

South African Teachers' Perceptions of the Primary Geography Curriculum: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

There is a dearth of research on primary school Geography in South Africa. With no Annual National Assessments (ANAs) being done in the subject, little is known about the quality of geographical learning and teaching in South African primary schools. This article begins to address this shortcoming. More specifically, it responds to the need for empirical research on Geography in primary schooling in the developing-world context of South Africa, where large scale education transformation has taken place since 1994. An overview of the national school system is given followed by a discussion of the major inefficiency characterising the South African school system, namely the low quality of learning and teaching in many schools. Our main contention is that the focus of research has been on understanding and addressing systemic factors associated with low learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy, with little attention being paid to Geography. Drawing on the findings of an exploratory qualitative study using semi-structured interviews, we provide tentative insights into primary Geography from the perspective of teachers. We conclude with some propositions for a future research agenda.

Keywords: South African schooling; Geography curriculum; teaching and learning; social sciences; primary schooling; teachers' perspectives; quality education

Introduction

Following Catling's (2013) call for research into primary Geography, this article presents the findings of exploratory research in a developing-world context such as South Africa, where there has been large scale education transformation since 1994.

The article consists of four sections. The first contains an overview of the South African school system and the systemic factors affecting the quality of education in

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South Africa. The next section describes national curriculum development and the organisation and structure of primary school Geography. The third section describes the research approach, and schools and the teachers that were involved. This is followed by a discussion on the findings of the empirical research we undertook in primary schools in the town where our university is located. In the fourth section we synthesise and conclude the discussion and make some proposals for a future research agenda.

The Structure of Primary Schooling and the National Curriculum

Although this article focuses on South African primary school Geography, it is nevertheless important to understand the larger school system of which it is part. In 2014, South Africa had 12.6 million learners in 25,741 schools, including independent (private) schools which accommodate 3.9% of learners. The vast majority of schools (20,000) are primary schools (Grades R to 7) catering for 7.1 million learners (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 2014a). Formal schooling spans 13 years or grades, from Grade 0 through to Grade 12, and is divided into two bands: General Education and Training (GET) from Grade 0 to 9 and Further Education and Training (FET) from Grade 10 to 12. The GET band consists of three phases: Foundation Phase (FP) (Grades 0 to 3); Intermediate Phase (IP) (Grades 4 to 6) and Senior Phase (SP) (Grade 7 to 9). Under the South African Schools Act of 1996, education is compulsory for all South Africans from the year in which they turn 7 (Grade 1) to age 15, or upon the completion of Grade 9.

The structure and organisation of schooling into bands and phases is mirrored in the structure and organisation of the national curriculum, although this is not completely aligned to the physical provision of schooling. Grades R to 7 are located in primary schools and Grades 8 to 12 in secondary schools. This means that Grade 7, the first of three years making up the Senior Phase of the curriculum, is taught in the primary school. There are low levels of collaboration between primary and secondary teachers which compromises continuity and conceptual progression in a subject such as Geography. This is exacerbated by secondary schools drawing from a large catchment area that normally includes more than one primary school.

Systemic Factors Affecting the Quality of Primary Education

The national school system is characterised by diversity with schools varying greatly in terms of quality, financial resources, ethos and size. According to Taylor (2011) it consists of two school sub-systems: one which is functional, relatively financially sound and which offers pupils a relatively good education; the other being poorly resourced, dysfunctional and unable to equip pupils with the necessary numeracy and literacy skills they should be acquiring.

Top quality schools, found in both the independent (private) and state school system constitute approximately 20% of schools, and produce generally acceptable educational outcomes. These schools consists of mostly former white state and independent schools and exceptional township and village schools, the latter serving a very small percentage of the majority of black children in South Africa (Westaway, 2015). Stark inequalities characterise the school system with 80% of South African children not meeting the

national curriculum standards (Taylor, 2011; Spaul, 2013; National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU), 2013).

