

Teaching and Learning Food and Textiles in Samoa: Curriculum Implementation as a Contested Process

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Abstract

Curriculum development and implementation are complex processes in which subjects have to compete for their place in the curriculum hierarchy. Once a curriculum policy is written, it does not necessarily follow that its implementation will be successful. The aim of this small-scale research was to examine the perspectives of those engaged in teaching and learning Food and Textiles Technology (FTT) in secondary schools in Samoa. The study attempted to understand the major factors that are impeding the successful implementation of FTT teaching and learning in secondary classrooms. A qualitative case study methodology was used to underpin the collection and analysis of data. The findings show that FTT education does provide learning opportunities to develop new concepts, skills and behaviours and that it can enhance the options available for early school leavers. In order to implement the curriculum successfully, however, teachers must be professionally trained and be able to effectively teach the relevant knowledge and skills that FTT offers to students.

Introduction

Curriculum writers highlight the complex and contested nature of curriculum development (see, for example, Apple, 2004; Bernstein, 1975; McGee, 1997; Mutch, 2004). What policy makers aim to achieve is filtered by curriculum developers, interpreted by professional development facilitators, and re-interpreted by schools, teachers and learners. Trowler, (2003) explains that there are actually two processes at work – the policy *encoding* process and the policy *decoding* process. The policy encoding process is where society's aspirations, government visions and stakeholder expectations are gathered through consultation and analysed by policy makers. In the curriculum field, these are then passed to curriculum developers to devise appropriate curriculum guidelines. Walker (1972, cited in Marsh, 1992) suggests that the policy encoding process provides the platform from which curriculum developers can frame their deliberations and embark on their overall curriculum design. McGee (1997) sees curriculum development as a more “dynamic ever-changing process that is situated in complex contexts” (p.44). McGee suggests that decisions need to be made about intentions and objectives, content to be studied, learning and teaching activities and the evaluation of learning and teaching – not in a linear manner – but in a way in which each decision impacts upon the other until the contradictions are resolved and the curriculum is coherent yet flexible enough to suit changing contexts and learner needs.

The policy decoding process begins once the curriculum document is completed and is ready for dissemination. There are many factors that might impede the successful implementation of a new curriculum. Even though a government might see this new curriculum as a priority, if it is not supported by funding for resources and professional development or if it is not included in high stakes assessment then it might not be accorded the same status in schools. Schools will accordingly see it as a lower priority in terms of staffing, resourcing, timetabling and rooming. This lower status will be reinforced by lower numbers of students enrolling in the subject, fewer parents encouraging their children to take the subject, fewer pre-service teachers learning to teach the subject and so on – the downward spiral will continue.

Food and textiles technology (FTT) in Samoa provides an interesting case study of such a curriculum impasse. While it is a curriculum area that brings together traditional values and activities with the possibility of future job prospects, it is not accorded high status. Samoan schools value FTT education as part of school activities through cooking, sewing, fabric printing, feasting, and floral arrangement. Parents see the value of teaching and learning FTT through which their sons and daughters come to learn more about home and family life. Enhancing personal, family and community well-being are all skills learnt through FTT and they help young people learn how to care and provide for their families. It is considered that young people might later be able to pursue active and rewarding careers in design, catering or tourism. It also supports family, local and national economic growth and development. Yet, it is not a compulsory area of the secondary curriculum and, therefore, is only implemented in a few secondary schools in Samoa. Schools prefer to concentrate on the core subjects – English, science, social studies, Samoan and mathematics.

This study set out to examine the multiple perspectives of participants towards teaching and learning food and textiles technology (FTT) in secondary schools in Samoa. The study aimed to identify the major factors that impeded the successful implementation of FTT teaching and learning in secondary classrooms. This article, therefore, focuses on the issues in the policy *decoding* process – the implementation rather than the development – of the FTT curriculum (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture [MESC], 2000). It does so with the aim of presenting a stronger argument for the wider acceptance of FTT as an important subject within the curriculum and concludes by providing recommendations to enable this goal to be achieved.

