Changing pedagogy: A comparative analysis of reform efforts in Uganda and Turkey

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CHAPTER: 3

Curriculum change in Uganda: Teacher perspectives on the new Thematic Curriculum

ABSTRACT[2]

Based on a fieldwork study, this chapter seeks to investigate the implementation of Thematic Curriculum in Uganda from the perspectives of teachers. The chapter shows that although the majority of teachers are enthusiastic about the new curriculum, their implementation efforts are constrained by a multitude of challenges. The findings raise questions with regard to the appropriateness of the new curriculum initiative to the structural realities of Ugandan classrooms, and calls for increased attention to the implementation process.

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, almost all sub-Saharan African countries have been involved in educational reforms, particularly in development of new curricula (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). Often, these curricula are well-designed and have laudable aims to achieve. Nevertheless, in many cases, their implementation has resulted in less than desirable outcomes and led to waste of considerable resources, time, and effort since well-intentioned policies were never translated into classroom reality (Rogan & Grayson, 2003).

The literature on education reforms in developing countries has been increasingly focusing on the extent to which numerous educational reform initiatives were rarely effectively implemented and have often failed to achieve their objectives (Fullan, 2007; Higgins, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2002; Psacharopoulos, 1989; Ward et al., 2003). There is now a common acknowledgement that policymakers need to consider and plan for the implementation stage if reforms are to be successful. Indeed, policymakers need to view implementation as a critical stage and understand all stages of reform process as interdependent, rather than as distinct from each other

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[2] The chapter is based on:

(O'Sullivan, 2002). Nevertheless, sufficient analytical attention has not been given to the implementation processes in developing countries; hence, many aspects of such processes are not yet well understood. Consequently, there is a limited information base that policymakers can draw on (Dyer, 1999). For this reason, Dyer (1999) argues that there is an urgent need for research that focuses on the implementation process in order to improve our knowledge on the actual processes of change, the potential problems and issues that can emerge, and methods of addressing them.

This chapter aims to respond to Dyer's call for more research on the implementation process by looking at the experience of Uganda. Similar to other African countries, Uganda has engaged in various curriculum reforms in the post-independence period after 1962. The new curriculum for primary schools, called the 'Thematic Curriculum', has been recently developed and implemented nationwide starting from February 2007. There are high expectations associated with the new curriculum. A literate and numerate population is regarded imperative for sustainable development and economic growth in Uganda. In this context, the Thematic Curriculum is believed to contribute to such processes by improving education quality, and more specifically by increasing the achievement levels of in literacy, numeracy and life skills.

Similar to many other curriculum initiatives, the Thematic Curriculum has many laudable goals and objectives. Yet, it remains to be seen whether the new curriculum initiative will be adequately implemented by teachers and whether the well-intentioned policies incorporated into the curriculum will be translated into classroom reality. This chapter seeks to explore these issues from the perspectives of teachers. It is based on a fieldwork study in primary schools that were selected to pilot the new curriculum in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. The chapter adopts an analytical framework developed by Rogan and Grayson (2003), and explores to what extent and how teachers have been implementing the Thematic Curriculum.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The significance of implementation stage in education reforms

Decision-making is a complex and crucial event in the policy process. It is preceded by analytical and/or political activities and followed by equally significant planning activities. Although both types of activities are crucial in

developing and realising education reforms, more attention has often been given to policy formulation at the expense of implementation stage. This is particularly the case in developing country contexts (Haddad, 1995). As Rogan (2007) confirms, the attention and energies of policymakers are too often focused on the 'what' of desired educational change and neglect the 'how'.

A considerable amount of planning and even de facto policy formulation takes place during the actual implementation process. These include the following reasons: (1) circumstances related to implementation constraints cause policy modifications to take place; (2) feedback obtained during implementation causes reassessment of aspects of the policy decision and subsequent modifications by policymakers; and (3) the mere translation of abstract policy intentions into concrete implementation causes reassessment and redesign. Undertaking such changes is not exceptional during educational reform process since implementation problems are frequently under-estimated during policy planning. Indeed, 'misjudging the ease of implementation is probably the most frequent error in policy-making' (Haddad, 1995, p. 36). Dyer (1999) warns that when implementation stage has not been well planned and structured, it may result in strong resistance to policy messages and unexpected outcomes. Consequently, the reform policy may be diluted by ad hoc adjustments and short-term strategies for coping.

Referring to the experiences of USA and Australia in educational change, Porter (1980) notes that those who are concerned with policymaking and enacting the relevant legislation hardly ever pay attention to the implementation stage. Likewise, in his analysis of 21 the World Bank-supported educational reform programmes, Verspoor (1989) concludes that such programmes tend to emphasize adoption and neglect implementation phase. Therefore, even if these programmes were essentially based on a good idea, the majority of them resulted in low outcomes due to poor implementation. Dyer (1999) also maintains that such neglect is highly regrettable, particularly in developing country contexts, as they can ill afford the wasted resources, time and effort. Moreover, cumulative and comparative knowledge of successful and less successful implementation experiences is hardly used in the design of new reform programmes. Therefore, the same mistakes can be repeated rather than being avoided (London, 1993).
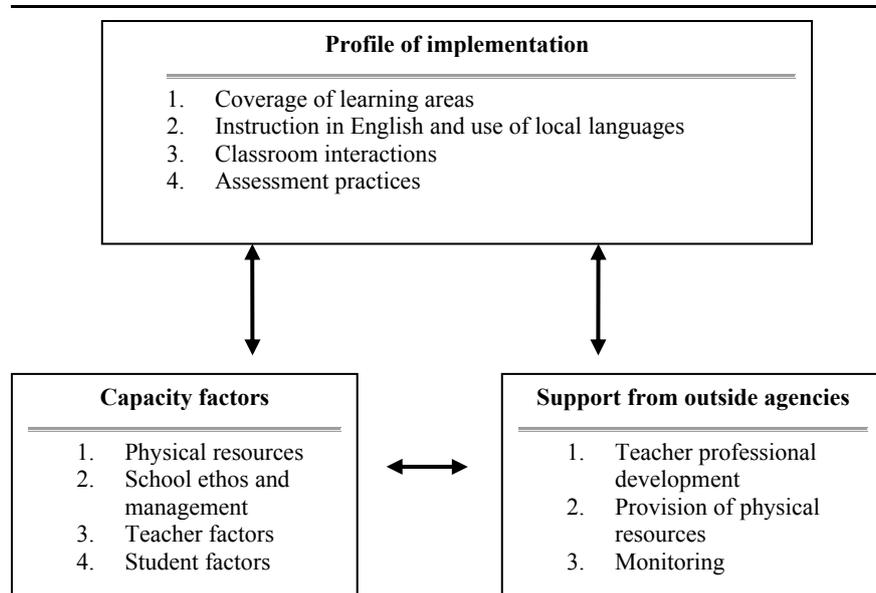
2.2. Analytical framework

