



Understanding Teacher Agency During Curriculum Transitions: A Case Study of Secondary School Natural Science Teachers in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, curriculum change remains a crucial national concern, particularly in secondary schools, where educational reform efforts intersect with broader concerns about equity, access to knowledge, and teacher autonomy. This study investigates how secondary school teachers understand and enact their professional agency in the face of curriculum change. Using an ecological framework of an agency, it examines how teachers perceive their roles as change agents, the factors that affect their choices, and their interaction with policy-driven changes. Using a quantitative design, the study collected responses through a structured questionnaire administered in 41 schools in the Northwest province of South Africa. Descriptive statistical analysis showed that although many teachers demonstrate a strong sense of professional responsibility and a deep commitment to curriculum goals, they are frequently constrained in their ability to act by external factors, including unequal access to resources, top-down policy mandates, and inadequate professional development. According to the results, teacher agency is influenced by the relationships they build within those settings, as well as by the institutional contexts in which they operate. In the end, the study emphasizes the necessity of rethinking teacher development frameworks to prioritize teacher voice, foster local innovation, and promote agency as a major factor in meaningful curriculum reform. For policymakers, school administrators, and curriculum developers seeking a more inclusive and responsive science education system in post-apartheid South Africa, these insights have significant implications.

Keywords: teacher agency, curriculum change, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), educational reform, ecological model

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum reform remains a major issue for educational systems worldwide, and it's frequently implemented to address disparities, enhance learner performance, and align instruction with the fast-changing demands of society and knowledge. However, the true indicator of reform is how teachers on the ground live and implement it, despite well-intentioned policy changes. Teachers are professionals who interpret, adapt, and mediate policy in accordance with their backgrounds, experiences, and opinions (Pantić & Florian, 2020; Tao & Gao, 2021). They are not just policy implementers. Their agency, which is their ability to act intentionally within structural constraints, is a key factor in bringing about educational change.

Curriculum reform has been a key component of efforts to address inequalities from the apartheid era and create a fairer educational system in South Africa. With the implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), there was a significant shift from the more adaptable National Curriculum Statement (NCS) to a comprehensive, content-based strategy emphasizing standardization and accountability. However, especially for teachers in under-resourced schools, the rollout of CAPS has created friction between pedagogical freedom and policy requirements (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2018; Botha, 2020). Teaching secondary subjects is, for many, not simply about delivering predetermined information but about making them approachable, pertinent, and empowering in the context of systemic inequality.

The dual challenge of meeting curriculum requirements while addressing the varied needs of learners and inadequate school resources is one that teachers frequently face. Recent studies indicate that teachers are more likely to embrace reforms and implement them

meaningfully when they are given the power to exercise their professional agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2021; Mgqwashu, 2022). But agency is not an isolated concept. Institutional culture, leadership, political considerations, and career development possibilities all play a role in its formation (Amukobole & Macheng, 2023).

This study examines the experiences and expressions of agency among secondary school teachers in South Africa during a continuous curriculum transformation. The focus is on Research Question 1: How is teacher agency demonstrated by and/or inferred from Secondary school teachers within the three dimensions of the ecological model during curriculum transition? The study uses an ecological lens on agency (Priestley et al., 2021) to explore the intricate interactions among individual ability, social relationships, and structural circumstances that affect how teachers adjust to curriculum changes. By centering the voices and lived experiences of teachers, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that promote or inhibit meaningful reform. It advocates rethinking curriculum support and professional development to recognize teachers as designers of equitable, context-responsive education, rather than just implementers.

Literature Review

The transformation of the South African curriculum since 1994 has been widely debated and, in many ways, remains a work in progress. Central to these debates is the role of the teacher, not simply as an implementer of top-down mandates, but as an agent who interprets, negotiates, and enacts policy in diverse classroom contexts. Teacher agency, in this regard, refers to the professional capacity of teachers to make purposeful decisions, act with autonomy, and influence curricular outcomes in ways that reflect their professional judgment,

values, and the realities of their classrooms (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

In the post-apartheid era, teachers have been encouraged to embrace new democratic identities aligned with social justice and curriculum transformation. However, these reforms have often been experienced as technocratic and prescriptive, leaving little space for teachers to innovate or adapt meaningfully (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). The conflict between policy intentions and lived experiences highlights the complex dynamics of teacher agency in South African schools.

The literature reveals that curriculum transformation has frequently been marked by symbolic politics, where reforms are enacted more to signal change than to facilitate deep, systemic shifts. Jansen (1998), in his critical analysis of curriculum reform in South Africa, contends that post-apartheid policies have too often been designed for political legitimacy rather than pedagogical impact. Teachers are placed at the front line of these reforms, yet seldom participate meaningfully in their design, undermining the very agency required to enact them effectively.

This disconnect becomes evident in teachers' day-to-day practice. For instance, curriculum documents such as CAPS provide strict pacing schedules and detailed content prescriptions. While intended to ensure standardization and quality, these features can constrain teacher autonomy and reduce opportunities for pedagogical creativity (Makeleni & Sethusha, 2020). Teachers are expected to be change agents, yet their working conditions and the curriculum's bureaucratic structure often inhibit this potential.

Despite these constraints, teachers are not passive recipients of policy. Research by Ngcoza and Southwood (2021) illustrates how teachers actively negotiate the space between policy mandates and classroom realities. Their study shows that teachers adopt a range of strategies from subtle resistance to creative

adaptation as they navigate the demands of curriculum reform. This concept of "negotiated agency" offers a more dynamic understanding of how agency is acted under conditions of pressure and constraint.

However, such an agency is unevenly distributed across the education system. Govender (2022) highlights the challenges faced by teachers in under-resourced and rural schools, where agency is significantly shaped by contextual limitations. In these settings, large class sizes, limited materials, and weak leadership structures can diminish teachers' confidence and ability to act as curricular innovators. Thus, agency is not only a matter of professional identity but also of institutional support and enabling conditions.

Professional development emerges in literature as a potentially powerful lever for enhancing teacher agency. When development programs are meaningful, collaborative, and contextually grounded, they can empower teachers to think critically about their roles and respond creatively to curricular challenges (Makeleni & Sethusha, 2020). However, much of the available training is generic, disconnected from teachers' classroom realities, and insufficient to build sustained agency.

For professional development to truly enhance curriculum agency, it must be aligned with the challenges teachers face in their own contexts. It must also create spaces for teachers to reflect, collaborate, and contribute to curriculum decisions, moving beyond compliance to ownership and leadership in the reform process.

Comparative studies across the African continent provide further insight into how agency is enacted in resource-constrained environments. De Villiers (2023) reports that in countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Namibia, teacher agency often flourishes when teachers are included in curriculum co-design processes or engaged in school-based action research. These practices help bridge the gap between

policy and practice and affirm teachers' professionalism as knowledge creators rather than as policy implementers alone.

