

Creating Spaces for Change: Critical Participatory Action Research as Professional Development for English Language Teachers in Uganda

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Abstract

Teacher Professional Development (TPD) has often been criticized for being ineffective and for neglecting the teachers' own concerns. However, effective TPD programs are needed, especially after curriculum reforms like the recent change from a knowledge-based to a competence-based curriculum in Uganda. Recent studies on in-service teacher training in Uganda have found small positive effects on skills acquisition and improvement in teaching and learning. This study set out to explore the use of a transformative and reflective approach to TPD such as Critical Participatory Action Research to spark positive change processes towards the new curriculum and teaching methods. The aim of this study was to explore the use of CPAR in TPD for competence-based English language teaching in lower secondary schools. Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy provided the guiding theory and framework. This exploratory study was anchored on the critical constructivism paradigm, adopted a qualitative approach and employed a CPAR design. The data were generated together with 14 English language teachers using the procedures of CPAR, and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that participating in the CPAR created in teachers a sense of ownership and empowerment, which increased their commitment to meaningfully change their teaching practice. This study concludes that CPAR is an empowering and transformative approach for continuous TPD, based on its strength to make teachers active agents in their own transformation and professional growth. The findings challenge notions of 'retooling' teachers and focusing on the acquisition of technical skills alone when introducing a new curriculum. This study contributes to the discussion about effective approaches to TPD, particularly in contexts of curriculum change and implementation in the specific context of Uganda. The study recommends that the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) incorporate participatory approaches into its ongoing teacher development programmes.

Key words: *Critical Participatory Action Research, Teacher Professional Development, Competence-based Curriculum, New Lower Secondary Curriculum, Modified Frayer Model*

1.0 Introduction

The transition from knowledge-based to competence-based curricula (CBC) often faces challenges such as insufficient professional development opportunities for in-service teachers, inadequate teaching materials and limited understanding of CBC pedagogy (Saware, 2021). The challenges to practice competence-based pedagogies in classrooms in various school contexts are manifold (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). Teacher professional development (TPD) is therefore vital, especially during a curriculum change. However, the focus of TPD programmes is often limited to basic knowledge and skills, and does not necessarily fulfil

other fundamental professional needs of teachers such as development of practices that are context-based and specific to different teachers' areas of specialization (Alwadi et al., 2020). Hence, Monnier & Gruson (2018) argue that TPD needs to be combined with participatory approaches that study, implement and reflect on learning done in different contexts. The participatory approach is rooted in the assumption that people have knowledge on issues that affect and are important to them (Svendsen, 2020). According to Arslan (2019), participatory approaches provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on challenging real situations in their practice and find ways to overcome them. This is a good way of linking theory to practice and, as Paulo Freire puts it, "real educational practice must be linked to its social context and the complexities of its environment"(Shih, 2018).

In 2020, Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) adopted a competency-based curriculum (CBC) in lower secondary school, commonly called the New Lower Secondary Curriculum (NLSC) (Giacomazzi et al., 2022, NCDC, 2020). It is hoped that the NLSC will meet the needs of learners of different abilities, thereby improving the quality of education and contributing significantly to the creation of a literate population, which is seen as necessary for the country's economic growth and sustainable development (NCDC, 2020; NCDC, 2019). TPD workshops were held at regional and local levels after the NLSC introduction, for improvement of teachers' skills and competencies. However, these turned out insufficient in equipping teachers with the necessary skills to promote changes in instructional practices (Olema et al., 2021). The goals of curriculum reform are challenging to implement in practice (Tadesse et al., 2021), and impose additional demands on instructors. TPD might not be enough in helping teachers positively impact their learners especially when it is not contextually relevant for the teaching and learning environments in which teachers work (Burroughs et al., 2019). Being an English teacher of lower secondary school in Uganda myself, I had had the opportunity to attend workshops organized to prepare me alongside other teachers to spearhead the implementation of the NLSC which I experienced as de-contextualized 'one-size fits all' sessions, and unproductive as I could not relate the content to my own practice. Empirical studies on the challenges of implementing school curricula in sub-Saharan African countries point at the neglect of teachers' contexts as one of the major challenges to implementation (Nsengimana et al., 2020).