There is a paucity of information on the quality of geographical learning in primary schooling because Geography is not assessed in the Annual National Assessment (ANAs) implemented in 2011 by the DBE to improve the information available about learner performance in numeracy and literacy at the primary school level (Grades 1 to 7). From the results of the 7.1 million learners who wrote the ANAs in 2014, we know that the majority of primary school children are not meeting the national standards for numeracy and literacy. While we do not have data for primary Geography, given the ANA results, it is probable that the majority of primary school children are not meeting the Geography curriculum standards. This is borne out by the low level of learning outcomes in the 'high stakes' National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination written at the end of Grade 12, the final (matriculation) year of school. The NSC Diagnostic Report for Geography (DBE, 2014b: 89) identified the following key problems:

- *Language, with second and third language candidates unable to express themselves clearly in English*
- *A lack of content knowledge including not understanding basic concepts*
- *A lack of fundamental knowledge of map work*

The NSC results for secondary Geography, together with the ANA results for numeracy and literacy, suggest that quality education remains an elusive ideal for the majority of South African children (DBE, 2013a).

Taylor (2011) identifies a number of factors accounting for the underperformance of South African learners, three of which are relevant to this study: the structure of the curriculum and schools; teacher subject knowledge, curriculum coverage and time management; and poverty. While recognising that there are many factors contributing to and sustaining underperformance, we concur that teaching and learning cannot rise above the ceiling imposed by low teacher capacity (Taylor, 2014). The findings of research done on secondary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of school Geography revealed a plethora of complex, often interconnected, factors impacting on school Geography, particularly in what are termed 'no-fee paying schools' (Wilmot & Dube 2015a). The research opened a window on the contextual challenges including, for example, a poor culture of learning evident in high absenteeism, loitering, being late for class, truancy, socio-economic disadvantage, teachers' weak Geography content knowledge ('what' is taught) and pedagogical content knowledge ('how' it is taught) (ibid.).

Weak content knowledge among teachers, notably in numeracy and mathematics is widely acknowledged in the literature, as are weak teacher assessment practices (Taylor, 2011; DBE, 2013a & c). This contributes to the systemic inefficiencies that continue to characterise the South African school system some twenty years after the formal end of apartheid. There is little, if any, information available on primary teachers' Geography content and pedagogical content knowledge. Spaul (2013) argues for the introduction of a nation-wide system of diagnostic teacher testing and training to improve basic proficiency. This proposal has been rejected by the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), the largest and most powerful teacher union. From our experience of

teaching the 'primary Geography teaching method course' to Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students, we are aware that many students do not study Geography in their undergraduate degree and some did not study it while at school. Their shallow knowledge base does not augur well for the effective teaching of Geography in Grades 4 to 7. Producing and ensuring that there are sufficient competent teachers, who can provide quality teaching for all school subjects and phases, is an urgent issue needing resolution (Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), 2015:1).

Other inefficiencies in the system are time management and curriculum coverage. There are high levels of teacher absenteeism in many schools, and when teachers *are* at school, they appear to spend less than half their time in class teaching (Taylor, 2011). There is evidence that this is not the case in functional schools. The national curriculum addresses time management through detailed time specifications (DBE, 2011). Furthermore, the DBE has issued workbooks to primary school children to resolve the problem of curriculum coverage (NEEDU, 2013).

High levels of poverty exist in South Africa. State schools are categorised into five groups, called quintiles, with quintile one being the 'poorest' quintile and quintile five the 'least poor'. These poverty rankings are determined nationally according to the poverty level of the community around the school, as well as certain infrastructural factors. Each quintile, nationally, contains 20% of all learners, but not 20% from each province. In 2014, schools in quintiles 1, 2 and 3 were declared no fee-paying schools, while schools in quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying schools (Grant, 2013). The majority of schools participating in our research (five of the eight) are no fee-paying (quintiles 1, 2 and 3). The remaining three schools are fee-paying.

The extent of poverty in South Africa is also evident in the level of support provided by the National Schools' Nutrition Programme (NSNP). This intervention programme, introduced two decades ago, is a state initiative which ensures that children living in poverty are not food-deprived and thus unable to participate fully in schooling. In 2012/2013 the NSNP fed 9,1 million learners attending school in South Africa for an average of 195 school days per year (DBE, 2013b: 14). The five no fee-paying schools participating in this research have a school feeding scheme.

