

Art. # 1041, 12 pages, <http://www.sajournalofeducation.co.za>

## The Lesotho curriculum and assessment policy: Opportunities and threats

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The end of British colonial rule in 1966 provided an impetus for curriculum reform in Lesotho. Since then, a number of curriculum and assessment reforms have been attempted, albeit with a little success. In all cases, the aim has been to achieve the goals of education for national development. The *Curriculum and Assessment Policy 2009* represents the latest education reform, which marks a departure from the subject and examination-oriented curriculum to a new dispensation wherein curriculum is organised into learning areas reflecting practical life challenges. In this paper, we analyse the content of this policy document in order to identify the underlying assumptions about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment focusing on secondary education. We take a critical perspective on policy analysis to uncover contradictions and paradoxes associated with the educational discourses being promoted by the document. We further discuss the implications of curriculum policy intentions of the document, highlighting opportunities and threats for educational development in Lesotho. Based on the findings of our review, we argue that although the new policy creates opportunities for personal growth of learners and economic development in Lesotho, there are threats and challenges, which can be detrimental to its successful implementation.

**Keywords:** assessment; curriculum; curriculum integration; pedagogy; policy

### Introduction

When examinations dominate curriculum, there is a likelihood that moves to introduce progressive practices may be stifled, unless there is a corresponding change in high-stake examinations (Cheng as cited in Carless, 2005:39).

The argument articulated in the quotation above is particularly relevant in Lesotho, where many attempts at curriculum reform have been constrained by the nature of the final public examinations, which have emphasised only cognitive skills (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982). The new *Curriculum and Assessment Policy* can be seen as a shift in education policy intentions from an undemocratic and examination-oriented education system to a more process-oriented curriculum, with a greater integration of assessment with teaching and learning. We analyse the content of this policy document to identify opportunities and threats that its policy statements create for educational development in Lesotho. We adopt a critical view of policy analysis in order to uncover contradictions and paradoxes associated with the educational discourses being promoted by the policy document, and discuss the implications thereof. It is hoped that this analysis will not only stimulate debate on the current curriculum reform, but will also provide feedback on the current curriculum policy development, especially at this critical, initial stage of the policy dissemination and implementation in curriculum materials. To set the scene for our analysis, we first provide a contextual background to the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy*.

### Background to the New Curriculum and Assessment Policy

For the first time after 43 years since independence, the Lesotho government developed and published a comprehensive curriculum and assessment policy in 2009 as a strategy to minimise the negative influence of examinations on the education system by integrating curriculum with assessment. There had been concerns about the relevance of school curriculum and the authenticity of public examinations, which did not accurately measure desirable competences and skills (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982). As such, the overall goal of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) in the new curriculum and assessment policy is “to ensure access, quality, equity and relevance in the educator sector” (MoET, 2009:1). The new curriculum and assessment policy rearranges education system for schools into two levels, namely: basic education, which covers the first 10 years of formal schooling from Grades 1 to 10; and the final two years of secondary education, Grades 11 and 12, which is our focus in this paper. Basic education is intended to form the basic foundation for secondary, technical, vocational education and lifelong learning. Secondary education, as has been the case before (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982), is expected to pursue the goals of preparing learners for the world of work and further education (MoET, 2009).

The policy document was developed and published at the time when Lesotho, like many other countries, was facing serious economic, environmental and social problems. In particular, as stated in the document, there were problems of unemployment, environmental degradation and increasing rates of HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), all of which posed a threat for sustainable development in Lesotho (MoET, 2009). These societal needs and problems provided an imperative for curriculum and assessment reforms in Lesotho to address issues of quality and relevance.

While there is an indication of drawing on the local context in this document, the reform process also has a global context, as illustrated by its explicit reference to progressive education discourses such as integrated

curriculum, learner-centred pedagogy, lifelong learning, economic competitiveness, production and work-related competences, which are currently guiding many education policies internationally. In line with these global educational ideas, the current curriculum reform is built on the theoretical concept of integration, in terms of which curriculum is organised around real life problems and issues of personal and social significance (Beane, 1997).

The notion of curriculum integration can be traced back to the era of the Progressive Education Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which emerged out of the dissatisfaction with a traditional education that emphasised disciplinary knowledge, as opposed to real life problems and challenges. The concept is associated with American education philosophers, notably John Dewey, who viewed schools as democratic spheres, where individuals can be empowered to effectively deal with practical life challenges (Dewey, as cited in Jackson, 1992). The adoption of such global and progressive ideas as curriculum integration may be seen as a national response to global trends and developments in education more broadly.

Responding to global patterns of educational change has been one of the major reasons for development of new education policies in many countries worldwide. For example, in 1994, Botswana revised its education policy in response to global patterns of production and industrial organisation (Tabulawa, 2009). Furthermore, we are aware of curriculum change towards outcomes-based education (in countries such as South Africa and Australia), which was stimulated by, among others, global trends relating to integrated curriculum and learner-centred pedagogy (Cross, Mungadi & Rouhani, 2002; Malcolm, 2001). However, while there are certainly potential benefits in drawing on global education discourses, it is important that such ideas be adapted to the local context, as they are not value neutral (O'Sullivan, 2004; Tabulawa, 2003). Although not focusing on the influence of globalisation on education policy development processes in Lesotho, this paper partly scrutinises the implications and relevance of these grand international educational concepts, as they relate to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the national context of Lesotho.

