

HOW ARE TEACHERS COPING WITH THE DEMANDS OF THE NEW SOUTH AFRICAN SENIOR CERTIFICATE?

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The new South African National Senior Certificate will be written for the first time at the end of 2008. This qualification differs from the previous one in that it is outcomes based and cognitively more demanding. The introduction of the National Senior Certificate has necessitated changes to teaching and learning as well as to assessment. There has been a shift away from a largely content focused and teacher centred curriculum to one which is learner centred and emphasises the application of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. Subject content has been modernised to make it more relevant to youngsters in the twenty-first century. The differentiated system of Higher Grade and Standard Grade has been removed and all students will have access to the same papers. Every student has to offer a package of seven subjects, four of which are compulsory: namely, two South African languages, Mathematics or Mathematical Literacy and Life Orientation. Life Orientation is the only subject that has no external examination: assessment is based entirely on a portfolio of evidence covering three years of work. Whilst there is a national curriculum, the assessment bodies in South Africa have their own assessment guidelines which specify how the achievement of the curriculum will be determined.

The IEB is a nationally accredited assessment agency for independent schools. It provides assessment for 157 independent schools across South Africa and in Namibia, Swaziland and Mozambique. The process of preparing the IEB community for the new assessment over the last three years has been multi-pronged: training of examiners, provision of exemplar material, workshops for teachers and instituting a standardisation project.

Examiners and moderators were required to attend several training programmes: a workshop on setting outcomes based questions and tasks run by Gordon Stobart at the 2005 IEB National Assessment Conference; IEB workshops on designing activities that assess outcomes of learning across a taxonomy of cognitive levels rather than the teacher's programme of learning; generic and subject specific workshops focusing on preparations for 2008 and its new demands and accredited assessor and moderator courses geared to the new curriculum. From 2005 examiners began to introduce a couple of questions in their papers that required applied competence and made use of marking guidelines rather than the traditional memorandum.

The examining panels prepared exemplar papers and portfolio tasks in 2006, 2007 and 2008 for Grades 10, 11 and 12 respectively. In frequent one on one meetings, the panels were mentored by the IEB Assessment Specialists in understanding and applying the National Curriculum Statement, the Assessment Standards for each grade and the IEB Subject Assessment Guidelines for their subject in the design of valid, fair and reliable

assessment instruments. The examining panels have developed significantly over the past three years and they have shared their “journey” with teachers at National Subject User Group Conferences.

Support for the teachers charged with the delivery of the new curriculum has taken a variety of forms. As already stated, the teachers have had three years of exemplar material. The IEB has actively sought feedback from teachers on the various materials and this has been used to feed into the development of the next year’s exemplars and to inform the planning of workshops. The annual National Subject User Group Conferences have allocated substantial parts of the programmes over the last three years to helping teachers become familiar with the demands of the new curriculum through lectures, discussions and workshops. In 2007 the IEB ran regional workshops around the country on the issue of determining quality in teachers’ and students’ portfolios of work. Support for this was such that another workshop was run this year on the meaning of a non-differentiated curriculum and designing tasks to cognitive levels. IEB assessor and moderator courses and a range of workshops related to the design, delivery, assessment and management of the new curriculum have also been available to schools.

In order to prepare for the standardisation process in 2008 a pilot project was initiated with Grade 10 in 2006 and followed the same learners in Grade 11 in 2007. The purpose was to gather reliable data on a representative sample of approximately 15% of the cohort of learners who will be writing the National Senior Certificate this year. The sample wrote common end of year examination papers in ten key subjects and two new subjects. Although the priority is obviously to set the papers “right” in the first place, this project means that the IEB will be fully prepared to deal with any standardisation issues at the end of the year since reliable historical data will be available on which to base its proposals. Pairs analysis and other statistical techniques will be used to address standardisation issues that may arise in subjects not included in the project.

With the final implementation of the National Senior Certificate examination imminent at the end of almost three years of preparation, it was decided to investigate the nature of the over-riding concerns that now lurk in the minds of teachers despite all of the interventions that the IEB has made.

A number of teachers of Geography, History and Life Orientation from a cross-section of schools were interviewed regarding their views on the following two questions:

1. What concerns do you still have about your subject at this stage of the implementation of the National Senior Certificate?
2. To what extent do you feel the IEB is able to address these issues?

(These subjects were chosen as they the three large subjects overseen by this assessment specialist.)

An analysis of the responses to the two questions posed reveals that there are significant similarities in views between Geography and History teachers regarding the new examination. Responses regarding Life Orientation were somewhat different, probably due to the fact that the subject is new.

It was encouraging to find that respondents across the three subjects were very positive about the guiding role the IEB has played in the preparations for 2008. Several comments were made to the effect that the onus was on the teachers to take advantage of all that was offered to assist them. The availability of personnel at the IEB to assist was also commented upon: it was noted that although the answers might not be the ones people wanted to hear, they were valid! Teachers appreciated being able to give feedback and that this feedback was taken into account.

Concern was expressed on several issues regarding History and Geography specifically: the Grade 12 exemplars of this year; increased content; text books; an increased administrative load and coping with change.

A number of respondents felt that the Grade 12 exemplars of 2008 had come out too late. Teachers wanted the “security blanket” of a Grade 12 exemplar earlier in the year than July. Explaining to teachers that the approach and type of questions set by the examiners in the Grade 11 end of year papers would be the same, only using Grade 12 content, did little to reassure them. Teachers were urged that the exemplar was simply an exemplar not a surrogate mid year examination paper. All the IEB examiners are teachers in the classroom and thus their examining work takes place after hours. Examining panels were under huge pressure, being required to develop the final papers, back-up security papers and exemplar papers, with deadlines from the external quality assurance body, Umalusi, to meet as well as internal deadlines. Being able to provide Grade 12 exemplars earlier would obviously have been first prize but teachers did have material and clear guidelines to work with.