Within this study, in order to explore how teachers implemented the Thematic Curriculum in selected schools in Kampala, a framework developed by Rogan and Grayson (2003) is used with some adaptations. The framework draws on the school development, educational change, and science education literature, and attempts to overcome some of the shortcomings of earlier frameworks developed by Beeby (1966), and Verspoor and Wu (1990). Beeby (1966) categorised schools and educational systems according to four developmental stages (Dame School, Formalism, Transition and Meaning), and assumed that schools progress from 'lower' to 'higher' stages. However, Beeby's model underestimates the complexity of an educational system and focuses only on teachers, making no reference to other aspects of the school context.

The more comprehensive model, which was developed by Verspoor and Wu (1990) and later on adapted by De Feiter et al. (1995), broadens the focus of development by including factors related to teachers, curriculum and school. However, this model neglects students. Similar to Beeby model, it proposes four stages of development: Unskilled, Mechanical, Routine and Professional. This model also implies a linear view of curriculum change, moving from one stage to the next higher stage. Therefore, both models tend to obscure the complex and idiosyncratic nature of the process (Rogan & Grayson, 2003).

Rogan and Grayson (2003) base their theory of implementation on three main constructs: support from outside agencies, capacity to support innovation, and profile of implementation (Fig. 3) The 'support from outside agencies' describes the kinds of actions undertaken by outside organizations, such as departments of education, to influence practices, either by support or sanction. In many developing countries, outside agencies may also involve international development agencies and local or international NGOs. The sub-constructs are divided into two: material support and nonmaterial support. Material support may include provision of physical resources such as buildings, books, or apparatus, and direct support to students (such as school-lunch programmes). Non-material support is mostly provided in the form of professional development. It is probably one of the most visible and obvious ways in which outside agencies attempt to bring about change in schools. As the literature on 'learning organisation' suggests, teacher professional development can also be promoted through cooperation and support among teachers (Karsten et al., 2000). Therefore, it can also be regarded as a sub-

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construct of school capacity. To bring about change, outside organisations can also exert pressure, such as by way of monitoring.

Fig. 3. The analytical framework (Adopted from Rogan & Grayson, 2003).

Profile of implementation

1. Coverage of learning areas
2. Instruction in English and use of local languages
3. Classroom interactions
4. Assessment practices

Capacity factors

1. Physical resources
2. School ethos and management
3. Teacher factors
4. Student factors

Support from outside agencies

1. Teacher professional development
2. Provision of physical resources
3. Monitoring

The construct 'capacity to support innovation' is concerned with factors that are likely to support or hinder the implementation of new ideas and practices in the new curriculum. This construct recognizes that schools differ in terms of their capacity to implement innovations. Possible indicators fall into four categories: physical resources, school ethos and management, teacher factors, and student factors. Physical resources are crucial as poor conditions and limited resources can limit the performance of even the best teachers and students. The school ethos and management are not the same, yet they are considered together as they are closely intertwined, particularly in schools in developing countries. If the school is in disarray and not functioning well, innovation cannot or will not be implemented. Research has also shown that the leadership role of the principal is critical in reform implementation (Fullan, 2007). Teachers play a pivotal role in reform processes, and factors such as their background, training, subject matter knowledge, motivation, commitment to teaching, and attitudes towards proposed innovation influence their capacity and willingness to implement change. Likewise, the background of students, and the kind of strengths and constraints they might

bring to the school are crucial. A range of issues influence student attitudes to learning and responses to change, such as their home environments, parental commitment to education, health and nutrition, and proficiency level in the language of instruction. The contribution of these four factors to the capacity of school to support innovation is likely to be dynamic and changing over time.

The third construct, 'profile of implementation' assists in understanding, analysing and expressing the extent to which the objectives of the reform programme are put into practice. It recognizes the fact that there can be multiple ways of putting a curriculum into action. However, it assumes that some broad commonalities of what constitutes excellence will emerge. In addition, the profile recognizes that there can be different levels at which implementation might be said to occur. Therefore, implementation of a new curriculum is not an all-or-nothing proposition.

3. Contextual background

3.1. Curriculum review process

Uganda has made enormous efforts and invested substantially through UPE to increase access to primary education. These efforts have resulted in dramatic increases in primary school enrolment rates. Immediately in 1997, enrolment rates doubled and continued to increase afterwards. Enrolment at primary level rose from 2.6 million in 1996 to 7.5 million in 2008. Gross enrolment ratio for all grades was 113.1 percent in 2008 and the net enrolment ratio was 93.3 percent in the same year (MOES, 2008). Other major gains included construction of new schools and classrooms, deployment and training of additional numbers of teachers, and increases in the production and distribution of textbooks. In 2008, there were 104,899 classrooms and 127,694 teachers on government payroll. Pupil teacher ratio in government schools was 53 (MOES, 2008).

Nevertheless, since the primary goal of UPE has been on access to primary education, it has significantly overshadowed issues relating to education quality. There is a widespread perception, especially among parents, that the quality of primary education has suffered because of the rapid expansion of the system with the UPE. There are indeed a number of weaknesses and challenges evident in the education system, such as poor student performance, frequent student absenteeism, high dropout and repetition rates, and poor quality of new infrastructure (Hoppers, 2008). In

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fact, the quality of education at primary level remains largely unsatisfactory. For instance, as a result of high dropout rates, only 22 percent of the 1997 primary one cohort was progressing through primary seven in 2003. Various studies have also shown that the majority of Ugandan pupils were failing to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy. For instance, studies conducted by Ugandan National Examination Board (UNEB) in 2005 revealed that only 38 percent of the primary three pupils and 30 percent of the primary six pupils reached the defined competency levels in Literacy. Figures for Numeracy were 14 percent and 33 percent for primary three and primary six pupils, respectively (UNEB, 2005). These results were considered by many to be both disappointing and unacceptable.

