

International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research
 Vol. 24, No. 7, pp. 130-144, July 2025
<https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.7.7>
 Received Apr 10, 2025; Revised Jun 5, 2025; Accepted Jul 4, 2025

Geography Teachers' Reflection on the Curriculum Implementation in Rural Schools of South Africa

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Abstract. The need for geography teachers to understand and reflect on the practices requires interrogation of their ability to provide better implementation of the curriculum in the classroom. The implementers have enforced the implementation, but reflection by geography teachers is not well addressed for better implementation. This study examines geography teachers' reflections on curriculum implementation in rural schools. Qualitative and case study designs reflect on the curriculum implementation in rural schools. The interpretivism paradigm was employed to check teaching practices since 2012 up to date in rural schools to understand the daily practices on the implementation of the geography curriculum. A convenient sample consisted of ten geography teachers. Individual semi-structured interviews and document reviews were used as data collection methods. The realist social theory on curriculum was used as a lens for the present paper. Geography teachers do not reflect on their daily classroom teaching practices, such as lesson plans and content knowledge. The study concluded that collaborative teaching practices, mastery of geography content, and pedagogical analysis are significant in curriculum implementation in South African rural schools. Proper assessment by the School Management Team should be in place among schools to constantly review the lesson plan used by geography teachers in line with the policy framework on the curriculum implementation in South African rural schools.

Keywords: agency; curriculum implementation; geography teachers; reflection; South African rural school; structural culture

1. Introduction

Globally, the reflection of geography teachers in educational institutions positively affects curriculum implementation because teachers develop competencies, practice routine and ownership of the change (Hauge, 2019). In the midst, school is concerned with creating knowledge and developing skills.

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The task of being relevant in contemporary society, for the present and future, includes monitoring policy implementation in the educational context and becomes a tool to measure effectiveness in the classroom (Komar et al., 2019). Monitoring in the school context becomes a pre-requisite for successful geography implementation of the curriculum through which School Management Teams (SMTs) assess whether teaching and learning occur for desired outcomes and pre-set objectives are attained.

Mpofu and Maphalala (2018) argue that significant requirements for curriculum implementation in rural schools only become successful through national and district monitoring. Caratiquit and Pablo (2021) further say that another method of monitoring curriculum implementation is observing the teaching and learning in the classroom. In support, another scholar further states that classroom discussions should be observed, and notes should be taken about the curriculum implementation policy in rural schools (Sefhedi, 2019). Observation and communication between a teacher and learners should be maintained to provide clear instructions and observe interaction.

Many educational institutions in various countries measure their educational success on teachers' reflections and hold leaders accountable (Malin et al., 2020). However, in South African schools, only a few teachers reflect on their practices. Teachers drive this reflection to enact time-tested, effective and efficient pedagogical approaches towards curriculum implementation in rural schools. This applies to geography teachers who must prepare their learners for the significant worksheets and examinations.

However, this reflection affects geography teachers and their teaching worldwide (Smit et al., 2023), leading to teacher burnout and increased attrition rates. Nationally, most geography teachers are still working in isolation, without collaboration, and there is a lack of reflection on curriculum implementation in rural schools (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). However, some geography teachers in rural schools treasure their professional way of thinking and embrace the change brought on by enquiries. In contrast, some teachers struggle with this conflict between their right to exercise professional judgment in what and how to teach and the reflection on their teaching in rural schools.

Curriculum implementation in various countries such as Australia focused on curriculum Assessment and Reporting Act of 2008 which is responsible for the development of the curriculum. Regarding such Act, Watt (2020) indicates the challenges and reflections of the uncertainty of who is responsible for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Similarly in Tanzania, one of the countries in the East Africa region has developed CBC because their training system is negatively affected by the quality of the graduates (Ishemo, 2019).

