



PERCEIVED OVERLOAD OF LGCSE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION SYLLABUS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract:

Religious Education syllabus faces several challenges including the perceived overload which presents significant challenges on effective learning of this subject. Even though a number of researches have analyzed curricula of different countries to investigate causes, challenges and solutions of perceived overload, there is dearth in information concerning Lesotho secondary schools RE syllabus. Therefore, qualitative case study underpinned by Cognitive Load Theory was employed to analyze the perceived overload of Lesotho General Certificate of Secondary Education Religious Education syllabus on effective learning in the 21st century. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to gather useful data. For sampling, purposive sampling was employed to select three RE teachers; each from different Religious Education associations in Lesotho. Data collected was analyzed qualitatively. The current study found that teachers are partially teaching the LGCSE RE syllabus. Teachers reported that prioritizing some syllabus topics could be a solution to perceived overload to effective learning. The study recommended that the ongoing review of RE curriculum should consider merging grade 9, 10 and 11 syllabi and remove extraneous content to ensure manageability of LGCSE RE syllabus content for effective learning in the 21st century.

Keywords: Perceived overload, effective learning, 21st century

Introduction

The world is undergoing a drastic change attributable to the advancement of technology and proliferation of information among others. This change appears to place unprecedented challenges and opportunities on individuals' lives given that the world today demands knowledge, skills, values and attitudes relevant to the 21st century. In response to the inevitability of up-to-date skills, values and attitudes, countries face an obligation to be responsive and develop relevant competences (Observation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Drawing

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from the need to foster competences, recent literature recognizes curriculum reform as a fundamental navigator utilized by countries to attain developmental goals (Kurata, Mokhets'engoane & Selialia, 2022b; Ayanwale, 2023).

Nevertheless, the process of reforming curriculum appears to be problematic. In the view of Observation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), the process of “connecting topics/themes or developing competencies across learning areas” (p.9) is one of the key issues of curriculum reforms. Basically, curriculum reforms involve the addition of new content and changes in pedagogical approaches to support effective learning. However, Voogt, Nieveen and Klopping (2017) accentuate that the likely consequences of adding content without proper consideration of what ought to be removed or retained leads to overloaded. What is important to bear in mind here is that curriculum overload has diverse dimensions being curriculum expansion, content overload, perceived overload and curriculum imbalance. However, the focalpoint in this study has shifted to perceived overload as the experienced overload by teachers and students.

In alignment with global plans to respond to the widespread issues, Lesotho, too, developed the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Framework (CAP) of 2009 as a rebutter to prevailing socio-economic setbacks in Lesotho. What is crucial to note here is that curriculum revamp in Lesotho impacted every subject curriculum including RE curriculum which was overhauled through adding up of up-to-date content and methodologies purported to produce a global citizen. This view is supported by Gearon (2014) and Sultana (2022) who writes that RE has refrain from teaching indoctrination of faith but teaching students how to think and have critical perception and reasoning. Despite the restructuring of RE in respond of global trends, it is likely to suffer some drawbacks including perceived overload (PO) which is triggered by time constrains, lack of teacher professional development, and a mismatch between inclusion and removal of content of RE syllabus.

1.1. Problem statement

There is an increasing concern that RE suffers major setbacks in particular, perceived overload which presents significant challenges in for effective learning in the 21st century. Crowded classrooms, gradual accumulation of content added to a curriculum, biasness over non-core subjects constitute some of the significant factors evoking PO. Today, one of the most significant discussions is the challenges and solutions of PO on effective teaching and learning. To solidify the highlighted claim, cases of curriculum overload have been reported in countries such as People's Republic of China, England, Malawi and Kenya (OECD, 2020; Ndjabili, 2004; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). Although extensive research has been carried out on curriculum overload, there is no single study that exists, if it exists, there is little knowledge concerning the analysis of PO of LGCSE RE syllabus to identify and address the challenges faced in the effective learning of the subject in the 21st century context. For this reason, this study is purported to address this gap.

