

A Case Study of Curriculum Unpacking Practices of a Kindergarten Teacher

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Abstract

Curriculum unpacking, defined as the process of interpreting the intended curriculum into classroom instruction, is important in the overall success of the school curriculum. As a critical process that serves as a bridge between the intended curriculum and classroom instruction, however, there is a paucity of research about it. Hence, this study aimed to describe the curriculum unpacking practices of a teacher. It entailed a qualitative research design specifically a case study to look closely into the single context of a purposively selected kindergarten teacher in a public school. The main data gathering techniques used were key informant interview and document review. The data obtained were subjected to thematic analysis. The result of the study revealed that the participant follows a generally linear process in unpacking the curriculum as noted in the compliance to the minimum standards of the intended curriculum, main consideration of the learner while translating the intended curriculum into instruction as mandated in the law, and alignment of the curriculum and instructional components. However, qualitative probes uncovered possible errors such as misinterpretation of the developmentally appropriate principle espoused by the intended curriculum and discrepancy between the curriculum standards and instructional activities. The implications in practice are discussed in the study.

Keywords: curriculum unpacking, kindergarten, case study

1. Introduction

Curriculum unpacking technically occurs when the intended curriculum is interpreted or translated by the teachers into classroom instruction. It is the connecting process that transpires between curriculum planning and curriculum implementation. It does not form as a process of classroom instruction, but researches claim that it has a potent influence on the learning outcomes as a result of classroom instruction.

Such an idea of curriculum unpacking was elaborated by Doll (1992) who distinguished the intended curriculum and classroom instruction as the distinction between “what we wanted to do” and “what we did do.” Bilbao, Lucido, Iringan, and Javier (2008) emphasized that these two dimensions should be connected because a gap along the line will make the connection weak and will lead to impediments in the achievement of the purposes of the curriculum. Hence, proper interpretation of the intended curriculum should occur to translate understandings into successful classroom instruction.

Moreover, as a curriculum is to be implemented, interpreting the intended curriculum needs a thorough process of curriculum unpacking. This process needs to be informed by a very clear understanding of the curriculum contained in materials of the intended curriculum. It particularly needs to consider its theory of content, the criteria for selecting, sequencing, and framing content for implementation (Deng, 2011). With these considerations, educators are expected to be in a position to reflect on their curriculum unpacking practices and on the possible sources of errors associated with the interpretation of what was planned and to what will be implemented in the classroom instruction.

Concerning a new curriculum that entails unpacking, a new kindergarten education curriculum program in the Philippines was institutionalized to the Basic Education Curriculum through the Republic Act 10157 in 2011. The

said law adopts the general principle of a smooth transition for learners to the elementary grades. Hence, kindergarten teachers must be able to unpack the intended curriculum appropriately for the attainment of such goal of educational reform, thus preparing children for basic formal education in terms of mastery of needed learning competencies and skills. Pagana, Mutambara, and Chagwiza (2015) underscored that the disparity between the intended curriculum and classroom instruction is one of the major contributors to poor learning performance in higher level of schooling. Hence, studying the curriculum unpacking, the linking process between intended curriculum and classroom instruction, is important as it has the potential to have great influence not only on the classroom instruction itself but more importantly on the student achievement as well.

When it comes to the place of curriculum unpacking in research, it is associated with fidelity in curriculum implementation. The concept of curriculum fidelity is defined by Pence, Justice, and Wiggins (2008) as the extent to which teachers implement an intervention, curriculum, innovation, or program as intended by the developers. However, a review of related studies in the area of curriculum implementation (Azano, Misset, Callahan, Oh, Brunner, Foster & Moon, 2011; Bümena, Çakar & Yildiz, 2014; Hord & Huling-Austin, 1986; Koo, 2009; Ntumi, 2016; Phaeton & Stears, 2017; Rusman, 2015; Satchwell & Loepp, 2002; Shadan & Oliver, 2016) reveal inadequate attention into how teachers unpack the intended curriculum into classroom instruction. This indicates an implied need to conduct a study in the area of curriculum unpacking practices of teachers where a knowledge gap exists.