Such trend in the country was based on misunderstanding of the new curriculum, inadequate materials such as books, laboratories, and weaknesses in school inspection. In South African curriculum, for the year 1997, the country saw the birth of Curriculum 2005 (C2005), which was rooted in OBE. In 2002, the C2005 was amended to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS). The

RCNS was not a new curriculum introduced but a streamline of C2005 with the aim of developing the full potential of learners as citizens in a democratic South Africa (DoE, 2004). The RCNS was later reviewed and amended to the NCS in 2009. This was done as an improvement to its implementation. However, NCS was amended in 2012, where subject statements, learning programme guidelines, and subject assessment guidelines in Grades R-12 were replaced by CAPS. This was developed through challenges experienced by teachers found in the world of work. Hence, the current study focuses on geography reflections on curriculum implementation in rural schools of South Africa.

To this end, studies have demonstrated the significance of reflection, but few focus on geography teachers' reflection on curriculum implementation in rural schools (Lo, 2021). Hence, the present study on geography teachers' reflection on curriculum implementation in rural schools is explored. The study's central question is, *what are geography teachers' reflections on the curriculum implementation in rural schools?* Followed by two sub question to: *what challenges Geography teachers face on the curriculum implementation? How can reflection of curriculum implementation inform geography teachers practice?*

The insights of the present study may help reflect on and review the curriculum policy in the school systems. Using realist social theory, this paper looks at the reflections of geography teachers on curriculum implementation in South African rural areas to achieve the objective: *to identify support mechanism geography teachers seek to implement curriculum in their teaching practices*. The present paper begins with an overview of the literature reviewed, qualitative approach and research methods are delineated. Subsequently, geography teachers' reflection followed through a series of narratives and discussions.

2. Reviewed Literature

Curriculum implementation internationally and locally is concerned with the best way for geography teachers to understand principles to meet their teaching practice and learners (Sleeter & Carmona, 2017). These concerns in rural schools represent learners. The reviewed literature on studies across the countries includes the study on the teacher's role in making curriculum into a powerful knowledge (Gong et al., 2021). The geography teachers' perceptions and challenges in the curriculum implementation of general secondary school geography remain constant due to a lack of reflection towards teaching (Delelu et al., 2025).

In support of the above, Madondo (2020), on curriculum reform and classroom practice: teaching geography in the Zimbabwean Curriculum Framework 2015–2022, found that teachers have limited time for lesson preparation, learner-centred instruction material and lack of motivation. However, due to the above findings, the present study focused on geography teachers' reflections on curriculum implementation in South African schools to address the identified gap between classroom practice and delivery.

2.1 Geography teachers' reflection

Studies show discrepancies between curriculum standards and school implementation (Chen et al., 2023). Similar problems are observed in the country such as China. The state of China's separation of the curriculum standards allows teachers to work to improve curriculum implementation (Cantoni et al., 2017). As a result, some learners in various schools perform well in assessment. On the other hand, some learners perform poorly because of the lack of reflection on the curriculum implementation in the subject of Geography. Therefore, some geography teachers have developed a reflection on their practice and tested their teaching goals (Huh & Jo, 2024).

Secondly, in China, geography teachers' reflection focuses on what is to be taught rather than what learners learn in the classroom, resulting in learner participation in the classroom instructional activities. Similarly, the National Curriculum implemented in Indonesia from 2013, did not achieve geographic skills as expected (Ridha et al, 2019). Teachers were found to teach the subject of geography only by collecting learners' assignments, not by teaching them the skill of creating maps (required by the national curriculum guidelines) (Kamil et al, 2020).

In South African rural schools, the curriculum implementation was a step towards educational outcomes between resource- and under-resourced schools (Du Plessis & Letshwene, 2020). The curriculum policy changes the plan for teaching, assessment, and timeframe for teaching practice. However, geography teachers do not reflect on the daily implementation of the curriculum. Nevenglosky (2018) add that a lack of theoretical knowledge of principles informs the curriculum change, which affects the curriculum implementation and its effectiveness in rural schools. Hence, teaching practices in the geography classroom is not enhanced by the instructional materials such as you-tube and use of television.