Methodology

Because this study is set in one particular context (Samoan secondary schools) and the topic is focused on one curriculum area (FTT), a qualitative case study method provided an appropriate research design. Case study design focuses on providing rich description, often through multiple methods, of a bounded case. The case could be a person, a setting or a concept (Mutch, 2005). In this study, the ‘case’ was focused on participants’ perspectives and insights into the issues surrounding the teaching and learning of FTT.

The participants comprised four students selected from two different Year 12 classes in two different secondary schools, four parents, two Ministry of Education, Sports and

Culture (MESC) officers and four teachers. The key participants selected for this study were valuable because of their on-going involvement in the teaching and learning of FTT.

The multiple methods used were semi-structured interviewing, non-participant observation and document analysis. These were all consistent with the purpose of this research and provided the opportunity to triangulate the findings from different sources in order to arrive at credible themes.

The interviews aimed to capture the personal perspectives and lived experiences of the research participants, which are strengths of the qualitative paradigm (Mutch, 2005). Interviews and observations were conducted with the selected students, parents, teachers and MESC officers after appropriate ethical clearances had been granted.

Non-participant observations were carried out during teaching sessions, where both students and teachers were observed. Listening to the teachers' discussions on teaching strategies and other issues – like FTT issues, the MESC issues and school committees – also contributed important data to this study. Document analysis was used to gather data from teachers' work plans, curriculum materials, timetables, teaching strategies and assessment activities.

Findings

The findings shared in this article are in two parts. Firstly, the two case study schools are described from an analysis of the observations, interviews and documentation. Secondly, a snapshot of the issues raised by the interviews is provided.

Case study schools

The case schools are referred to as Case Study 1 (CS1) and Case Study 2 (CS2). CS1 was a government-managed school with a roll of 400 predominantly Samoan students, and CS2 was a church-based school of mainly Catholic Samoan students. CS1 and CS2 were similar in many aspects of administration and both the school buildings were well maintained.

Case study school (CS1)

Although this school began as a Form 3-5 junior secondary school, in 1997, it established a Year 12 class so that students could be examined via the Samoa School Certificate. In 2004, the MESC selected this secondary school to become a college (senior secondary school) in Samoa. The majority of the students in this school come from eight surrounding villages.

Consistent with the general school practice, one of the teachers observed prepared her weekly workbook in advance. This was signed by the principal or vice principal, who approve that the teacher has planned out his/her week.

The topics covered in the FTT curriculum in this school included kitchen hygiene, food preparation, recipe trialling, meal planning, nutrition and related diseases, food budgeting, sewing and tailoring. There were three electric sewing machines and one hand sewing machine which were expected to cater for the needs of many FTT students.

Along with the lack of resources, another problem raised included insufficient time to implement the FTT curriculum effectively. The classes were not given priority with most of the classes occurring in the afternoon when students were getting tired and unable to concentrate fully. The low status of the subject was also apparent as it was seen as the best place for 'slow learners,' while academically oriented students were expected to take the more academic subjects. It was observed that the school operated with a largely academic curriculum, on a fixed timetable and mainly teacher-directed lessons.

A strength of the school was that teachers valued their Christian beliefs as a guide for maintaining harmony in the school community. It was noted that there was positive collaboration and teamwork between the school committee, principal and teachers in managing the school.

As noted above, there were difficulties but there was some evidence from the school principal that FTT was valued, for example, he confirmed that most of his FTT teachers were sent to attend relevant professional development. This was to encourage the teachers to become familiar with the content, research, practical skills and teaching strategies of the new curriculum. If the teachers were correctly trained, then they could encourage students to develop a positive interest in FTT.

Observing the teachers in their daily teaching routine provided an opportunity to understand how each teacher had facilitated the learning of FTT knowledge and skills. One teacher, for example, who had spent more than 10 years teaching FTT was experienced in teaching both the content and skills of the FTT curriculum in the way the curriculum guidelines advocated, whereas another was new to the school and had only been teaching FTT for four years. This teacher rarely attended any workshops for FTT teachers. As a result her delivery was teacher-directed and the students received these skills and knowledge via a transmission style.

