

EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF A COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM REFORM: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

La pedagogía eficaz en el contexto de una reforma curricular basada en competencias: percepciones de docentes en la República Dominicana

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Resumen

In 2016, the Dominican Republic Ministry of Education launched a competency-based curriculum, thus promoting a constructivist and learner-centered pedagogy. However, two years later, a national study found that several obstacles impede the implementation of this curriculum, specifically teachers' lack of appropriation which resulted in the use of traditional instructional methods such as copying. By further exploring the culture of copying in Dominican public schools, this study contributes to the literature on effective pedagogy at the primary level. Using an ethnographic lens, the research explores the perceptions of four teachers in two schools in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be effective in the context of the Dominican Republic. Drawing on data from interviews and observations, the study seeks to address the following questions: How do teachers conceptualize effective teaching and learning? In what ways do these perceptions reveal themselves in the classroom? What facilitators or inhibitors to effectiveness exist? The findings demonstrate that teachers construct practical knowledge that allows them to tend to the culture of copying in a more reflexive manner. They reject copying as an effective teaching strategy and demonstrate evidence of a paradigm shift towards constructivism. However, they still resort to using copying as a pedagogical activity due to several reasons: their perceptions of students, of curricular content, and of the political and material conditions in which they work. This study thus argues for more research that explores teachers' voices and sense-making processes in order to understand not just *what* teachers do, but *why* they do it.

Keywords: Curriculum, Dominican Republic, Primary School, School Culture, Teacher Effectiveness, Teaching and Learning

Abstract

En 2016, el Ministerio de Educación de la República Dominicana publicó el nuevo currículo basado en competencias para promover una pedagogía constructivista y centrada en el estudiante. Sin embargo, dos años después, un estudio identificó importantes obstáculos para poner el nuevo currículo en práctica; sobre todo, la falta de apropiación del personal docente, la cual resulta en algunos maestros utilizando métodos tradicionales como copiar. Al indagar más sobre la cultura de copiar en escuelas públicas dominicanas, esta investigación contribuye a la literatura sobre la pedagogía efectiva a nivel primaria. Como un estudio etnográfico, explora las percepciones y prácticas de cuatro maestros en dos escuelas para profundizar nuestro conocimiento de lo que significa ser eficaz en el contexto dominicano. A través de entrevistas y observaciones, plantea respuestas a las siguientes preguntas: ¿Cómo los docentes dominicanos perciben los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje eficaz? ¿Cómo se manifiestan estas percepciones en las aulas? ¿Cuáles factores facilitan o inhiben su eficacia? Los resultados indican una percepción más reflexiva de parte del docente, iluminando un conocimiento práctico que se construye dentro del aula. Los cuatro docentes rechazan el acto de copiar como estrategia eficaz y demuestran un cambio de paradigma hacia el constructivismo. No obstante, utilizan el acto de copiar en ciertos contextos por varias razones: sus percepciones sobre sus estudiantes, los contenidos del currículo; y las condiciones políticas y materiales en las que trabajan. Asimismo, la investigación indica que se requieren más estudios que exploren las voces del profesorado dominicano y sus procesos de toma de decisiones para entender no solamente *que* hacen los docentes sino el *por qué*.

Palabras claves: currículo, enseñanza, escuela primaria, cultura escolar, eficacia del docente, República Dominicana

1. Introduction

Since 2014, the Dominican Republic Ministry of Education (MINERD) has passed a series of political reforms as part of its *Educational Revolution*. Among these reforms, the MINERD launched a new Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2016, thus promoting a constructivist pedagogy in Dominican classrooms. Two years following the launch of the CBC, however, a network of Dominican institutions, called the Socio-educational Forum (*Foro Socioeducativo*), in partnership with Oxfam International, published a report analyzing the country's progress in achieving the sustainable development goals. This report indicated that there still exist significant barriers that impede the proper implementation of the CBC, namely the lack of appropriation by teaching staff, which results in some teachers using traditional methods such as copying (Checo, 2018). This contrast, between the constructivist pedagogy that the new CBC outlines and the traditional practices that some teachers utilize, demonstrates a gap between the new policy and its implementation.

This gap between policy and practice is a common theme in the literature on comparative and international education. Therefore, this study begins with a review of literature on international educational reforms in the past five years, in order to highlight some of the common challenges of implementing new curricular and pedagogical policies across contexts. Next, it provides a brief description of the current context in the Dominican Republic and the various theories that the new CBC proposes. The article then elaborates on the methodological design of this research. It employs an ethnographic lens to explore the perceptions and practices of four teachers in two public schools in the Dominican Republic. As an ethnography, this research provides an in-depth analysis of the living realities in which Dominican teachers work within their specific school and classroom contexts, as they attempt to implement the new CBC. It uses observations and "stimulated recall" interviews to examine teachers' decision-making processes, as well as how they make sense of their own practice (Calderhead, 1981). In doing so, this

study contributes important insights to broaden our understanding of effectiveness in the context of the Dominican Republic by centering the voices of Dominican teachers.

2. Literature review

Five years ago, the UNESCO Office of International Education published a report stating that "in the processes of curricular reform in national contexts it has become normal to refer to themes and approaches that seem to form an international educational agenda, with the associated risk of importing them without generating contextualization and critical appropriation" (Amadio, Operti, & Tedesco, 2015, p. 10). The authors identify various elements that influence national reform agendas and curricular innovation, such as: reference to developing students' competencies (rather than content knowledge); a focus on teaching values and socioemotional skills; and curriculum frameworks that propose coherence through the development of a "global-local" narrative which suggests a gaze both externally towards the world and internally toward the national society. The following literature review explores both of these aspects of the "global-local" juxtaposition, beginning with an international perspective about curricular reforms and their processes of implementation, especially in the regions of Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, and concluding with an introspective view towards the local or national contexts of the Dominican Republic and the government's recent educational reform that establishes the CBC.