2.2 Collaboration as a challenging strategy for Geography teachers

To dwell more on the geography teachers' reflection regarding curriculum implementation in South African rural schools towards teaching and learning. Collaboration becomes a challenge to teachers on their planning and route to better implementation. Chizhik and Chizhik (2018) argue that lesson plans created by teachers contribute to the practice. Additionally, it allows geography teachers to focus on reflection, but most teachers found in rural areas fail to make reflections and comply with curriculum requirements. Hence, teachers prefer to implement prescribed curriculum to fulfil their role and contract duties.

Any form of good curriculum implementation in rural schools requires geography teachers to reflect on their work; without such practice, the framework in the classroom is likely not to be implemented (Madondo, 2020). Geography teachers' values and beliefs play a role, and transparency on the reflection of the curriculum becomes a concern (Priestley et al., 2015). Without transparency maintained, the reflection of the curriculum by geography teachers is likely not to be successful. Leach and Bradbury (2024) admit that successful policy framework implementation depends on geography teachers'

understanding and intention to support its implications. Additionally, theoretical underpinnings and classroom application must be understood.

In support, Mbatha (2023) conclude that curriculum implementation occurs when learners acquire knowledge and skills to enable learners to participate and function effectively in society. However, Govender (2018) believe that curriculum implementation is about teachers in the classroom teaching learners as they learn, requiring adjustments to the personal habits of teachers, learning space, and existing curricula and schedule (Tomlinson, 2022). Therefore, teachers need work collaboratively to reduce challenges on the implementation of geography curriculum.

2.3 Geography Assessment Programme

Yuen et al. (2018) argue that teachers must reflect on information transference and participation in activities requiring curriculum standards. In support, Zhang and Wong (2018) argue that reflection makes teachers not only focus on the teaching process, content, and assessment methods for better feedback. Some teachers focus on learner assessment, with discrepancies between classroom and instructional activities regarding the required content and depth of knowledge (Lam, 2019). The classroom assessment and instructional activities can lead to teachers' inability to understand actual learning. Therefore, it must be understood to adjust teaching content and promote learners' teaching objectives and implementation in rural schools.

The evaluation and reflection of curriculum by geography teachers is applied through formal and informal assessment (DBE, 2011). Evaluation is always done during the lesson on a weekly and quarterly basis to indicate whether learners are learning and understanding the subject. An overview of the assessment of the implementation determines adjustments and reviews in the classroom. Nisar et al. (2019) further argue that managing the classroom effectively during teaching and learning improves academic achievement, entailing that geography teachers develop relationships of mutual trust and support learners, which contribute to effective teaching.

In support, Huh and Jo (2024) argue that geography teachers should ensure the teaching activities structure that guides and leads learners to understand content. In reflection mode, South African geography teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices, instructional materials, assessment and practical knowledge for better curriculum implementation.

3. Theoretical Framework: Realist Social Theory (Archer, 1995)

Archer's theory underpins this study. Archer's realist social theory emphasises the synergy between structure, culture, and agency to understand social phenomena rather than collapsing them all into one (Archer, 1995). The emphasis of the study was on geography teachers' reflections on curriculum implementation in rural schools. In the geography classroom, this theory provides insights into how structure, culture, and agency contribute to the classroom's reflection. Thus, this realist social theory is deemed to understand

better the reflection of geography teachers on curriculum implementation in rural schools. Archer's theory played a significant role in the study because it reveals that the structural, cultural, and teacher agency determined geography teachers' reflections towards implementing the curriculum in the rural classroom (Archer, 1995). Below is the application of all three theoretical lenses to the geography teachers' reflection on curriculum implementation in rural schools.