In-service teacher training for the implementation of new curricula therefore needs to be tailor-made for the teachers' concerns and also subject-specific to meet the goals of curriculum reform (Barasa et al., 2023). This implies that even with continuous TPD, teachers need to collaborate in implementing new teaching methods and reflecting on new acquired practices (Svendsen, 2016). However, participatory TPD approaches still remain largely unexplored in in-service teacher training in Uganda. A distinct participatory approach to TPD might therefore be a powerful instrument for teachers' professional improvement, since effective change in classroom practices must come from the teachers themselves as they collaborate and reflect on a new acquired practice (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Loveline & Mbah, 2020; Svendsen, 2020). Therefore, the objective of this study is explore the use of Critical Participatory Action Research in teacher professional development for competence-based English language teaching in lower secondary schools. This project's research question has been crafted as follows: How can Critical Participatory Action Research be used in Teacher Professional Development for English language teaching in the framework of the competence-based curriculum in lower secondary schools?

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (1972) and the critical pedagogy's seven basic elements framework by Spear & da Costa (2018). The theory's main aim is humanization, which means that education should enable both teachers and learners to critically and consciously understand their reality and how they relate to the world. Spear and da Costa (2018) point out that TPD programs can be driven to the greatest possible extent if teachers themselves design programs suited for their contexts. Hence, critical pedagogy was chosen because it acknowledges the importance of continuous TPD that starts from the grassroots. There are seven elements of critical pedagogy; knowledge, generative themes, codification, dialogue, conscientization, transformative change (easter experience) and intervention (action).

1.5 Conceptual Framework

Based on these theoretical elements, the conceptual framework for this study highlights the steps and interaction of key concepts of the critical pedagogy.

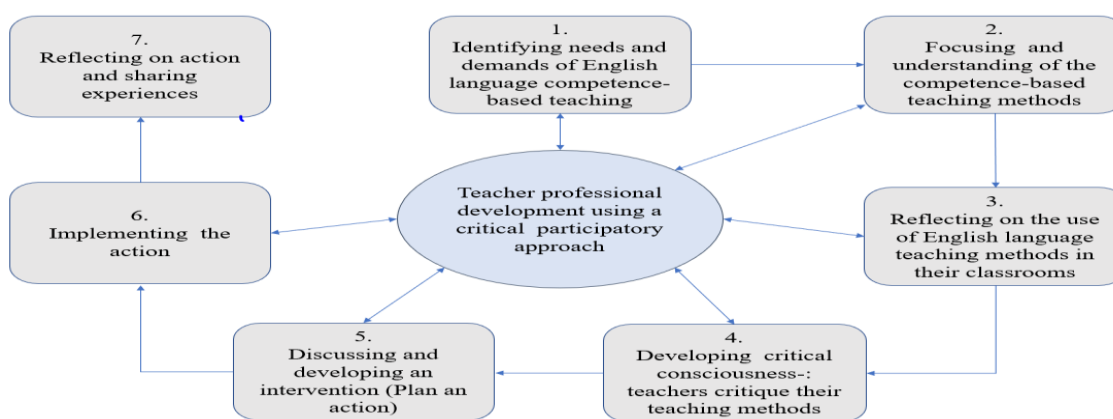


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Source: Ekyakunzire, 2022)

In this model, teacher professional development starts with the teachers meeting within their context, discussing competence-based teaching and what it means to them. The second concept involves a deeper understanding of the approaches used in teaching while the next concept involves reflecting on classroom practices in relation to the requirements of CBC. This leads to the concept of critical consciousness as teachers identify unsatisfactory areas, analyze causes and what is needed to effectively implement CBC. Concept five involves planning and developing an action as an intervention, which they then implement in their classrooms in concept six. The last concept involves reflecting on classroom experiences with the use of the method developed in concept six, as summarized in figure 1.

2.0 Literature Review

Competence-based education is constructivist in nature and advocates for approaches to teaching and learning that regard learners as having the ability to construct and apply knowledge rather than just assimilating the knowledge transmitted from the teacher (Lupeja & Komba, 2021). A CBC uses a learner-centered teaching strategy that is flexible to meet the changing needs of learners,

teachers and the society (Mabonga, 2021). Teachers are therefore challenged to use various teaching strategies that focus on real life situations and allow learners to collaboratively investigate and construct their own knowledge (Kitta & Tilya, 2018).