Such comparative insights reinforce the idea that agency is not determined solely by systemic factors, but by the degree to which teachers are empowered to participate meaningfully in reform. In the South African context, this means rethinking reform as a participatory process in which teachers' voices are not only heard but also positioned at the center of curriculum dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

This study used the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency, created by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015), to examine how secondary school teachers perceive their professional agency during curriculum transitions. This model provides a nuanced view of agency that goes beyond simple structure-versus-choice dichotomies. Rather, it defines agency as a context-sensitive, emergent phenomenon shaped by the temporal interplay of past experiences, present circumstances, and future hopes.

The model is based directly on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal-relational theory of agency, which outlines three fundamental aspects of human behavior: the iterational dimension, which takes into account the impact of prior experiences, values, and career backgrounds, the practical-evaluative dimension, which is based on current limitations and opportunities like material circumstances, policy requirements, and institutional culture; and the projective dimension, which is connected to a teacher's aspirations, objectives, and envisioned futures.

The ecological model provides a layered perspective on how teacher agency is expressed—or restricted during periods of curricular change by incorporating this temporal context within the institutional,

political, and cultural frameworks of schools and educational systems.

This method is especially pertinent to the South African educational environment, which is heavily influenced by politics, policy, and frequent curriculum changes. Driven by the goals of equity, redress, and efficiency, post-apartheid reforms have transitioned from Curriculum 2005 to the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) and, eventually, CAPS. Nonetheless, these efforts have frequently produced technocratic documents that dictate curriculum and pacing while sidelining teachers' input and freedom (Chisholm & Wildeman, 2019; Spaul & Jansen, 2019).

In this context, the iterative dimension of agency illustrates how the historical legacies of apartheid education, the Bantu Education system, and the uneven implementation of reforms since 1994 have influenced South African teachers' identities and pedagogical practices. Numerous teachers still rely on professional experience gained within an educational system marked by inequality, distrust of governance, and minimal involvement in curriculum development (Hoadley, 2020; Sayed & Singh, 2021).

The practical-evaluative dimension reflects the institutional realities of teaching in South African secondary schools, such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, excessive policies, and little pedagogical assistance. These realities significantly affect how teachers understand, implement, and occasionally oppose curriculum requirements. Many schools are anticipated to adopt policies that assume a much higher level of resources than is available, according to Maringe and Moletsane (2024), thereby placing the responsibility for adaptation squarely on teachers.

The projective dimension concerns teachers' envisioned future and their hopes for their own development, change, and learner

success. However, in a system that is frequently described as having rapid reform cycles, inconsistent leadership, and few opportunities for teacher input, these hopes are often dampened by feelings of disillusionment or marginalization. However, many teachers can maintain identities focused on the future, viewing themselves as potential catalysts for significant change rather than merely as recipients of policy (Kennedy, 2019; Vandeyar, 2020).

In this way, the ecological model is consistent with sociocultural practice theories (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), which stress the relational, situated, and mediated aspects of human behavior. It disproves the idea that agency is entirely free or wholly restricted. Instead, it suggests that teachers exercise agency within "ecologies of practice," which are shaped by structural factors but also by their ability to adapt, reinterpret, or oppose those influences in accordance with their identities and objectives (Toom, Husu & Patrikainen, 2021; Biesta & Tedder, 2023).

This framework is particularly valuable for understanding teacher agency during curriculum transitions, which are often complex, emotionally charged periods marked by uncertainty, pressure, and professional vulnerability. These transitions require context adaptation and interpretive judgment in addition to technical conformity. This study seeks to illuminate how teachers understand their roles as curriculum actors and how the contexts in which they operate both facilitate and impede their agency by using the ecological model.

In the modified model (Figure 1), systemic components specific to South Africa are incorporated into the three dimensions of agency. For instance, in the iterative dimension, teachers interpret new reforms in light of past policy failures, historical experiences under Bantu education, and inherited teaching customs.

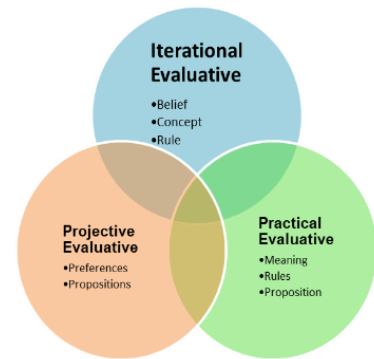


Figure 1: Thematic structure for teachers' conceptual understandings of Teacher Agency

Source: Researcher's original design (2025)

In the practical-evaluative dimension, the daily exercise of agency is impacted by inconsistent leadership, underfunded schools, and policy overload (e.g., CAPS). The projective dimension reflects how teachers envision their professional futures, particularly regarding managing ongoing changes and efforts to regain pedagogical relevance and professional standing.

The model offers a strong analytical perspective on how teachers conceptualize and practice agency during curriculum transitions by situating it within these intersecting dimensions. This encompasses instances of conformity, defiance, creativity, and adjustment, all of which reflect how agency is influenced by and influences the reform process itself.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative, descriptive survey design to examine secondary school teachers' understanding of their responsibilities as curriculum change agents. A quantitative approach was chosen to gather widespread trends in teachers' experiences, perceptions, and beliefs across various school settings. The design was particularly well-suited to collecting organized data that could reveal trends and systemic patterns related to teacher agency.

Participants in this study included Principals, Deputy Principals, Departmental Heads, and teachers from several public secondary schools across Ngaka Modiri District in the North West Province, South Africa, all of whom completed a survey questionnaire. This broad inclusion of school leadership and teaching staff was pivotal in capturing a wide-ranging perspective, enhancing the validity and reliability of the quantitative analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A stratified purposive sampling method was used to guarantee diversity in teacher demographics (experience, qualifications, gender), school quintile, and geography (urban, peri-urban, and rural). The survey was completed by 190 teachers. Participation was optional, and all ethical requirements, such as informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality, were diligently followed.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) and the North West Department of Education. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire specifically designed for this research. Key concepts from the ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) and previous research on curriculum reform in science education served as the foundation for the instrument.

The questionnaire comprised two sections. Section A was on Demographic Information. This section captured participants' background data, including gender, age, educational qualifications, teaching experience, post level, class size, and school location. These details provided a contextual framework for understanding the respondents and their environments. Section B focused on questions related to the understanding of teacher agency

during curriculum transition. This section utilized a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") to assess respondents' perceptions and experiences. The Likert scale enabled the measurement of subjective opinions in a quantifiable manner, ensuring consistency and comparability across responses.