3.1 Culture

The theory describes the school's culture by interactions between people in the same social structure. Cultural values drive the notion of geography teachers' reflection. Therefore, geography teachers must refrain from the old to the new culture of curriculum implementation in rural schools. Kimathi and Rusznyak (2018) argue that South Africa's teaching culture has been criticised for focusing on compliance rather than professional autonomy and innovation, stifling the geography teachers' ability to effectively adapt their teaching needs of diverse learners (Bin Jamaludin, 2024).

3.2 Structure

The structure refers to geography classrooms and instructional materials for curriculum implementation in rural schools. Archer (1995), in the realist theory, emphasises that structure is a significant element contributing to curriculum implementation in rural schools. Tarmo and Kimaro (2021) support the view that curriculum policy emphasises knowledge and skills; this may limit teachers' ability to develop their learners. Critical and analytical skills are also needed in digital use to support structural support and reflective teaching (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). Therefore, continuous professional development opportunities and reflection networks can affect curriculum implementation in rural schools.

3.3 Agency

Agents refer to people in a space to which they can influence the structure and culture. Agency as geography teachers to make choices and take actions to shape their practice (Molla & Nolan, 2020). Most geography teachers in rural areas tend to feel overwhelmed by the reflections within their workspace regarding their teaching approach. Geography teachers in rural areas succumb to structural and cultural effects that limit their agency and professional development in curriculum implementation in rural areas (Raanhuis, 2022). Geography teachers have the agency power to interact with their fellow teachers to make a reflection on the curriculum implementation in rural schools.

4. Methodology

This qualitative research paper reports on geography teachers' reflections on curriculum practice in rural schools. Interpretivism was applied to understand geography teachers' reflections on curriculum implementation in rural schools. Austin and Sutton (2014) advise that qualitative researchers observe people in their natural setting to learn what they think, why and act. This case study focused on five secondary schools in rural areas. Data gathered involved ten

geography teachers from rural schools in Limpopo Province, who responded to the individual semi-structured interviews and document reviews such as lesson plans and assessments formulated on reflection towards implementing curriculum in South African rural areas. Geography teachers per school were chosen using the convenience sampling technique because research participants were easily accessible by the researcher.

SMTs assisted the researcher in identifying the geography teachers who would participate in the present study to ensure transparency among teachers. Some of the selected geography teachers had been teaching at the school for 5 to 10 years and possessed knowledge on reflection of curriculum implementation in rural areas. Participants were asked questions requiring reflection on the policy framework, lesson plan, geography content, pedagogies, and assessment of curriculum implementation in rural schools. Participants demonstrated their awareness of how teachers neglect the reflection on curriculum implementation in rural schools.

Creswell (2013) advises that data collection and analysis must be cyclical, concurrent, and iterative, enabling the researcher to move forward and check the trustworthiness of the data and new insights in this reflective study. In the current study, audio was used to record the individual semi-structured interviews held with teachers through their permission. The individual semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The study participants responded to interviews, and follow-up questions were asked to clarify the constructed question.

The documents reviewed were the policy framework, lesson plan, geography content, pedagogies, and assessment given to learners to help them understand the nature of curriculum implementation in rural schools. Additionally, it allowed the researcher to gain insights about what is expected from teachers regarding curriculum implementation in rural schools.

During the data gathering process, individual semi-structured interviews was between the researcher and geography teachers using question prepared prior to interview session. The aim was to obtain a better understanding on reflection towards the curriculum implementation. A thematic method was applied by using the themes to categorize the obtained information from ten geography teachers. The data collected was coded to hide the identification of teachers who participated.

To ensure that data obtained from the participants is credible, all the participants were advised by the researcher not to disclose their names or any other identification. Additionally, participants were informed of their voluntary participation and withdrawal to partake in the research. In terms of ethics, permission to conduct research was provided by the ethics committee of one University in South Africa.