Teacher Professional Development (TPD) is regularly employed as a tool to help teachers improve their competencies so as to alter their methods when new national educational initiatives are launched (Gardner et al., 2019). These TPD programs, however, often come along as a top-down measure with a notion of 're-tooling' teachers, while disregarding their professional concerns and educational approaches that might have proven effective in their contexts. Hence, Zeng & Day (2019) suggest that TPD programs should go beyond these top-down approaches and even beyond collaboration, to help teachers to reflect on, review, refresh and maintain their commitment to the larger reasons of teaching. Also, the personal, professional and external circumstances that put teachers' commitment in jeopardy need to be considered when designing professional learning opportunities (Avidov- Day, 2017; Ungar & Herscu, 2020). Training modules need to be related to practical situations and challenges with a focus on pedagogical innovation so as to positively impact student learning (Catalano et al., 2020). As Freire puts it, the social context and complexity of the environment must be connected to educational practice for education to be truly meaningful (Shih, 2018a).

Against this backdrop, action research comes in as an invaluable participatory approach that is collaborative and based on teachers' identified needs and day-to-day classroom experiences, therefore one powerful way to improve professional learning of teachers (Kemmis et al., 2013, 2014; Mamlok-Naaman, 2018; McTaggart et al., 2017). When teachers engage in action research, they develop a shared concern related to the local needs and have a chance to question and reflect on challenging real-life dilemmas so as to collaboratively find ways of overcoming them (Johannesson, 2022; Yalcin Arslan, 2019).

Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) is that type of inquiry in which a researcher and participants who are committed to engaging in a broad social analysis of their situation, gather, collectively study their practices and decide what to do to improve and address their condition through communicative action (Fine & Torre, 2021; Kemmis et al., 2019; McTaggart et al., 2017). It originates from, among others, Paulo Freire's pedagogy which aims at liberation and democracy in all spheres of life, education included, through dialogical reflection and action (Freire, 1970). CPAR builds on participatory action research by committing to examine power dynamics throughout the research design (Xin & Brion-Meisels, 2022). It arises when individuals share concerns and collaborate to improve their respective practices, making them more reasonable, more sustainable and less unfair (McTaggart et al., 2017). In summary, CPAR focusses on assisting teachers in transforming their work and qualitatively altering the circumstances in which they are present (Brooks et al., 2021).

From this paradigmatic stance and theoretical lens, a CPAR type of inquiry can be regarded as a suitable approach for bridging the gap between theory and instructional practices, since it promotes group and self-reflective inquiry (Laudonia et al., 2018; Miedijensky & Sasson, 2022). For critical constructivists, practice and theory are much related to practices of shared adaptation, joint questioning and of shared illumination (Bentley, 2016). CPAR illuminates the consciousness

and voices of the teacher participants and empowers them to make changes in their practices through analysis, interpretation, and reflection (Nugent, 2019). Participants plan, act, observe and reflect to address the obstacles to learning and empowerment, which are often negative effects of social practices rooted in global issues (Kemmis et al., 2016; McTaggart et al., 2017). Hence, we identified CPAR as a potentially useful approach to assist English language teachers in Uganda deal with uncertainties of implementing the new pedagogy.

3.0 Materials and Methods

This study was guided by the critical constructivist paradigm and it adopted a qualitative approach using a Critical Participatory Action Research design (reconnaissance, planning, enacting the plan while observing how it works and reflection) as shown in figure 2. It was conducted with 14 purposively selected teachers, out of 32 that were teaching English language in lower secondary classes in the 7 public secondary schools in Kabale Municipality, Uganda. Six of these participants were female while 8 were male. The participants selected were in senior one and senior two as the only classes implementing CBC at the time (2022) and the selection was based on their willingness to commit effort and time into the discussions and action that formed the study.