2.1. The formal vs. implemented curriculum: an international perspective

According to a recent analysis of curricular reforms across the African continent, of 55 countries, only six have not implemented a new CBC in the past several decades (D'Angelo, Marcus & Pereznieta, 2019). Similar patterns have appeared throughout the region of Latin America, causing some authors such as Díaz (2016) to refer to the CBC rhetoric as "a hegemonic discourse" (p. 29). Through processes of globalization, multilateral organizations and

international development agencies with headquarters in the Global North have imposed curricular frameworks across Africa, Latin America, and other regions of the world, as a way of promoting the economic development of countries in the Global South (Anderson-Levitt, 2017; da Silva, dos Santos & Pacheco, 2015). But in many of these countries, the attempt to transfer foreign educational theories, such as constructivist approaches to teaching and learning, often confronts “local resistance” (Yessoufou, 2019). A review of studies that have explored these curricular reforms over the past five years, allows us to see how this research sheds light on gaps between policy and implementation. Studies that examine tensions between concepts such as the “formal” or “official” curriculum and the “informal,” “lived,” or “implemented” curriculum explore those gaps between what curriculum policies propose and what is observed in practice (Montoya, 2017).

An abundance of research has inquired into the process of appropriation of curricular reforms. Research generally describes this process as slow and gradual. Through it, teachers may begin to appropriate certain aspects of a reform without fully grasping all of the fundamental theories that the new policy entails. In the context of Mexico, for example, Noriega-Jacob (2020) found that teachers were able to describe the principal focus of a new Spanish program based on constructivist pedagogies, as well as their roles as teachers within this program. However, the same teachers had little knowledge and mastery over the curricular standards and the specific competencies that the program outlined. Still, the author also highlights that although the teacher participants in the study did not fully grasp the new program, as outlined in its policy, “they show that from their training and teacher experience, they know what resources to employ to achieve certain learning gains in their students” (Noriega-Jacob, 2020, p. 113). In the context of curricular reform in Cameroon, teachers learned to utilize resources to implement a CBC, though they were unable to demonstrate deeper understanding of the theories that constituted the core of its design (Chu, Nnam & Faizefu, 2018). In these examples, we see how the utilization of teaching and

learning materials may be the first step in the appropriation of a constructivist curriculum; nevertheless, this result falls short of the more holistic and integrated appropriation which one would hope to eventually achieve.

In addition to the instructional strategies that teachers use, systems of evaluation are another important theme in the literature on curricular reform. In an ethnographic study inquiring into the perceptions of Colombian teachers, Castellanos (2014) finds discontinuity between teachers’ learning objectives, their teaching and learning activities, and the evaluation strategies they used. Similarly, in the context of Senegal, Miyazaki (2016) suggests that teachers implemented new pedagogical strategies but without focusing on student learning; thus their pedagogical transformation did not result in improved learning for students. Innovations in curriculum and pedagogy may conflict due to the ways in which evaluation is designed and implemented within education systems (Armadio, et al., 2015). Thus, there are a multitude of factors that must be considered in the implementation of such a reform.

On the one hand, the literature indicates evidence of a “paradigm shift,” or the ideological and pragmatic movement from a teacher-centered pedagogy (conceptualized as a traditional practice) towards a student-centered pedagogy (conceptualized as a more progressive and innovative style of teaching) (Hung, 2015; Mbarushimana & Kuboja, 2015). On the other hand, however, a review of research inquiring into this paradigm shift, allows us to consider critical factors that arise from the contexts in which educational reforms are implemented, such as the culture of teachers (their beliefs and perceptions), school-level structures, and the material conditions in which teachers and students work. Within these broad categories, factors exist that may either facilitate or inhibit the effective implementation of a policy. In a comparative study of Mexico and Peru, for example, Chuquilin and Zagaceta (2017) argue that the personal identities and experiences of teachers play an important role in the social mechanisms that they utilize to put into practice new educational

reforms. In addition, Mulenga and Kambobwe (2019) demonstrate that the economic and political contexts of Zambia cause challenges that obstruct the implementation of a new CBC, due to the fact that this curricular framework requires more resources, equipment, and infrastructure. Therefore, the literature suggests that in order to appropriate a new curriculum, one must consider not just the economic investment, physical and human resources, structures, and systems that constitute the political and institutional environment in which teachers work, but also the individual culture of each teacher.

The same can be said of political reforms that transcend the curriculum. In a study about educational reform in Argentina, Krichesky and colleagues (2020) report three challenges that exist when implementing and recontextualizing a new school policy: (1) school norms, shaped by the conceptions that various actors in the educational system have, as well as the organizational structures that influence the reification of such norms; (2) the tensions that exist between traditions and existing alternatives that the new reform proposes, which subsequently result in teachers' passive acceptance, resistance, and/or rejection of that policy; and (3) the persistence of patterns of failure and exclusion, such as student dropout and repetition rates, which end up limiting the reach of a certain political reform. Ultimately, various factors exist which contribute to the gap between policy and practice: factors at the micro-level (individual actors involved), meso-level (schools and other institutions) and the macro-level (the educational system as a whole). Moreover, these contributing factors may be interpreted as technical and affective: technical factors include the structures and resources required to implement a new policy, while affective factors include the ideological and moral or value-laden issues that arise from any actor within the system, his or her culture, beliefs, and the perceptions that shape their actions.

