

Surmounting the Disconnect in Practical Lessons between Curriculum Expectations and Learners' Prior Experiences

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ABSTRACT: Home Economics, Consumer Studies and other similar subjects can contribute valuable learning to the lives of learners. Efforts to globalize the contents of these subjects have, however, occasionally led to a loss of cultural inclusivity in curricula, as has been the case in South Africa. Notwithstanding the South African educational landscape needing to cater for diverse cultures, the Consumer Studies curriculum still mainly focuses on Western knowledge and skills, particularly the selection of products that learners must make in food production lessons. This leaves especially African learners feeling disconnected and unmotivated to perform well or succeed in the subject. The overarching aim of the research was to frame recommendations in the form of practical suggestions as part of efforts to surmount this disconnect in order to broaden the perceived and experienced value of food production in Consumer Studies for a wider range of culturally diverse South African learners. A qualitative case study was employed to explore if and how a Consumer Studies teacher at a school consisting of mostly African learners was attempting to overcome the disconnect between the curriculum expectations and learners' prior experiences. Interviews and site visits were conducted to collect data, and the data were then thematically analyzed from an interpretivist perspective. The findings indicate a substantial disconnect between the expectations of the teacher (informed by curriculum requirements) and the prior experiences and learning expectations of her learners, especially as regards the qualities of successful food products. Two recommendations are made: first, the teacher should use demonstrations as a teaching method to improve learners' familiarity with products; and second, clear visual images should be displayed to learners to aid them in understanding the expected outcomes of the products they have to make in practical lessons.

KEYWORDS: Consumer Studies, cultural inclusivity, curriculum expectations, demonstrations, food production lessons, visual aids

Background and problem statement

Home Economics was first introduced in South Africa in 1904 and has since undergone several name changes and advances similar to trends in comparable subjects internationally. The name for the subject with these roots in the latest South African school curriculum is "Consumer Studies." Consumer Studies has advanced from focusing on the family as production unit to the family as a consumer unit (Umalusi 2014, 34). In line with this change, the practical component of Home Economics entailed making items (such as food or clothing) to fulfill the needs of the family, whereas practical lessons in Consumer Studies now focus on skills development in various production options (including food, soft furnishings, accessories and clothing) with the dual purpose of helping learners to produce quality, marketable products for consumers and supporting learners' entrepreneurial development (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011; Ngwenya and Shange 2019; Umalusi 2014).

Developing learners' entrepreneurial knowledge and skills is crucial in South Africa, where youth unemployment is persistently high. The youth unemployment rate in South Africa was 53,06% on average between 2013 and 2020 but reached an all-time high of 59% in the first quarter of 2020 (Trading Economics 2020). These statistics underscore the potential value of Consumer Studies, as this subject can contribute to addressing youth unemployment. This value is interwoven with the practical lessons in Consumer Studies, which offer learners opportunities to cultivate skills and knowledge that they can use to design, develop, make and sell products (Du Toit and Kempen 2018;

Ngwenya and Shange 2019). Teaching learners practical knowledge and skills – especially for food preparation – through Home Economics and subjects related to Consumer Studies has been practiced for more than 100 years (Nanayakkara, Margerison, and Worsley 2018, 2).

The type of products (and associated skills) that learners develop depends on the practical production option offered at each school. The five options from which schools may choose – including some examples of products made in each option – are as follows: Food Production (cakes, biscuits, pastries, sweets, gelatin dishes, meat dishes); Clothing Production (shirts, trousers, hats, beach bags); Soft Furnishings Production (bedding, tablecloths, cushions, curtains); Knitting and Crocheting (granny squares combined to make blankets, scarves, hats, mittens, cardigans); and Patchwork Quilting by Hand (cellphone or eyeglass cases, bags, comforters, placemats and other quilted items) (DBE 2011). Schools may choose only one option, provided that they have the infrastructure stipulated by the curriculum for that option. For example, for Food Production, a “fitted and equipped training kitchen with electricity supply” and “[f]our-plate stoves with ovens, adjacent to work surfaces”, as well as several other requirements, must be available (DBE 2011, 10).