The systemic factors described above, while not specific to primary Geography *per se*, by association are nevertheless relevant and it is highly probably that they impact on the quality of the teaching and learning Geography in South African primary schools. This is discussed in the section on our research findings.

The South African Primary School Geography Curriculum

The past two decades have been characterised by three cycles of national curriculum development, implementation, review, revision and change. The curriculum shifts, emergent issues and challenges, and how these have shaped and affected school Geography have been well documented (Nel & Binns, 1999; Beets & Le Grange, 2008; Wilmot & Dube, 2015b). The first national curriculum statement called *Curriculum*

2005³ (C2005) (DoE, 1997), had an outcomes-based education design and adopted the principle of subject integration. This resulted in a collapsing of discipline boundaries and packaging of knowledge as Learning Areas in the General Education and Training band of schooling. After two years of implementation, policy makers realised that C2005 was not achieving its goals. It was reviewed and a strengthened and streamlined Revised National Curriculum Statement (NCS) was implemented in 2002 (DoE, 2002).

The implementation of this, the second iteration of the national curriculum, was not without its challenges. This prompted the establishment of a Ministerial Review Committee in 2009 and culminated in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement document (CAPS) in 2011 (DBE, 2011a). CAPS calls for a stronger knowledge focus, and it strengthens the weak subject boundaries that characterised C2005 and to a lesser extent, the NCS. Geography continues to be offered alongside History in the Social Sciences Learning Area. CAPS abandons an outcomes-based education orientation, adopting instead a content-based orientation focused on “high knowledge and high skills” with minimum standards of knowledge and skills clearly specified for all subjects (DBE, 2011b: 4). CAPS emphasises the need for the two disciplines to be “kept separate” but acknowledges that the curriculum is designed to “complement the knowledge outlined in each” (DBE, 2011c: 8).

In the first four years of schooling, Geography is not offered as a discrete subject in the curriculum. Elements of geographical content and skills are however embedded in the theme *Begining knowledge* in Life Skills, one of four learning areas in the Foundation Phase curriculum. This theme has

Content and concepts drawn from Social Sciences (History and Geography), and Natural Sciences, including: conservation, cause and effect, place, adaptation, relationships and interdependence, diversity and individuality, change, and planet earth and beyond (DBE, 2011d: 8).

In the Intermediate and Senior Phase, Geography is offered alongside History in the Social Sciences Learning Area (DBE, 2011b & c). The curriculum advocates the two subjects being “kept separate” yet complementing one another (DBE, 2011b:8). Elements of Geography are also offered as a ‘strand’ - “Planet Earth and Beyond”- in the Natural Sciences Learning Area (DBE, 2011e). Geography, in the Social Sciences IP curriculum, is seen as an integrated discipline that examines both physical and human processes over space and time. It aims to help young people understand the complex world and offers a bridge between the natural and social sciences. It includes the learning about:

- Spatial patterns and trends: the location of people and places in the world
- Similarity and difference: how lifestyles and environments compare and why there are differences
- Movement and change: of people, goods, water, land, sea and air
- Planet earth: land water and air
- Human settlement: where people live and why

³This title is somewhat confusing as the implementation of the new curriculum, which started in 1998, was intended to be fully implemented by 2005.

- Human activities; what people do, how the environment affects them and how they affect the environment
- Interdependence; the links between climate, wildlife, resources distribution, human settlement and activity, and
- Change: the changing nature of people and places (DBE, 2011b: 12-13).

Furthermore, the development of graphicacy, especially map skills (including scale, direction, latitude and longitude), is emphasized in every grade as is the need to develop young people who: are curious about the world in which they live; have a sound general knowledge of places and natural forces at work; understand the interactions between society and the natural environment; think independently; care about their planet and the well-being of others; observe and research in the local environment; communicate effectively and make informed decisions to take action (DBE 2011b:14).