This study may provide insights to curriculum developers, school administrators, and teachers. The glimpses into the curriculum unpacking practices may lead to an understanding of the processes that happen between the intended curriculum and classroom instruction. As such, it may stimulate education stakeholders, particularly those in school management, to support teachers and help improve their practices.

With these realities established in the background, the general purpose of this research is to describe the curriculum unpacking practices in a case context of a kindergarten teacher. Specifically, it attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the curriculum unpacking practices of the teacher?
2. What are the possible errors in the process of curriculum unpacking of the teacher?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design specifically a single case study. A case study method, according to Creswell (2013), generally explores a real, contemporary single bounded system or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed data collection involving multiple sources of information.

The case study as a research design was considered appropriate for this paper to describe the curriculum unpacking practices of a kindergarten teacher in an educational institution over a selected grading period. Furthermore, it suitably provided for a more focused approach in examining the processes involved in the curriculum unpacking through the collection of relevant information from multiple sources.

2.2 Context and Participant

The implementation of the Republic Act 10157 or Kindergarten Education Act and the transition to the K to 12 Curriculum in the Philippines in 2012 made huge changes in the educational system of the country. With these changes, it was expected that the new intended curriculum for the kindergarten program needs to be unpacked by the teachers. This expectation, however, is compounded by such challenges that are prevalent in some public schools where material, financial, and technical support is still greatly desired. Hence, a selected public school with a kindergarten program encountering such challenges was selected to provide a context for this study.

Moreover, a female kindergarten teacher was purposively selected as the single case participant of this study. She has experience in teaching in the public school for years, is currently handling kindergarten classes, and has been involved in the actual unpacking of the new intended kindergarten curriculum. The necessary consent of the participant was obtained first before commencing with the data collection process.

2.3 Data Sources

The data of this study were primarily gathered through structured interview and document review. The structured interview provided for the source of data for the curriculum unpacking practices. The interview questions mainly focused on the means and steps employed by the participant to obtain a perspective of her curriculum unpacking

practices. On the other hand, the document review was employed to confirm data on the unpacking practices, from which deviations were carefully examined if they account for possible errors in the process of curriculum unpacking. The review involved several documents accessed from the participant upon permission. These documents included the National Kindergarten Teaching Guide (NKTG), Curriculum Guide (CG) and Lesson Plans (LPs).

2.4. Data Analysis

The obtained responses from the interview and information from the document review were respectively subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a technique designed to focus on the identifiable patterns of behavior (Aronson, 1992). This technique was systematically applied in two main stages of data analysis in this study.

First, from the transcribed responses of the participant in this study, the researcher identified patterns which served as a basis for categorizing the data obtained from the interview. The related patterns were then combined and cataloged into themes. For this study, the process of analyzing the construct, concept, and theme was employed to arrive at relevant data on curriculum unpacking practices.

Second, the data obtained from the interview were triangulated through document review. The teaching guides and lesson plans served as the documents under evaluation. They were examined through the same process of thematic analysis, probing the initial findings until possible errors in the process of curriculum unpacking, if any, emerge.

The results of this study were presented following the framework of Creswell and Creswell (2018) in writing case studies. It consists of two main parts: case description and case themes. The case description provided the context of the study and the participant involved. On the other hand, the case themes presented the emerging patterns of ideas that are relevant to the questions of this study.

3. Results

This section presents the results and discussion of this study. They are discussed following the style of presenting a case study through case description and case theme. The themes are further presented according to the research questions of this study.

3.1 Case Description

The kindergarten schooling was not compulsory in the Philippines until the enactment of the Republic Act 10157, also known as the Kindergarten Education Act, which was only realized in the year 2012, formally making kindergarten the first stage of compulsory and mandatory formal education. Aside from being considered as a big leap in the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals on achieving Education for All by the year 2015, the law emphasized that kindergarten education is vital to the academic and technical development of the Filipino child for it is the period when the young mind's absorptive capacity for learning is at its sharpest.