The new curriculum has brought a modernised content. However, whilst more, relevant content has been added, very little was removed. The content and context in both Geography and History is broad. Thus teachers who are moving away from a content and teacher-centred mode of teaching, and who have no experience as yet of the new qualification, are reticent to leave the content approach which has always worked for them in the past. This feeling of an increased volume of work to get through has been exacerbated this year as teachers who would have begun the Grade 12 content in the latter part of the Grade 11 year did not do so in 2007 as they wanted to complete the Grade 11 content in order for their students to write the end of year Grade 11 exemplar/standardisation papers. The “vastness” of the syllabus has meant that some teachers are skimming over topics to ensure coverage rather than understanding. This has meant that a lecture type approach has been adopted which flies in the face of the purpose of the qualification which is for students to use skills, knowledge, attitudes and values at different levels of cognitive ability.

New content has meant extra work for teachers – on top of having to get to grips with learning outcomes and assessment standards. Teachers are also grappling to teach applied competence. The purpose of the qualification is that students will have applied competence at different levels of cognition. Thus some teachers are not yet preparing their learners to meet the requirements of the qualification.

Both History and Geography respondents felt that more prescription should have been provided regarding the detail needed to adequately cover the content as set out in the National Curriculum Statement: could certain sections be skimmed over while others needed more depth? When considering the issue of whether to provide more information regarding content detail, the Geography examining panel had felt no further clarification was necessary. However, one of the Geography respondents pointed out that while the content may be vague enough for teachers to pursue their interests, what if those interests are not shared by the examiners? The History panel provided some content prescription for one particular section, but was reluctant to become too specific in general as they felt to do so at this stage in the introduction of a new curriculum might result in them restricting their options at a later date. In the implementation of a new curriculum one needs to see how things pan out before tying things down. Despite the understandable reticence of examining panels it may well be necessary to produce an assessment syllabus which seeks to tease out the under-specification in the National Curriculum Statements, but in such a way that examiners are not tied down. These ideas need to be discussed by the relevant National Subject Forum, a body (consisting of the examining panel, teacher representatives from the various regions and the assessment specialist) whose function is to guide the development and progress of the subject.

A plethora of new textbooks have been written for the new curriculum. Most textbook writers are themselves teachers, who, in dealing with an underspecified curriculum, have resorted to making their own calls regarding interpretation. Teachers have found this difficult as different texts highlight or downplay different issues. The question asked is 'How much detail is needed?' Teachers acknowledge the importance of skills yet emphasise that students need a solid background of knowledge on which to pin these skills. History teachers are particularly anxious regarding the amount of detail needed to answer the essay paper effectively – what if the essay topics are too broad or too narrow for their students and will the weaker child cope with the demands of the essay questions? An assessment syllabus would assist teachers in dealing with the problem of depth.

Some respondents felt that the new curriculum has increased their administrative load (in terms of recording coverage of Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards and reporting performance on these), ignored extra mural involvement and taken from preparation time. Any new system when first introduced seems onerous, but, once familiar, is managed with ease. Concerns regarding depleted preparation time and pressure of after school commitments are obviously internal school issues and need to be addressed accordingly.

Respondents referred to the general antagonism towards change in the generally conservative teaching community. Learning Outcomes, Assessment Standards, new content, non-differentiation, cognitive levels *et al* have caused many to feel they are inadequate and unable to adapt or cope. It is interesting to note that none of the concerns about change focused on issues around learning: rather the teachers were worried about themselves and their perceived inadequacies.

The concerns of Life Orientation teachers are somewhat different as has already been indicated. The subject has four Learning Outcomes: personal well-being, citizenship education, recreation and physical activity and careers and career choices. Thus the subject has the potential to play a significant role in preparing students for the demands of the 21st century. The perceived lack of status of the subject is perhaps the most strongly felt concern. The fact that tertiary institutions do not have a common view on the subject has meant that a mixed message has been sent to pupils, parents and principals. Some schools do not allocate the necessary amount of time to the teaching of Life Orientation and allocate teachers to teach it on the basis of who doesn't have a full timetable. Life Orientation is a three year course and evidence of the three years of work is needed in the portfolio. Some teachers are experiencing great anxiety at having to take responsibility for the inadequacies of their predecessors. In addition, as the subject is new, there is a feeling of working towards a goal that is to some degree undetermined. The nature of the subject requires a generalist approach which is hard for those coming from being a specialist in a narrowly defined subject area. The time needed to gain competency in such a broad field has also been voiced as a concern.

Some Life Orientation teachers commented that the IEB should influence resistant school principals regarding allocation of time and personnel to the subject. This raises an interesting debate: the IEB is an assessment body accredited to assess at exit points, Grade 12 being one, and is not responsible for curriculum implementation. The schools choosing to write the IEB examinations are independent and thus have more freedom in how they implement the curriculum. The IEB has drawn and will continue to draw schools' attention to the national policy regarding contact time. Once the first portfolios come in for moderation at the end of this year we will be able to ascertain whether any non-compliance or shortfall may have been caused by inadequate time allocation.

Many of the concerns expressed by teachers relate to the specifications of the subjects themselves. These will unfortunately remain until the qualification is reviewed in 2011. For now, the IEB and its schools await the outcome of the first National Senior Certificate assessment to see if all the seeds that were planted have borne the desired fruit.