The curriculum provides a detailed summary showing how content matter is organised according to themes and topics in Grades 4 to 6, but does not make any links to geographical concepts and skills taught in the Foundation Phase and the Senior Phase (Grade 7). This militates against teachers' understanding the progression and integration within and between different themes and grades. Furthermore, the content for each grade is clearly specified for each of the four school terms. It includes time frames (number of hours) for the teaching and learning of each theme and topic and the resources that should be used. This seeks to address the problem of time management and curriculum coverage across the national school system in South Africa (Taylor, 2011; Spaul, 2013). The curriculum document also explains how and why assessment of, and for, learning must be done. An experienced, creative teacher may find the CAPS curriculum overly prescriptive and rigid, and this may stifle creativity. However, the clear and detailed structure is the state's way of ensuring that there is full curriculum coverage and regular and appropriate assessment.

In summary, the past twenty years has seen a shift first to an integrated outcomes-based curriculum consisting of broad learning areas and weak subject boundaries and an under-specification of content, and secondly the abandonment of an outcomes-based curriculum framework and adoption of a high knowledge and skills curriculum, stronger subject boundaries and a focus on conceptual understanding and skill development. We contend that content in the CAPS curriculum is well balanced with a clear progression from the junior to senior grades of the primary school. The extent to which teachers fully understand and are able to implement an integrated approach is discussed in the section on the research findings. This approach emphasises the need for developing children's understanding of the environment as a system consisting of interconnected and interdependent biophysical, economic, political and social dimensions.

Research approach

The dearth of research on primary Geography in South Africa, the lack of information on learner performance, the persistent low level of learning outcomes in the Geography NSC examination, the diverse and starkly unequal schools in South Africa, and the systemic factors described above, prompted us to undertake a small exploratory research project on primary Geography in Grahamstown, the town where our university is

located. Grahamstown was selected as the research site for convenience and accessibility reasons and because it has diverse primary schools broadly representing the full continuum of the kinds of schools in South Africa. We decided to focus on the Intermediate Phase because Geography is first offered as a subject in this phase, albeit as part of the Social Sciences. The goal of the research, investigating the primary Geography curriculum from the perspective of teachers, informed our decision to use a qualitative research approach in teaching this subject (Merriam, 2009; Conrad & Serlin, 2006).

Fifteen teachers in eight schools were interviewed for purposes of the data presented here. The eight schools were a carefully selected *purposive sample* (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) to reflect the full range of the 21 schools offering Intermediate Phase Geography in the Grahamstown school district. Grahamstown schools are broadly reflective of urban schools in South Africa as a whole. The schools fall into two broad categories classified according to their geographical location⁴: **Group A** in Grahamstown East are 'township' schools, and **Group B**, consisted of schools located in central and west Grahamstown. Each group was characterised by a number of features, although, as will be noted, there are exceptional circumstances within each group. Group A included two no fee-paying and one fee-paying state school, and Group B included three fee paying, schools two of which were well-resourced state schools, and two independent, well-resourced high fee-paying schools, which received no state subsidy or support.

Access to the schools was obtained by visiting each school and meeting with the principal to explain the nature and purpose of the research and obtain permission to interview some of their IP teachers. Without exception the principals were helpful and supportive.

Data were gathered through the common qualitative strategy of semi-structured interviews (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Following a pilot survey of three teachers, (not included in the results) after which minor changes in the wording of questions were made, we interviewed 15 teachers at the eight schools. The time spent with individual teachers ranged from 30 minutes to 2½ hours. The teachers themselves were a mixture of university- and college-trained, the latter predominating. Four of the teachers had no formal training in Geography, including one in a Group A school who was one of the three most enthusiastic individuals we encountered. (He was self-taught, relatively well informed and very keen on cross-curricular work, linking Geography to Science, History, Mathematics and Language.)

Nearly all the teachers expressed discomfort at the idea of a tape recorder being used when interviewing. Thus notes⁵ were made during and after the interview. What we

⁴Geographical location is significant in South Africa where, in spite of scrapping of the segregation laws that determined where different racial groups could reside in an urban settlement, the legacy of a divided and segregated residential system is still evident today. The vast majority of Black South African still reside in 'township' areas that are characterised by poor service delivery and poverty.