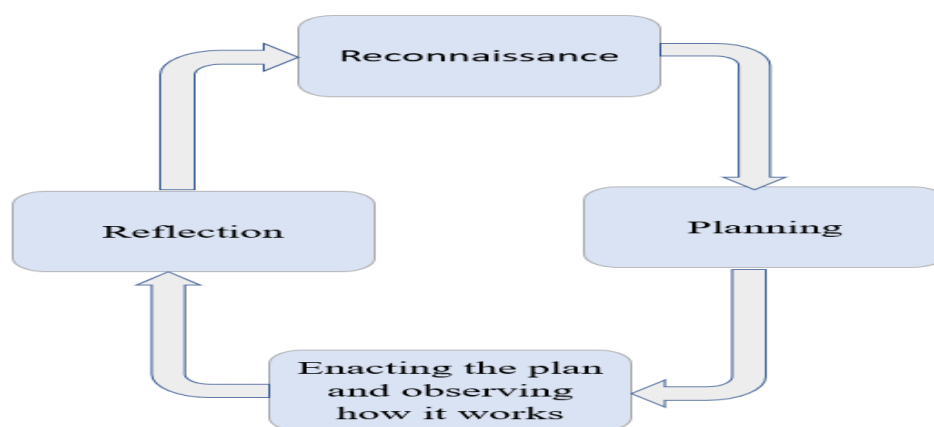


Figure 2: The Steps of Critical Participatory Action Research (Source: Ekyakunzire, 2022)

In alignment with the CPAR design of this study, the participants were invited to engage in a dialogue in which they shared their English language teaching practice concerns. They were provided with reflective journals for recording observations, thoughts, and opinions during the classroom action, and for later reflection. The study followed Lincoln and Guba's four criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. I analyzed the data according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedure, interpreted it with the help of participants, and completed the analysis and documented the findings.

This study observed ethical considerations of doing CPAR according to Locke et al., (2013). I adhered to the "the affective principle" by refraining from asking questions that could lead to worry, anxiety or other negative effects. I observed justice by ensuring that sessions allowed self-expression and discouraged domination. Beneficence and inclusivity by were ensured by allowing each participant free expression. Each participant was regarded as a key and full participant to

observe Locke's "principle of maximal participant recognition". I obtained informed consent, ensured confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudo names and codes.

3.1 Researcher's Positionality and Motivation

I undertook this study as an insider. My motivation arose from having been a teacher of English language for more than thirteen years in different secondary schools in Uganda. In 2021, I had had the opportunity to attend workshops organized to prepare me alongside other teachers to spearhead the implementation of the NLSC. These combined all subject teachers and I experienced them as largely ineffective since my own concerns and actual situations were not considered. This experience resulted in a desire to explore TPD from a different angle and prompted me to undertake a CPAR study. Kemmis et al. (2014 & 2019) emphasize that researching one's own practices and practice traditions be done from the inside. We, as teachers, needed to share our professional knowledge, expertise and unique insights to effectively help one another. Additionally, CBC offered relevant new angles to reflect and change our own pedagogy towards more learner-centeredness, participation, interaction and inclusion. My already-existing professional and shared relations made me more readily acceptable to my colleagues as a researcher.

4.0 Results and discussions

The findings of the study are presented in line with the CPAR design that is: reconnaissance, planning, enacting the plan while observing how it works and reflection.

4.1 Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance took place in the first meeting which lasted four hours from 9:00am to 1:00pm and I had three sub-questions to guide this dialogue session to keep it focused.

Sub-question one: *What were your experiences with the professional development trainings attended so far regarding the new lower secondary curriculum?*

From the discussions, participants found that they had all only attended the four-day regional 're-tooling' workshop organized by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC). None of the participants had attended any national training which had been for only a few teachers from a few schools countrywide. The teachers agreed that the regional training was engaging since they actively participated in the discussions, activities and group discussions.

However, all participants found the workshop an inadequate "one-size-fits-all" that combined all teachers from the entire South-Western region of Uganda. For instance, Rorian experienced the workshop as a "general" one that *"did not go into details of English as a language and how to handle it in class."* Jenny added, *"...we trained in January, 2020, then went into lockdown soon after.... By the time schools opened for the lower classes, what we had trained had been completely erased from our memories."* Den experienced the training as "hurried," saying, *"The trainers themselves seemed unsure ...and maybe not thorough preparation was made...."* Andre highlighted that the issue of *"projects was not handled well"* and suggested *"another training to retool us about that area."*

Moreover, with no follow-up activities by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) the participants felt unsupported in the implementation. Rian indicated that *“They haven’t come on ground to ascertain whether what they trained us is actually being followed...”*.

The participants needed contextualized, subject-based workshops, saying that the implementation of the NLSC was hurried, without adequate preparation and support to the teachers who were the key implementers.