2.2. A competency-based curriculum in the Dominican Republic

In 2016, as an integral part of its Educational Revolution, the MINERD conducted a revision of the

national curriculum, followed up by launching its new CBC. In the policy document outlining the basis for the new curriculum, the MINERD (2016) describes the purpose of this curricular revision to adopt a new curricular framework “that responds to the need to contribute to strengthening the quality of Dominican education, making it more adequate for reality, in relation to societal conditions and challenges and to 21st century knowledge” (p. 21). One of the central axes of the new CBC is constructivism. Constructivism conceptualizes knowledge as a human construct that depends on mental schemes formed based on previous experience and knowledge, as well as the cultural practices in which we are inserted (MINERD, 2016). The policy itself frequently draws on the work of Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, who was a leading theorist of constructivism and learner-centered pedagogy, hence reifying the notion of a “global-local” nexus in the context of the Dominican Republic. Three orientations also form the basis of the CBC: a historical-cultural focus, a socio-critical focus, and a focus on competencies:

- a) **A historical-cultural focus** locates teaching and learning processes throughout time and space and recognizes diverse cultures and views. It permits pupils to internalize learning and mobilize not only their cognitive abilities, but also their emotional and affective skills.
- b) **A socio-critical focus**, as a philosophy and pedagogical practice, considers social and human problems as the basis of teaching-learning processes, and promotes interactive collaboration as a tool to overcome these problems. Because of this, discourse takes on a fundamental role and through dialogue, the student, together with another actor (either a fellow student or the teacher) co-constructs knowledge.
- c) **A focus on competencies** establishes the pertinent skills that students should develop to become autonomous in society, mobilizing not only concepts and processes, but also attitudes and values. There are seven *fundamental* competencies (ethics and citizenship;

communication; logical, creative, and critical thinking; problem solving; scientific and technological skills; nature and health; and personal and spiritual development), as well as various *specific* competencies that correspond to each curricular subject or subtopic.

The political framework of the CBC states that “we don’t just go to school to memorize subject content that is in the curriculum. We go, over everything, to develop through learning, particular ways of thinking, acting, and feeling” (MINERD, 2016, p. 39). However, two years after launching the CBC in the Dominican Republic, obstacles continue to impede its implementation, especially the lack of appropriation on the part of teaching staff, which results in some teachers utilizing traditional teaching methods such as copying (Checo, 2018). A gap thus exists between the political framework outlined by the CBC and its implementation, or the observed teacher practices. For this reason, this study enquires into the pedagogical perceptions and practices of Dominican teachers in order to better understand how they attempt to be effective within the context of a new CBC reform. The research questions are:

1. How do Dominican teachers perceive effective teaching and learning?
2. In what ways do these perceptions reveal themselves in classrooms?
3. What are some of the inhibitors and facilitators of effective teaching in the context of public schools in the Dominican Republic?

3. Methodology

This article draws on only some of the findings of a larger ethnographic study conducted as part of a Doctorate degree in education and international development at the University of Cambridge. The research employs a descriptive and interpretive lens on the perceptions and practices of Dominican teachers in order to identify and describe effective teaching. Although the curriculum was not a central point of enquiry in the design of this study, it became a

critical element that influenced how teachers perceived effective teaching. Therefore, the findings presented in this article focus specifically on the act of copying and its relationship with effective teaching in the context of the Dominican Republic. For the purposes of this research, the richness of ethnography is used as a guiding point for the collection of data about the processes of teaching and the perspectives that teachers have of their practice (Rockwell, 2009). Diverse instruments have been used to collect data, including semi-structured interviews of teachers, students, and school leaders, classroom observations, and the analysis of policy documents, such as the curriculum and other materials created by the MINERD.

The objective of this study was to identify best practices in public schools of the Dominican Republic. Hence, the two participating schools were selected using a purposive sampling style (Morse, 2011). The researcher spoke with various actors within the education system to identify two public primary schools that were recognized as ‘model’ schools. In other words, through conversations with teachers at the primary, secondary, and university level, as well as MINERD employees, researchers, and leaders of non-governmental organizations, the researcher created a list of possible exemplary schools. Afterwards, school leaders were contacted, and an initial meeting was scheduled. In this meeting, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the school director and asked each director to choose two fifth and sixth grade teachers who he or she considered would exemplify good teaching practices. A second meeting was then held with these teachers to further discuss the project and their role as teacher participants. Once permission was granted, the study commenced.

Two teachers participated in each of the two schools for a total of four teacher participants. The two schools were located in the provinces of Puerto Plata and Maria Trinidad Sánchez, both on the north coast of the Dominican Republic. They were structured differently, however, in that the first school was based on a rotating structure and thus the two

teacher participants rotated between four classrooms (or ‘sections’) across fifth and sixth grade (5A, 5B, 6A, 6B), but each teacher only taught one subject. One teacher taught Spanish Language and the other taught Mathematics. In the second school, the two teachers were ‘set’ teachers, so they stayed in one classroom each, and were in charge of teaching six curricular subjects, including the four principal subjects (Spanish Language, Math, Science, and Social

Studies) as well as Art and Holistic Human and Religious Training. Due to the fact that this study seeks to identify best practices, each teacher was able to choose the lesson to be observed each week. Therefore, in the second school, both teachers ended up choosing the subject that they felt most confident in, Spanish Language and Science, respectively. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms and important demographic data about the four teacher participants.