A number of research studies have tried to analyse the underlying causes of low quality at primary schools. These studies highlighted lack of qualified teachers (especially in rural areas), inadequate lesson planning, overly large classes, lack of basic materials, and high teacher and head teacher absenteeism (ESA, 2003). These studies also raised questions about the quality and appropriateness of curriculum. Indeed, there had already been some criticism of the 2000 curriculum before it was introduced into primary schools. Therefore, the curriculum issue was kept very much at the centre of the growing debate on education quality in the past years. Consequently, the MOES initiated a curriculum review process, and installed a Task Force to consider the 2000 primary curriculum (Penny et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2006).

The subsequent report of the Task Force confirmed earlier concerns over the curriculum. The report concluded that the overall performance of pupils at primary level had not significantly improved, and that literacy levels in English and in local languages were unacceptably low, especially outside Kampala and in rural areas. The curriculum was overloaded, emphasized the acquisition of facts in various subjects, and the teaching and learning also focused mainly on recall and other lower cognitive skills. In addition, 'reading, writing, listening and speaking were not allocated sufficient time in the current primary curriculum and that literacy and numeracy teaching skills in lower primary grades were seriously inadequate. Because students failed to develop early literacy, they performed poorly in all curriculum subjects and failure to perform led directly to loss of interest by both parents and students with consequent high dropout rates' (Read & Enyutu, 2005, p. 9).

The Review Report also highlighted that reform of the primary curriculum, by itself, would not be sufficient to achieve higher education quality, and suggested a number of other, closely related areas that needed urgent reforms, including local language policy, learning materials provision

and use, pre-service and in-service teacher training, primary school supervision and mentoring, and assessment (Read & Enyutu, 2005). The Review Report was subsequently shared with all education stakeholders in Uganda and their views were sought in various meetings. These meetings informed the Roadmap, which was intended to guide the curriculum development and implementation processes. The writing process for the new curriculum began in 2005 and was completed in the following year.

3.2. Thematic Curriculum

The Thematic Curriculum is based on three main principles (NCDC, 2006a):

1. Rapid development of literacy, numeracy and life skills at lower primary;
2. The treatment of concepts holistically, under themes of immediate meaning and relevance to the learner; and,
3. The presentation of learning experiences in languages in which the learners are already proficient.

In terms of content, the new curriculum covers almost the same areas that existed in the 2000 Curriculum. However, the knowledge and competencies are arranged in accordance with a thematic approach. At the same time, it strives to adopt a 'child-centred approach' by putting the child's interests, experience and needs at the centre of the curriculum. The thematic approach also helps to avoid content overlaps and repetition that existed in the subject-based curriculum. Although a theme-based approach is used for curriculum for primary one, two and three, the subject-based curriculum will remain at upper levels (NCDC, 2006a).

The new curriculum also stipulates that wherever possible the child should learn in the home language or at least in a language that is familiar to the child. It is based on the conviction (and evidence recorded by various research studies) that higher achievement levels are reached in literacy when children study in a language of which they already have a strong oral command. Therefore, all learning materials used in the first three years of primary education will be provided in the child's own language or a language familiar to the child. In addition, all written tests that are used for assessment purposes will be administered in the local language except for the assessment of English language competence. However, English will be the language of instruction in schools in which there is no predominant local language or area language. At P4, both English and the local language will be used during

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teaching and learning, yet a gradual transition from local languages to English is expected. By the end of the year, the local language will be used only for explaining the most difficult concepts. Written materials, including textbooks will be in simple English and all assessment will be carried out in English (NCDC, 2006a). During the remaining three years of primary education, English will be used as the language of instruction across the country.

The language of instruction policy was the most controversial issue during curriculum development process. There are more than 60 local languages used in Uganda, hence, there are many potential language of instructions. Selection of a local language as the language of instruction at school has financial, staffing and training as well as political implications. Such cultural and political considerations assume huge importance particularly in districts with various different and sometimes rival, competing languages (Read & Enyutu, 2005). Furthermore, urban schools are allowed to use English as the language of instruction as there are pupils from various language backgrounds in such schools. However, since all schools are expected to teach in English in upper grades and since the Primary Leaving Examination is in English, some considered schools in urban areas to be in an advantageous position. There were fears that such a language policy would augment the performance gap between urban and rural schools.

The 'child-centred' approach of the Thematic Curriculum is further emphasized in teaching and learning methodologies. By child-centred, the new curriculum particularly refers to the following (NCDC, 2006b, p. 3):

1. Children should have a chance to interact with each other and with the teacher during the lesson;
2. Class activities should be organised so that children learn by doing. They should be able to move around from time to time, and to use their hands;
3. Activities should be organised around a variety of learning materials, and children should be able to handle the materials;
4. Children should have an opportunity, from time to time, to have influence on the direction that the lesson (or day) takes. Allow the lesson to reflect the interests, abilities and concerns of the children.

According to the official curriculum documents, several components of the new curriculum reflect a child-centred approach, such as the focus on thematic areas and choosing themes that closely relate to children's interests, experiences and background. The recommended pedagogical approach emphasizes children's activities rather than teachers. Therefore, there is a

strong focus on activating children during lessons, encouraging them to participate and perform. Instead of being passive receivers of what they are told, children are expected to engage actively in learning by way of exploring, observing, experimenting, and practising. The curriculum also suggests some enjoyable activities, such as games, acting, drawing, dancing, and singing. According to the new approach, the majority of lesson time should be spent on classroom activities, which might involve group or pair work or individual pupils working on assignments independent of the teacher. Moreover, a rich and varied literature environment is viewed important, therefore the curriculum recommends the use of a range of learning resources, such as flash cards, sentence cards, wall charts, work cards, simple readers and children's own written work. Teachers are also encouraged to think of other creative ways that would engage children in learning, and stimulate learning through play (NCDC, 2006a; 2006b).

With regard to student evaluation, the new curriculum adopts continuous assessment and requires teachers to assess their pupils on a daily basis. The purpose of such assessment is considered to be diagnostic and remedial. It is assumed that frequent assessment would facilitate appropriate feedback and corrective action on the part of teachers. For instance, it would enable teachers to identify individual learning difficulties and provide adequate help so that the child would catch up with the rest of the class. Likewise, high achievers can be identified and given more challenging tasks to stimulate their learning (NCDC, 2006a). The main principles of assessment are laid down as such within the curriculum:

1. The assessment should be done during the normal lessons as children carry out their daily tasks.
2. Teachers keep records for each child, showing competencies achieved.
3. Assessment is cumulative. For example, if a child has not achieved a particular competence in one Theme, the same child may achieve it at a later stage and this should be recorded at that time.
4. Assessment can be conducted through the following: by the teachers observing children, listening to them in class, looking at their exercise books, marking handwriting and looking at the class work they produce and recording what they have achieved. The teacher should not set separate 'assessment' tests/examinations (NCDC, 2006a, p. 12).