Case study school 2 (CS2)

The second case study school was established in 1956 as a secondary school/college and provided secondary education for female students of the Catholic faith. Most of the students were selected from the Samoa Year Eight Certificate Examinations. The school had an organisational structure similar to the government schools, that is, principal, assistant principal, heads of departments, assistant teachers, and students. The school's PTA and the Old Girls' Association also played an important role in the school's management.

Observation and document analysis revealed that this school also operated with a largely academic curriculum, a fixed timetable and teacher-directed lessons but there was a willingness to tailor programmes to students' needs. The staff met monthly to discuss matters concerning students, teachers, general school matters and teaching programmes. According to the principal, the FTT teachers in her school were quite experienced and she supported them so that they could teach the FTT content and skills effectively. The principal and teachers prioritized the learners' needs in terms of teaching and learning in both FTT content and skills. Furthermore, the researcher observed that students were encouraged by teachers to take FTT and other vocational

subjects. In this school these subjects were given higher priority and status than in other schools.

A strong theme to come from the case study school data analysis was that where schools valued FTT and other vocational subjects, they supported these through resourcing, timetabling and teacher professional development.

Perspectives of the participants

This snapshot of participant perspectives includes responses from teachers, principals, students and parents. They raise issues that support some of the findings from the school observations and add other concerns. First, teachers were asked for their perspectives of FTT and the issues they faced. Overall the teachers, particularly, Teacher 1, felt that the FTT curriculum was very important – both the theory and practical elements – however, teachers differed in the aspects that they thought were most relevant. Teacher 2 considered that teaching the concepts of consumer education was important:

“It was an important subject when students learnt about the skills and knowledge of consumer education, such as expiry dates on food products, food labelling, and use of new and technological appliances at home.”

Teacher 1 noted that learning FTT could lead on to benefits post-school:

“This subject was important to learn the life skills. I taught one student at this school who, when he left school, started to run a small business at home baking home-made scones, coconut cream buns and doughnuts to sell to the village people.”

A common concern, as expressed by Teacher 1, was that the MESC provided very few resources. This was supported by Teacher 3 who felt the MESC should share resources equally between government and mission (church) schools.

Teacher 1 also pointed out that there were other issues and gaps that needed to be addressed in order to implement the curriculum effectively:

“[Firstly]. . . the biased attitudes of one of the principals towards teaching subjects in school. His first priority was to appoint teachers to teach English, maths and science, and not FTT. Secondly, FTT teachers had to struggle to get resources. And, most important – this was the main reason why the school has a shortage of FTT teachers – because teachers, who originally trained as FTT teachers at the Faculty of Education / National University of Samoa, were pushed to take English, maths and science.”

It was made clear by the teachers that the MESC, principals and school committees needed to hear teachers’ voices, and that the MESC be encouraged to work collaboratively with teachers, principals and school committees.

Principals also raised their concerns, although this differed according to their situations. The principal of CS1, for example, was not very happy with the way the

school funds were handled by the school committee, whereas the other principal was however more praiseworthy of her school committee. She asserted:

“It is very important to work in partnership with the school committee and PTA in order to strengthen the school programs and developments in school. I rely on them for their support and school improvements. I learnt a lot from them in terms of sharing knowledge and experiences.”

Principal (CS1) also felt that MESC needed a more hands-on approach to curriculum implementation:

“The MESC needed an on-going monitoring of school curriculum by the curriculum officers. This was an important issue to ascertain if the teachers were following the curriculum correctly and to help teachers close gaps on the teaching of the curriculum and the teaching practices in the classroom.”

Students and parents were also asked about their perspectives of FTT. Most students said that they liked to continue education in FTT because the content matter of the subject, both theoretical and practical, motivated them to learn more of FTT’s practical and life skills. One parent explained that although FTT had low status, it was still valuable:

“FTT is a ‘second class’ option for early school dropouts. So the schools need to teach the FTT curriculum effectively, until the students leave school. This opportunity of ‘learning something’ will enable the students to reach out to contribute to their families and society.”