Table 1. Demographic data about the teacher participants

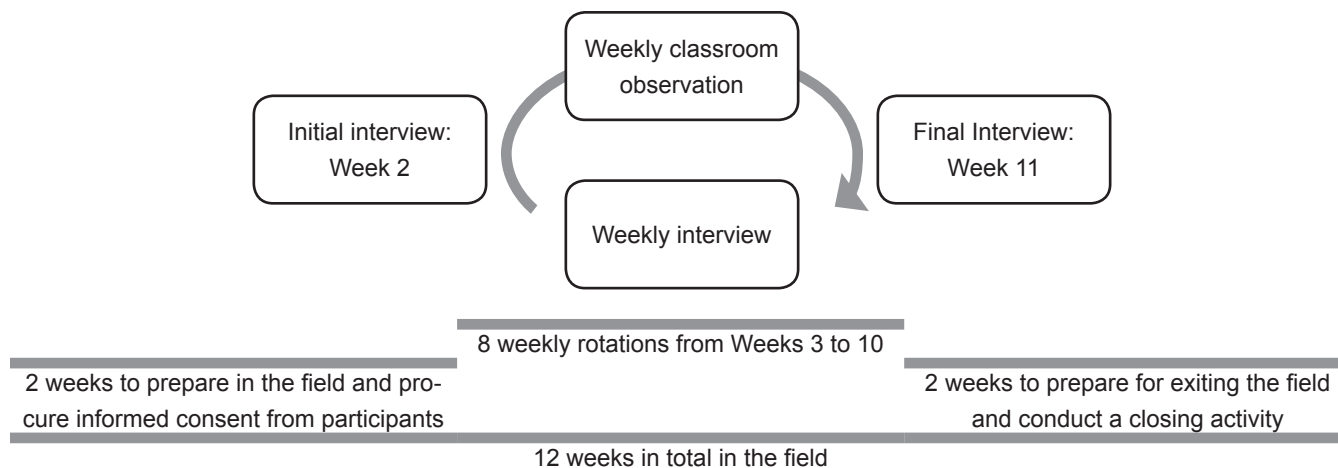
School	School A		School B	
Pseudonym	Samuel	Miguel	Gloria	Fernanda
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female
Age	28	27	37	43
Experience	4 years	6 years	12 years	21 years
Grades	5 th and 6 th	5 th and 6 th	5 th	6 th
Subject	Spanish	Math	Spanish	Science

Note: Created by author. “Experience” refers to the number of years of experience teaching in a classroom setting, either formally (as a certified, in-service teacher) or informally (as a substitute or pre-service teacher). This number is calculated based on the time that the research was conducted (academic school year 2018-2019). For example, a teacher that only has two years of teaching experience started his or her second year of teaching in classrooms in August 2018.

As a foreigner, the researcher sought to combat any hegemonic position that may have appeared from her relationship with the teacher participants (Jakobsen, 2012). She positioned herself as someone seeking to learn from the teachers, and she focused on the development of positive social relationships as a central pillar of ethical research (Tikly & Bond, 2013). Moreover, in each school, the research lasted three months, and the first two weeks were dedicated to the “settling in” process, as an important aspect of ethnography, which allows the researcher and participants to develop rapport before beginning data collection (Davis & Davis, 1989), thus reducing the probability of confronting social desirability bias, and increasing the validity of the results.

With the purpose of learning more in-depth about teachers’ actions and the contextual circumstances that shape their pedagogical and curricular decisions, in each school non-participatory observations

were conducted and followed by weekly interviews. This study explores the perceptions of teachers, and thus semi-structured interviews were used so that teacher-participants could lead the conversation in the direction that they deemed important, ultimately adding depth to the observational data collected (Drever, 2003). First, an initial interview was conducted with each teacher with the purpose of inquiring into their pre-service and in-service teaching experiences. A similar interview was conducted at the end of the fieldwork, including some of the same questions, to see if teachers’ perceptions had changed over the course of the investigation and the weekly reflexive conversations. Between these first and last interviews, there were eight weeks of weekly cycles that included formal classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. This process of data collection is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figura 1. Interview and observation process for teacher participants in each school

Note: Created by author. Fieldwork lasted 12 weeks (three months) in each school. Research was conducted from September 3rd to November 30th in School A and from January 14th to April 12th in School B.

During the classroom observations, the researcher focused on the teacher and his or her actions, utilizing narrative observation to write down what was said and done, rather than infer or interpret teacher actions (Clark & Leat, 1998). The researcher took notes of as much as possible, including, for example, teacher-student interactions and the didactic materials that the teacher used. During the subsequent interview, these events were repeated to the teacher in sequential order in the form of “stimulated recall,” in order to probe teachers’ thoughts and decision-making processes (Calderhead, 1981). Sample questions from the weekly interviews are included as an Appendix. These questions allowed teachers to comment on observed actions and why they engaged in each action, thus allowing the researcher to construct an understanding of teachers’ knowledge or wisdom (*saber docente*), or that knowledge which informs their practice (Díez, 2014).

As an ethnographic study, data was analyzed in an iterative process, so that interview questions were constantly modified throughout the fieldwork in order to continue enquiring into the themes and categories that arose during the process of data analysis (Pink, 2006). At the end of the fieldwork, the researcher transcribed all interviews word-for-word in their original language, Spanish. Initial descriptive themes

were then created and later NVivo 12 was used and the constant comparative approach was employed, whereas one interview of each teacher participant was randomly selected to see if each data source could be coded using the same thematic categories (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To present the results, the researcher opted to utilize narrative writing to recount the stories and experiences of the teacher participants, and to highlight how teachers used metaphors and images to speak of their practice (Calderhead, 1989; Clandinin, 1986). This further contributed to the ethnographic nature of the research design (Agar, 1980).

4. Findings

The following section highlights three key findings that emerged from the analysis of teachers’ perceptions. First, it explores the culture of copying in Dominican schools, why teachers believe that this culture exists and how they try to combat the culture of copying in the classroom. Next, it provides evidence of a paradigm shift in teachers’ perceptions of effective teaching; one that strays from traditional practices and promotes a pedagogy centered on constructivism. Within this finding, teachers’ perceptions of the various curricular contents play an

important role in shaping their decisions about the teaching and learning activities they employ in the classroom. The third finding then turns the gaze from the individual teacher to the contexts in which these teachers work, emphasizing important factors that impede teachers' implementation of the CBC and contribute to fostering a culture of copying in Dominican schools.