The new curriculum was introduced into each grade level one year at a time. It was first piloted at P1 in 90 selected schools in 11 districts staring from

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February 2006. After the pilot phase, the Thematic Curriculum was launched nationwide in February 2007. In the same year, it was piloted at P2 at the same 90 schools. The implementation of the new curriculum will be completed through P1 to P7 in 2013 over a period of seven years (Read & Enyutu, 2005).

4. The present study

4.1. Sample

The analysis presented in this chapter is based on research conducted in Uganda between June and July 2007. All the eight schools which were selected to pilot the Thematic Curriculum in Kampala were visited. These were all government aided, so called UPE schools. The criteria for school selection were decided upon by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), yet the actual selection of schools was done by the District Inspectorate of Schools. The criteria included geographical location, socio-economic background of pupils, and head teachers' commitment to the new curriculum. The oldest school visited was established in 1932, and the others were founded mostly in 1950s. The school size ranged widely between 500 and 2,258. According to the information provided by head teachers and teachers, the pupils came mostly from poor and some from middle-income families. Only in one school were pupils from comparatively higher-income groups also enrolled. The schools were all mixed in terms of ethnic background, and in three of them children from the conflict-affected northern and eastern regions were in the majority. These children migrated with their families to Kampala due to prolonged insecurity in those regions. Some were also sent by their parents to stay with their relatives and attend schools in Kampala, as they were considered to have better quality.

There were six head teachers, four deputy head teachers, and 34 teachers who took part in the study. Although there was only one female head teacher, all the other teachers, except for one, were female. The ratio of female teachers in primary education is around 40 percent in Uganda, yet in Kampala district, female teachers outnumber male teachers. Besides, in general there are more female teachers at lower grades across the country. Therefore, the dominance of female teachers at lower grades in the visited schools was not exceptional. Unlike the pupils, teachers were dominantly Baganda.

4.2. Methods

The research methods included interviews and classroom observations. Since the Thematic Curriculum was implemented at P1 since February 2006 and has been piloted at P2 since February 2007, all teachers teaching at P1 and P2 classes were interviewed on one-to-one basis, and in some cases on group basis, following classroom observations. Teachers' views were recorded on the new curriculum content, language policy, teaching methodologies, student assessment methods, as well as the responses they have received from pupils and parents. The interviews were also held on one-to-one basis with head teachers and deputy head teachers. In total 44 interviews were conducted at schools: 34 interviews were with teachers, four with deputy head teachers, and six with head teachers. Furthermore, interviews were also conducted with a selected number of officials in the Ministry, NCDC and UNEB, as well as with academics.

In addition, lessons were observed in all P1 and P2 classes, 28 in total. Lesson observation was carried out at different times of the day and during all working days. The duration of lesson observation ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. When the school had many streams at one grade, lessons were observed at each stream for one particular learning area, approximately 30 minutes. In other cases, observations continued for longer periods. This allowed me to study how teachers shifted from one learning area to another. Lessons were observed almost in all learning areas, yet the majority were in English, Literacy and Mathematics. Teachers seemed to focus mainly on these areas, and they also appeared to prefer teaching these learning areas in the presence of the researcher, possibly due to the high importance attached to the achievement of literacy and numeracy. These learning areas also appear in the curriculum more often than others. During observations, I was seated either in the front at the teacher's desk or at the back next to pupils. I also reviewed student work while they carried out written tasks or when they were engaged in 'free activity'. A checklist was used during classroom observations. It included items on classroom organisation, teacher and student activities, the level of interaction between students and teachers, teacher feedback, classroom management, and atmosphere.

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5. Findings

In line with analytical framework explained above, the findings will be presented in three parts: support from outside agencies, capacity to support innovation, and profile of implementation.

5.1. Support from outside agencies

5.1.1. Teacher professional development

Both before the pilot phase and nationwide implementation, teachers who were expected to implement the new curriculum were asked to participate in a training programme. The programme was designed as a cascade system: first, the trainers and Centre Coordinating tutors (CCTs) were trained in the Thematic Curriculum approaches, methodology and requirements. They were in turn expected to train, upgrade and support teachers in classrooms. Before the nationwide implementation, a ten-day, intensive training programme was designed for teachers and took place in January 2007 during school holidays, just before the start of the new academic year in February 2007. The participation level of head teachers and teachers in these training programmes was reported to be high. Likewise, District Inspectors of Schools were trained so that they can effectively carry out their supervision role.

According to some official accounts, the training was sufficient to prepare teachers for the implementation of the new curriculum. Nevertheless, the majority of the teachers who took part in this study believed that the training was severely inadequate. First, its duration was viewed as too short to deal with all aspects of a new curriculum. Therefore, for them the training was too hectic and hurried. Some teachers also raised questions with regard to the quality of training, suggesting that the trainers themselves were not knowledgeable enough about the new curriculum. The account of the following teacher describes the frustration felt by many teachers:

> They have rushed Thematic Curriculum too much. They should have spent more time on training teachers, preparing them for it, letting them to digest and understand it. They should have provided longer and better training to us. We just had 10 days, and they tried to talk about everything there. It was too much to deal with in such a short period. Many of us came back to school without understanding what thematic was all about. We were confused. We were not convinced of its importance, its necessity or difference. The shortness of the training created a negative attitude towards the Thematic Curriculum.

Throughout the school year, teachers were visited by trainers and CCTs to get feedback from them and also to provide additional support. Many teachers were also invited for shorter training programmes on specific issues, such as assessment or lesson planning. Shorter training programmes were also considered insufficient. Consequently, teachers in general did not feel well equipped to implement the Thematic Curriculum. Some commented that they had understood nothing from the training they received, or they were very much confused at the end. Some were not sufficiently convinced of the benefits of the new curriculum, or in which areas or how it could make a difference in education quality. The confusion and inadequate information even created resentment and opposition to the new curriculum, which was detrimental to its effective implementation. Only a few teachers with long experience in teaching commented that they were satisfied with the quality and duration of the training they received. Yet, they also noted that inexperienced teachers would have even greater difficulty in teaching the new curriculum.

5.1.2. Provision of physical resources

Once the new curriculum was ready, P1 Thematic Curriculum and accompanying Teachers' Guides were printed in both English and in nine local languages, and distributed to schools. Nevertheless, no textbooks were provided to teachers as they were still in the process of writing. Furthermore, although the new curriculum encourages the use of teaching and learning materials, such as wall charts, flash cards and sentence cards, these were also supplied to schools in limited amounts. The schools were allocated a budget to buy such resources. However, since printed materials were expensive, the budget was only a fraction of what was needed. Consequently, head teachers and teachers noted that school budgets were further constrained.