5. Findings

Evidence generated from the data revealed that most geography teachers do not reflect on their documented work to implement a better curriculum in rural schools. Moreover, the study revealed that proper reflection on lesson preparation, pedagogical analysis and geography content in rural schools should be aligned with the policy. Therefore, the SMT, educational specialist, and geography teachers need a remedial plan to implement the rural schools' curriculum. The three themes: challenges of the teaching practices, classroom learning barriers and focus area on Geography as a subject assist in explaining geography teachers' reflections on better curriculum implementation in rural schools.

5.1 Theme 1: Challenges of the teaching practices

The participants' reflections on curriculum implementation documents vary differently. The geography teachers in the school believe that the document serves its purpose.

Teacher A remarked:

"CAPS is a new curriculum, and the document is based on learners understanding the topic rather than the teacher being at the centre with resources such as textbooks."

Teacher D noted:

"It is a guideline to the content taught in the classroom, but we do not follow it to the teeth as we always freestyle."

Teacher E and Teacher F remarked:

"It's a document that is prescribed and guides teachers as we are not allowed to teach our very own content, which we feel is better for learners, but most teachers do not follow or consult the document as they rely more on the annual teaching plan."

From the participants' views, teachers have diverse meanings about the curriculum policy. Teachers believe the document is provided but not utilised during the teaching of geography offered in schools. Realist theory talks about agency, which refers to geography teachers' informed choices and actions that shape their teaching practice.

5.2 Theme 2: Classroom learning barriers

Suppose the implementation of the curriculum is to be successful in classroom practice. In that case, teachers need to be conversant with the policy and understand the content to place it at the centre of teaching.

Teacher B remarked:

"I think the difficulties come with teaching prior knowledge to learners because we are guided to check prior knowledge before proceeding, and it becomes a challenge since most learners require prior knowledge before proceeding to the next topic."

Reflecting on Teacher B's views, learners have obstacles that stand out in their way of grasping the content, which may be caused by one or more barriers to learning throughout the process, such as emotional, social, and language barriers.

Teacher C said:

"The teachers experience different barriers as we have learners with visual impairments and those learners who are unable to comply with smart boards or the display of the slides."

Teacher F noted that

"The CAPS only caters to learners who are good at remembering, while some learners are very good at the practical work. This entails that the reason we are failing to implement the CAPS document is because it does not cater for all."

The participants believe most teachers lack prior knowledge to comprehend the curriculum document. Teachers also have learners with various barriers contributing to misunderstanding the content. Concerning the knowledge, other participants have elaborated that the curriculum only caters for a certain number of learners, clearly revealing that teachers need to be well-equipped with content in line with the curriculum framework. The theory suggests that the structure of the education system, such as curriculum policies and instructional material allocation, can enable teachers' agency towards curriculum implementation in South African rural schools.

5.3 Theme 3: Focus area on Geography as a subject

The school policy document directs teachers on how content should be taught in the classroom, but teachers do not well-mastered the implementation into teaching practice.

Teacher A remarked:

"Teachers do not follow the policy document and annual teaching plan. They focus more on the topics on which learners find difficulties instead of sticking to the CAPS document."

Teacher C noted that

"Changing the syllabus in the teaching practice because some teachers majored in a specific degree rather than a bachelor of education affects the implementation of the curriculum and assessment policy document and becomes difficult for certain individuals."

Teacher D remarked:

"I would say that at the university, there is some content that we did not deal with correctly and master of technological use. Therefore, it becomes difficult at the school level during the implementation of the curriculum document." It shows that most geography teachers cannot implement the curriculum framework for topics found in geography. Archer's

theory emphasises the cultural values that drive the notion of geography teachers' reflection on their practices."

6. Discussion

6.1 Classroom teaching practices

Geography teacher's reflection is significant to teaching (Orakcı, 2021). The study revealed that geography teachers neglect to reflect on what the document requires and what teaching practice is. Teachers are the primary source for the teaching and learning process; this is determined by other teachers' knowledge, skills, qualifications, and motivation within the field (Mulang, 2021). Geography teachers in rural schools should understand the curriculum policy. The theory by Archer (1995) discusses the school culture, where people in the same social structure interact, involving their beliefs, values, and norms that shape the profession. Goldhaber (2019) argues that workshops do not prepare teachers for the challenges they experience in the classroom. Geography teachers should engage in different programmes to understand the policy framework and its application to the subject.

