of materials because it was beyond teachers' control. They suggested an alternative way, which is media platforms. In this case, having access to external platforms to access information would assist learners in deepening their understanding of various subjects.

Sub-theme 2.2. Mixing learners

Teachers expressed that learners from different backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles can be mixed in the same learning environment in a practice known as heterogeneous grouping. The approach presented a way that engages learners and challenges their intellectual curiosity. Teachers used to mix learners in group learning in the classroom to mitigate challenges. A teacher (P5) explained the strategy as follows:

Learners possess different strengths that could be utilized in the classroom. However, the weaknesses remain an issue unless addressed. I try to mix the learners up so they can support one another.

Another teacher (P10) said:

A strategy that has helped me tremendously is mixing learners so that they can learn from one another. I want to challenge learners to observe what others are doing. I place them outside of their comfort zone.

The analysis of the quotes reveals that learners from different backgrounds and abilities are given equitable access to learning experiences. The findings suggest that the teachers applied social constructivism as a philosophy of teaching and learning to eliminate any stereotypes and biases that may exist between learners. They were constructing and sharing knowledge, broadening their perspectives on the world, and cultivating empathy for persons from other backgrounds. Those who were proficient in a subject assisted peers who may be having difficulties, fostering a collaborative learning environment.

Discussion of the findings

Most secondary school teachers found that a lack of resources, such as textbooks, workbooks, and equipment, frequently hindered teaching and learning experiences. A study conducted by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011, p. 815) also revealed that a lack of necessary classroom stationery and equipment, such as science tools, textbooks, or instruments, prevents teachers from giving their learners opportunities for experiential, hands-on learning. Mupa and Chinooneka (2015, p. 128) explain that inadequate or outdated resources may force teachers to use teaching strategies that are not effective in meeting the needs of their learners. However, some teachers have found ways to overcome this challenge by allowing access to relevant platforms such as search engines and social media to obtain information.

Teachers find it challenging to practice philosophies of teaching and learning when learners' intellectual levels differ. It is challenging for teachers to establish a cohesive and cooperative learning environment when learners have varying comprehension and

skill levels (Mizikaci et al., 2021, p. 873; Rogahang et al., 2023). This finding concurs with those in the studies of Wrench et al. (2013, p. 935) and Wilde and Avramidis (2011, p. 90), revealing that different intellectual levels make it difficult for teachers to give each learner the support and attention they need in a classroom. In the context of the present study, secondary school teachers find it difficult to cater to the individual needs of learners if there are no resources to assist them. However, some teachers overcame this challenge by mixing learners in the classroom.

Conclusion

The findings revealed that the lack of resources (instructional materials, access to technology, and supportive learning environments) and the different intellectual levels of learners are challenges that teachers experience when practicing philosophies of teaching and learning in classrooms. Some teachers have found ways to overcome these challenges by mixing learners in the classroom.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the transformation process to achieve learning outcomes was hampered by a lack of resources, technology access, and supportive learning environments. The challenges resulted in teachers finding it difficult to develop learners' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, competencies, and communication skills that are fundamental for their success in the real world of work. However, some teachers strived to integrate the available school resources into the process of learning.

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