5.1.3. Monitoring

The pilot schools were visited occasionally by trainers, CCTs and the representatives of NCDC. However, the frequency of these visits varied greatly from one school to another, and the purpose was mainly to get feedback from teachers to revise the curriculum documents before nationwide implementation. Some head teachers and teachers brought up the issue of supervision as an important concern. They thought adequate supervision was crucial not only to make sure that teachers come to school and engage with

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their students, but also to foresee whether they were implementing the curriculum according to the guidelines provided by the Ministry. This issue was particularly important for making sure that teachers were developing adequate sheets and report cards and carrying out continuous assessment as intended. Otherwise, it could lead to inconsistencies and incomparable assessment results across schools.

Nevertheless, regular and effective school inspection is largely considered inadequate in Uganda in a number of studies (Ward et al., 2006). Inspection is carried out by the district inspectorate, which is understaffed both at the headquarters and district levels. For instance, more than half of the senior positions are unfilled or occupied by junior officers acting in post. They often lack logistical support and an adequate budget to cover their operating costs. For example, there is a chronic lack of funds at district level to ensure regular travelling to all schools in all districts (Read & Enyutu, 2005). Besides, inspectors are underpaid as their salaries compare unfavourably with those of most teachers. Consequently, although the inspectorate is perceived as key link between the development and delivery of the curriculum and overall educational quality, it does not have sufficient resources to fulfil its role (Ward et al., 2006). The issue was also considered a high priority issue in the Road Map due to concerns about teacher absenteeism and lower than expected primary school contact hours.

5.2. Capacity factors

5.2.1. Physical resources

As stated earlier, the new curriculum encourages the use of different learning materials and visual aids in teaching and learning. As one teacher put it: 'Previously all we needed was a blackboard and chalks, now we need lots of other materials to teach'. Teachers seemed enthusiastic about use of learning aids, as they believed it made learning more enjoyable and interesting for children, and simplified their work. However, these materials were in inadequate amounts in visited schools. Teachers claimed that lack of adequate learning materials limited the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum. Very often teachers tried to make the materials themselves. The classrooms were indeed very colourful, and the walls were mostly filled with handmade drawings, charts, writings, and pictures. The quality of these visual aids depended on material availability, and the creativity and time of individual teachers. Teachers also noted that making learning materials cost them a lot in

terms of time and energy. They spent afternoon hours making materials or some even came to school at weekends. Teachers found such activities tiresome as well as difficult as they were not necessarily talented in drawing.

The Road Map highlights the importance of providing adequate teaching and learning materials for good quality education. It is considered critical in improving achievement levels in literacy, one of the main objectives of the Thematic Curriculum (Read & Enyutu, 2005, p. 24):

> It seems obvious that the rapid and effective development of literacy must depend to a considerable extent upon the availability of suitable teaching and learning aids [...] and a variety of interesting and stimulating reading books and materials [...] And yet in English, and particularly in local languages, there is still a great shortage of reading materials in the overwhelming majority of primary schools. In effect, the system is attempting to achieve fluent reading in young children without the provision of anything for them to read.

Among the eight visited schools in this study, only in one classroom did the teacher distribute story books to children so that they could begin to recognise certain words and expressions. Furthermore, inadequate storage facilities emerged as a serious concern. Available learning aids were piled on teacher desks, on empty desks, or on the floor. The classrooms had a cupboard, but it was mainly used to keep notebooks, which were not handed over to pupils until they were completed. This issue was also highlighted in some other studies. Often, learning and teaching materials have been kept in teachers' houses at some distance from the school. Or they are kept in a central school store where the keys may not always be available when required, particularly when the head teacher travelled. Field investigations conducted during curriculum review process in 2003 suggested that classroom based storage was required if the learning and teaching materials were to be used regularly and effectively (Read & Enyutu, 2005).

5.2.2. School ethos and management

The Thematic Curriculum seems to generate a lot of excitement and expectation within the Ministry and other institutions that were involved in its development and implementation. This enthusiasm is largely shared by head teachers as well, and some of them appeared to be strong advocates of the Thematic Curriculum. They highlighted the strengths of the new curriculum as being content organisation, focus on literacy and numeracy, and assessment methods. They believed that it could potentially contribute to

improvements in the quality of education in Ugandan primary schools. They could already see some visible gains in terms of reduced dropout, increased attendance, higher achievement levels in literacy and numeracy, and improvements in life skills education. However, head teachers also underlined serious obstacles to effective implementation; they were convinced that if authorities would take necessary remedial measures, a great leap could be achieved in improving the quality of education. Indeed, only one head teacher seemed undecided about the possible benefits of the Thematic Curriculum.

The schools were visited unannounced in this study and the majority of head teachers were present at the schools, except for two. However, head teacher as well as teacher absenteeism is a serious problem in Uganda. For instance, a study of teacher absenteeism conducted in 2004 revealed that an average rate of 27 percent of teachers were absent from schools in Uganda. This was a considerably higher rate in comparison to other countries that had similar surveys in the same year. For example, it was 15 percent in Bangladesh, 25 percent in India, 11 percent in Peru, 17 percent in Zambia, and 14 percent in Ecuador (Chaudhury et al., 2006). Inadequate inspection, low teacher salaries, poor working conditions, and low teacher morale are among the primary reasons of high teacher absenteeism.

5.2.3. Teacher factors

Studies suggest that pre-service teacher education has not been providing adequate support to teachers in Uganda for the development of key skills of lower primary teaching. Particularly, training in the basic techniques of teaching reading, writing, listening comprehension, speaking, and mathematical skills and concepts is considered insufficient. Besides, the curriculum for teacher education is often criticized for being too theoretical, focusing on content and giving very little pedagogical orientation. In other words, the curriculum emphasizes knowledge acquisition and overlooks development of skills and attitudes. Such an approach encourages student teachers to only read and pass their exams (MOES, 2006). Therefore, it prepares teachers inadequately to teach the Thematic Curriculum. Furthermore, it was observed that in many schools across the country, often the least qualified teachers were allocated to lower primary classes. Indeed, education policies have tended to give emphasis to upper primary in the allocation of the most qualified and experienced teachers (Read & Enyutu, 2005). Within this study, the teachers were all professionally trained; a very few had university degrees in education, the rest were either diploma holders

or Grade II certificate holders. They all had long years of experience in teaching. The minimum number of years of experience was five. Teachers were in general not satisfied with the in-service training they had received prior to the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum. Therefore, they reported that they were learning by improvising and practising on a daily basis. Indeed, P1 teachers who had been teaching thematically for a second year seemed more confident with teaching the Thematic Curriculum. Yet, more confusion, disillusion and apprehension were observed among P2 teachers who were practising it only five months at the time of this research.