Under the law, all Filipino children with the age of five years are required to complete a year in kindergarten in preparation for entry to the first grade. It rests on the research evidence that preschool is known to improve the performance of a child in grade school and arrest the incidence of early dropout. This reform effectively mandated the Department of Education (DepEd) to develop the curriculum for kindergarten education that reflects such features.

The kindergarten curriculum was developed consistent with the following assumptions: universally accepted norms and standards, including values formation all of which shall be developmentally appropriate; use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction and to periodically review such for purposes of upgrading; develop teaching strategies using the unique feature of the mother tongue which shall include, but not limited to, the following: storytelling and reading, listening story, oral communication activities; interactive strategies; use of manipulative games; and experiential, small group discussions and total physical response. It is further provided that the learning development materials shall consist of the following at the minimum: listening story; small books; big books; experience story; primer lessons; and lessons exemplars.

Moreover, on the aspect of kindergarten teacher education, the law ordered the development of a continuing professional development program for kindergarten teachers to ensure constant updating of their knowledge in current trends, pedagogy, methodologies, and concepts on early childhood education. Because of the new intended kindergarten curriculum, one of the most important skills to be further developed among the teachers is the curriculum unpacking.

The participant of this study is a 30-year old, female, licensed professional teacher. The participant finished a degree

in Bachelor of Science in Family Life and Child Development in 2010 from a leading university in the Philippines. It is a degree program that prepares students for professional careers in the teaching and supervision of preschool children in different institutional settings, for planning and administration of family life programs, and research on children and families.

After graduation, she took the national board examination for professional teachers and passed it. Holding a license is considered an advantage when applying for a teaching job in most private schools although it is not required. On the other hand, it serves as one of the minimum requirements for a permanent entry in the public school.

When it comes to teaching experience, the participant has been in the kindergarten field for a total of eight years. She first spent her formative teaching career in a private school for two years. By the time she applied and transferred to the public school, it was also the implementation of the compulsory kindergarten education in the country. Thus, several capacity enhancement activities through seminars and workshops related to the new intended kindergarten curriculum were attended by the participant. These professional development activities ranged from national to school, periodically scheduled throughout the school year.

At present, aside from being a teacher, the participant is pursuing a graduate degree in a private university to keep herself informed of the current trends in the profession. She is currently assigned to handle classes in a public school offering a kindergarten program in a city. She has been in government service for six years now. She also continuously attends mandated and voluntary professional development activities.

3.2 Case Themes

3.2.1 Curriculum Unpacking Practices

This study looked into the curriculum unpacking practices. The resulting themes that emerge from the interview are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes on Curriculum Unpacking Practices

Construct	Concept	Theme
NKTG and CG are the sources of selecting objectives of the lesson	Use of intended curriculum in selecting objectives	Compliance to the intended curriculum
NKTG is the basis of selecting contents	Use of intended curriculum in selecting contents	
A prescribed Blocks of Time guide in planning the methods and strategies	Use of intended curriculum in planning learning activities	
Designing of lesson plans is based on the CG	Use of intended curriculum in planning lesson	
NKTG and CG are referred in deciding what skills and contents to teach	Use of intended curriculum in deciding skills and contents	
The child is the basis of developing teaching strategies that are developmentally appropriate	The nature of the learner as primary consideration	Learner-centered and developmentally appropriate practices
Blocks of Time is the basis of teaching strategies that reflect developmental appropriateness	Prescribed instructional events as a reference to create developmentally appropriate strategies	
Activities in LPs are based on the nature of learners	Teaching activities as part of making developmentally appropriate plans	
The teacher can modify to suit the needs and interests of the learners	Teacher empowerment in making developmentally appropriate plan	
Match the learning domains based on prescribed Blocks of Time	Congruence among the learning activities	Alignment of the curriculum and instructional components
Match the objectives, contents, and activities through the use of the NKTG	Congruence among the objectives, contents, and activities	
Match the objectives and learning activities following the prescribed Blocks of Time	Congruence between objectives and activities	
Match the contents and activities in the LPs based on the NKTG and CG	Congruence between contents and activities	

As shown in Table 1, the analysis of constructs and concepts produced themes that describe the curriculum unpacking practices of the participant.