Sub-question two: *What is your perception about the CBC approaches currently being used to teach English language?*

The CBC advocates a number of approaches for classroom instruction including group work, roleplay, drama and discussion. Most participants used group work, because learner’s books always instructed that the learners be paired for each lesson. Therefore, this dialogue centered on the use of group work and revealed both positive and negative perceptions about it. All participants credited it for promoting student collaboration and active learning; and for making learners active agents of their learning process. As Seb says, *“CBC emphasizes...collaboration. By grouping learners, they collaborate and help each other discover a number of things.”* However, most participants found it time consuming and challenging. Jany noted, *“It takes a lot of time yet the content to be covered is a lot....”*. Nestorn added, *“...it takes a lot of time especially for the large classes.”*

It seemed to me that this partly negative perception was linked to the fear of the unknown, worsened by lack of information from the National examination body about how exams were to be set. Jany notes: *“There is a risk that we might reach the time to sit UNEB (time for final examinations by the national examination body) when we are still covering the senior two work.”* Participants were distressed by the large numbers of activities in the NLSC learners’ books Rorian said, *“You hardly complete a lesson fully and most times carry it forward...we are allowing all groups to participate, time wasted is a lot and not much content is covered.”* The negative perception was attributed to group dynamics. Seb noted; *“...there is this passive member of the group ...not part of this whole learning process..., forcefully like a passenger ... just waiting for the time to reach the destination and disembark... especially if you’re dealing with big classes.”*

The participants generally had a positive perception towards group work since it is learner-centered and allows self-discovery. However, it was time-consuming, especially with the large numbers of learners and activities that made it hard to progress. The teachers were still caught in the same pattern of teaching in assessment – the examinations were the important benchmarks for them. The NCDC always released textbooks late, so the participants were lagging behind in coverage of content. Most participants were still driven by the need to complete a set number of activities rather than going by the learners’ acquisition of the expected skills and competences. The shift to focusing on competences was therefore not being put into effect. It is a systemic contradiction to expect from the teachers to cover all aspects of the lesson and focus on competences and include learner-centered teaching methods. Everything needed to shift, the textbooks, instruction and examinations, before teachers could implement the change.

Sub-question three: *What are your teaching practice concerns when using these approaches to teach English language in your classrooms?*

The participants expressed that their creativity was crippled. Even after the regional ‘re-tooling training’, they seemed to think that they were solely supposed to use the books provided. Seb said: *“The teacher is challenged and the learner is equally challenged because we are also learning on the job. That’s the biggest challenge.....our creativity is limited in some way.”* They were also highly uncertain about the implementation. Seb says: *“This is the third year, the first year was utter chaos, the second year was no better.... and now we are beginning to ask ourselves questions; is what we are doing right? Is the content we are helping learners bring out in class enough?”*.

The other concern was about instructional materials that were inadequate. As Jany said, *“My concern are the books. Like now, we have the pioneers in senior three and we don’t have the books... Even when they bring them, they are not enough.* Dowin added, *“My concern is materials...textbooks, markers, manillas ...are few...”*. The teachers still felt uncertain whether they were implementing the new curriculum the right way or not. This is consistent with (Barasa et al., 2023) who highlighted that Ugandan teachers had concerns about the increased workload and general uncertainty about their role in the implementation of the NLSC. These concerns necessitated another meeting to critically reflect on how to address them which followed next.

4.2 Planning

The planning for a praxis intervention took place as participants suggested possible solutions to their teaching practice concerns. The overriding concerns were about group work dynamics, inadequate instructional materials, the participants’ uncertainty about whether they were doing what was expected of them and limited creativity. The participants agreed on the need to put more effort into adequate lesson preparation and to be creative in solving the concern of group dynamics, as well as inadequate time to cover the many activities in the learners’ books. Participants discussed what teaching approach could be used to solve most of these concerns guided by the question.

Sub-question four: *What teaching approach do we use to teach English language in the framework of CBC considering our different concerns?*

We formed groups to save time and get a variety of approaches from which to choose one to implement. We formed 3 groups of 5, 5 and 4 members each, which had 30 minutes design an approach and present it. Group 1 presented the group modification approach which majorly looked at rotation and substitution of roles of the members of the groups. Group 2 discussed a Frayer model, the organization of content in circular form on either a chart, piece of paper. The strength of the approach was the ‘cold calling’ and ability to widen coverage of content. Group 3 presented the falling leaves approach, where a teacher gives learners different small papers on which to write their responses. When a group makes a presentation of an idea, the groups with the same idea drop their papers on the ground if they do not have a different idea. The falling leaves are these papers which have the same ideas as those presented and are dropped. The groups that stay with the papers also present and the same is repeated until the last paper is dropped. The teacher gets ideas from all the groups without the unnecessary repetitions and time wastage.