1.2. Research questions

1. What challenges are Lesotho secondary teachers facing in dealing with the perceived overload of LGCSE RE syllabus?
2. How can the challenges associated with the perceived overload be overcome to ensure effective learning of LGCSE RE syllabus?

Review of related literature

Causes of perceived overload

1.3. Strive to meet the country's demands

According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2010) and OECD (2020), perceived overload refers to the perspectives of teachers and students' feeling about the demands and expectation of the curriculum at hand. In other words, it is a feeling that there is a mismatch between content quantity to be enacted and the available time allotted to activate that content of a subject syllabus. To further understand PO, Pepper (2008) draws our attention to acknowledge that the rapid advances in technology, skills and knowledge have compelled countries to update their curricula to meet a range of needs including social, economic and technological needs. Indisputably, a need to meet the highlighted countries' needs is a major factor triggering curriculum overload in particular PO. To understand this claim, it is important to acknowledge that the addition of content aimed to address countries' needs to the curriculum gives rise to many discrete objectives which are difficult to be covered within the limited time of instruction.

1.4. Unchanging teaching time

Time is a fundamental component for effective teaching and learning of any subject curriculum. Actually, when there is more content to be covered yet there is inadequate time for instruction, perceived overload is inevitable. Basing ourselves with OECD's (2020) affirmation that addition of themes leads to content overload, Pepper (2008) crystallizes how time frame could provoke an overload. What Pepper underlines is that despite the addition of new content to a curriculum, if the time remains unchanged, the content of the syllabus is at jeopardy. It is now well established from a variety of studies including a comparative study of countries and their subject allocation of the impact of time in the activation of a syllabus that there is relatively a trace of change in the number of time of instruction even after addition of content to the curriculum (OECD, 2020). As a result of this limited instruction time, effective learning is compromised since students are denied opportunity to learn deeper and adequately since they have to keep pace with the time.

1.5. Overcrowded classrooms

It is a widespread knowledge that to meet the demands of the 21st century, relevant learner-centered methodologies are recommended (Tladi, 2018; Agustiningrum, 2019). However, there have been dissenters on the claim that learner-centered pedagogy and assessment are dependable. For instance, Kuilena, Altinyelken, Voogt and Nzabalirwab (2022) argue that learner-centered pedagogy and assessment need quality time to enable deeper learning that fosters competences. Along similar lines, Ndjabili (2004) points out that there are major discrepancies associated with

learner-centered methodologies on the grounds that they are effective only when students to teacher ratios are acceptable. Admittedly, learner-centered methodologies need ample time to yield anticipated outcomes. What is disturbing now is that in developing countries such as Lesotho where teacher pupil ratio is above 1:50, any attempt to employ learner-centered approaches is risking the completion a curriculum.

Challenges of teaching an overloaded syllabus

1.6. Ineffective teaching and learning

The situation of perceived overload is numbered among some problematic issues that impede effective learning in the 21st century. Apparent evidence is drawn from Eduwem and Ezeonwumelu's (2020) affirmation that teachers often complain that they cannot cover the content of the subject curriculum due to limited time allotted for a particular subject. While this situation prevails, there is likelihood that students will lack knowledge, skills and attitudes indispensable in this highly competitive global market of the 21st century. This is agreeable to the fact that, it is impossible for students to cope in the competitive world if they learned only at the surface level of curriculum content due to limited time.

Cambridge Primary Review (2009) revealed a somewhat interesting point that teaching a heavily overloaded syllabus often lead to the distortion of the curriculum by teachers. That is, they teach what they need to teach in a particular grade and in teach the content in a manner that they would feel comfortable without aligning themselves with the intended curriculum. Situations such as this one where there is a misalignment between the curriculum goals and the implemented curriculum often perpetuates the already prevailing challenges a country was attempting to eradicate. This would therefore be a situation of a country going in circles.