4.1. "Doing class" and how to combat a culture of copying

Throughout the weekly interviews, the teacher participants confirmed that in effect a culture of copying did exist in the public Dominican schools in which they worked. The phrase, "doing class" (*hacer la clase*) was often heard from both teachers and students and it eventually became clear that this phrase referred to the act of writing in one's notebook. Students would be "doing class" when they were copying notes down or completing exercises that were provided in a textbook or on the chalkboard. In other words, those actors that were most closely involved with the teaching and learning processes perceived the act of writing as a fundamental part of a class or lesson. Moreover, the act of writing at times consisted of copying. Through classroom observations, it became evident that pupils were asked to copy in various ways, either by transcribing text that their teachers had written on the chalkboard, or from a textbook or a *dictado*, (dictation), information that a teacher or another classmate recited aloud for others to copy.

Two of the teacher participants attributed this culture of copying to students' previous experiences. In other schools, or with other teachers, the act of copying had been utilized as "a way of keeping [the students] calm" (Fernanda, March 6, 2019). Teachers would ask their students to copy extensive texts as a form of punishment. Recognizing this as an ineffective practice, Samuel said: You can't make [a student] transcribe or read a book and transcribe it. You know what that obliges him to do? To learn how to hate books because he's going to see that he only ends up writing when he [has a book and] is punished"

(October 9, 2018). The perceptions of Samuel and Fernanda were consistent with the classroom practices observed. In both schools, some teachers asked students to copy in order to spend time and to ensure that students were occupied, thus minimizing the possibility (and probability) of misconduct or conflict in classrooms. Suffice to say that student behavior was a significant challenge that all teachers confronted.

Therefore, the act of copying became understood as an activity that served two purposes: a teaching technique and a classroom management strategy. Throughout the years, students had been socialized into copying or transcribing, either as a means of punishment, or simply because certain teachers had utilized this strategy for teaching. Moreover, this classroom and school culture had instilled in students a desire or need to copy, which ultimately resulted in further challenges for teachers. All four teacher participants agreed that students had a difficult time producing their own written work independently because they were so accustomed to copying someone else's words (either from a book or the chalkboard). According to the teachers, a weakness that students had was summarizing texts, stories, and information, or taking notes in their own words about a certain topic. This was also observed when teachers asked students to create oral presentations. Although teachers wanted students to learn the topic beforehand and then teach it to their classmates, their culture of copying resulted in students transcribing from a textbook or a computer and writing a text word-for-word on a poster. Students would then read or memorize what they wrote, thus returning to the same traditional strategies of rote-call and memorization. Nevertheless, in their interviews, teacher-participants rejected these traditional strategies and the act of copying extensive texts as an effective teaching strategy.

Instead, teachers had to take certain measures to combat this culture of copying in their classrooms. One Spanish teacher insisted that the problem students had when attempting to write independently was the first few words, or the *arranque*, of their text.

During one lesson, students had to write their own original story, and at the moment in which students were asked to begin, Gloria paced through the aisles between students' desk offering help to ensure that this *arranque* was as smooth as possible, scaffolding students so that they could begin their writing, since this was something they struggled with. In the interview, Gloria explained: "We spoke about the difficulty that they have with starting [the story]. How to begin. I am going to write, [but] what am I going to write about? Some had doubts... so I had to remind them again" (February 5, 2019). Observational data suggested similar patterns. The majority of students sought help from a friend or a teacher as soon as they were asked to write. Accustomed to copying from a textbook or the chalkboard, the pupils found it difficult to write in their own words. Teachers thus faced the challenge of trying to combat this copying culture and cultivate autonomy in their students: the ability to produce their own texts, either through their writing or by presenting information orally and independently.

The culture of copying required teachers to take certain measures in order to ensure that their students did not waste time copying trivial information or getting distracted while the teacher explained the lesson. Some teachers used the strategy of giving talks to students about their expectations. "I like to explain, Ariel," Miguel said to a girl in fifth grade. He explained how one learns through oral explanations, and that for him this discourse was more important than writing whatever was on the chalkboard. Ariel had taken out her notebook as soon as Miguel started to write on the chalkboard. The habit of wanting to write down anything that was written was natural for her, since her previous teachers had expected this. But the four teacher-participants all agreed that copying large amounts of text was unproductive. Throughout the various lessons, teachers had to continue reminding their students not to copy, or to put away their notebooks and pencils in order to resist temptation. Samuel and Gloria had to hide the poster boards and other materials that they used to explain new concepts, in order to ensure that students would not write what was not expected of

them. Nevertheless, although the four teacher participants rejected the notion of copying as an effective teaching strategy, at times they still resorted to employing elements of copying in their lessons. The next section explores why.

4.2. Evidence of a paradigm shift towards constructivist pedagogy

"Here there is a culture that the children, if you don't ask them to write, they think they haven't taken the class. And I remove that culture from their heads. We're not in traditional times anymore, we are in new times. A child has to get that idea out of his head, that a class is just transcribing, transcribing, transcribing. No, sir. As much content that there is on the chalkboard, a child should adapt and understand that class can also be given singing, it can be given in the form of a play, and it can also be given by just speaking. We can sit at a table, we can go outside to the schoolyard, there and just speak about a topic and one learns a lot more than when he or she is just copying, because they don't get tired, they feel more comfortable. I don't like that, that [the students] think that everything is about copying" (Miguel, September 26, 2018).

Miguel explains clearly that a culture of copying contrasts with a more dynamic and interactive pedagogy. He explicitly recognizes that "we are no longer in traditional times" thus implying that copying comes from an antiquated era, when school culture was centered on the teacher and the student played a passive role. Now, "we are in new times," Miguel says, and he describes a conceptualization of teaching that incorporates music and theatre, as well as interaction with nature. These strategies were also observed in the classroom. Miguel implemented games, competitions, stories and songs to teach mathematics. His perceptions and practices resonated with the pillars of a constructivist pedagogy.