The participants found all the three presented approaches were very good at addressing different concerns. The Frayer model was time-effective and would make all the learners alert in their groups. However, some of the groups would not get to present their ideas since discretion would be used to select groups of interest to present. This meant denying some groups chance to present their ideas. This led participants to modify “the Frayer model” so that it could accommodate “the falling leaves approach” for its strength in ensuring that all ideas from all the groups were listened to in the shortest possible time. We agreed that “the Frayer model” should also encompass “the group modification approach” for its suitability for large classes and strength in fostering collaborative learning. This was the approach we agreed to implement in our classes and we called it “the Modified Frayer model”.

4.3 Enacting the Plan and Observing how it Works: Reflective Journals

In CPAR, participants make their own records as the study progresses (Maros & Juniar, 2016). The 3-week classroom action commenced two days after the second meeting. The teachers documented their thoughts, observations, reflections, before, during and after the process in the classroom. The following are the reflections of participants, presented using narration, and weaving extracts from different reflective journal data to illustrate the journey of teachers as they engaged in the classroom action.

Initially, they echoed the teachers’ apprehension towards implementing the modified Frayer model. The majority of the participants reported nervousness and uncertainty, which they attributed to the fear that the approach might face resistance from the learners: *“I am a little nervous... afraid whether learners will adopt the changes made especially group rotation and substitution of roles (journal 2).”* *“I am concerned that the big numbers will make it impossible for every learner to be given an opportunity to present their ideas (journal 12).”* A few participants hoped the new approach might be supportive: *“I believe that passive learners will fully participate in classwork (journal 6).”* *“Students may put more effort in carrying out research when given activities (journal 5 and journal 8).”*

Later on, the reflections echoed the teachers’ shift in mindset and appreciation of the modified Frayer model as a good approach in helping them to overcome their concerns: *“Learners paid attention as they expected to take up different roles any time (Journal 3).”* *“Most of the learners were active and alert since they did not know who was going to present (Journal 1).”* The reflective journals presented teachers’ transformative experiences and valuable insights into the effectiveness of CPAR for empowering teachers for positive change in their teaching practice.

4.4 Reflection

After classroom action, the participants met again for a final reflection meeting to shed light on the strength of CPAR at promoting transformative teaching practices and contributing to equitable educational systems.

4.5 Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the findings. Table 1 shows the summary of the themes generated and the underlying code categories.

Table 1: Summary of Findings by Theme and Categories

Using CPAR in Teacher Professional Development (TPD) for Competence-Based English Language Teaching		
Research Question	Themes	Categories
How can CPAR advance TPD for competence-based teaching?	Teacher Agency	Mutual Engagement
		Creativity
	Empowerment	Critical Reflection
		Collaborative learning

Source: Ekyakunzire, 2023

4.5.1 Theme One: Teacher Agency

Agency is a creative aspect of TPD and developing a sense of agency is a social process that cannot be developed in isolation (Bandura, 2018). Participants who were part of the NCDC regional training reflected on the teaching practices and approaches from the training and decided it was impractical to apply them uncritically in their classrooms. The participants' commitment to bring about positive change in their classrooms was evidenced by their mutual engagement and creativity.

(a) Mutual Engagement

Participants sacrificed time to meet and engage in dialogue sessions about their teaching practice and concerns. They also shared aspects of their current teaching practices that they felt needed to change for an effective curriculum implementation. The in-depth conversations showed a commitment towards working together to find a solution to the various classroom challenges and concerns. The participants were eager to learn from each other, and loved working together. They collectively developed a modified Frayer model to address their concerns which they implemented in their various classrooms. These findings agree with Dhungana et al., (2019) who asserts that TPD should be participatory and contextual-based so as to enhance teachers' continuous professional development.

(b) Creativity

Teachers generated innovative interventions for more equitable educational practice. They thought of a modified Frayer model as a teaching approach that was suitable to their teaching environment and embraced different voices and viewpoints so as to make it inclusive and reflective of the diverse realities of their classroom teaching concerns. Past studies have proved that when teachers engaged in action research, they developed a shared concern related to the local needs since they had a chance to question and reflect on challenging real-life dilemmas so as to collaboratively find ways of overcoming them (Johannesson, 2022).