1.7. Psycho –social stress to both teachers and students

Besides the fact that perceived overload compromises the development of the 21st century competences, Majoni (2017) note that it also evokes mental stress to both a teacher and learners. A further elucidation by Luciano (2017) and Suhaimi & Hussain (2017) is that if there is more content to be activated, a teacher is obliged to pull out all the stops to teach a wide range of content in a limited time. Consequently, this leads to psycho-social stress to both a teacher and learners. This highlighted situation seems to corroborate the fact that teaching an overloaded syllabus is a very strenuous process. However, students endure more pressure as they are often subjected to learn through rote learning as a means to keep pace with time. Worryingly, this eventually exhausts and leaves both a teacher and students stressed.

Theoretical framework

By virtue of this study being a perceived overload study, Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) is employed as a suitable lens to study PO of LGCSE RE syllabus on effective learning in the 21st century. What we now know about CLT is largely based on the works of John Sweller and colleagues around 1980s and 1990s. According to Kirschner, Sweller and Clark (2006), CLT

centres on two widely accepted ideas that are associated with how human brains process and store information. First, it holds that human brains have a limit on how much information they can process at one time. The second is that it is still unknown on how much stored information can be processed by human brains at one time. In fact, this theory explains what takes place in human brain when learning happens. It is clear from the articulated ideas that CLT is concerned of ensuring effective learning. In their argument, Houichi and Sarnou (2020) aver that to ensure effective learning, we should optimize the complexity of content, reduce excessive content that are imposed on the working memory and increase the transfer of information to the long-term memory causing students to apply effort to learn.

This theory is useful in informing the study on whether or not the content of LGCSE RE syllabus is fit within the working memory of students in a given instructional time allotted to the subject. Furthermore, CLT will inform the study in identifying the type of cognitive load associated with the LGCSE RE syllabus. The theory will differentiate the type of cognitive load affecting the RE syllabus. That is whether, the syllabus entails complex content for students, which is intrinsic cognitive load or whether there is excessive content imposed by the instruction which is extraneous cognitive load.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative case study (QCS) approach to investigate impact of an overloaded LGCSE RE on effective learning in the 21st century. As Leedy and Ormrod (2015) remarks, QCS involves an in-depth collection, examination and presentation of data about a phenomenon with the purpose of learning more about them. The approach will therefore assist the researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and solutions of perceived overload of RE syllabus. Eligible three RE teachers who matched the selection criteria were identified by purposive sampling and were recruited from RE associations in the Northern region, central region and Southern region of Lesotho. The selection of these three regions is based on Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007) assertion that selection of cases from diverse population ensures richness of data. This implies that the three RE teachers from RE associations possess rich information about the topic. The profile of the participants is illustrated in **Table 1** below:

Table 1: Profile of participants

Teachers	Mr Thabo	Mrs Palesa	Mrs Puleng
Type of school	Private school	Missionary school	Missionary school
Region	Northern	Central	Southern

For data collection, semi-structured interviews were employed to gather significant data from the participants. One major importance of using semi-structured interviews is that they provide spontaneously exploration of some topics that resonates with the main topic (Mokhets'engoane,

2021). Therefore, semi-structured interviews permitted the researcher to probe open ended questions and gather adequate data. The questions were administered through the phone since the participants are in distanced places. For data analysis, data from semi-structured interviews was qualitatively analyzed through transcription, coding and thermalizing.

Findings and discussions

What challenges are Lesotho secondary teachers facing in teaching an overload RE syllabus?

Teachers from three associations were asked to provide feedback on their encounter with teaching LGCSE RE syllabus. With one accord, teachers admitted that it is impossible to teach this syllabus within the allocated time in the time table. As a result, they have normalized to partly teach this syllabus. This finding is a bit counterintuitive on the basis that the country's hope is that RE would foster relevant competences. Mrs Puleng articulated,

This issue of grade 9 and 10 syllabus reminds me of the miseries in 2021 mid-year when we realized that grade 9 and 10 syllabus content will not form part of the summative assessment in grade 11. What was most disappointing was that we realized this in the mid-year while students were left with only four year before sitting for final examinations. From that day on, we have abandoned grade 9 and 10 syllabi so that we focus on grade 11 syllabus.