The other teachers also agreed with this constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Gloria also compared today's teaching with "traditional" times in which teachers tended to lecture and forgot about the use of materials and didactic resources (March

15, 2019). She often utilized teaching and learning materials in her lessons, as she described these as “captivating” for students (March 27, 2019). Samuel recognized the importance of incorporating a socio-cultural focus and implementing kinesthetic activities for students since “they like to use their hands” (October 9, 2018). In Science class, Fernanda spoke of the importance of developing scientific inquiry skills, such as researching, analyzing, and evaluating, so that the student could learn to be “critical” (March 6, 2019); and in Math and Spanish classes Gloria and Miguel both used “why” questions to develop students’ critical and creative thinking skills. These pedagogical practices demonstrate teachers’ implementation of the competencies outlined within the CBC.

Moreover, all teacher-participants spoke of incorporating the lived experiences of students into lesson plans, thus making connections between the new curricular content and students’ previous knowledge. In class discussion, they incorporated references to life in the countryside, the natural environment, technology, cultural traditions, religion, and various forms of popular culture, such as music, sports, television shows, and cartoons. They described how these strategies—using resources, making connections to real life, and drawing on students’ cultural knowledge—were all means by which they could transform the intangible theories and concepts of the CBC into tangible teaching and learning activities for students. Due to the fact that teacher-participants had varying years of experience, there existed certain variations in the degree to which they were able to implement these strategies. However, all teachers demonstrated knowledge of the theories outlined in the new CBC, thus evidencing a paradigm shift towards constructivist pedagogy.

One important nuance in this analysis is that although all teachers disagreed with the culture of copying, especially copying extensive texts, each teacher did, at one point or another, ask his or her students to copy. Thus, one question to consider is how teachers decide what students do and do not need to copy. An important insight appears in the

findings: teachers’ perceptions of the topics and subtopics of the CBC influenced how they made decisions about what students must write. In other words, the curricular content that teachers found easy to teach through interactive and participatory methods, they taught using this approach. But there was certain curricular content that teachers felt could not be taught using this constructivist pedagogy, and thus writing was used as a strategy for students to retain this information. Generally, the teachers agreed, as Gloria said, that students would only write “what was necessary” in their notebooks (April 3, 2019). But “what was necessary” varied, depending on the curricular subject and teachers’ perceptions of these subjects.

In Math class, for example, students tended to write down less, because teachers perceived the subject as “exact” and “pure” which required the teacher to speak more often to explain how to perform certain operations and procedures (Gloria, January 15, 2019). Miguel taught most of his classes through oral explanations, followed by several example exercises done together in whole-group instruction, and then several more exercises that students were expected to complete independently in their notebook. At times, students were also required to copy down instructions about how to do the process so that they could refer to these instructions as a guide. Similarly, for Spanish class, students were expected to write down the “topical notes” or “central ideas” of lessons (Samuel, November 8, 2018). The Spanish curriculum in the CBC consisted of units of studies focused on functional texts, such as letters, stories, recipes, advertisements, conversations, and anecdotes. Therefore, students had to write down definitions of the functions of these different texts, or the various components that comprised the texts’ structures. As Samuel said, “not everything can remain in theory” (September 27, 2018). After further probing, he clarified, “Not everything can remain in theory, in words. They [students] should have it written down.” Writing in the notebook, therefore, became yet another means by which students transformed the intangible theories and concepts of the CBC into tangible learning activities. Teacher-participants

perceived that the concepts and theories outlined in the curriculum would become more understandable for students through the act of writing.

As previously mentioned, the Dominican teachers prioritized participatory and interactive teaching that the CBC outlined; however, they also believed that there were certain topics that could not be taught using these strategies. For example, in Spanish class, Samuel used role play to teach the unit of study on conversations and made connections between the recipe unit and Dominican cultural traditions; but for him, the grammatical aspects of Spanish lessons could not be taught using similar approaches (October 25, 2019). Similarly, Fernanda described how in Science class students should write down those topics that could not be taught using either practical or verbal methods. Generally, students copied vocabulary words and key concepts in their notebooks, while other topics that were relevant to the natural environment or student experiences could be taught through discourse and collaborative dialogue. In the unit on temperature, for example, Fernanda asked students to copy the definitions of Fahrenheit, Celsius, and Kelvin; and later the students discussed where the country experienced high and low temperatures, and how the terrain, trees, ocean, breeze, and altitude may impact these temperatures. The students shared experiences of themselves on the beach, in the countryside, and the teacher used open-ended questions to guide the conversation. The lesson was an example of bidirectional conversation, in which students participated actively in the co-construction of knowledge. It also suggests that teachers had distinct perceptions of the various curricular contents and subtopics, and thus it is pivotal that an analysis of these perceptions is included in discussion of their pedagogical practices.

4.2. Teaching conditions: challenges and barriers to effective teaching

Inquiry into the notion of constructivism should not be limited to the perceptions and practices of teachers. It requires a more holistic vision that considers the classroom and school contexts in which Dominican teachers work. The teacher-participants

of this study believed that the CBC—though well designed in theory—would “remain in the air” or fail to bear fruit in action, because it was far from the realities of their classrooms. The heterogeneous nature of their classes, and the fact that many students still lacked basic foundational skills in numeracy and literacy, meant that it was a challenge to ensure all students developed the competencies that the curriculum standards outlined. As one school coordinator described, “it’s like trying to play the violin with a guitar.” Samuel even explicitly recognized that the curriculum consisted of “designs from different countries” in Europe and other parts of the world, but that the design itself was not always applicable in certain countries, because, “if they are going to apply it, it should be across all of the standards that the curriculum demands” (September 10, 2018). He later clarified that the MINERD national exams used to evaluate students were not aligned to the competencies and standards of the curriculum, contributing to a misalignment in the Dominican system.