4.5.2 Theme Two: Empowerment

Empowerment increases teachers' motivation and confidence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems with a strong belief that they can confront new circumstances and solve their own challenges to change their practice (Vodopija-Krstanović, 2023). This study offered teachers a collaborative environment to engage in dialogue and knowledge sharing and their empowerment was reflected through collaborative inquiry and critical reflection.

(a) Collaborative Inquiry

Collaborative inquiry gives participants an equal voice in the entire research process in order to create a shared ownership of the research process and outcomes so that the research is meaningful, relevant and sustainable. This study highlighted the value of establishing a collaborative relationship in researching issues of common concern. Participants were collaborative co-constructors of knowledge as they suggested, discussed and negotiated which of the approaches could be used in the classroom action. They learnt from each other in a dialogical and non-authoritarian process in which each other's ideas were recognized and respected. The teachers showed a commitment to continue to work to change and transform their teaching practice and that of their colleagues. The findings concur with literature that collaborative inquiry empowers teachers to take charge of their professional development (Lieberman, 2023), and that teachers need not be passive recipients of a 'retooling process' but active agents of educational change (McTaggart et al., 2017).

(b) Critical Reflection

According to McGarr et al. (2019), reflection can be a personal process or a shared meaning-making one. This study took the latter, as teachers engaged in critical reflection about their concerns and reached a shared understanding of how to address them. They acknowledged that the suggested approaches from the three groups were all good at addressing different classroom concerns and decided to adopt and merge them into one approach. This reflection process gave them a new understanding that they could solve their own concerns and make changes that were vital for improvement of their teaching practice. The teachers gained deeper insights into their practice and adapted their teaching approaches to better meet the needs of their learners, thereby becoming better practitioners. The teachers preferred CPAR to the training methods they had encountered before as said by Den: *"In the last meeting, we raised a number of issues and concerns and were able to come up with practical solutions which have been very useful... I recommend this approach to professional development."* These findings concur with those of Kemmis et al (2019) that action research empowers educators to make informed decisions about how to improve their own practice and to promote equitable and socially just educational outcomes for all learners (Kemmis et al., 2019).

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

It can be concluded that participating in Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) gives teachers a sense of ownership and empowerment, which increases their commitment to bring about meaningful change in their teaching practice. CPAR puts teachers in charge of their own professional development, allows them collaborate in alleviating their teaching practice fears, helps in deeper understanding of their practice and in co-create knowledge that is contextually relevant and therefore more sustainable. CPAR develops in teachers' feelings of agency and a

commitment to change their practice as well as becoming change agents in their respective schools. Through its reflective practice, CPAR can uplift teachers and make them catalysts of positive change within their classrooms and different contexts within which they work.

5.1 Implications for Policy

This study showed a different way of facilitating TPD especially after curriculum change. The evidence provided indicates the need for TPD to start with the teachers' concerns, as involving their voices creates a deep commitment to curriculum change. This study also highlighted that teachers do not have to be passive recipients of a 'retooling process' since they have the capacity to be active participants in their own professional development. The methodology demonstrates how teachers can actively engage with the NLSC in a creative way. Opening spaces for teachers to engage in dialogue about their teaching practice develops motivation to implement and accept new pedagogies. The study indicated how a CPAR could contribute to teacher professional development since it is inclusive, collaborative, context-based and originates from the teachers' own questions and concerns. Through CPAR, teachers can monitor their own progress with the implementation, policy makers can improve and monitor the implementation process through gathering the teachers' voices, creatively involving them in the suggestions for improvement and use of context-based approaches, and getting feedback from the implementation of the NLSC in their classrooms.

5.2 Recommendations

The study therefore recommends that:

- i. Participatory modes of TPD should be used widely and possibly taken up by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), and National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) in demarcated regional school settings that exhibit a great similarity. This can be done by establishing platforms and spaces for mutual engagement where teachers come together, share their experiences with NLSC implementation and collectively identify issues of concern so that they are empowered to become active agents of curriculum change.
- ii. Critical Participatory Action Research is a structured process that allows for effective monitoring and evaluation regarding the process of implementation of the NLSC. This will be based on gathering the teachers' voices, concerns and critical reflections on their classroom practice, which can differ widely in the various regions. CPAR has proven to be a powerful tool to for creatively involving teachers in the suggestions and use of context-based solutions, which will make the implementation process more effective.
- iii. Educational institutions should provide support in terms of time and resources for CPAR-based professional development initiatives and encourage collective learning and action among teachers.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict to declare

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