The curriculum and assessment policy reform being analysed here was developed and is being implemented in a national context where many other curriculum reforms have been attempted before, albeit with a little success. In the next section, we provide a historical overview of curriculum reform in Lesotho from the period after independence to the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the new curriculum and

assessment policy document was developed and published.

#### *Curriculum reform landscape in Lesotho: then and now*

The end of British colonial rule in 1966 provided an impetus for curriculum reform in Lesotho. However, a review of official documents and literature suggests that the curriculum reform landscape in Lesotho is characterised by continuities, rather than discontinuities (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982; Mosisili, 1981; Nketekete & Motebang, 2008).

In 1977, eleven years after independence, Lesotho began a flurry of *lipitso* (public gatherings), with a view to soliciting input towards designing a curriculum that would respond to the needs of the young nation. Running from October 1977 to March 1978, there was altogether a series of fifty-one such gatherings, in different parts of the country (Mosisili, 1981). Following this consultation process, a National Education Dialogue was held in 1978 for further consultation. The purpose of the gatherings, in part, was to relate education planning to overall national development plans and to inform any subsequent policy reforms. Additionally, the Minister of Education had, in 1971, announced the Education Policy for Development as a response to the perceived limitations of the education system inherited from the colonial administration. This policy recognised the central role of education in achieving economic growth.

Following the 1978 national Education Dialogue, an Education Sector Task Force was established by Cabinet to prepare a policy document that would guide education processes. Its terms of reference were to:

- Review the education policy;
- Examine the existing system of education and its role in the development of the nation; and
- Propose long-term policies (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982).

This was a multi-disciplinary task force, composed of Basotho nationals and external consultants from other African countries (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982:iv). The report of this task force was presented and adopted in 1982 as a policy document guiding education reform processes up to the year 2000. The document's policy statements for secondary education emphasised the need for the inclusion of more practical subjects, with the purpose of enhancing the quality of education and preparing learners for a meaningful life in a changing society with uncertain employment prospects. Education was seen as the main vehicle towards achieving the national aspirations of self-reliance and economic independence hence, an adjustment to the educational content and practice was seen as a

catalyst to this achievement.

Following the education for development policy, a number of reforms were introduced in the education system of Lesotho. These included the curriculum diversification reform, the core curriculum reform and the localisation of the 'O' Level (Ordinary Level) curriculum, which is relevant to this paper.

#### *The curriculum diversification reform*

The curriculum diversification reform was initiated in 1974, with the purpose of introducing new practical subjects such as agriculture, technical subjects and home economics. It was intended to achieve the goals of self-reliance through education with production, while not ignoring the goals of further education (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982). The introduction of a new subject, Development Studies, in the early 1980s was part of this programme. Due to its practical component, the subject was deemed to have the potential to bridge the gap between practical subjects and traditional academic subjects. By 1993 however, not much, if any, success was found to have been achieved by this reform. As reported in the evaluation report on this programme, there were ambivalences regarding the underlying assumptions and expected outcomes of the programme (Ministry of Education, 1993). This quotation captures the mood of policy planners at the time when the evaluation of the programme's success was done:

Whilst pupils have a positive attitude towards practical subjects, diversification appears to have had very little impact on their career aspirations or their subject preferences. Pupils lack information on what diversification can lead to, and how these practical subjects contribute to the quality of their secondary/high school education (Ministry of Education, 1993:2).

#### *The core curriculum reform*

The reform was intended to increase efficiency in the operations of secondary and high schools by reorganising the curriculum into six groups of subjects with emphasis on English, mathematics and science as the core subjects (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982). English further assumed an enhanced status as both a medium of instruction and a passing subject for all examinations. In terms of the provisions of the curriculum policy, these three subjects are allotted six periods a week at secondary and high school levels; more than any other subject within the curriculum (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1984). In this regard, the following questions may be asked: what was the reasoning behind government's decision to allocate top priority status to English, mathematics and science? Whose interests were served by this policy decision?

Ansell (2002) argues that while the government's intention by adopting this curriculum structure was to address the limitations of colonial education, the structure still retained the key aspects of its colonial predecessor. In this structure, English was still privileged over other practical subjects, which were intended to address the national goals of education with development.

#### *The 'O' Level localisation reform*

The need to localise the 'O' Level curriculum and examinations has been a long-standing issue in Lesotho, since the early 1960s (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982), when the weaknesses of the Joint Matriculation examinations, which were administered in South Africa, were noted. This led to the decision in 1961 to adopt the Cambridge Overseas Schools Certificate (COSC), administered by Cambridge University in the United Kingdom. The issue re-emerged during the National Education Dialogue in 1978 when problems associated with the COSC curriculum in the context of an independent Lesotho were noted.