Teachers had distinct views on the new curriculum, which can be grouped into three main groups. The first group, which was the smallest, did not think that the Thematic Curriculum introduced anything new for schools in Kampala. The same themes were just organised differently, the contact hours for certain learning areas were increased, and a new assessment system, which did not work very well in reality, was introduced. Members of this group were found more among P2 teachers. The second group, which was larger than the first group, believed that the Thematic Curriculum had many strong points, including increased relevance, emphasis on literacy and numeracy, catering for slow learners, better assessment system, increased student participation, and being more enjoyable for children. Yet, they believed that many of these could not be realised in schools outside of Kampala, especially in rural schools due to grim systemic problems. These included large classes, lack of adequate teaching and learning materials, low teacher morale, and inadequate teacher training and supervision. Lastly, the third and the largest group thought that the Thematic Curriculum had already led to some visible improvements in the quality of education. They acknowledged that the systemic issues or problems encountered during implementation process restricted its effective implementation. Yet, some of these, if not all, would be resolved in time. Hence, they had much more faith in the Thematic Curriculum and hoped that it would not be abandoned in a couple of years and replaced by new reforms. They have seen in the past that some reforms were discarded soon after they were introduced.

One of the issues that concerned teachers most and influenced their attitude towards the new curriculum was the introduction of the classroom teacher system. In the previous system, teachers were responsible for certain subjects; for instance, one teacher would teach Mathematics or Social Studies at various streams at a grade. Although the new system leaves this structure intact in higher grades where teaching is still organised according to subjects, at P1-3 teachers are now assigned to one classroom and expected to deliver

all learning areas. The new system was appreciated by few teachers. They believed the new system enabled teachers to interact with their pupils more frequently and for longer periods. Therefore, they had more opportunities to get to know them, follow their progress, understand their strong and weak points, and provide assistance accordingly. Deeper knowledge of pupils was also considered indispensable to carry out continuous assessment in an effective way. Additionally, in this system students will have the opportunity to get to know their teachers better.

There were also a lot of objections to the classroom teacher system. The most commonly cited reason was the problem of replacing teachers during their absences. It was argued that when the teacher was on holiday, sick, or had some other excused absence, the entire class missed out schooling on those days. Often, the classrooms at the same level were combined in such cases. However, since the classrooms were already large, it was not always feasible to combine the classes due to space limitations. Except for one school, classrooms in all the other schools were already fully occupied, in some classrooms pupils were sitting on the floor while they were doing exercises.

A second argument against classroom teacher system relates to teachers' heavy workload which was perceived to be augmented with the introduction of the Thematic Curriculum. Teachers argued that teaching different learning areas was already a big challenge. A teacher might be more talented or developed expertise in teaching literacy or mathematics. Or, a teacher might not be talented at all in teaching music. Furthermore, a teacher was supposed to teach during four consecutive hours, teaching eight learning areas per day, switching from one to another every half an hour. This was also considered very demanding and tiring.

Teacher motivation is considered crucial for the successful implementation of the Thematic Curriculum and for improving the quality of education in general. The Thematic Curriculum makes further demands on teachers by asking them to engage children in learning more, and to be more innovative and creative in their teaching. Yet, the majority of teachers noted that teacher morale was alarmingly low. A number of reasons were discussed in this respect including low teacher salaries, lack of incentives, the low social status of teaching profession, and inadequate working conditions. Low teacher salary was cited as the main cause of low teacher morale. Teacher salaries in Uganda are lower than average teacher salaries in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2007). Teachers unanimously noted that their salary was not sufficient to lead a decent life, especially in urban areas. Financial

problems seem to occupy their minds constantly, and distract their attention and concentration in the classroom as well. Sometimes, their own children had to stay at home because they could not afford to pay their tuition fees. Financial difficulties also seemed to interfere with their wellbeing and health. The account of one of the teachers is illustrative in this sense:

> We are not boosted. Out health is not good. We sometimes come just for the sake of coming to school. Teacher motivation is very low. You keep quiet since there is no solution. We are overworked, we do not eat well. We have too much responsibility. They want us to work a lot but they give very little. They also want us to work lovingly. This job requires people who teach lovingly, so that children would also love learning, get motivated, interested and enjoy schooling. But in order to do that you need to motivate teachers in the first place. When you are tortured here and there, how can you come and teach enthusiastically and lovingly [. . .] When my mind is busy and preoccupied with basic necessities of my own life, how can you expect me to perform well in the classroom?

Another dissatisfaction that relates to their low income was the fact that years of experience or performance makes little or no difference in their salaries. Therefore, there is little incentive for teachers to improve their teaching. A third issue that worried teachers was the little respect they seemed to enjoy in society. Previously, both children and parents respected teachers, and teaching profession was in general a high status, esteemed job. Nevertheless, teachers felt that they were no longer respected. One teacher explained: 'People respect money and material things. We teachers do not have money, so we have less credibility, less weight on parents and children.' The status of teachers teaching at lower grades was considered particularly low, even among teachers.

Such concerns regarding deterioration of teacher status and motivation are not peculiar to Uganda. Indeed, similar issues are raised in many parts of the developing world and their interrelationship with education reforms are highlighted in some other studies (Barrett, 2008; Mooij, 2008). As Robertson (2007) point out the neoliberal policies and programmes in education have eroded teachers' working conditions and undermined teaching as a profession. This is a paradoxical development given the fact that the knowledge economy discourse places education quality at the centre of policymakers' agendas.

5.2.4. Student factors

Class size was a big concern in all the schools visited except for one, as they had around 70 or more pupils per classroom at P1 and P2. Teachers discussed a variety of issues in relation to large class sizes affecting their teaching practices. Classroom management was one of the most important concerns according to many teachers:

> The large number of students in the class makes it impossible to work with the Thematic Curriculum. You look at one group; try to explain things while behind you there is another group which is throwing things to each other, or doing absurd things. Just keeping things in order requires a lot of time and effort.