However, another parent noted the demands that learning FTT can put on a family:

“I am required to pay the school fees and provide other resources needed for my children in learning FTT, such as cooking ingredients, sewing materials and sometimes providing used cooking utensils from home for my daughter’s practical tasks in school.”

In summary, the participants’ responses, as some of these examples show, confirm that FTT teaching and learning faces challenges, but FTT knowledge and skills can enhance student learning and post-school opportunities, and can make a contribution to the economic development of communities in Samoa. In order to strengthen the status of the subject, it requires more commitment to the subject, improved respect between the stakeholders and a more collaborative approach to solving the issues.

Discussion

Key themes from data analysis

Three themes to come from a synthesis and analysis of the interviews, observations and documentation will now be discussed in more depth. These are the importance

of professional development for teachers, the development of appropriate teaching strategies, and the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture.

The importance of professional development

The strongest theme to come through was that where teachers were provided with and undertook quality professional development they were better able to implement the FTT curriculum in the way in which it was intended. According to the literature, effective professional development frequently requires groups of teachers to work actively and collaboratively together (McGee 1997; Stoll 2000). Furthermore, effective learning is not just about building teacher knowledge, but it is also about transferring teacher learning into class practice (Hill, Hawk & Taylor, 2002).

Crawford (2008) states that professional development programmes aimed at improving teachers' pedagogical content knowledge of any subject matter results in teachers improving their use of specific strategies for effective teaching. Bell and Gilbert (1993) identified that continuing teacher professional development did lead to improvements in teaching and learning in the classroom.

Professional development is not just necessary for teachers; principals need continuing education (Cooper, 2004). Riley and Louis (2000) suggest that educational leaders/principals should be professional learners too. Sergioivanni (2007) suggests that principals and teachers who know about teaching, and care about teaching, are willing to help each other, and are committed to being continual learners.

The purpose of professional development is to enhance student learning, especially where schools seek improvement and make changes to teaching and learning practices (Fullan 1991; West, 1994). A successful education in vocational subjects like FTT is an important part of the educational system (Maia'i 1957; MESC 2003; Nabobo 2001). Through FTT, students can gain skills to increase employment scenarios, particularly for school leavers who can then contribute to the social and economic development of the country (Sharma, 2000). Creating a strong FTT curriculum will assist with the challenge facing parents and teachers to ensure that students emerge from school with a strong commitment to the community and to living a fulfilling and productive life (MESC 2003; Atwell, 1992).

The development of appropriate teaching strategies

The observations of the teachers in the case study schools revealed both differences and similarities in the teaching strategies used by the teachers. Many factors impact on teachers' practices. A recent report from the Education Review Office in New Zealand (ERO, 2011, p.44) describes the characteristics of effective teachers:

Effective teachers are committed to providing high quality education for all their learners. They treat children and young people as individuals, positively acknowledging their differences and building collaborative learning relationships. Teachers set high yet attainable expectations, providing learning-rich programmes that respond to learner needs and interests. Effective teachers differentiate the curriculum as needed and

engage learners in purposeful learning through a range of media and resources. Teachers are supported to undertake professional learning and to strengthen their pedagogical content knowledge.

This study found that some of these characteristics were observed and others were not so apparent. In general, teachers developed positive relationships with their students but these were at the formal end of the continuum. Three of the teachers planned and implemented FTT curriculum competently even if delivery of content was usually more teacher directed and practical activities were limited. These teachers attempted to use a more student-focussed approach to learning, although this is somewhat contrary to the traditional cultural approach. They also attempted to adapt activities to the needs of individuals or groups of students. One of the teachers observed, however, never used any practical activities in her teaching because of a lack of resources. As a result, her students did not appear to be actively engaged in learning. It seems that students who undertook more practical work were engaged more in FTT learning.