As a response to the localisation reform, alternative syllabuses in subjects such as geography and science were produced in the early 1980s and put on trial in some schools in the mid-1980s. The syllabuses remained in a trial stage until they were replaced by the current new syllabuses in 1999, due to poor coordination of curriculum activities and other factors (Nketekete, 2001; Raselimo, 1996). Then, in 1989, the marking of examination scripts was localised after the training of markers, but overall control still remains with Cambridge University. There has been concern over the fact that the curriculum has not changed, and that examinations are still set in Cambridge, despite the initial desire to attain full localisation.

In the 1990s, the issue of localisation of the 'O' Level curriculum became the central focus of national conferences and seminars. The most important of these was the 1995 seminar in which, for the first time, the meaning of localisation in the context of Lesotho was clearly articulated. The report emanating from this seminar defined localisation as "... taking charge and control of all activities and responsibilities over curriculum development and assessment" (Ministry of Education, 1995:18). As stated in this report, "the major concern for this policy has always been the relevance and appropriateness or otherwise of the COSC to Lesotho's educational and developmental needs" (Ministry of Education, 1995:iii). Relevance was defined in terms of national development needs, particularly making the curriculum more contextually relevant.

As part of the implementation strategy, from around 1995, there was a comprehensive review of

syllabuses in all subjects at junior secondary level with the purpose of dovetailing the Junior Certificate (JC) curriculum with the 'O' Level curriculum. The revised syllabuses were first put on trial in 1999, and implemented in all schools shortly afterwards. However, the process of revising the 'O' Level curriculum started only in 2012, 17 years after the announcement to localise the curriculum had been made in 1995. Why did it take this long?

From his evaluation of curriculum development processes leading to the localisation after the 1995 policy intentions, Nketekete (2001) reports a number of constraining factors, which include lack of coordination among different stakeholders involved in curriculum policy making, implementation and evaluation. He explains that this is mainly because there has been no clear vision to guide the whole process and as a result, curriculum development activities were not systematically conducted. He further indicates that this reform process has been forestalled by a lack of common understanding between the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) and the Examination Council of Lesotho (ECOL) regarding what localisation really means in the context of Lesotho. This was the case despite clarification of the meaning of 'O' level localisation by the 1995 localisation policy, as stated earlier in this section. It would appear that there is a tension between quality, as defined in the localisation report, and examination standards as conceptualised by NCDC and ECOL (key implementing agents). The current new curriculum and assessment policy, which is being analysed in this paper, is at the pinnacle of the whole process of localisation. It is intended to guide the process, which is now at an advanced stage.

The review of curriculum reforms presented in this section of the paper provides a trajectory for education development processes, where tension between policy intentions and implementation is a common problem. In trying to explain this tension much previous education policy research has generally focused on technical issues constraining envisaged changes, without engaging in a critical analysis of the content of policies that were intended to guide the change process in the education sector. Writing in the context of South Africa, De Clercq (2010) also criticises policy research for failing to link the common problem of policy-practice gap to unrealistic policy content. It is against this background that we analyse the content of the new curriculum and assessment policy for Lesotho with the purpose of highlighting the opportunities it creates for education development in Lesotho. We argue that while new policies may create opportunities, they also introduce certain threats and challenges, which can

be detrimental to the achievement of the expected policy outcomes.

### Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The unit of analysis in this paper is policy, as it relates to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In this section we conceptualise the meaning of policy and policy analysis. Our approach is critical, and rooted in the tradition of the neo-Marxist scholars, who see the primary task of policy analysis as to reveal the tacit assumptions and values in policy texts (Apple, 2004; Ball, 1994; Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992; Cornbleth, 1990; Eisner, 1992; McLaren, 2007; Olssen, Codd & O'Neill, 2004). The strength of this critical approach is that it provides a language of critique to question the "appearances and taken-for-granted practices" (Cornbleth, 1990:3), which may be ignored when researchers use the technical-rational approach. Thus, the approach helps to probe what is not immediately seen as problematic in curriculum and assessment policy documents (Thompson, 2003). Following Ball (1994), we conceptualise policy as both text and discourses. As a text, policy represents "the formal body of law and regulation that pertains to what should be taught in schools" (Elmore & Sykes, 1992:186). In defining policy as text, Ball (1994:16) writes as follows:

We can see policies as representations, which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and representations) and decoded in complex ways via actors' interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context.

Since policy is a social construction as this quotation suggests, Ball (1994) argues that policy is both text and discourse, because policy texts carry discourses about educational values or ideologies that a society considers important. Ball further notes that, "discourses are about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when and with what authority" (1994:21). Thus, the focus in this paper is on the Lesotho *Curriculum and Assessment Policy* document as an official text serving a cultural function, giving people an opportunity to express shared values or ideologies regarding what should be taught in schools and how it should be taught and assessed (Walker, 2003).