⁵Interview questions included *inter alia*: 'What is your view of the CAPS curriculum for primary Geography and how closely are you able to follow CAPS?' 'How do you feel about the general aims of school Geography as expressed in the curriculum?' 'How do you feel about the specific aims of Geography in the Intermediate Phase?' 'How do you feel about the content that is specified?' 'Are you able to link the content of Geography in the Social Sciences to the content of the Natural Sciences where it overlaps?' 'How do you bring the world into the classroom as required by CAPS?' 'What parts of the curriculum do you find most difficulty to

tried to do was encourage the teachers to talk, within the framework of enquiry, about *their* view of the primary school Geography curriculum. We also sought critical evaluation of the IP Geography curriculum, which all of them were happy to offer. In three of the schools, the principals also sat in on the interview. Following conventional qualitative data analysis procedures (Cohen *et al.*, 2011), data were analysed by teacher and school in order to identify emergent patterns and themes which form the basis of the discussion. We acknowledge that the data presented is based on teachers' perceptions and our interpretation of these in relation to the wider education context. Furthermore, we also acknowledge that we did not investigate what actually happens in their classrooms, and that this may be perceived as a limitation of the survey.

The research adhered to the usual ethical requirements of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality and written and oral explanation of the project (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Teachers in all the schools approached were wary of being 'evaluated' and 'judged for competence'. This was dealt with by assuring them that it was neither they nor the schools that were being judged, but that our interest was in evaluating the *curriculum*. They were also reassured that neither they nor their schools would be mentioned by name. Nearly all the teachers were known to us, either from our teaching practice supervision over the years, or having had at some point taught several of them. This encouraged a relaxed, informal, informative and, in our opinion, a non-threatening dialogue.

Discussion of findings

It must be stressed that in addition to the differences in approach to the curriculum between schools, there were often substantial differences of opinion between teachers in the same school. These related to 'how' to teach as well as to what was most worth teaching or where the emphasis should lie. This was true of both groups of schools. Key findings of our observations and interviews were as follows.

The Curriculum Approach Adopted By the Teachers

As advocated by the Social Sciences curriculum (DBE 2011b), Geography and History are taught as separate subjects by the majority (12) of teachers interviewed with little more than lip service is paid to cross-curricular links. The typical response was "we do it wherever it is relevant". In each case when examples were asked for, they were either weak or not forthcoming. There appeared to be a wide interpretation of what constituted 'relevance'. Three teachers displayed a conscious and impressive dedication to subject integration.

Group A schools generally have *subject* teachers, that is, subject specialists who teach Geography to all grades in the IP. According to one teacher, this was due to parental pressure and the desire to ensure that a child does not end up with a consistently poor teacher for all subjects. We contend that this is not a compelling argument for subject teachers. From our discussions with teachers it seems that it is a way of thinking about teaching that has become entrenched because it is perceived to

teach?' 'How do you use the local environment for teaching Geography?' 'What teaching aids and resources do you use?' 'How do you use them?' 'How often do you do project work?' These were among the questions used to stimulate and frame the ensuing conversation.

allow for subject specialization and therefore greater expertise. The interviews suggested that this does not necessarily follow.

Teachers' Curriculum Knowledge

All the teachers claimed to be aware of the IP Social Sciences CAPS curriculum (DBE 2011b) and some brought copies to the interviews. It was apparent, however, that while some were thoroughly conversant with the contents, others were not and two clearly had little idea of it, reacting with some bewilderment and uncertainty when it was shown to them. We suspected they had never read it despite claims to the contrary. Only two of the 15 teachers stated they were familiar and conversant with the IP Natural Sciences curriculum (DBE, 2011e). Nine had not seen it or consulted it. None of the teachers was familiar with the potential for geographical thinking in the FP Life Skills curriculum (DBE, 2011d). We found little evidence of the teachers' understanding the wider context of Geography education and the role it can and ought to play in developing children's holistic and systems thinking in the context of the global socio-ecological crisis that characterises the 21st century. There were, however, a few exceptions. Generally, teachers' curriculum knowledge is narrow and limited. It should be noted too that many of the teachers expressed difficulty in teaching map work.