As noted, in the data obtained from the one school, the bias towards teaching academic subjects versus vocational is an important issue to consider for future implementation of the FTT curriculum. In CS1 the ‘slow learners’ were pushed to take FTT while more academically oriented students were encouraged to study the academic subjects. Teaching less able or less-motivated students, in fact, requires teachers who are more skilled in a range of teaching strategies and have strong pedagogical content knowledge and the understanding of the conceptual underpinning of the subject in order to differentiate the curriculum according to students’ needs and abilities. As Alton-Lee (2003, p.v) states, “The central professional challenge for teachers is to manage simultaneously the complexity of learning needs of diverse learners”. This is a challenge that is especially apparent in teaching and learning FTT.

The roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture

A clear message from the principals and teachers was that the MESC needs to thoroughly monitor the school curriculum and to conduct on-going training for teachers in all subject areas. Vocational subjects like FTT should be considered equally as important as other subjects. FTT was strongly endorsed by teachers as a useful, culturally-embedded subject – students learn to cook, sew, weave local crafts, arrange flowers for church and hall decorations, make wreaths, paint fabric and do screen printing to earn money for the family. Furthermore, it provides skills for self-employment opportunities when the students leave school, allowing them to contribute to the welfare of their families and communities. One teacher spoke about one of her students who left school early, because his parents could not afford to pay his school fees, used the life skills he learnt from FTT at school and applied it to a home-baking business.

Another of the teachers also felt that there was value in teaching FTT as it helped prepare students for the Year 12 and Year 13 national and international assessments. If the students achieved good marks in FTT, they would be able to continue education at the National University of Samoa or even gain scholarship awards to study overseas. For this reason, FTT also needs to be properly staffed and resourced.

The MESC was seen as having an important role in up-skilling teachers’ knowledge

and practice. One teacher appreciated working collaboratively with the curriculum officer at the MESC. She recommended that the MESC officers should come more often to visit schools and help teachers solve their difficulties.

Although the MESC officials who supported teaching FTT were enthusiastic, there were clear expectations that the MESC should further support teaching and learning FTT in all aspects, including the provision of resources, and on-going monitoring to check the equipment, tools, utensils and consumables supplied to schools for implementing vocational subjects effectively.

Conclusion

The FTT curriculum has much to offer students in secondary schools in Samoa. It can motivate them to engage in practical and creative learning both as part of their schooling and in preparation for later career opportunities. In general, teachers of FTT and principals where this subject is taught have a positive attitude towards the subject and its place in the overall curriculum. It has even been seen as a useful preparation for students who undertake examinations for higher learning post-secondary schooling. Unfortunately, it does not always figure highly in the curriculum hierarchy. It suffers from being seen as a non-academic subject, often as a place to put less able or less-motivated students. Subsequently, it is not well funded, staffed or resourced. It does not often receive favourable consideration when decisions are being made about professional development for teachers, maintenance or upgrading of facilities and resources, or placement on the timetable. This leaves the subject in a difficult position. These are the very things that need to be given higher priority in order for the subject to live up to its promise and possibilities.

In order to lift the subject's profile, a co-ordinated approach needs to be taken at a range of levels. At the Ministry level, the MESC needs to provide on-going teacher professional development, MESC officers to liaise with schools on curriculum implementation, and adequate funding for facilities, equipment and resources. At the school level, each subject, whether academic or vocational, needs to be valued for its overall contribution to students' learning and development. FTT deserves to have teachers who are trained in the subjects' pedagogy or who are upskilled to teach in this area and not for these teachers to be used to fill vacant places in other curriculum areas. At the teacher level, steps could be taken for teachers to work collaboratively to share expertise and support innovations that allow for more practical experiences for students and for teaching that is differentiated to meet students' needs.

Finally, to return to the theoretical concept of encoding and decoding policy, there is plenty of evidence in the literature that schooling in the 21st century needs to prepare young people personally, intellectually and socially to take their place in an increasingly globalised world (Levi, 1995; Thaman, 2002). The school curriculum is important in articulating society's goals and interpreting these for particular cultural and educational contexts. In order for the *encoded* curriculum to be correctly *decoded*, however, it is necessary to reinforce consistent messages. If FTT is to take its place as a subject that builds skills for the 21st century and supports Samoa's cultural identity and economic growth, it must be recognised, funded and supported to do so.

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