Drawing on literature on policy analysis, Olssen et al. (2004) make a distinction between two forms of policy analysis, namely analysis *for* policy and analysis *of* policy. They assert that analysis *for* policy has the purpose of making specific policy recommendations and providing policy makers with information; whereas analysis *of* policy examines the processes of policy construction and the effects of such policies on various groups of people. It may also focus on the content of policy,

in which case researchers “examine the values, assumptions and ideologies underpinning the policy process” (Olssen et al., 2004:72). As we have already mentioned, in this article we take a critical approach and focus on the analysis of policy, as opposed to the analysis for policy, to probe the values and assumptions about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and the possible effects of such on the learners and educational development.

Following Bowe et al. (1992), we assume that a policy text embodies contradictory and tacit messages about values and ideologies of which policy developers may be both conscious and unconscious. These messages need to be unpacked in order to yield an understanding of the drivers of proposed curriculum reform, and their implications for schools and educational development. Bowe et al. (1992:21) note that at the legislative level, policy texts are not necessarily clear, but rather “are generalised, written in relation to idealisation of the real world, and cannot be exhaustive.” They further point out that official policy texts are often contradictory in their use of key terms, and are reactive to particular events and circumstances. This suggests that a curriculum policy text should be analysed alongside other relevant policy texts to establish inter-textual links, and in the context of its history and particular site of production.

We recognise that the development of an education policy represents an arena, where interested parties struggle to dominate the prevailing discourse (Bowe et al., 1992). As such, a policy text carries messages about norms and values that dominant groups consider desirable for bringing about change in society. As has already been mentioned, policy texts produced in this arena are the products of struggle and compromise, as groups of actors are competing for control of their meaning (Bowe et al., 1992). This implies that a curriculum policy is never neutral, but always a political document, representing the interests of dominant groups (Apple, 2002; Jansen, 1998) as suggested by critical curriculum theory. This being the case, a critical policy analysis needs to go beyond explicit messages to examine the taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions about a good education practice.

In order to understand the kind of curriculum policy messages contained in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy framework, we subjected the document to content analysis. According to Berg (2007), content analysis involves the examination of artefacts of social communication, such as written documents. Although this method is usually applied in quantitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Wolcott, 1994), Berg (2007) argues that it can be equally effective in qualitative analysis. He explains that:

Textual elements merely provide a means of identifying, organising, indexing and retrieving data. Analysis of the data, once organised according to certain content elements, should involve consideration of literal words in the text being analysed, including the manner in which these words are offered (Berg, 2007:307).

Using this method of data analysis we focus on sections of the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy* document dealing with curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. We however, refer to other sections of the document, where there are relevant statements for illustrating our argument. Our approach was essentially inductive, as we did not have clear analytical categories.

#### The Major Thrusts of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy

In this section, we analyse the policy document in order to understand the view of the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Integrated into our analysis are the discussions of the implications of the policy messages for schools and the education system in Lesotho. Where appropriate, we compare the new curriculum and assessment policy framework with the previous one with a view to highlighting the kind of change proposed by the former. In the process of analysis, we also highlight contradictions and paradoxes associated with the current curriculum reform. We first present an analysis on curriculum organisation. This is followed by a critical analysis of the espoused pedagogy. Finally, the analysis shifts to the proposed assessment system.

#### *Curriculum organisation*

The policy envisages an integrated curriculum, organised into learning areas to which all school subjects are expected to contribute. As described in the policy document, learning areas are seen as chunks, which are “used as filtering mechanisms meant to select concepts and principles derived from subject areas that address real issues and challenges” (MoET, 2009:18). To this end, the framework identifies five learning areas, which are intended to serve as quality control mechanisms to ensure relevance and coverage of key competences in curriculum planning and organisation. As shown in Table 1, the identified learning areas for both basic and secondary education are: Linguistic and Literary; Numeral and Mathematical; Personal, Spiritual and Social; Scientific and Technological; and Creativity and Entrepreneurial (MoET, 2009). The learning areas highlight life challenges and contexts in which learners are expected to function.

As depicted in Table 1, the new curriculum and assessment policy differs considerably from the previous model of curriculum organisation. Unlike the previous curriculum structure, which emphasised disciplinary knowledge, the new model

envisages an integrated curriculum. As defined in the policy document, the term integration refers to:

the holistic view and treatment of issues related to intelligence, maturity, personal and social development of the learner for survival purposes and economic development of the nation as opposed to the compartmentalised subject-based form of instruction (MoET, 2009:15).

This definition reflects the intention to make a curriculum more contextually relevant, by linking it with real life problems. Consistent with the notion of curriculum integration as conceptualised in the literature (Beane, 1997), the document prescribes that school life should be integrated with community life and everyday experiences of the learner. To achieve the goals of curriculum integration, the curriculum is aligned with practical life challenges relating to “high unemployment rate and slow economic growth, high poverty, rampant

HIV and AIDS and contagious diseases, environmental degradation, gender equality and equity, human rights and democracy and many more” (MoET, 2009:15). These challenges are also identified, in other national policy documents such as *Vision 2020*, *Poverty Reduction Strategy* and *Education Sector Strategic Plan*, as development needs of top priority. This coherence between the new curriculum and assessment framework and the Lesotho national needs is likely to lead to successful implementation of the policy intentions at the level of curriculum documents and school implementation. However, the achievement of the goals of the new curriculum will depend on the ability of the stakeholders involved in curriculum development and implementation to interpret this policy in their specific contexts.