Curriculum Time Specification

While the indicated time frames were seen by some teachers as rough guidelines at best, others tried to adhere to them fairly rigidly. A point repeatedly made regarding the time specifications provided for the different topics in the curriculum was that the time allocated was insufficient for weak students. Language was consistently raised as a concern, even in the Group B schools, all of which cater for significant numbers of African language mother-tongue learners. It is particularly difficult for African language mother-tongue speakers learning through the medium of English in Grades 4 and 5 to understand key ideas and concepts, especially abstractions such as 'latitude and longitude' and 'scale'. We found evidence that teachers also struggle, with one teacher asking "What is this latitude and longitude?" and "Why is it needed?"

Teaching and Learning Resources

State approved textbooks are used in all the schools except for one in Group B. With the exception of one teacher, who supplements the books with his own notes because he 'did not like the textbook', the teachers in Group A schools tend to rely on the textbook using little or nothing in the way of supplementary learning material. Teachers in Group B varied in the value they placed on textbooks and the extent to which they relied upon them. At one end of the spectrum is a teacher who relies entirely on them and at the other end two teachers who do not use them at all, regarding them as very limiting, poorly written and generally lacking in quality. Both of these teachers provide their own extensive learning material of high quality to their pupils. The rest of the teachers in Group B fall between these two points. The majority of the teachers in both groups criticised the approved Geography textbooks for inaccuracies and for big gaps in the explanations they offered. Several made the point that they had had no say in the selection of these books, which some felt were imposed upon them.

For various reasons, including parental support, it is commonplace that the schools in Group B are better equipped than those in Group A in terms of teaching and learning resources. One Group A school, however, has a 40-station computer laboratory, which all the children have access to, as well as a partially functioning library and many maps. By contrast, another did not even have a globe, never mind a library. In the other two Group A schools teachers, but not the children, had access to the Internet, with computers located in the administration section. Three of the Group A teachers also had Internet access at home. Children and their teachers in all the Group B schools had access to the Internet. The extent to which this uneven access to internet sources of information may impact on the quality of geographical learning needs investigating.

Teachers' Assumptions and Pedagogical Approach

Teachers in the Group A schools in particular, but also in some cases in the Group B schools, emphasised that many of the pupils they had in their classes had "no background", virtually no prior knowledge relating to the concepts they were being taught, and were "blank". Many of the teachers commented on how difficult it was to cope with the diversity of backgrounds of their pupils especially given that many children had a very narrow, restricted life experience. This was complicated by the different levels of language proficiency in the class. This finding is significant because there is a view that if teachers are unable to recognise the diverse and different life experiences that their pupils bring to school, they will not be able to mediate learning and make the links between scientific (abstract) geographical curriculum knowledge and the children's knowledge.

Lotz-Sisitka (2009) argues for a changing epistemological context in post-apartheid South Africa and how this has implications for how teachers might engage with the practice of enabling epistemological access in schools. She reports on teaching practices that essentially fail to enable epistemological access. Her negative account does not seek to vilify teachers, rather it is intended to sharpen our observations of what the implications are for the practice of teaching and for teacher education so that we can develop a critical change-oriented response for teacher education. Of significance to our research is that, given the recent shift to foregrounding knowledge in the national curriculum, we need to investigate not only what is taught and how it is taught, but also whether, and to what extent, children are acquiring geographical knowledge.

Many of the teachers also made the point that, for various reasons, the pupils (and the school) generally received very little parental support. This inevitably meant that, even when the teachers were keen on it, there was little opportunity for curriculum enrichment or extension. Low levels of parental support militate against homework in the Group A schools and some of the Group B schools. Similarly, undertaking project work was regarded as being unrealistic, despite the curriculum injunction to regularly do so. Most of the pupils, it was emphasised, had neither the support nor the resources to complete projects out of school. Thus any project-type work had to be done during school time in what was perceived to be an overcrowded curriculum, with the teacher providing direct and individual support. Projects of the kind envisaged in the curriculum did not happen in most of the schools. Only two schools in Group B exceeded the project requirements outlined in the curriculum.