In addition, teachers identified various barriers that they confronted in their environment as they planned and implemented lessons, including the scarcity of didactic materials, and a lack of time which would be required to make their own. A significant challenge for teachers was the lack of textbooks. Two years after the launch of the CBC, the MINERD had still not published textbooks that were aligned with this new curriculum. Therefore, the act of copying in notebooks became a means by which students created “supporting materials” (Fernanda, January 29, 2019) that they could then use to study from at home. As Gloria said, “their notebooks end up being their own library” (March 12, 2019). Frequently, teachers asked students to refer to the information that they had copied down, in order to review previous topics or to study for an exam. Because students did not have textbooks, nor alternative forms of written information with the definitions of key concepts and vocabulary words, they themselves had to write this information down in their notebooks as a means of creating their own personal textbooks.

Apart from the CBC, teachers did not have any other teaching guides or manuals. They often spoke

of the time-consuming process required to plan lessons from the dense CBC. Lesson planning required transforming key curricular concepts and words into concrete teaching and learning activities by searching for definitions and explanations on the Internet or elsewhere. The CBC it did not contain that information. This process was even more complicated for Spanish teachers, since the CBC was based on functional texts, yet did not provide examples of these texts to use in lessons. Teachers thus had to spend time searching for sample texts to plan lessons, and during some lessons, students themselves were asked to copy these texts so that they could use them later. Other times, students were asked to copy short stories or lists of vocabulary words that they could use to study. Students interviewed indicated that the act of copying was an effective way for them to develop spelling and grammar skills, since it allowed them to refer to a model text. Because there were such limited resources available, students did not have books to bring home, and thus had to produce their own exemplary texts in their notebooks. The contents of their notebook became their personal textbook to develop skills in reading and writing, as well as curricular content. Thus, the act of copying becomes much more complex when we consider the material conditions in which teachers and students work.

There was yet another purpose for having students write in their notebooks. It was not only for students, but also for other external actors who often visited the classroom. Two of these actors are the MINERD supervisors who observed teachers, as well as the parents and families of students. For these actors, the notebook became “evidence of the work that was done,” as Samuel explained (October 25, 2018). The four teachers agreed that it was important to have something written down either in students’ notebooks, or on separate pieces of paper that would be posted to the classroom walls, as evidence of the curricular content. In the case that an external actor entered the classroom, they would see this written work as evidence that the teacher was indeed teaching and following the curriculum. According to the teacher-participants, when MINERD

supervisors would conduct classroom observations, they could ask to see a student’s notebook to assess how far, or up to what study unit in the CBC, the class had completed, thus ensuring that a teacher was doing his or her job in advancing through the CBC at an appropriate pace.

Similar patterns occurred with parents. At times, parents arrived at the classroom door to ensure that the teacher was fulfilling his or her duties. Teachers believed that some students would dare to tell their parents that they “did not teach” a certain topic, using this as an excuse to not complete their homework. This occurred during a classroom observation when a mother arrived upset and frustrated because her son had told her that his teacher did not explain the lesson and thus, that he could not complete an assignment. When the mother arrived, the teacher quickly looked for another student’s notebook to show the mother the pages of notes that had been copied during class that same day. In that moment, the notebook became a shield for this teacher, protecting her reputation with the parent. Therefore, students’ notebooks are not just support materials for students, but rather they also serve as visual evidence that teachers are fulfilling their responsibilities. Copying and writing thus also become a defense mechanism in the political environment. The exchange between the teacher and her student’s parents became a clear manifestation of why it is important to locate pedagogical practices within the wider social and political context of the Dominican education system.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article began with a brief review of the literature on curricular reforms in international contexts, as well as the various gaps that occur between policies and their implementation. This same gap is what Checo (2018) highlights in the context of the Dominican Republic, when he recognizes that the new competency-based curriculum had yet to be appropriated by teachers, thus resulting in the use of traditional strategies of teaching, such as copying. The findings in this study support this observation,

in that the four teacher-participants did use the act of copying as a pedagogical strategy. However, the findings also suggest that a more critical and holistic analysis of the act of copying is required in order to understand the perspectives of Dominican teachers and how they conceptualize effective teaching in the context of this new curricular reform. This new analysis considers how the perceptions teachers have of their students, the curriculum, and the conditions in which they work, all play a role in their construction of knowledge and the meaning of effectiveness. It thus centers the voices of teachers to enquire into their lived realities and to explore “*el saber docente*” (teacher knowledge or wisdom), which in turn informs teachers’ practice (Díez, 2014).

This teacher knowledge or wisdom is different from the prescriptive pedagogical knowledge (Díez, 2014), which in this case is the constructivist pedagogy outlined in the CBC. The teacher-participants of this study have explained how in today’s context, effective teaching requires teachers to take certain measures to combat students’ desire to copy, and other remnants of the culture of copying that are deeply rooted in the past schooling experiences of Dominican students. In other words, the teacher-participants in this study have constructed their own “practical knowledge” (Calderhead, 1989) that helps them tend to the particular needs of their students. This practical knowledge echoes the concept of “*saber hacer*” (knowing to do), knowledge that is rooted in experience, constantly modified and updated in real-life practice, and thus situated within concrete situations (Bontá, 1998). Therefore, the evidence suggests that teachers are reflexive practitioners that look for innovative solutions to the challenges they face in order to offer quality education to their students and cultivate a (re)conceptualization of writing and a paradigm shift away from traditional forms of pedagogy.

Similarly, this research complicates our understanding of observed pedagogical practices in Dominican public schools by highlighting certain conditions in which teachers work. First, at the classroom level, teachers’ have heterogeneous classrooms in which

many students still do not have basic literacy and numeracy skills, so teachers perceive the CBC as unrealistic and far from the realities in which they work. Moreover, the exams used to evaluate students are not aligned with the competencies outlined within the curriculum standards, making it difficult for teachers to prepare their students for these standardized tests. As the literature review above demonstrates, these challenges are common factors that contribute to the gaps between policy and practice (Amadio, et al., 2015; Miyazaki, 2016).