**Table 1** Curriculum structure of secondary education

Learning area	Core contributing subjects	Compulsory subjects
Linguistic and literary	Sesotho, English, Art & Crafts, Drama, Music and other languages	Sesotho and English
Numerical and mathematical	Mathematics	Mathematics
Personal, Spiritual and Social	History, Religious Education, Health and Physical Education, Development Studies, Life Skills	Life Skills
Scientific and Technological	Science, Geography, Agricultural Science, Technical Subjects	Science
Creativity and Entrepreneurial	Business Education, Clothing and Textile, Food and Nutrition, Home Management, Information Communication Technology (ICT), Accounting	Any subject

Source: MoET (2009)

For optimum learning, the policy document prescribes that learners should take a minimum of six subjects (i.e. at least one from each learning area) and a maximum of eight. It further specifies the core curriculum, consisting of Sesotho, English, Mathematics, Life Skills, Science and any other subject from the Creative and Entrepreneurial learning area, as compulsory subjects for secondary education. However, this curriculum structure, as shown in Table 1, seems to marginalise certain subjects and continues to privilege others, which were previously designated as core subjects. With the exception of Life Skills, which is a newly added subject in the learning of Personal, Spiritual and Social, this structure still reflects the elements of the 1982 core curriculum reform, which emphasised Sesotho, English and Mathematics over other subjects (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982). While we do not contest the importance of these core subjects in the context of Lesotho as a small and developing country, the reasoning behind the decision to allocate them a high curriculum status is not clear in the policy document. In this regard, it is important to reflect on the following question: To what extent does the curriculum structure respond to the real societal needs and problems in Lesotho?

Ansell (2002) argues that while curriculum reforms in Lesotho are intended to address the limitations of the colonial education, most reforms in their curriculum structure still mimic the key aspects of colonial education. The same could be said about the current reform as conceptualised in the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy*. The proposed curriculum structure paradoxically marginalises the practical subjects, which were and still are intended to address the national goal of education with production (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982; MoET, 2009). As can be seen in Table 1, within the ‘Scientific and Technological’ learning area, the structure gives science a priority while vocational subjects (Agricultural Science and Technical subjects) are relegated to an optional status competing for curriculum space with geography. This paradox may reflect a tension between meeting the goals of further education through traditional academic subjects, and the need to promote vocational skills necessary for preparing learners for the world of work (MoET, 2009).

We wonder whether or not this paradox reflects also a symbolic gesture to keep pace with international trends in education, which is a typical feature of policy reforms in other countries in the

region (Jansen, 1998; Tabulawa, 2009). Why does the new curriculum not create space for learners to follow different routes, so that those who decide to learn more vocational skills can take more practical subjects?

It is also noteworthy that the placement of geography only in the learning area of Scientific and Technological reflects a narrow understanding of the subject. Being both a natural and social science subject, geography could also fall under the Personal, Spiritual and Social learning area. Thus, the proposed curriculum structure puts geography in a tight competition with well-established natural science subjects. This poses a threat for the subject to demonstrate its unique role in addressing issues of environmental sustainability and climate change, which are currently considered part of the priority areas for curriculum reforms, both in Lesotho (MoET, 2005, 2009) and internationally.

It is also important to note from Table 1 that the new curriculum structure gives priority to a newly-introduced subject of Life Skills. While there are obvious implementation challenges facing Life Skills, notably lack of teacher preparedness, its inclusion in the school curriculum creates opportunities for the Lesotho education system to deal more effectively with issues of HIV and AIDS, which is seen as a multi-sectoral development issue with social, economic, and cultural implications (Government of Lesotho, 2004). The addition of Life Skills is also seen as signalling the government's intention to encourage development of basic survival skills relating to self-awareness, assertiveness and interpersonal skills, which have hitherto not featured very strongly in the secondary education system of Lesotho.

Notwithstanding the important role of Life Skills Education, as described in the foregoing paragraph, we caution that elevating one subject to the status of a core in the Personal, Spiritual and Social learning area, has the potential to marginalise other equally important subjects. Giving schools an option to teach Religious Education, Development Studies or History has implications for achievement of the national goals relating to democracy, peace, spiritual and moral development, which are important to Lesotho as a young democracy and a predominantly Christian state.