Indeed, various other challenges that they highlighted were in line with the findings of a study that looked at teachers' experiences of teaching large classes in 20 schools in Kampala and Wakiso districts (Nakabugo et al., 2007, pp. 6–7). These included: classroom control and management difficulties resulting in indiscipline (e.g. excessive noise and children dodging exercises); difficulty to prepare enough teaching and learning materials for the large numbers; difficulty to reach out and interact with all learners, especially those with learning disabilities and the slow ones; difficulty in giving comprehensive helpful feedback; due to marking difficulties giving less exercises and practice; difficulty developing children's handwriting skills because of limited writing space due to overcrowding; easy spread of infectious diseases such as flu and colds; time constraints and failure to complete the syllabus if one attempts to give individual attention; limited space for group work; and lack of attention for individual learners. Teachers noted that teaching in large classes was already a big challenge for them because of the reasons mentioned above, yet, effective implementation of the Thematic Curriculum particularly requires smaller class sizes. The general impression of teachers was that the Thematic Curriculum would not work with such large numbers because the recommended teaching methodologies, such as increasing student participation, learning by doing, and group work, were very time consuming.

Moreover, teachers believed that there was a huge gap in ability levels of , and this was also considered a big challenge in teaching and learning. The primary causes of such differences were identified as three: age differences among students, participation in pre-primary education, and rural versus urban backgrounds. The official entry age for primary education is six, yet more than two thirds of pupils studying at P1 in 2004 were older than six,

and 25 percent of these pupils were even older than ten. Within the UPE programme, schools were obliged to register children to the appropriate grades irrespective of their ages. This resulted in considerable age differences among students enrolled at a given grade. According to a recent evaluation study of primary education in Uganda (IOB & MOES, 2008), those face low probabilities of academic success and are likely candidates for repetition and dropout.

Teachers also reported that there was often a considerable difference between ability levels of who had attended nursery schools and those who had not. Depending on the duration of their attendance as well as the quality of those centres, when children came to P1, they had a basic understanding of English, literacy, and numeracy. Therefore, they were ahead of students who did not have the chance to go to nursery schools. Pupils in the first group, therefore, needed further stimulation and tasks that are more challenging. When teachers were asked about participation levels of their students in early-childhood education, they could not provide precise figures, but commented that more than half of them went to nursery. In few schools, this rate was believed to be much higher.

Furthermore, differences were observed among pupils with urban and rural backgrounds. The first group was considered advantageous due to higher levels of parental education, exposure to English, exposure to printed documents and written texts on the streets and so on. Teachers reported that some children from rural backgrounds had significant learning difficulties. Teachers were trying to address differential learning needs of these pupils by grouping them together and providing adequate tasks. Yet, due to overcrowding, this was not always done effectively. Use of English rather than a local language from their immediate environment, that children are already familiar with and fluent in, seems to be an impediment for some of the children. Children who did not receive early childhood education and children who had recently moved from rural areas to Kampala especially seemed to encounter more difficulties. As a result, their progress was slower in comparison to others and their participation was also more constrained.

5.3. Profile of implementation

The following sub-constructs of profile of implementation will be considered: (1) coverage of learning areas defined in the curriculum; (2) instruction in English and use of local languages; (3) the nature of classroom interactions; and (4) assessment practices. The chapter will focus on these four sub-

constructs since they are highlighted as being among the most important objectives of the Thematic Curriculum.

5.3.1. Coverage of learning areas

There are eight learning areas scheduled for each day in the new curriculum, and each learning area is designed to last 30 minutes. In general, time planning within the Thematic Curriculum was considered unrealistic by teachers. They believed that Thematic Curriculum took longer time to teach as the recommended teaching methods required teachers to use learning aids and real objects in teaching. So they need to demonstrate objects and provide explanations about them. Written exercises and drawings were also time-consuming. During classroom hours, in addition to active teaching, teachers were required to distribute notebooks to children and collect them after the exercises, to take care of pencil sharpening, and to organise learning aids before moving into the next learning area. These responsibilities also took time and ate into active teaching and learning time.

Consequently, 30 minutes was often insufficient, especially for literacy or Mathematics. Teachers argued that hardly any teacher could manage to teach eight learning areas in a day. What they seemed to do is to shorten the time scheduled for some learning areas, or skip them altogether. Learning areas such as News, Physical Education, Music, Free Activity or Religious Education were often considered less important. Teachers ended up teaching four or five learning areas per day, mostly emphasizing Literacy, English and Mathematics. This problem echoes similar problems experienced in the 2000 Curriculum. There as well, teachers emphasized Volume I and hardly taught Volume II. According to the Curriculum Review, large parts of the 2000 Curriculum were not being delivered in the majority of the schools. Besides, the curriculum had too much factual content and most schools reported that they were unable to complete many subject syllabus requirements in a school year (Read & Enyutu, 2005).

5.3.2. Instruction in English and use of local languages

In line with the language policy, all schools within this study were using English as language of instruction both at lower and upper primary levels. When teachers were asked about their opinion on language policy, they acknowledged that use of local languages at lower primary could accelerate reading and writing. In many classrooms, teachers spoke local languages

when they needed to clarify a concept, give instructions or maintain order within the classroom. Luganda, the local language widely used in central region, was used by teachers. Yet, in some schools, where a large proportion of pupils came from northern or eastern regions, teachers asked children who came from those regions and also had a basic understanding of English to translate what they said into local languages. Pupils were also given the opportunity to speak in their local languages during News hours. Teachers commented that speaking a language that they felt comfortable with made a big difference. Those children who were quiet might suddenly became vibrant and articulate. Some of the teachers had the opportunity to observe classrooms in rural schools where a local language was used as language of instruction. They noted that classroom atmosphere was somewhat different there, as student involvement was higher.

Although use of English was considered a big challenge for some children, and cause for slower progression in literacy, in later stages pupils who received instruction in English were regarded to be in an advantageous situation. Already at P4, all pupils are expected to learn in English, and the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) is also administrated in English. Some teachers argued that those who start to learn in English at an early age might do better at PLE at the end of P7. Teachers did not encounter any parental resentment for the use of English either. Due to the high status of English, and perceived advantages in terms of PLE, parents were pleased with the use of English. Additionally, given the ethnic and linguistic diversity of schools in Kampala, parents would be more opposed to Luganda or any other dominant language in a given school.