More than 95% of schools offering Consumer Studies as an elective subject chose Food Production for their practical component (Du Toit 2018). Most South African Consumer Studies learners, therefore, have many opportunities to produce food products that can be used for entrepreneurial purposes. A detailed document analysis of the Consumer Studies curriculum currently in use revealed that the cultural variety of food products learners are taught how to prepare is quite restricted and most items have a Western origin (Du Toit 2018). For example, the Food Production option of the Consumer Studies curriculum includes products such as pasta Alfredo (DBE 2011, 39), éclairs and cream puffs made with choux pastry (DBE 2011, 40), or Swiss rolls (DBE 2011, 41). In addition, when considering that the most recent mid-year population estimates indicate that about 80,8% of South Africans are of African ethnicity (Statistics South Africa 2020) comprising various cultural groups – including isiZulu, isiXhosa, Xitsonga, Setswana, Tshivenda, isiNdebele, and others – the emphasis on food products with mainly Western origins that learners must make in the Food Production component is perplexing, as it does not reflect the rich cultural diversity of the country.

There are various reasons for the emphasis on the “Western foods” learners must make as per the curriculum requirements for Food Production. Home Economics (of which Consumer Studies is an extension) was brought to the African continent by missionaries’ wives, who were obviously trained in Western cultures (Celumusa 2018, 57), and their influence is still pertinent in these subjects. This influence includes, but is not limited to, the particular skills and techniques associated with certain products (such as using steam as a raising agent in choux pastry) and a preference for certain products such as Swiss rolls, eclairs, or vol-au-vents. The inclusion of Western content also contributes to countries’ efforts to keep their local curricula aligned with global trends. This situation is not unique to South Africa. The curricula of subjects that are similar to South African Consumer Studies in other countries have also been criticized in that they “[reflect] a strong Western influence and could be viewed as irrelevant” to the context of certain groups of learners (Celumusa 2018, 57). Similar criticism has emerged in, for example, Swaziland (Celumusa 2018), Australia (Nanayakkara et al. 2018) and India (Rathi 2017). Rathi (2017, 43) puts the blame for this Western focus on the globalization of the curricula of subjects such as Home Economics and Consumer Studies, stating that prior to the globalization of the current “irrelevant and poorly designed” Home Economics curriculum in India, the curriculum was actually “quite relevant” to the Indian context.

The South African National Curriculum Statements (of which Consumer Studies is one subject) state the general aim that this “curriculum promotes knowledge in local contexts, while being sensitive to global imperatives” (DBE 2011, 4). Notwithstanding the general aim of the overall school curriculum, efforts to globalize the content in Consumer Studies have led to a loss of cultural diversity in this subject’s curriculum. Cultural inclusivity is, therefore, lacking in the Consumer Studies curriculum document, and this is particularly evident in the products available for the Food Production practical component of the subject. This can leave especially African learners feeling disconnected and unmotivated to perform well or succeed in the subject or to pursue the potential for entrepreneurship linked to practical production. Celumusa (2018, 26) is convinced that, if curriculum

content is not contextualized and culturally relevant, “educators may not find it meaningful, with learners losing interest”, which not only negatively affects the learners but also the subject teachers.

Interviews that were conducted with Consumer Studies teachers across South Africa in a previous study confirmed that several teachers believed that many of their (especially African) learners were unfamiliar with Western dishes, having had limited or no prior experience thereof (Du Toit 2018). Ngwenya and Shange (2019) report that Consumer Studies learners are unfamiliar with several ingredients in the recipes; they do not fully understand the techniques required in production (such as kneading); and they do not know what the final product should look like or what properties it should have. Learners are, therefore, often unclear about what is expected from them (actions) as well as the expected outcomes (product appearance and qualities). Schoenfeld (2018) states that a lack of prior experience means that learners are underprepared for the challenges they will face in the learning environment and that they need to be educated through learning-by-doing so as to prepare them to overcome these issues and so that they can learn from their mistakes. In this regard, it is important to give credence to the suggestion of Therrell and Dunneback (2015), who argue that it is vital that teachers provide and communicate their expectations clearly to learners. Their argument is that clear expectations give a voice to the teaching-learning needs of teachers and learners and that clear expectations provide learners with a “pathway to a good grade” (Therrell and Dunneback 2015, 59), which should improve their chances of succeeding in the subject. In the context of the current study, if learners are provided with clear(er) expectations of the process and outcomes of products, they can succeed better in Food Production practical lessons. This, in turn, may increase their motivation to endeavor to develop such products into entrepreneurial opportunities, which can contribute to self-directed employment generation and thus a reduction in the number of unemployed youths in South Africa.