Du Plessis and Letshwene (2020) argue that teachers do not subject themselves to change; they fear the unknown and lack knowledge, and some believe that it will subject their way of teaching to the challenges of curriculum policy. The scholar further argues that teachers understand the mandate of the policy framework and are unprepared to put it into practice (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2021). The theory confirms the findings through agency as geography teachers who make choices and take actions to shape their practice (Molla & Nolan, 2020). Most teachers neglect the current document's visitation for better reflection of their work on the lesson preparation; therefore, such practice should be over-emphasised. To encourage geography teachers to work collaboratively to achieve principles and aim of policy document.

6.2 Content knowledge

Objectives and content drive the curriculum policy in schools to measure curriculum performance, which requires school management to be driven in managing the curriculum implementation (Ntuli & Mahlangu, 2023). The study revealed that most teachers lack knowledge of the curriculum policy. Therefore, curriculum is about the content to be taught in the classroom and guidelines policies. Archer's (1995) theory emphasises that structure is a significant element contributing to curriculum implementation in rural schools. Additionally, the inclusion of curriculum implementation in rural areas will respond to learner diversity in the classroom and the policy programme and promotion requirements of the NCS in Grades R-12.

Niemelä (2022) argues that when teachers teach a particular subject, they must choose the subject matter (knowledge), content methods and assessment. These show the significance of knowledge content in ensuring that enacted content is relevant to the prescribed curriculum (Rezvani & Farsimadan, 2025). The teachers are not trained on content regularly that is in line with the curriculum policy, so they are likely to neglect the use of the policy document. SMT needs to

play a role to support geography teachers for better implementation of curriculum.

6.3 Shift from simple to complex

Most teachers cannot implement the curriculum policy on topics found in the subject of geography. The CAPS document (DBE, 2011) confirms that teachers must teach and learners to learn, which includes the concept, knowledge, and skills acquired. These include what learners are expected to learn in the subject. Gess-Newsome et al. (2019) assert that generating knowledge through lessons is regarded as content-knowledge creation.

In support, Archer's (1995) theory talks about agents as people in a space in which they can influence the structure and culture. Therefore, the researcher asserts that the subject's content should align with the curriculum policy document, allowing geography teachers to reflect on the curriculum implementation in South African rural schools.

Researchers such as Choppin et al. (2022) and Sebaeng (2022) argue that knowledge and skills, preparation of human resources in curriculum implementation, serve as the ones to be adopted by the rest of the teachers to teach the relevant content in line with the policy curriculum. This suggests the success of the curriculum depends on both teachers and learners (Kanyonga et al., 2019). This call for teachers to invest on daily reflection for curriculum implementation in the geography classroom to fulfil learners' knowledge and skills.

7. Conclusion

Geography teachers' reflection on the curriculum implementation in South Africa requires a multifaceted approach that considers the reflection identified by the geography teachers in Curriculum implementation in rural schools. Results further shows that Geography teachers do not work on their reflections from challenges encountered by fostering a collaborative teaching practice, the mastery of geography content and pedagogical analysis can potentially enable teachers from practices that do not align with the policy framework.

The study recommends proper assessment by the SMT among schools to constantly review the lesson plan used by geography teachers, pedagogical analysis, and geography content to align with policy on the curriculum implementation in rural schools—a recognition of the collaborative reflection among teachers in geography teaching. Additionally, the school leadership of selected rural schools should adopt the evaluation system. The present study was limited to ten geography teachers due to travelling cost on research. Studies on geography teaching in South Africa are unexplored; therefore, future geography researcher can focus on the strategies educational specialists can use to support geography teachers on the practical guidelines of CAPS.

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