In addition to English, each school is supposed to chose a local language to be taught as a subject. Indeed this issue generated more heated discussions. Schools are supposed to select the local language in consultation with parents. In schools, where children who were ethnically Baganda, selection of Luganda as a subject is not contested. Yet, in some other schools, groups from northern or eastern regions were the biggest majority. In one of those schools, parents preferred Acholi (a language spoken in the north). Yet, non-Acholi, especially Baganda parents were strongly opposed to this suggestion. They argued that all pupils should be learning Luganda; after all, it was the local language of the region. School management was also supportive of the second group. There were also problems of finding teachers who could teach in Acholi.

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5.3.3. Classroom interactions

Teachers often commented that with the new curriculum children have become much more involved in their learning and assumed more responsibilities. This made learning much more enjoyable and interesting for children as they easily got bored when the teacher was talking all the time. The level of pupils' involvement differed from one classroom to another and from one school to another. Yet, in general, their involvement included activities such as answering teacher questions individually or in chorus, repeating in groups after the teacher, doing exercises at the blackboard, demonstrating certain lessons, or telling news and stories. During lessons, often children were asked to come to the front to demonstrate certain activities to their classmates. Some teachers believed the relatively more participatory nature of teaching and learning contributed positively to children's self-esteem, assertiveness and confidence. Since pupils were given more space in the classroom, they talked more and they had more opportunities to express themselves (e.g. News and Story hour).

Although group work is emphasized by the new curriculum, and teachers were willing to experiment more with pair or group work, they admitted that they often failed to do group work because of the high number of students, limited space within classrooms restricting teacher and student movement and rearrangement of desks for special group activities, and lack of adequate learning materials that would facilitate group work. In the majority of classrooms, pupils were seated in groups. However, these groups were often very large making it impossible to carry out meaningful group activities. The group sizes ranged from six to 30. Consequently, grouping was used as a tool for clustering pupils according to their ability, thereby making it easier for teachers to identify ability level of pupils and give them differential tasks. The opportunity to cooperate and learn from group members seemed limited though not exceptional. Pupils were sometimes given exercises to be completed as a group in Mathematics, or they were given a teaching aid to discuss within the group.

5.3.4. Assessment practices

The introduction of continuous assessment seemed to be the most important issue that concerned teachers about the new curriculum. They unanimously commented that they learned little about assessment issue after the training, so they did not know how to carry out continuous assessment in practice.

Furthermore, large class sizes were considered as a serious impediment to carrying out continuous assessment. This new assessment system requires teachers to observe and follow each student on a daily basis, and record their progress over a variety of competencies. This expectation was considered unrealistic as it was considered beyond the capacity of a single teacher to follow up to 70 students on daily basis. As a result, continuous assessment was hardly done. This was also why some teachers preferred exams to continuous assessment even though they acknowledged certain benefits and advantages of continuous assessment in improving education quality.

Furthermore, many parents were concerned about the new assessment system which replaced examinations with periodic progress reports. These progress reports made no reference to marks, but included descriptions of how children are performing in pre-defined competencies in certain learning areas, and how they can improve their performance. The progress reports seemed to create confusion due to a number of reasons. Some parents, especially in neighbourhoods with lower socio-economic backgrounds, were illiterate. Therefore, even if they could still identify marks and make judgements on achievement levels of their children, they failed to read the descriptions mentioned in the progress reports.

Moreover, those who were literate could make little sense of the statements in the progress cards, such as 'Sharon can read sentences' or 'can count to five'. Teachers have often heard of parents saying: 'So what?' Instead of such vague statements, they preferred to see marks as well as the position of their children within the classroom. Some of those parents who were displeased with the new system took measures that are more drastic and transferred their children to private schools where implementation of the Thematic Curriculum was delayed. Almost all schools in this study reported student transfers to private schools or threat of transfers. Alarmed by these and similar parental dissatisfaction, some schools carried out exams, or added marks and even position of the child in progress report. Indeed, NCDC also revised the progress report and included both marks and descriptions on achievement levels in selected competencies.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that although teachers were in general enthusiastic about the new curriculum and appreciated the improvements they have noticed in their students, they were also rather critical of a variety of issues over the curriculum and the implementation process. These issues

range from heavy load of the curriculum to lack of teaching and learning materials, from large classes to inadequate teacher training. Yet, most of the criticisms were concerned with the implementation process, suggesting that the introduction of the Thematic Curriculum is accompanied with similar problems as the introduction of the 2000 Curriculum. Despite the limitations imposed by structural problems and the way the curriculum was implemented, teachers stated that they did their best in trying to implement the new curriculum as effectively as possible since they believed it contributed to the improvements in their students' achievement levels, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

The Thematic Curriculum incorporates many good ideas; it is well-designed and well-intentioned according to many education stakeholders in Uganda. However, systemic problems within the Ugandan education system, such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching and learning aids, inadequate number of textbooks, and low teacher motivation, suggest that some of the expectations are unrealistic and indeed very difficult to realise in classrooms. For instance, none of the teachers claimed to teach eight learning areas per day, as they felt the need to squeeze or avoid learning areas that were deemed less important. Likewise, even if the majority of teachers acknowledged the advantages of continuous assessment, they were hardly practicing it in their classrooms that had often more than 70 pupils. Implementation of CCP was constrained similarly due to overcrowding and lack of aids. Since schools in Kampala are far more well-equipped in comparison to schools in rural areas, teachers who are implementing the Thematic Curriculum outside of Kampala are likely to encounter even more severe challenges. Consequently, there is a danger that some of the mistakes of Curriculum 2000 might be repeated in implementation of the Thematic Curriculum, and might lead to demoralising experiences and further waste of time, energy and resources.

The failure of policymakers to adequately consider the classroom realities, as well as other subjective and objective realities within which teachers work, is not uncommon in sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa's most ambitious curriculum initiative, the outcomes based-education, exemplifies this failure. Yet, according to Jansen (1998), this was not because politicians and bureaucrats were misinformed about the conditions of South African schooling, but because the policy was primarily driven by political imperatives which had little to do with the realities of classroom realities.

Furthermore, studies conducted in Namibia (O'Sullivan, 2002), South Africa (Rogan & Aldous, 2005), Botswana (Tabulawa, 1998) and

Ethiopia (Serbessa, 2006) highlight that capacity of schools to support educational innovation is taken for granted. Factors that determine school capacity to support curriculum implementation, including teacher and student factors, school ethos and management, and physical resources are inadequately considered or ignored. Yet, successful implementation of curriculum reforms or any other educational innovation will ultimately depend on the extent to which policymakers and planners take school realities into account (Heneveld & Craig, 1996). As Rogan and Grayson (2003) underline, in order to be effective, strategies for curriculum implementation need to consider both the current level of curriculum and classroom practice, and the current capacity to support innovation.