#### *The intended pedagogy*

To address the content of the school subjects shown in the curriculum structure portrayed in Table 1, the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy* espouses a learner-centred approach, which is not new on the education scene of Lesotho (see for example, Ministry of Education, 1995). It is important to note that learner-centred pedagogy is currently the dominant paradigm in curriculum reform, especially in Africa, where it is intended to serve as

an enabler of democracy (Chilsholm & Leyendecker, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2004; Tabulawa, 2003). The idea originates, in part, from John Dewey's experience-oriented conception of curriculum. Dewey was dissatisfied with aspects of traditional education, which he believed separated the learner from the curriculum. Influenced by the ideas of progressive education in the early twentieth century, Dewey linked the concept of curriculum with the learner, arguing that "the child and curriculum are simply two limits which define the same process" (Dewey, as quoted by Jackson, 1992:6). By bridging the gap between the learner and the curriculum, John Dewey envisaged democratic teaching and learning processes, where control on the curriculum emerges from interactions, rather than from being externally imposed (Doll, 2002). It is guided by principles such as free choices, implying that learners will have some control over instructional processes. It is our argument that giving learners control over instructional rules, especially with respect to the pacing of lessons has the potential to increase the costs of secondary education. Is this the kind of learner-centred pedagogy envisaged? If so, are its democratic principles in the best interest of the Basotho people?

The *Curriculum and Assessment Policy* document elaborates on the kind of the learner-centred approach envisaged as follows:

The focus in pedagogy has therefore shifted more to teaching and learning methods that can further develop creativity, independence, and survival skills of learners. Learners are expected to become more responsible for their own learning processes and thus should be able to identify, formulate and solve problems by themselves and evaluate their work (MoET, 2009:22).

As this quotation suggests, the current reform introduces a shift from teacher-dominated teaching methods to learner-centred methods, thus implying new roles for teachers and students. In this current reform, it would seem that teachers are expected to act as facilitators of students' learning rather than as knowledge transmitters. It implies that students can also be knowledge creators, and that they do not come to class as completely empty vessels waiting to be filled with information. In this way, the new policy challenges the existing dominant teacher-centred methods, which are a typical feature of classroom teaching and learning processes in Lesotho (Nketekete & Motebang, 2008; Raselimo, 2010).

It is also evident from the quotation above that the new curriculum and assessment policy emphasises development of skills and attitudes necessary for achieving rapid social and economic change. This could be seen as creating opportunities for secondary education to produce learners with vocational skills with which they can be empowered and can meaningfully contribute to

national development. In this regard, we can argue that the new curriculum and assessment framework reflects the social reconstruction ideology in terms of which learners are expected to use knowledge and skills to solve social problems (Schiro, 2008). This creates an opportunity for school teachers to teach context-specific content, skills, attitudes and values relating to life challenges such as HIV/AIDS and environmental degradation, which are identified in the policy document as imperatives for curriculum and assessment reforms.

Furthermore, although there is no indication of democratic principles such as active participation in the quotation above, the adoption of the learner-centred approach could be seen as a positive step towards consolidation of democracy. As the literature shows, the ideal of learner-centred pedagogy was seen as a catalyst to expediting the process of democratisation in most African countries (Chilsholm & Leyendecker, 2008). A few examples may be cited to illustrate this argument. Post-apartheid South Africa adopted Outcomes Based Education (OBE) from 1994 onwards, signalling a departure from apartheid education to a democratic dispensation (Cross et al., 2002). In Namibia too, the introduction of learner-centred education after independence in 1990 was regarded as a means of consolidating democratic ideals (O'Sullivan, 2004).

While the learner-centred pedagogy may be a highly celebrated education ideal in Lesotho, experience from other African countries illustrates that, if not well adapted to the local contexts, it can potentially pose a threat to educational development. The educational ideas relating to the concept, as it is internationally conceptualised, are not necessarily relevant to all national contexts. They are also not value-neutral, as they carry messages that are intended to incorporate countries adopting them into the global economy (Tabulawa, 2003, 2009). Chilsholm and Leyendecker (2008) observe that developing countries adopted the philosophical ideal of learner-centred education as a result of international pressure to transform their societies and economies from agricultural-based polities to modern (Western) and knowledge-based polities. Is this the case in Lesotho? Although there are certainly potential benefits in drawing on global educational discourses, there is also need to adapt such progressive ideas as learner-centred pedagogy to local contexts so as to avoid a negative influence of international pressure and hegemony on the Lesotho education system.

Another important aspect of the espoused pedagogy in the current curriculum reform is the interdisciplinary approach, requiring teachers to make use of knowledge from other subject areas when dealing with emerging issues. This is evident in the following quote:

The first seven years of Basic Education shall follow an integrated approach managed through five learning areas, with the gradual emergence of subjects in the last three years [...]. In the last three years of Basic Education [Grades 8, 9 and 10], curriculum will be drawn from the core contributing subjects to the respective five learning areas (MoET, 2009:21).