To confirm the instrument's clarity, reliability, and validity, a pilot test was carried out with a small group of teachers (n=5). Based on the input, we made the necessary changes. The questionnaire was distributed through both online platforms (Microsoft Forms via a link) and hard copies, in areas where internet access was limited. Teachers were given three weeks to complete the questionnaire, and follow-up reminders were sent to improve the response rate. In total, 160 survey questionnaires were collected. To examine trends in teacher perceptions, data were cleaned and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, to provide numerical insights into teacher agency. Descriptive statistics are simpler to use and comprehend. Frequency analysis was used to ascertain the proportion of legitimate responses to each survey question. The analysis was guided by the research question: What are teachers' conceptions of teacher agency in curriculum transformation? This framing facilitated the identification of how teachers negotiate their responsibilities and how contextual or structural factors affect their ability to act as change agents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents key statistical patterns revealed by the survey, interpreted through the lens of the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), which views agency as a dynamic interplay between teachers' past experiences, present contexts, and future aspirations. The data reflect how secondary school teachers

conceptualize their agency during curriculum transitions in South Africa.

The survey, which included 160 participants, examined teachers' perceptions across several aspects of their professional lives, including the significance of agency, the impact of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum, school support structures, available resources, and the overall teaching environment. These factors were considered in relation to the development of teacher identity and agency.

The findings are drawn from a comprehensive survey of 160 secondary school teachers and are analyzed across several dimensions: demographics, experience, post levels, qualifications, and teaching environments. Each of these factors contributes

to a holistic understanding of how teacher agency is shaped and enacted in real-world schooling contexts. The following table presents the demographic and professional characteristics of the 160 secondary school teachers who participated in the survey, providing a thorough overview of the sample makeup. The patterns of teacher agency explored in this research cannot be understood without these variables: gender, age, post level, years of teaching experience, qualifications, class size, and school location. It is essential to understand these characteristics since they interact with the ways in which teachers handle curricular modifications, exercise professional judgment, and exercise agency in their own contexts.

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Profile of Surveyed Teachers (N = 160)

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid %	Cumulative %
1. Gender	Female	80	50.0	50.0	50.0
	Male	80	50.0	50.0	100.0
	Total	160	100.0	100.0	
2. Age	25-35	52	32.5	32.5	32.5
	36-45	21	13.1	13.1	45.6
	46-55	71	44.4	44.4	90.0
	56 +	16	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	160	100.0	100.0	
3. Present Post Level	Departmental Head	35	21.9	21.9	21.9
	Deputy Principal	19	11.9	11.9	33.8
	Other	5	3.1	3.1	36.9
	Post Level 1	64	40.0	40.0	76.9
	Principal	37	23.1	23.1	100.0
	Total	160	100.0	100.0	
4. Years of teaching Experience	1 -5	38	23.8	23.8	23.8
	6 -10	35	21.9	21.9	100.0
	11 -15	14	8.8	8.8	32.5
	16 -20	19	11.9	11.9	44.4
	21 +	54	33.8	33.8	78.1
	Total	160	100.0	100.0	
5. Highest Qualification	Degree	92	57.5	57.5	92
	Diploma	27	16.9	16.9	27
	Honours	31	19.4	19.4	31
	Masters	10	6.3	6.3	10
	Total	160	100.0	100.0	160
6. Class Size	5 -29	14	8.8	8.8	78.1
	30 -45	69	43.1	43.1	43.1
	46 -60	42	26.3	26.3	69.4
	61 -75	16	10.0	10.0	88.1
	76 +	19	11.9	11.9	100.0
	Total	160	100.0	100.0	
7. Area where schools are located	Informal Settlement	1	0.6	0.6	0.6
	Rural	120	75.0	75.0	75.6
	Semi-urban	20	12.5	12.5	88.1
	Urban	19	11.9	11.9	100.0
	Total	160	100.0	100.0	

Understanding teachers' identities, including their backgrounds, roles, and career experiences, is foundational to analyzing how they engage with curriculum reform. As Fullan

(2016) posits, meaningful educational change must begin with those responsible for implementing it. This section outlines the demographic and professional characteristics of

the participants, offering insight into how their identities and positions shape their conception of agency during curriculum transitions. Gender distribution was evenly split, 50% female and 50% male. This ensured a balanced perspective, especially since gendered experiences may shape leadership pathways, confidence levels in reform contexts, and openness to change.

One of the variables used to map the context and/or environment in which teachers exercise their teacher agency is age (see Table 1). Along with experience, age can be associated with how teachers exercise their agency, as it can significantly influence teacher behavior and actions, thereby impacting their teaching styles, assessment practices, and adaptation to curriculum changes (Priestley et al., 2015). Understanding how these factors intersect with teacher agency is crucial for interpreting the data presented on the ages of participants who interact, in their individual and collective capacities, in the work of teaching. That is, in their activities of achieving agency by the environments and/or contexts of their schools and the district at large, and specifically across the ages involved. The age distribution of respondents illustrates a broad spectrum of teaching experience and professional maturity.

The largest age group, 71 (44.4%) consisted of teachers aged 46–55, many of whom have extensive classroom experience and a historical view of curriculum evolution in South Africa. 52 Teachers aged 25–35 made up 32.5% of the sample, representing early-career professionals who tend to bring energy, openness to new pedagogies, and familiarity with recent educational training, though they may still be developing their confidence and contextual understanding.

In total, 21 of those aged 36–45 (13.1%) often occupy mid-career positions, balancing both teaching duties and informal leadership roles. 16 Teachers over 56 years (10%) typically bring deep institutional memories and often

contribute as formal or informal mentors within their schools. This generational diversity creates opportunities for both intergenerational mentoring and varying responses to curriculum change, shaped by differing levels of exposure to past reforms.

The data on teaching experience reveal significant implications for how agency is enacted. The data indicate that 54 respondents (33.8%) have more than 21 years of teaching experience. The significant level of longevity (21+ years) suggests resilience, adaptability, and the capacity to interpret reforms through the lens of lived classroom realities. Such teachers have not only navigated several iterations of curriculum change (from NATED 550, Outcome-Based Education (OBE), RNCS to CAPS), but many have also worked with external stakeholders and departments. Their broad understanding of education systems enhances their agency by allowing them to provide guidance, mentor colleagues, and participate meaningfully in reform processes.

In other words, their experience may include the numerous curricula changes they went through. During these curriculum changes, these experienced teachers may have developed resilience and adaptability to different challenges. As Mampane (2022) and Schleicher (2023) note, long-term exposure to educational reforms enhances teachers' critical thinking, enabling them to assess the effectiveness of changes and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly. Their ability to draw on past experiences provides a more nuanced understanding of the implications of new changes, making their reflections particularly insightful. Moreover, these seasoned teachers can serve as mentors to less experienced colleagues, sharing strategies and ideas to facilitate curriculum transitions. Their influence extends beyond personal growth, contributing to a culture of reflection and professional development within the academic community (Smith, 2022).

Meanwhile, 38 respondents (23.8%) had 1–5 years of experience, bringing new teaching strategies and openness to pedagogical experimentation. Their agency is often shaped by their exposure to recent trends in teacher education (Kennedy, 2019; Mkhabela & Khoza, 2023). Notably, experience is not defined solely by years in the classroom. The findings suggest that an agency is also built through involvement in broader educational activities, collaboration with stakeholders, participation in policy forums, and contributions to school development planning.