Compliance to the intended curriculum. The participant consistently mentioned the importance of using the intended curriculum prescribed by the DepEd as the basis of instructional planning. She specifically pertained to the NKTG and CG which contain standards and competencies formulated at the national level by the DepEd. She relied on the objectives, contents, and activities from these prescribed documents in designing her LPs. Moreover, the participant was used in following the prescribed Blocks of Time which contains the suggested methods and strategies according to particular instructional times. This positively guided her in selecting and organizing her methods and strategies in her LPs.

Learner-centered and developmentally appropriate practices. The participant stressed that she makes sure she prepares learner-centered and developmentally appropriate instructional plans for her pupils. She also viewed the prescribed curriculum as the source of objectives, contents, and activities that are suited to the nature and needs of the learners. She further used activities like songs, stories, individual and group activities. However, she also acknowledged that the materials and activities are suggestive, so she makes use of activities and materials that are deemed suited to the children.

Alignment of the curriculum and instructional components. The participant described several of her practices that observe the matching of the curriculum and instructional components. She particularly mentioned the matching of the objectives, content, and activities; objectives and the evaluation; objectives and learning activities; the contents and activities. In ensuring that objectives, contents, and activities are congruent, she carefully referred to the NKTG, CG, and Blocks of Time in designing her LPs.

3.2.2 Possible Errors in the Process of Curriculum Unpacking

This study further looked into possible errors in the process of curriculum unpacking. The resulting themes that emerge from the document review are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Themes on Possible Errors and Its Sources

Construct	Concept	Theme
All the objectives reflected in the LPs expressed in terms of Developmental Domain, Content Standards, Performance Standards, Learning Competencies are properly and correctly coded based on the prescribed objectives in the NKTG	Use of intended curriculum in formulating objectives	Compliance to the intended curriculum
Some transportation items like submarine, spaceship, hot air balloon are not age-appropriate and not relevant to the immediate culture of the kindergarten children	Some contents not age-appropriate and not culturally relevant to the learners	Psychologically and culturally inappropriate contents
The transportation item <i>vinta</i> in the story is not relevant to the immediate culture of the kindergarten children	A content not culturally relevant to the learners	
The activities on sound blending are not suited to the stated content standards on sound and name relations	Some activities not matched to the standards	Misalignment of the curriculum and instructional components
The activities on addition and subtraction illustrated are not sufficient to achieve the content and performance standards	Some activities not sufficient to reach the standards	

As shown in Table 2, the analysis of constructs and concepts generated themes that may suggest possible errors in the process of curriculum unpacking of the participant.

Compliance to the intended curriculum. The LPs designed by the participant probed that the objectives used by the respondent were taken from the intended curriculum prescribed by the DepEd. These objectives are expressed in the form of Developmental Domain, Content Standards, Performance Standards, and Learning Competency which were all coded and matched with the ones in the NKTG. It can also be confirmed that the documents used the Blocks of

Time as prescribed in the national curriculum. This ensured the proper sequence of activities.

Psychologically and culturally inappropriate practices. While objectives and contents are designed to be developmentally appropriate for the learners, the analysis of the LPs of the participant indicates that there is inconsistency in terms of cultural appropriateness of some contents of the materials used, thereby not in conformity with the prescribed guideline of ensuring developmentally appropriate practices for students. Specifically, the selected pictures and one story used, e.g. submarine, spaceship, hot air balloon, were deemed not relevant to the immediate culture and age of the learners.

Misalignment of the curriculum and instructional components. Because the LPs of the participant strictly followed the prescribed Block of Time, analysis of document from the participant shows a match between objectives expressed in Developmental Domain, Content Standards, Performance Standards, and Learning Competency, as well as the general activities for the most part. However, looking into the specific instructional activities, it was evaluated that some of them were either not suited to the content standards or not sufficient to reach the content and performance standards stated in the curriculum. This means that the activities used in the instruction did not match the intents and contents required in the curriculum.