As the above quote suggests, an interdisciplinary approach is adopted in the higher grades, where there is policy expectation for subject integration within learning areas. The adoption of this approach could be seen as a strength, because it enables conceptual progression within specific subjects, and therefore creates opportunities for achievement of the goals of further education and training. In South Africa, the Curriculum 2005 policy was criticised for overemphasis on integration with less attention being given to progression (Department of Education, 2000). Given that in Lesotho, as in other countries such as Botswana (Polelo, 2009), there is usually policy borrowing, the task force which developed the new curriculum and assessment policy document may have drawn from experiences from South Africa and made a conscious decision to retain disciplinary knowledge at secondary school level.

While the adoption of the interdisciplinary approach has advantages for educational development, it contradicts the notion of curriculum integration as it supports the idea of organising curriculum into discrete subjects rather than dissolving subject boundaries (Beane, 1997). This is likely to reinforce compartmentalised teaching in schools, which the policy was intended to address. Organising subjects into discrete learning areas, as shown in Table 1, can easily encourage teachers to operate within a certain learning area and position themselves as specialists in that learning area. For example, English teachers may find it difficult or unacceptable to draw content from scientific, spiritual or technological backgrounds. To this end, we reflect on the following question: Could the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach reflect a conflation of concepts or a dilemma in promoting integrated learning while at the same time ensuring progression? This is not clear in the document and is left to the interpretation of individual readers.

Whether or not there was a careful consideration for adopting a mixed model of curriculum design, we contend that the adoption of the interdisciplinary approach is based on a flawed assumption that there is a collegial environment in schools, where teachers can freely consult across subjects. The findings of a recent study in some high schools of Lesotho reveal that such a collegial environment does not exist due to teachers' epistemological beliefs and school organisational structures (Raselimo, 2010). As such, the envisaged change

will require not only changing teachers' beliefs about subject matter but also the organisational structures where subjects are organised into physically separate departments.

There is also an internal contradiction between the learner-centred pedagogy and most of the curriculum aims set for secondary education. The manner in which these aims are stated in the policy document is not consistent with learner-centred epistemologies. Out of six aims, four are stated in a manner that reflects an objective view of knowledge rather than the constructivist view, which is what underpins the envisaged learner-centred pedagogy. The following extract may serve to illustrate our argument: at the end of the secondary education, students should "have *acquired* knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to interact appropriately with the environment and promote socio-economic development [...]" (MoET, 2009:13). The use of the word *acquire*, renders learners to a status of knowledge recipients. Yet the policy advocates for a shift "from knowledge acquisition to development of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes" (MoET, 2009:viii). Such a contradiction in the use of language may confuse curriculum developers and teachers alike in designing teaching and learning programmes, and thus posing a threat for successful implementation of the policy at the level of classroom practice. We also observe that the curriculum aims such as the one cited above, are in favour of high-stake examinations, which generally emphasise knowledge acquisition. As such, little will be achieved in terms of reducing the undue influence of public examinations on curriculum.

#### *Assessment practice*

In this section, our analysis focuses on assessment practices recommended by the new *Curriculum and Assessment Policy*. We identify the innovative assessment practices by comparing the current assessment policy with the previous one as stated in the *Education Sector Survey Task Force* report of 1982. We then discuss their implications for educational development in Lesotho, highlighting opportunities and threats.

Unlike the previous assessment policy, which emphasised summative assessment (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982), the new policy prescribes that three strategies will be used for assessing learning. These are, formative assessment, remediation and monitoring of educational progress, with the first strategy taking the form of continuous assessment (CASS). There will also be summative assessment in the form of public examination at the end of Grades 10 and 12, which will still be used for certification and selecting learners for higher education. The policy however, extends the scope of such summative examinations to include also practical competences such as

problem-solving and critical thinking (MoET, 2009). The focus on practical skills represents a shift from the traditional examination system, which covered only cognitive objectives, thereby marginalising learners with special cognitive learning needs.

Moreover, contrary to the current assessment practice, where all learners sit for a common examination, the new policy accommodates candidates with different abilities. It is stated in the policy document that "[b]oth group examinations and subject examination will be available for candidates of different abilities and circumstances" (MoET, 2009:24). Thus, access to higher education will not necessarily be determined by students' performance in group examination, but will be determined also by performance in subjects where learners have the best abilities. This creates opportunities for all learners to achieve in final examinations and follow different career paths in tertiary institutions, even if they did not meet the requirements of group examination such as passing English language. However, realising this policy outcome will require a sound career guidance programme at schools, so that learners realise their potential abilities early enough in their school life. It will also require a change of attitude among parents and learners alike towards practical skills-based subjects. Reflecting on the challenges of implementing the curriculum diversification programme in Lesotho, Ansell (2002) notes that practical subjects were regarded by many parents to be inappropriate for preparing their children for those lucrative white-collar jobs towards which colonial education was geared.

Another exciting feature of the new curriculum and assessment policy is that CASS will contribute to the final assessment in all learning areas. The document emphasises that CASS will be used for diagnosis of learning difficulties and to monitor performance of learners. Although the weighting between examination and CASS is not specified, this policy intention creates many opportunities for the enhancement of the quality of education in Lesotho. First, provided there will be equal weighting, we content that implementation of CASS will most likely reduce the undue influence of public examinations on classroom teaching, which has long been identified as a major constraint to curriculum change (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 1982). Second, the implementation of CASS will create opportunities for assessment *for* learning, incorporating practical skills, which cannot be adequately assessed by pen and paper tests or examinations. Third, it is also likely to bring about quality in the teaching and learning processes through adaptation of instructional processes to meet the needs of individual learners, and increased parental involvement.