The analysis of post levels represents varying degrees of responsibility and authority within the teaching profession and reveals a high number of teachers at post level 1. This may indicate where the activity of curriculum changes or enactment lies. The data show that 64 of 160 respondents (40.0%) were post-level 1 teachers, classroom practitioners who offered grounded insights into daily teaching realities. Additionally, 37 (23.1%) principals, 35 (21.9%) Departmental Heads, and 19 (11.9%) Deputy Principals bring administrative perspectives and often play strategic roles in the school-wide implementation of curriculum policies. Meanwhile, 3.1% (5/160) of respondents were a small but important group of officials supporting schools, including Subject Advisors and Curriculum Coordinators. These officials provide a bridge between school sites and districts or provincial offices.

This distribution allows for a multidimensional view of curriculum reform, combining top-down policy interpretation with bottom-up implementation perspectives. Leadership figures typically shape school culture and policy mediation, while classroom teachers operationalize reform in direct contact with learners. This diversity in respondents' post levels brings a broad range of perspectives on program implementation and curriculum changes. Teachers at different post levels experience varying degrees of agency and

influence within the educational system (Guskey & Yoon, 2023). For instance, school principals and Department Heads often possess greater decision-making power and the ability to influence policy implementation, thereby shaping the broader educational environment. On the other hand, post-level 1 teachers, who are primarily engaged in classroom teaching, bring direct classroom experience and practical knowledge, offering valuable insights into the realities of implementing curriculum changes (Day & Sammons, 2020).

The significant representation of principals (23.1%) and Deputy Principals (11.9%) among the respondents suggests that leadership perspectives are relatively well represented. These leaders play a crucial role in facilitating and supporting curriculum changes by spearheading professional development initiatives, allocating resources, and fostering a school culture that embraces change (Fullan, 2021). The role of the Head of Department (21.9%) is particularly pivotal as they serve as middle managers who interpret and communicate curriculum changes to teachers, provide support, and ensure that school policies align with the new curriculum. This position acts as a bridge between administration and teaching staff, helping translate policy into practice (Bendikson, Robinson, & Hattie, 2020). The relatively low percentage (3.1%) of respondents in support roles, such as Subject Advisors and Curriculum Coordinators, indicates a limited but specialized support structure. These roles are critical as they provide specialized expertise and guidance on curriculum content and teaching strategies. Their support enhances teacher agency by offering targeted assistance, helping teachers navigate curriculum changes effectively, and encouraging innovative teaching practices (Timperley, 2021).

Professional qualifications are a key indicator of teacher capacity and potential agency. The prevalence of teacher qualifications

(see Table 1), which is intended to signify professional competence, should play a significant role in shaping teachers' agency in curriculum change and the professional management of their teaching practice. As the statistical table illustrates, these qualifications are integral in the analyses of how teachers may exercise agency in the context of curriculum transitions. Of the 160 respondents to the questionnaire, 92 (57.5%) hold a Bachelor of Education degree, followed by those with advanced degrees: 31 (19.4%) with honors and 10 (6.3%) with master's degrees, indicating a high level of academic engagement and pedagogical depth. 16.9% of respondents hold diplomas, which often signify long-standing experience, particularly among older teachers who entered the profession before.

Teachers with postgraduate qualifications often bring enhanced understanding of the curriculum and confidence in navigating reform. They may also be more inclined to participate in curriculum design, mentorship, and research-based practice. At the same time, younger teachers, although less experienced, tend to have up-to-date training and may be more open to adopting innovative methods.

The distribution of qualifications also correlates with teachers' age and experience. For example, 32.5% of respondents are between 25 and 35 years old, many of whom are likely to be teachers holding entry-level qualifications, such as a bachelor's degree in education. Although these younger teachers may have less experience, they might be more adaptable and open to new teaching methods and curriculum updates, given their recent training and exposure to contemporary educational practices (McNally, 2023).

In contrast, individuals in middle-management positions, such as Principals, Deputy Principals, and Departmental Heads, are predominantly aged 46-56 (44.4%). These individuals typically have more years of

experience and have advanced through the ranks. The data suggests that many of these leaders hold advanced qualifications, such as honors or master's degrees, equipping them with the skills necessary to manage both administrative and educational responsibilities effectively. The analysis of years of experience further supports the notion of career progression, with most middle managers having over 20 years of teaching experience, thus reinforcing their capacity to guide less experienced teachers through curriculum transitions (Schleicher, 2023).

The role of middle management is particularly crucial during curriculum changes. Teachers in these positions bring extensive teaching experience and advanced education, which enhances their ability to mentor younger teachers and provide guidance based on their past experience. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) emphasize the importance of such leadership in fostering a supportive environment during curriculum transitions. Moreover, Subject Advisors and Curriculum Coordinators, who play crucial support roles, typically possess significant experience and professional qualifications. Although they represent a smaller proportion of the teaching population (3.1%), these individuals are likely to possess advanced degrees and a deep understanding of curriculum content and teaching strategies. Their expertise is vital to facilitating curriculum changes, ensuring that transitions are well supported and that all teachers are adequately prepared (Timperley, 2021).

The distribution of teachers across different post levels, reflecting varying years of experience, suggests a well-structured support system within the education sector. While teachers in junior positions may have less experience with curriculum changes, they bring new energy and innovative ideas. Conversely, more experienced teachers in leadership roles provide invaluable experience in managing curriculum changes, which is essential for

mentoring and supporting less experienced colleagues. This balance of adaptability and expertise contributes to a dynamic and responsive education system (Day & Sammons, 2020). This diverse distribution of roles and experiences supports a holistic approach to implementing change. Bringing together experienced leaders and newer teachers creates a collaborative environment where all teachers feel supported during transitions. This is crucial for nurturing teacher agency and ensuring successful curriculum implementation (Kennedy, 2016).

Teachers' agencies are also mediated by their work environment. 120 Rural schools constituted 75% of the sample, suggesting significant challenges, including resource scarcity, large class sizes, and administrative overload. In total, 39 (24,4%) Urban and semi-urban teachers may have more access to support and training. Class size varied greatly: 69 respondents (43.1%) taught 30–45 learners, while 42 (26,3%) taught in overcrowded classrooms with 46–60 learners. This limits individualized teaching and increases pressure, thereby reducing opportunities for innovative curriculum enactment.

Teachers' responses to curriculum change are mediated by these structural constraints, which can either enable or restrict the practical enactment of agency. Despite these constraints, some teachers still demonstrated high levels of agency, often facilitated by strong leadership, collaboration, and personal motivation. The findings thus highlight a complex interaction between structure and agency (Priestley et al., 2015), reinforcing the need for context-sensitive reform strategies.