For reasons similar to the above, fieldwork of any sort was seen as very difficult, if not impossible, to do in most of the schools. This links to the point made earlier about 'subject' versus 'class' teachers. In addition most of the schools' timetables strongly discouraged or disallowed it. Only one teacher in the Group A schools stated that he felt competent and knowledgeable enough to undertake fieldwork. One teacher in the Group B schools appeared to feel much the same way: he dismissed fieldwork as inappropriate and unnecessary at the IP level.

Overall, the quality of teaching in the schools we visited was uneven, ranging from outstanding (a small minority of schools) to poor with none being completely dysfunctional or of very poor quality. Of concern is our observation that teachers appear to be unable and/or unwilling to implement the curriculum as intended in policy. This is evident in the lack of independent project work and fieldwork being done; the (over) reliance on the textbook as the sole source of information; the limited use of ICT, and the narrow interpretation of the curriculum content all of which are constraining the contribution Geography should make to young children's education.

Teacher Professional Development Opportunities

The matter of the support that teachers either receive or do not receive from the provincial and district Department of Education was raised in five of the eight schools. It was generally felt that academic and professional support to the teachers was inadequate. Some teachers felt they were better off without it, while others felt they really needed it. The emphasis in teacher professional development has been focused on the core curriculum areas of numeracy and literacy, with little attention paid to developing teacher knowledge in subjects like Geography. As a result there have been fewer opportunities for in-service teachers to upgrade or deepen their geographical learning. The introduction, by the DBE in 2015, of a system of Continuous Teacher Professional Development (CTPD) requiring teachers to complete 80 hours of professional development each year, offers exciting opportunities for Geography teacher professional development. Universities are in the process of responding to the call for short courses in all phases and subjects of the curriculum, but these too present a number of challenges beyond the present discussion.

Primary Geography Teacher Education

A significant change which took place in teacher education after 2000 was the closure of state controlled colleges of education where the majority of South African primary teachers had trained for a number of reasons beyond the present discussion. By 2003, 104 of the 120 colleges had closed or been incorporated into universities. The assumption was that universities could better fulfil the role of teacher training. The re-opening of colleges of education is, however, a matter of on-going debate.

At present, there are two ways of becoming a qualified primary school teacher in South Africa. The first is by completing a four year undergraduate Bachelor of Education degree. The second is by capping an undergraduate degree with a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). The former foregrounds pedagogical knowledge and knowledge of the child, and is considered by many as being more appropriate for Foundation and Intermediate Phase teaching. The weakness of the BEd

route is arguably its generalist orientation. Preparing students to teach all six learning areas of the curriculum means that there may not be sufficient time for deep learning in the different disciplines. In the PGCE (Intermediate Phase) programme at our university, only 20 hours are allocated to Geography. By way of comparison, Mathematics gets 80 hours, Home Language 40 hours and First Additional Language 40 hours. Investigation of the time given to primary Geography across the PGCE programmes offered by other South African universities still needs to be explored. Again, this must be seen in the context of the national priority given to language and mathematics.

Conclusion

This article has responded to the call for research in primary Geography. It has outlined the systemic factors contributing to the persistent and, as yet unresolved, issue of low quality teaching and learning in South African primary schools. We have described how we undertook exploratory research to shed light on how these factors may, or may not, be affecting Geography in diverse South African primary schools.

In focusing as we have on teachers' perspectives and one phase (the Intermediate Phase, Grades 4 to 6), we are aware that our limited exploratory research provides only partial insights into primary Geography. Ideally it needs to be extended and complemented by classroom observations of teachers' practices to understand their pedagogical approaches and assessment practices. How practicable this will be in the current socio-political context is open to question. Furthermore, if we are to address the issue of low learning outcomes in Geography in the NSC examination at the end of Grade 12, we need to investigate the efficacy of South African children's geographical learning and skill development in the primary school. Given teachers' dependence on the textbooks and the range of textbooks used, there is also an urgency to critically evaluate them. This will be one of our research agendas for the future. Two other areas needing to be investigated are what actually happens in primary Geography classrooms and the quality of children's geographical learning.

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