While the potential benefits of CASS, as outlined above, may be obvious, its implementation

is likely to face challenges. We caution that teachers' inability to implement it might pose a threat to quality in educational assessment. It should be noted that the notion of CASS is not new in Lesotho's education system. There were attempts to implement it in the early 1980s. Reporting on its implementation problems, Sebataane (1985) attributes the failure of CASS to among others, lack of clarity of the concept among the implementers, which include school inspectors and classroom teachers. In the case of the new policy on assessment, the same problem can be expected. Given that there is a strong tradition of continuous testing in the form of weekly and quarterly pen and paper tests in secondary schools of Lesotho (Ts'ilo, 2006), teachers are likely to interpret CASS as another version of this established assessment practice. Studies conducted in other national contexts and in Lesotho show that teachers generally understand innovations as minor variations of what was practised before (Blignaut, 2008; Raselimo & Wilmot, 2013; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002). We could, therefore, argue that unless a clear distinction is made between CASS and continuous testing, teachers are likely to confuse the proposed model with continuous testing, thus posing a threat of continuity rather than change. In view of the past experience with the implementation of CASS, as reported by Sebataane (1985), we would have expected the document to provide clear explanation of CASS and guidelines for implementing it.

Furthermore, we suggest that implementation of CASS at school level might be constrained by multiple contexts of schools and classrooms such as large class sizes and high teachers' workloads, which are likely to make it difficult to monitor the progress of individual learners. A shortage of teaching resources, such as computers and workshops, might also constrain assessment of practical skills especially in science and practical subjects. Experience from other African countries illustrates that the implementation of assessment practices similar to CASS has practical problems in school contexts, where there are no supportive materials and equipment (Kampambwe, 2010).

One other challenge for CASS is the amount, or lack thereof, of trust that can be placed in teachers. To ensure its effective implementation, this will require constant monitoring by the Central Inspectorate, perhaps through devolution of more powers to principals and heads of departments. With more support from the Inspectorate, teachers are assured of a firm scaffolding to assist them to continue the quest to reach higher levels of achievement and implementation of the new policy. Such government structures as the Inspectorate are therefore pivotal if meaningful change is to take place. Finally, the implementation of CASS will require a shift in the focus of ECOL from

examination to assessment. This will necessitate the renaming of ECOL to reflect its new role in providing assessment that facilitates students' learning, rather than focusing more on measurement.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the curriculum and assessment policy, as presented in this paper, highlights a number of opportunities created by the new policy for education development in Lesotho. We have contended that the adoption of an integrated approach, and its associated concept of learner-centred pedagogy, has a great potential to make secondary school curriculum more responsive to the national development needs. The analysis has revealed that the curriculum is aligned to the Lesotho development needs such as unemployment, poverty, HIV/AIDS and environmental degradation. Addressing these national needs requires social constructivist approach, emphasising active learner participation, which is a strong aspect of the envisaged pedagogy in the policy document. Additionally, through the proposed continuous assessment, the framework creates opportunities for assessment of practical skills, which can contribute to personal growth of the learners and economic development.

However, although the new framework represents a departure from the earlier reforms, some indications of continuity, rather than change, are still evident in the policy document. It has emerged from the analysis that the grouping of school subjects into discrete learning areas still mimics the structure of the 1982 Core Curriculum reform, by marginalising certain subjects in favour of others. The analysis has also revealed contradictions associated with the structure of curriculum and the use of language in some areas of the policy document. We have shown that the curriculum organisation model adopted by the new policy lies in tension with its stated claim of using integrated approach, thus posing a threat of partial implementation of the policy at classroom level. The teaching of subjects within specific learning areas is likely to perpetuate fragmented disciplinary approach denying teachers the opportunity to draw content from different learning areas and life experiences of the learners. Another contradiction was evident between the visions of learner-centred pedagogy and curriculum aims. Finally, we have observed that the policy also makes some assumptions, which are somewhat at a distance from the reality to be found in schools, particularly with respect to pedagogy and assessment.

In conclusion, we argue that the attainment of the intended policy outcomes will be stifled not only by structural and contextual issues, but also by its internal contradictions, as described in this paper. To this end, we hope the paper has generated

useful insights for further debate and research on the implications of the policy for schools and learners in the national context of Lesotho. We acknowledge, however, that the analysis presented in this paper is limited in scope, as the focus is only on the content of the policy document. Further research on the social context of this policy document, as understood by its developers, is recommended. It would also be interesting to explore the congruence between the policy messages and the newly developed adapted Lesotho General Certificate for Secondary Education (LGCSE) syllabuses, as well as classroom practice.

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