In concluding the reflection on the context by which individual teachers' agencies emerged, enacted, and/or achieved, the analysis of teachers in the district revealed a rich

diversity in their professional qualifications, experiences, and understanding of curriculum changes. Statistical data from the questionnaire indicate that teachers' perspectives are shaped by various factors, including their age, qualifications (e.g., degrees), and the teaching environments in which they work. Those with advanced professional qualifications tend to exhibit greater agency in navigating curriculum changes and actively advocate for the professional development opportunities necessary to enhance their teaching practices. Middle managers, as pivotal figures in school leadership, provide essential support during these transitions, creating collaborative spaces where expertise is shared and ensuring that curriculum goals are meaningfully integrated into classroom practices.

The following findings are interpreted through the lens of the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015), which offers a multidimensional understanding of how teacher agency is enacted through past experiences (iterational), present institutional contexts (practical-evaluative), and future aspirations (projective). This model provides a rich framework for examining how teachers navigate agencies during curriculum transitions.

These findings highlight the need to bridge the gap between curriculum policy and classroom practice. While teachers demonstrate professional commitment and collaboration, their agency is shaped by a constellation of historical experiences, structural realities, and future aspirations. As the ecological model affirms, teacher agency is not automatic, must be nurtured through trust, autonomy, meaningful engagement, and enabling environments. Table 2 summarizes the responses to the ten statements.

Table 2. Responses of Respondents on The Understanding of Agency And The Impact of Its Aspects

STATEMENTS	STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEUTRAL	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	TOTAL
Agency is an important component of a teacher's professional life	11(6.9%)	2(1.3%)	25(15.6%)	95 (59.4%)	27 (16.9%)	
The CAPS curriculum provides opportunities for teachers to exercise their agency	7(4.4%)	11(6.9%)	32(20%)	94 (58.8%)	16(10%)	
3. The CAPS curriculum differs from the previous curricular that you have experienced.	4(2.5%)	10(6.3%)	31(19.4%)	98(61.3%)	17(10.6%)	
4. The implementation of the CAPS curriculum has been challenging.	7(4.4%)	47(29.4%)	22(13.8%)	68(42.5%)	16(10%)	
5. The curriculum changes that have occurred over the last decade in South Africa address educational challenges faced in your classroom.	11(6.9)	44(27.5%)	27(16.9%)	69(43.1%)	9(5.6%)	
6. The Curriculum is well-designed to cater to the needs of learners.	10(6.3%)	41(25.6%)	18(11.3%)	82(51.3%)	9(5.6%)	
7. The School Management Team (SMT), teachers, and parents support teaching and learning activities fully	7 (4.4%)	25(15.6%)	21(13.1%)	86(53.8%)	21(13.1%)	
8. Teachers work together towards the implementation of the curriculum.	3(1.9%)	5(3.1%)	20(12.5%)	110(68.8%)	22(13.8%)	
9. The resources available are enough and in line with the curriculum.	28(17.5%)	77(48.1%)	16(10.0%)	30(18.8%)	9(5.6%)	
10. The environment is conducive to teaching and learning.	29(18.1%)	37(23.1%)	25(15.6%)	58(36.3%)	11(6.9%)	
Average	6.6%	18.9%	14.9%	49.7%	9.9%	

This section presents a detailed analysis of teachers' responses to questions about their understanding of agency and their opinions of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in South Africa. The data, collected from 160 respondents, are analyzed using the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley et al., 2015), which emphasizes how personal, contextual, and structural variables interact dynamically to influence teacher agency.

The findings are drawn from responses to 10 key statements examining elements of professional agency, curriculum experience,

support networks, and facilitating circumstances in the classroom. To understand how teachers view reform and curriculum implementation, each answer is analyzed thematically.

Agency is an important component of a teacher's professional life

The statement that "Agency is a vital component of a teacher's professional life" emphasizes the essential role agency plays in influencing a teacher's sense of self, independence, and involvement in their profession. In the context of the Ecological

Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), agency is understood as a situated, dynamic capacity that emerges from the interaction among individual capabilities, structural circumstances, and the socio-cultural environment of schooling. Acknowledging agency as a crucial component of education entails recognizing that teachers are not simply passive executors of policy but rather active, reflective practitioners who understand, modify, and implement curriculum in ways that address the demands of their learners and environments. Teachers are more likely to take initiative, innovate in the classroom, and engage critically in changes in education when they see themselves as having agency (Biesta et al., 2015; Day & Gu, 2014). This feeling of ownership and empowerment is crucial for successful and meaningful curriculum change.

According to data, 122 (76.3%) teachers see agency as essential to their professional identity. This supports the Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson's (2015) notion that teacher agency is not simply reactive but a proactive, context-sensitive ability that teachers use to influence instructional results. The 25 (15.6%) neutral responses may indicate a lack of theoretical understanding of the term "agency" or a reluctance among people working in restrictive or unsupportive contexts, suggesting a need for more focused professional development. On the other hand, 13 (8.2%) who disagreed may reflect feelings of disempowerment or top-down directives that have diminished perceptions of professional authority (Kennedy, 2016; Day & Gu, 2014).

The CAPS curriculum provides opportunities for teachers to exercise their agency

The central issue of whether curriculum policy empowers or limits teachers in their professional capacities is addressed by the statement "The CAPS curriculum provides opportunities for teachers to exercise their agency." Teacher agency, according to the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), is not only a personal attribute but also the result of the

interplay between individual skills, institutional culture, and structural possibilities. Although meant to standardize material and define learning objectives, a curriculum like South Africa's CAPS can still give teachers professional autonomy in how they interpret and teach it. With proper support, CAPS may foster agency by enabling teachers to make instructional decisions, modify materials to meet learners' needs, and respond to contextual circumstances. Nonetheless, the extent to which CAPS is perceived as empowering is strongly influenced by teacher preparedness, access to resources, and school-level support (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2020; Timperley, 2021). Therefore, the question examines not only curriculum creation but also the broader systemic capacity to grant teachers the authority to act as curriculum agents.

The 110 (68.8%) respondents agreed, indicating that many people believe CAPS provides some degree of professional discretion, possibly in lesson modification, evaluation methods, or classroom choices. This could also be due to the flexibility in how content is delivered and evaluated. According to Biesta et al. (2015), teacher agency is context-dependent and situational, which is supported by this discovery. However, 32 (20%) respondents were neutral, and 18 (11.3%) disagreed, indicating that not everyone has access to these opportunities. This may also suggest that the apparent degree of autonomy may depend on context, particularly school leadership styles and resource availability (Kennedy, 2016). Some may find CAPS too prescriptive, particularly in fields with strict pacing and content frameworks, which limit room for expert interpretation (Spaull & Jansen, 2019; Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2020). As a result, even though CAPS may offer an agency framework, its actual implementation depends on the available resources, institutional culture, and leadership. The full potential of the CAPS framework may not be realized by teachers in schools that are more bureaucratic or resource-poor.

The CAPS curriculum differs from the previous curriculum that you have experienced.