Another striking report from the participants was that teaching the LGCSE RE has left them disorganized. They affirmed that they are mindful of the learner-centred methodologies they are encouraged to employ. However, teachers revealed that they are occupied with how best they can haste and complete the syllabus not on how they could teach effectively. Mr Thabo exclaimed,

The most painful thing is that we are teaching slow learners who need ample time. So we have resorted to progress with those who can learn faster and ceased to offer individual assistance to slow learners. Ultimately, effective learning is negatively impacted.

Mrs Puleng shared similar views and said,

It is only this year that I hope I will complete grade 11 syllabus since I started teaching it from grade 10. Even though I have started to teach this syllabus earlier, I still have to attend morning classes, on weekends and on holidays to cover the syllabus. Indeed, this is really tiring. What worsens the situation is that RE used to have five periods of forty minutes per week in the COSC curriculum. In a contrary, RE syllabus taught in grade 11 has four periods since one period was allocated to Life Skills Based Sexuality Education.

How can overload be overcome to ensure effective learning?

Teachers were asked to suggest what could be resolutions to the PO in RE syllabus. In their responses, teachers were of the same opinion that similar concepts from grade 9 and 10 be merged with grade 11 syllabus. Mr Thabo said,

In one RE workshop, we were told that grade 9 and 10 RE syllabi are only fragments of the grade 11 RE syllabus. Therefore, when we deal with a topic, we should peruse all the syllabi to merge their content for a once off teaching of that concept. That might work even now.

Another solution proposed by teachers was that teacher-students' ratio should be reduced so that teachers could give every learner sufficient attention. They argued that contrary to the ratio of

40:1, their classrooms are overcrowded. As a consequence, teachers are induced to employ teacher-centered teaching and assessment strategies. Mrs Palesa remarks,

LGCSE syllabus has excessive content to be covered. Even if I would love to engage them in projects and presentations, that would take me long since these students are many.

Teachers also suggested that RE should be given extra period to enable teachers to cover all the content which is meant to develop skills and values of the 21st century. Mrs Puleng put it,

If we on weekends and in winter holidays to complete grade 11 syllabus. This should be an indicator that RE need to be granted an extra period if we want to ensure effective teaching and learning.

Teachers also suggested that it would be better to identify important concepts that need to be prioritized. Mrs Palesa said,

It is better to identify ideas and fundamental content that possess greater promotion of skills, values and attitudes.

Conclusions

One major finding was that teachers fail to complete LGCSE RE syllabus. This has also led to the abandoning grade 9 and 10 syllabi on the basis that these syllabi are basis for the Grade 11 syllabi. This finding implies that there is a great misalignment between the intended RE curriculum and the implemented RE curriculum. What is worrisome about this misalignment is that the there is a cross-cutting aim to equip learners with relevant skills, values and attitudes that will allow them to be successful person in live is compromised which is indeed fundamental (MoET, 2020a, 2020b). The underlying concern is how would students develop the intended competences while grade 9 and 10 syllabi are abandoned and grade 11 syllabus partially done?

The study also revealed that teachers have distorted the RE curriculum. In fact, every teacher has liberty to choose which syllabus content to teach and to disregard. The conclusion that could be drawn here is that there is lack of monitoring and supervision from the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) to ensure that they provide effective strategies on how to teach grade 11 syllabus in a period of one year. What we need to understand here is that RE syllabus in the phased out Cambridge Overseas Schools Certificate (COSC) comprised of four aims and it was completed within two years. Contrarily, the LGCSE syllabus comprises of seven aims with additional demands and it is intended to be completed within one year of grade 11.

Another finding that emerged was that teachers are unable to employ learner-centred teaching and assessment methodologies. It is obvious from this concern of RE teachers that teachers' pedagogical practices are still mimicking the traditional teacher-centred paradigm. This finding is somewhat surprising given the fact that the current curriculum aims to achieve its goals through RE as one of the taught subject. However the subject still perpetuates undemocratic pedagogical practices that discourage the development of 21st century competences.

Recommendations

- MoET in Lesotho should look into reducing the students-teacher-ratio to enable effective learning.
- Curriculum developers should merge grade 8, 9 and 10 syllabi to enable identification of excess content which needs to be removed.

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