Second, at the school level, although a new CBC has been launched, teachers still do not have textbooks that are aligned to this new curriculum. Therefore, the student notebook becomes a personal textbook and copying or writing in it becomes a necessity so students can produce their own study material. Student notebooks can be a powerful source of data for understanding what really occurs in classrooms and for analyzing the transformation of the formal curriculum into the lived curriculum (Gvitz, 2007). As this study indicates, the perceptions that teachers have of curricular content, as well as the availability of teaching and learning resources, influence the decisions they make about what students are to write in their notebooks. Vavrus and Bartlett (2012) have argued that the cultural, material, and economic realities existing in local contexts determine the ways that teachers conceptualize effective teaching and the construction of new knowledge. We have seen how this study echoes this in the context of the Dominican Republic.

Thirdly, at the system level, teachers must follow certain policies and fulfill duties that are expected of them by other actors within the Dominican educational community. MINERD supervisors that evaluate teachers based on one-off classroom observations tend to utilize student notebooks and other written work as evidence that the teacher is fulfilling his or her responsibilities and following the content of the CBC. For this reason, student notebooks also become a form of evidence so teachers can protect themselves and prove to parents and MINERD leaders that they are doing their job effectively. Once

again, we see how evaluation processes influence the pedagogical practices of teachers (Castellanos, 2014). In order to properly implement an educational reform in any system, Care and colleagues (2019) identify the need for the “alignment” of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Thus, when analyzing the implementation of a curriculum policy, a more systematic and holistic approach is necessary (Jonnaert & Therriault, 2013). As the UNESCO report (Amadio, et al., 2015, p. 17) indicates: “the curriculum needs an institution that appropriates it to develop it.” Teachers alone cannot appropriate a curriculum if the institutions in which they work do not provide an enabling environment.

The purpose of this article is not to disagree with the findings of the report published by the Dominican Socio-educational Forum and Oxfam International (Checo, 2018), but rather it serves to broaden our understanding of pedagogical practice in Dominican schools and more specifically our understanding of copying. A limitation of this study is the small sample size, yet a novelty of it—especially in the context of the Dominican Republic—is the methodological approach and the use of “stimulated recall” to enquire into teacher thinking and decision-making processes (Calderhead, 1981). By doing this, we are able to construct a new understanding of not just *what* Dominican teachers do, but also *why* they do it. Brown and McIntyre (1996) argue that in order to improve the quality of teaching, one must first understand teachers’ perceptions of effectiveness and how they go about trying to be effective within their particular contexts, or what they term teachers’ *craft knowledge*.

Although the concept of craft knowledge has been explored in the United Kingdom, and other countries in the Global North, it has yet to receive attention in the Dominican Republic and many countries in the Global South. The results of this study suggest that Dominican teachers have unique perceptions of their students, the subjects and curricular contents that they teach, as well as the material, social and political contexts in which they work. These same perceptions create the images that teachers have about their practice (Calderhead, 1989) and inform those

activities and strategies they choose to implement in their classroom. Future research should continue to explore teachers’ craft knowledge in the Dominican Republic, to expand our understanding of effectiveness.

There is currently a dearth of ethnographic research in the field of Dominican education. A significant amount of research on teacher effectiveness uses prescriptive tools to identify observed pedagogical practices or quantify learning. However, this study has demonstrated that there is much more to explore underneath what is seen on the surface. For this reason, future research should continue to examine the perceptions of Dominican teachers to further develop our understanding of how these perceptions shape teachers’ understandings of effectiveness and thus how they manifest themselves in the classroom through teaching and learning processes. If the teacher is the most important factor in improving the quality of teaching and learning (Hattie, 2009), then more research must be conducted at the classroom level to center their voices.

This research considers Dominican teachers as reflexive and critical professionals, capable of explaining their ideas and decisions in the classroom (Shulman, 1986/2005). In doing so it has proved that Dominican teachers have important insights to contribute to our understanding of effectiveness. Moreover, this study has illuminated the lived realities of these teachers in order to offer a deeper understanding of the material, social, political, and cultural conditions in which they work daily. One cannot begin to understand the processes by which a new curriculum policy is appropriated without listening to the voices of those in charge of implementing it. To ensure systemic change, more school-based research approaches should leverage the knowledge and skills of those actors of change itself: the teachers. Only through this can we promote bottom-up development (Díaz-Barriga, 2012) that is relevant to the local contexts and realities of teachers and students. Competency-based curricula may be an effective approach for preparing students who are critical and capable of succeeding in the 21st century. But

in order to effectively implement this approach, we must provide an enabling environment for teachers and students, and we must seek to understand how these actors think and act, as they are the ones most intimately involved in teaching and learning processes.

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Appendix. Examples of questions used in stimulated recall interviews

General questions about the lesson

- What was the objective of today's lesson? Was it achieved? How do you know?
- What do you think went well? What were you most pleased with? Why?
- What do you think did not go well? Why?
- How did you use the curriculum to plan this lesson? Did you come across any difficulties when planning it?
- Were there any surprises or anything else you found to be interesting?
- Did you learn anything from the lesson?
- If you taught the lesson again, would you do anything differently? Explain.
- What will you do in the follow-up lesson? Why?

Stimulated recall questions regarding observed actions

- When you did _____, what was the purpose of this activity?
- You did _____. Why do you think you did this? Did something cause you to do this?
- You used _____ as teaching and learning materials. Why?
- When you did _____ did you notice how the pupils reacted? Why do you think that happened?
- When the pupil(s) did, _____, you did _____. Why did you do this? What were you thinking then?
- You did _____. How did you learn how to do this? Where may you have learned to do this?

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