Teachers' comparative experiences across curriculum reforms are addressed by the statement, "The CAPS curriculum differs from the previous curriculum that you have experienced." This statement prompts thoughtful consideration of how teachers in South Africa's post-apartheid educational environment have changed their views on curriculum reform. Prior experiences are a crucial component in the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). To inform them how they understand and implement current reforms, teachers draw on their prior involvement with earlier curriculum models, such as RNCS, Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), and NATED 550.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which was fully implemented in 2012, has been widely regarded as a more prescriptive and content-heavy alternative to OBE, providing comprehensive instructions and structured pacing across subjects. According to recent research, many teachers view CAPS as having clearer goals and as more demanding in terms of instructional time and evaluation (Dlamini & Mthiyane, 2021; Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2020). The way teachers use their professional judgment, particularly in classrooms with diverse learners' needs, is affected by these perceived changes.

It is crucial to curriculum development and policy sustainability to understand how teachers experience and compare curriculum frameworks. Recent studies indicate that a teacher's prior curriculum experiences serve as cognitive filters that influence their confidence, preparedness, and ability to respond to current policy needs (Mampane, 2022; Mkhize, 2023). The necessity of recognizing historical curriculum routes to create policies that are more inclusive, flexible, and empowering is underscored by this dynamic. 115 (71.9%) respondents agree that there are significant differences between CAPS and earlier curricula,

such as RNCS, OBE, and NATED 550, confirming their familiarity with multiple phases of educational reform. These differences frequently entail changes in evaluation methods, instructional focus, and curriculum structure. For instance, CAPS is distinguished by a more prescribed schedule, standardized evaluation criteria, and more content-specific results characteristics intended to increase uniformity but that may restrict flexibility (Dlamini & Mthiyane, 2021; Mkhabela & Khoza, 2023). This aligns with existing literature that critiques CAPS as more prescriptive yet more focused on clarity and content sequencing (Mkhabela & Khoza, 2023). These distinctions likely affect how teachers approach curriculum design and assert agency, particularly when integrating instructional methods with content-heavy structures.

The implementation of the CAPS curriculum has been challenging.

The implementation of the CAPS curriculum has been challenging," emphasizes the difficulties teachers have in applying policy in South African classrooms. According to the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), agency is shaped by systemic constraints, institutional dynamics, and current working conditions rather than exercised in a vacuum. Despite the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) being intended to provide a more organized, content-rich framework than earlier curricula, its real-world application has proven difficult for teachers at the grassroots level.

According to recent studies, teachers frequently struggle to strike a balance between the demands of CAPS and the realities of the classroom, including overcrowding, learner diversity, and time constraints (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2020; Dlamini & Mthiyane, 2021). According to several teachers, the curriculum's rigorous pace, administrative workload, and lack of support for professional development hinder the use of adaptive methods needed to properly address learners' needs (Mampane, 2022). These issues are

exacerbated by the unequal distribution of resources between urban and rural schools, which often puts teachers in under-resourced regions at a disadvantage (Mkhabela & Khoza, 2023).

These results demonstrate, from an ecological perspective, the necessity of supportive school structures, ongoing training, and responsive leadership to promote teacher agency. Curriculum implementation may turn into a mechanical activity rather than a meaningful, context-responsive process if these facilitating circumstances are not in place.

More than half the respondents, 84 (52.5%), affirm challenges with CAPS implementation, indicating that teachers find it difficult to put into practice. This includes issues such as time pressure, learner diversity, resource shortages, and, in some cases, ambiguous policy communication. 54 (33.8%) respondents who disagreed point to differences in the execution experience, likely due to the caliber of the school administration, available resources, or the quality of the training. Although the implementation of CAPS was intended to provide clarity and order, it has been criticized for placing an excessive burden on teachers and prioritizing uniformity over contextual relevance (**Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2020**; Hoadley, 2018). From an ecological perspective, these challenges demonstrate how the current situation, including classroom size, SMT support, and teacher training, affects the degree to which teachers can exercise their agency. Implementation is simpler where there are supportive ecosystems; where there are too many restrictions, the agency is limited to compliance.

The curriculum changes that have occurred over the last decade in South Africa address educational challenges faced in your classroom.

The statement "The curriculum changes over the last decade address educational challenges faced in your classroom" highlights the perceived efficacy of national curriculum reforms in addressing the evolving issues in

South African classrooms. The data indicate a nuanced and split view of the efficacy of these reforms, with 78 (48.7%) of respondents viewing these reforms as responsive, and 55 (34.4%) still not convinced. This split may suggest that systemic issues, such as overcrowding, inadequate resources, and learner underperformance, persist and continue to influence perceptions of curriculum effectiveness despite changes to the curriculum (Spaull, 2013). A teacher with more agencies may respond well to curriculum adjustments, while others might struggle without institutional assistance.

According to the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), the curriculum policy's relevance and responsiveness are key elements of the current environment that impact how agency is exercised. Teachers can implement a curriculum effectively when it adequately meets learners' needs, accounts for socioeconomic factors, and considers the conditions under which they teach. Teachers may find it difficult to view curriculum changes as a means of addressing urgent classroom issues, such as crowded classrooms, multilingual learner groups, poor performance, and lack of assistance, if they perceive these changes as unrelated to the realities of daily teaching.

This uncertainty is echoed in recent research. Research has revealed that the CAPS has not always been responsive to contextual differences across school settings, despite providing clarity and structure (Dlamini & Mthiyane, 2021; Mahlangu & Beckmann, 2021). Teachers in disadvantaged or rural locations, in particular, report that policy changes frequently ignore their specific challenges, such as huge class sizes, language barriers, and inadequate infrastructure (Mkhabela & Khoza, 2023). In addition, the top-down approach to reform has restricted teachers' ability to contribute to curriculum development, which may have undermined their agency and reduced the efficacy of classroom-level changes (Mampane, 2022).

Therefore, although curriculum reforms may aim to reduce systemic inequalities, their actual effects depend on their compatibility with local circumstances and their ability to accommodate teacher input, flexibility, and creativity.

The Curriculum is well-designed to cater to the needs of learners.

Curriculum design is a structural element that interacts with teachers' pedagogical agency and professional judgment. Teachers may tailor their teaching approaches to match their learners' interests, developmental levels, and socioeconomic circumstances when the curriculum is well-organized and learner-focused. Teachers' sense of purpose and professional confidence is boosted when they view the curriculum as consistent, adaptable, and conducive to learner development. However, critics contend that curriculum design might be excessively prescriptive, material-laden, or inconsistent with classroom realities in several instances, particularly in systems such as South Africa's CAPS, thereby impeding differentiation and responsiveness (Spaull & Jansen, 2019; Mahlangu & Beckmann, 2021). Therefore, teachers' assessments of curriculum design provide crucial information on whether a policy results in instructional empowerment or mandates strict adherence.