4. Discussion

Based on the results of this research, it is notable that the participant practiced a generally linear process in unpacking the intended curriculum into classroom instruction. Such a linear manner of unpacking is reflective of what Remillard (2005) appeared to refer as the fidelity approach of curriculum implementation. This approach assumes that the intended curriculum is fixed from the higher level and it dictates what the teacher should enact in the classroom instruction. This fidelity approach is directly supported by Koo (2009) who expressed that change, or the process of unpacking the intended curriculum in this case, is seen as a linear procedure. Thus, considering the centralized nature of the educational system and curriculum development in the context of the participant, it can be understood that a linear manner in interpreting the intended curriculum into classroom instruction is observable.

This linear process in curriculum unpacking uncovered in this study was particularly noted in the compliance to the minimum standards as required; primary consideration of the learner in the curriculum unpacking as mandated in the law; and alignment of the components of the curriculum and instruction.

The first curriculum unpacking practice mirrors the idea of Fullan (2001) of a fidelity approach of curriculum implementation. According to him, where an already developed curriculum exists, the role of teachers is to implement it devotedly in practice. It is assumed that experts have developed the intended curriculum at a higher level and that teachers in the field have to carefully unpack it following its established principles and assumptions. The second curriculum unpacking practice is parallel to what Vikoo (2003) referred to as the role of teachers in the curriculum implementation. Whether mandated or not, according to him, teachers must acquire knowledge of the learner. As learners are the center of education, the teacher should understand the ways they develop and learn to design lessons that meet the needs of the learners. Furthermore, considering the third curriculum unpacking practice, teachers are expected to know the curriculum. Deng (2011) in particular suggested that in interpreting the intended curriculum, it is imperative for teachers to bear in mind its theory of content, the criteria of selecting, sequencing, and framing content for implementation.

Moreover, this study uncovered two possible errors in the process of curriculum unpacking. One of these possible errors observed was the misinterpretation of the principles of developmentally appropriate practices. This was evident in the presence of contents that are either not appropriate to the age or not relevant to the culture of the learners. This is inconsistent with the mandate of the intended kindergarten curriculum that it should follow the principles of developmental appropriate practice. Print (1993) suggested that in selecting content for instruction, one important criterion is the interest. He described that content should be based on the maturity level and cultural experience of the learners. By considering this criterion, teachers ensure that content is engaging to the learners.

A second possible error noted was the discrepancy between the curriculum standards and instructional activities. It was evaluated that some learning activities do not collectively attain the stated learning standard because they are either not matched to the standard or too simple to reach the standard. Kizlick (2017) explained that learning activities planned by the teacher may not necessarily contribute directly and effectively to the lesson objective. It is wrong to engage learners in activities just to keep them busy. Whatever teachers tell learners to do should contribute in a direct way to the accomplishment of the intended curriculum.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion of this paper, the following conclusions are drawn:

First, a generally linear process in the curriculum unpacking practices is evident. This is specifically observed in the compliance to the minimum standards of the intended curriculum, main consideration of the learner while translating the intended curriculum into instruction as mandated in the law, and alignment of the curriculum and instructional components.

While a linear approach in the process of curriculum unpacking in a centralized system is desired to ensure fidelity to the intended curriculum, an adaptive approach may also be considered by the teachers. This will allow an opportunity for the consideration of other sources apart from the intended curriculum, creativity in designing the lessons, adjustment in the process of using the materials, localization of the contents to the culture of the learners, and application of varied teaching techniques to respond to learning diversity.

Second, possible errors in curriculum unpacking appeared to be present. These possible errors are misinterpretation of the principle of developmentally appropriate practices espoused by the intended curriculum and discrepancy between the curriculum standards and instructional activities.

Hence, though this study may be restricted to a single case, it can be generally suggested in the level of continuing professional teacher education that relevant programs about planning a developmentally appropriate instruction and translating curriculum standards into instructional activities may be highly considered. It should be stressed that professional development programs that respond to the difficulties of the teachers in the field are essential so that the complete success of the curriculum will be attained.

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