The CAPS design is supported by 91 respondents (56,9%), but 51 (31,9%) of respondents are unhappy with it. Critics argue that CAPS frequently encourages rote memorization and minimizes learner agency or creativity (Mahlangu & Beckmann, 2021). Differences in training, the topic's relevance, or discrepancies between classroom realities and policy objectives may account for the varied reactions among teachers.

The School Management Team (SMT), teachers, and parents support teaching and learning activities fully

The statement "Parents, teachers, and the School Management Team (SMT) provide support" addresses the crucial role of collaborative partnerships in fostering effective teaching and learning. The Ecological Model of

Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) posits that teacher agency derives from both individual skills and the social and institutional contexts in which teachers operate. A unified support system is established when school management, teachers, and parents collaborate. This system improves teachers' self-assurance, reinforces instructional objectives, and equips the school with the tools it needs to manage change. An effective SMT fosters a common vision, supports professional growth, and serves as a bridge between classroom realities and policy needs. At the same time, active parental participation strengthens the home-school link, fostering accountability and helping learners achieve academic success. On the other hand, teacher isolation, disjointed implementation, and a weaker curriculum coherence are frequently the results of a lack of stakeholder collaboration (Day & Sammons, 2020; Timperley, 2021). As a result, the involvement of all significant players is crucial to maintaining teacher agency and facilitating effective curriculum implementation.

107 respondents (66.9%) indicated adequate institutional and parental support, which is crucial for encouraging teacher agency (Timperley, 2021). The ecological model's focus on enabling factors, such as school culture and collaborative leadership, is also consistent with this. However, 32 the (20%) dissatisfaction rate shows that some teachers are still constrained in their ability to make independent decisions by systemic inequalities or subpar management.

Teachers work together to implement the curriculum.

Teacher agency is not practiced in a vacuum, but is heavily impacted by institutional and relational environments, according to the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Teachers' collaboration promotes shared professional development, the co-development of pedagogical strategies, and mutual support throughout curriculum revisions. Consequently, collaborating on curriculum implementation is essential for facilitating

individual and collective agency and fostering coherence, consistency, and innovation in teaching methods. Through reflective and adaptive practices, teachers who function as professional learning communities are more likely to successfully manage policy demands and maintain reform (Avalos, 2011; Timperley, 2021).

132 respondents (82.6%) agree that curriculum development involves significant collaboration. It is well understood that collegiate interaction improves reflective practice and professional learning (Avalos, 2011). Collaborative networks serve as critical platforms for nurturing collective agencies and mitigating reform anxiety.

The available resources are sufficient and aligned with the curriculum.

The environment in which agency is exercised is heavily influenced by resources, whether physical (such as textbooks and infrastructure), technological, or pedagogical. Sufficient and curriculum-aligned resources not only help teachers teach effectively but also enable them to be creative, modify content, and connect with learners in meaningful ways. In contrast, a teacher's capacity for professional judgment is limited when resources are scarce or misaligned with curricular needs, leaving them with no choice but to improvise or dilute the intended outcomes. The disparity between curriculum requirements and available resources continues to restrict fair implementation and restrict teacher autonomy in several South African contexts, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools (Spaull, 2013; DBE, 2019).

The fact that 105 respondents (65.6%) highlighted that they do not have enough resources or resources that are in line with their needs is alarming, reflecting persistent problems in South African schools, notably in rural districts, where curriculum implementation is hampered by a lack of textbooks and infrastructural deficiencies (DBE, 2019). By making the teacher responsible for all

improvisation, such restrictions might significantly reduce the agency.

The environment is conducive to teaching and learning.

The Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) posits that agency is not merely an individual characteristic but arises from the interplay between individual talents and environments that facilitate or constrain them. An encouraging environment, defined by safety, mutual respect, professional trust, and minimal disruption, is necessary to promote successful instruction and long-lasting learning. In such a setting, teachers can teach the curriculum with confidence, adapt their lessons to meet learners' needs, and contribute significantly to the life of the school. On the other hand, teacher morale and agency may be stifled in environments characterized by overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, disciplinary problems, or administrative instability. Day and Sammons (2020) contend that because positive school environments are so crucial in the larger curriculum reform ecosystem, they are closely linked to improved teacher efficacy and learner outcomes.

The near-equal split of 69 respondents (43,2%) agreeing and 66 (41,2%) disagreeing is shown by this discovery. Some teachers work in encouraging settings, but others face obstacles such as noisy classrooms, excessive class sizes, or unsafe conditions that stifle creativity and engagement (Spaull & Jansen, 2019). Positive settings are essential for an agency to thrive.

The evidence may indicate that resource limitations and environmental constraints remain significant obstacles, even if teacher collaboration, institutional support, and understanding of agency are all robust. These results reinforce the significance of context in the exercise of agency, lending credence to the ecological viewpoint that agency is located, developing, and dependent on several strata of culture and structure (Priestley et al., 2015).

The accessibility and suitability of instructional resources are essential environmental factors that either promote or

restrict agency. For curriculum changes like the CAPS to be effective, teachers need access to resources that are not only enough in quantity but also directly aligned with the curriculum, evaluation criteria, and teaching methods. Teachers are better positioned to implement the curriculum effectively, differentiate instruction, and address a wide range of learners' needs when this alignment exists. However, a severe disparity persists between curriculum expectations and resource allocation in many South African settings, notably in rural and under-resourced schools. This gap compels teachers to fill it, often diminishing their creativity and undermining both the quality of instruction and learner outcomes (DBE, 2019; Spaul & Jansen, 2019).

The data indicate that despite strong teacher collaboration, institutional support, and agency awareness, resource limitations and environmental constraints remain significant challenges. These results corroborate the significance of context in the exercise of agency, lending credence to the ecological view that agency is situated, arises, and depends on numerous levels of culture and structure (Priestley et al., 2015).

A teacher's agency is a flexible capacity that develops through interactions with people and their social and cultural surroundings, rather than a fixed characteristic. This study's results are analyzed primarily using the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), which focuses on temporal, interpersonal, and contextual factors influencing agency. Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) temporal-relational theory of agency, which views agency as a temporally embedded process informed by the iterational (past), practical-evaluative (present), and projective (future) dimensions, further complements this.

Taken together, these ideas provide a strong lens for examining how South African secondary school teachers engage with curriculum reform under CAPS. The way teachers perceive and exercise their agency under CAPS is heavily influenced by their past

experiences, which have been shaped by prior curriculum reforms such as NATED 550 and OBE. According to the data, 33.8% of participants had more than 21 years of teaching experience, indicating a high level of familiarity with various curriculum changes. This historical engagement contributes to what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) refer to as the iterative component of agency, in which individuals draw on past behaviors and ideas to guide their current decisions.

Teachers with extensive experience have been shown to have a greater capacity for reflexivity and flexibility, a finding corroborated by recent studies by Mampane (2022) and Schleicher (2023), who contend that prolonged exposure to reform environments fosters more thoughtful pedagogical reasoning and critical engagement with new policies. By assuming mentoring positions, these seasoned teachers frequently share institutional knowledge and improve the group's capacity for change.

The Practical-Evaluative

According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), the agency's practical-evaluative aspect concerns taking action and making decisions based on the needs of the present context. The study found that factors such as the school environment, teaching quality, class size, and available resources had a major impact on teachers' agency. For instance, 75% of the sample came from rural schools, and many teachers cited overcrowded classrooms (e.g., 26.3% taught 46–60 learners), few resources (only 24.4% thought they were sufficient), and inconsistent SMT support. These restrictions highlight how context might support or constrain agency and teachers' ability to implement the curriculum (Priestley et al., 2015; Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2020).

Even with these obstacles, 82.6% of teachers reported engaging in curriculum implementation, indicating the presence of professional learning communities (PLCs) that foster collective agency. Even in a restricted setting, this kind of collaboration promotes mutual reflection, shared problem-solving, and

creativity, demonstrating that agency may be maintained via relational support systems (Avalos, 2019; Day & Sammons, 2020).

The Projective

Through their engagement with curriculum reform and professional development, teachers also demonstrated forward-looking goals, indicative of the projective aspect of agency identified by Emirbayer and Mische. Although 76.3% of respondents said that agency is a crucial component of their professional identity, just 48.7% thought that curriculum changes over the past ten years have addressed classroom issues. This discrepancy highlights a conflict between the policy's goals and the facts on the ground.

In under-resourced settings, this type of misalignment can undermine teachers' confidence in lasting change and demoralize them (Mkhabela & Khoza, 2023). However, many participants, especially those with graduate degrees (25.7%), expressed confidence in their ability to influence curriculum results. Teachers with more academic capital are more likely to participate in curriculum co-design, mentor coworkers, and advocate for context-responsive teaching methods, according to Kennedy (2019) and Timperley (2021).

This supports the notion that teachers have greater projective agency when they have access to advanced credentials, leadership support, and methods for providing policy feedback. Agency risks can be reduced to compliance when these circumstances are absent.

The Ecological Interdependencies

The ecological framework of an agency demonstrates how micro (classroom), meso (school), and macro (policy) systems work together to influence teacher agency. Middle-management roles for teachers (principals, deputy principals, and heads of department) have been shown to increase their confidence in dealing with curriculum changes, largely due to their strategic positions and access to decision-making processes. Day & Sammons (2020) describe middle managers as "translators" of

policy, connecting top-down directives with bottom-up activities.

They were essential in this experiment for maintaining coherence, promoting professional growth, and ensuring that curriculum implementation was supported by the necessary tools and pedagogical guidance. Their agency served as both a systemic leverage point and an individual capacity (Schleicher, 2023).

A significant insight from the findings is the divergence in teachers' perceptions of the CAPS curriculum design. While 56.9% of teachers viewed it as well-structured and supportive of teaching, a substantial 31.9% expressed dissatisfaction. This divergence reflects the tension between the benefits of standardization, such as clarity and consistency, and the constraints it imposes on teacher autonomy and pedagogical flexibility. Many teachers, particularly those in schools with limited resources, view CAPS as rigid and top-down, even though it offers defined results and a steady pace. Such recommendations often contradict the realities of teaching, limiting opportunities for contextualized learning, as Dlamini & Mthiyane (2021) contend.

This is consistent with the literature that advises against overly prescriptive reforms that weaken teachers by limiting their professional judgment (Spaull & Jansen, 2019). As a result, effective curriculum reform requires a balance between structure and autonomy, enabling teachers to adapt course content to meet their learners' needs.

The results confirm that teacher agency in South Africa is historically rooted, layered, and dependent. By looking at the same issue through the lens of the Ecological Model and Temporal-Relational Theory, it is clear that: (1) Structural support (such as leadership, cooperation, and resources) can help protect against policy inflexibility; (2) How reforms are received and implemented are strongly influenced by a teacher's identity and experience; and (3) Encouraging long-term, projective agencies require professional development and involvement in policymaking.

To foster teacher agency in a meaningful way, lawmakers must acknowledge that schools are ecological systems rather than independent entities and ensure that reforms are adaptable, inclusive, and reflective of teachers' real-world experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to investigate how secondary school teachers in South Africa understand and exercise their professional agency amid ongoing curriculum changes. Based on the Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) and Emirbayer and Mische's temporal-relational theory of agency (1998), the study has shown that agency is not a fixed characteristic but rather a contextual, temporal, and relational one.

The results revealed that a convergence of individual histories, institutional environments, and future-oriented goals dynamically influences teacher agency. Previous encounters with policy changes from NATED 550 to OBE, RNCS, and CAPS provide teachers with a framework for understanding ongoing reforms and iteratively influence their agency. The data emphasized the practical-evaluative aspect most, illustrating how everyday choices are influenced by classroom factors such as overcrowding, resource constraints, and the robustness of professional communities. On the other hand, the projective dimension revealed a combination of caution, optimism, and irritation, as teachers expressed a need for change while also doubting the government's ability to respond.

Data from 160 individuals offered convincing quantitative insights. Although 76.3% of respondents saw agency as essential to their work, just 48.7% thought that recent curriculum changes had adequately tackled the issues they face. Likewise, 31.9% of respondents were unhappy with CAPS's design, while 56.9% thought it was well-designed, demonstrating a conflict between standardization and teacher independence. These results highlight the

contextual diversity of agency, particularly between urban and rural schools, and between new and veteran teachers. Additionally, the study emphasizes the important role that middle management, such as principals and department heads, plays in either enabling or limiting agency. These leaders are essential in translating policy and facilitating professional growth, especially in schools with inadequate systemic support. In addition, postgraduate-qualified teachers demonstrated greater confidence and flexibility in handling curriculum changes, making professional credentials a key facilitator of agency.

Theoretically, the study helps to broaden the use of ecological and temporal-relational models of agency in curriculum research in developing nations. Empirically, it expands the restricted body of research on the lived experiences of South African teachers throughout policy changes. In practice, it supports the notion that curriculum reform must be based on teachers' daily experiences, recognizing their expertise, respecting their professional judgment, and fostering innovation and cooperation for it to be meaningful and lasting.

Given these results, the following recommendations are made: (1) School administrators and politicians make investments in ongoing, context-specific professional development that fosters both individual and collective agency; (2) Teachers' opinions are integrated from the beginning to the conclusion of the curriculum development and reform processes through a participatory approach; and (3) More resources and concentrated help should be directed toward underfunded schools, where systemic limitations most severely restrict the agency. Future studies will employ longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches to investigate how agency develops over time across a variety of educational settings and disciplines. The study ultimately emphasizes that teachers are active change agents whose agency must be recognized, promoted, and valued, not just

passive recipients of curriculum change. It is essential to increase teacher agency to bring about fair, context-appropriate, and long-lasting change in South African education; it is not an optional addition to reform.

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