The problem, therefore, was that a disconnect exists between the products that the Consumer Studies curriculum expects learners to produce and the prior experiences of many learners of those products. It was unclear if and how Consumer Studies teachers – especially at schools consisting of mostly African learners – were attempting to overcome the disconnect between the Food Production curriculum expectations and learners’ lack of prior experiences of the products they had to make. If insights were gained about such practices (if any), recommendations could be made in an effort to surmount this disconnect. The long-term goal of this investigation was to broaden the perceived and experienced value of Food Production in Consumer Studies for a wider range of culturally diverse South African learners. In an effort to address the above-stated problem, the following question guided this investigation: How and to what extent does a Consumer Studies teacher at a school consisting of mostly African learners attempt to overcome the reported disconnect between the Food Production curriculum expectations and many learners’ lack of prior experiences of the products they must make?

Conceptual and theoretical framework

When viewing this problem against the background of the cultural iceberg theory – based on the work of Hall (1976), and French and Bell (1995), among others – it is clear that deep cultural issues such as learners’ cultural expectations, perceptions, notions of cleanliness and basic assumptions are often disregarded in education (Figure 1). Even though “food” is considered to be a more obvious or surface aspect of culture in the cultural iceberg theory (Figure 1), it typically refers to what learners prefer or are accustomed to eat rather than what they have to prepare in line with the curriculum requirements. Rathi (2017, 26) describes learners’ familiarity with foods as being “mainly driven by what they [adolescents] visualise and eat most frequently, and are developed through repeated exposure to food.” From a socio-constructivist point of view, the experiences of individuals can be regarded as shaped and determined by their culture as well as the customs, contexts and people they interact with (Creswell 2013). These experiences are used to construct knowledge, which serves as a foundation for subsequent learning. Consequently, if learners have no prior experience of certain food products in the curriculum, they are probably unable to visualize what the qualities or appearance of

those products should be, unless they are supported in this regard. Also, while food is an obvious cultural aspect in the iceberg model, deeper cultural issues (including expectations) must also be kept in mind when planning educational experiences that would be culturally relevant to learners. Therefore, in cases where the curriculum cannot be changed, ways need to be developed to support learners' learning and understanding of aspects in the curriculum they might be unfamiliar with.

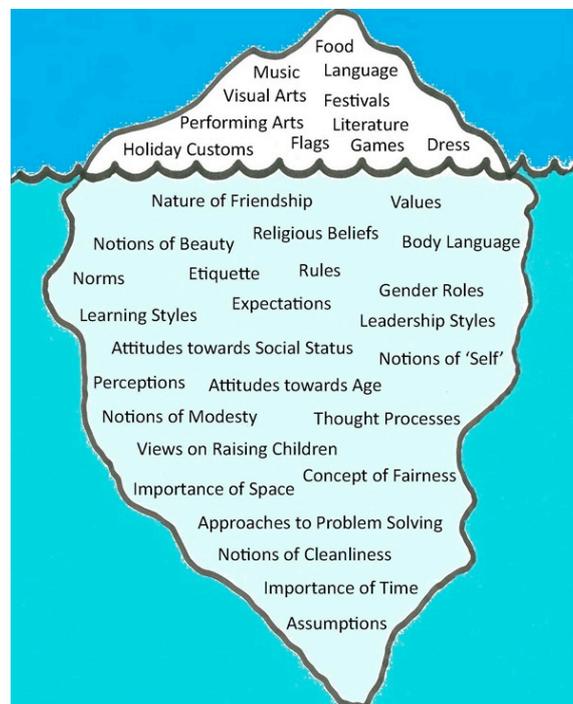


Figure 1: Visualization of the cultural iceberg theory or model

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To support learners in obtaining successful learning outcomes, curriculum expectations should be clarified (Therrell and Dunneback 2015). Teachers play various roles in providing such support to learners when implementing the curriculum. These roles include planning and preparing lessons; assessing learners' learning; sourcing or developing teaching resources; and “demonstrating practical skills” (Celumusa 2018, 269). Further demarcating such support, and in line with socio-constructivism, Schoenfeld (2018) recommends that teachers should provide links between theory and practice – in particular, by way of visual support and also in the form of demonstrations – to provide connections between prior learning and new experiences. The visual support that Schoenfeld (2018) refers to frequently includes teaching resources such as textbooks or other visual aids such as posters or videos.

Visual aids supplement the work and verbal instructions of teachers and contribute to more consistent and professional lesson presentations (Eseza 2019). In circumstances where particular “items are not readily available locally”, visual aids would help learners to visualize concepts to support learning and skills development (Celumusa 2018, 273). For example, when visual aids such as textbooks, posters and videos were introduced and used in the Home Science curriculum in India, a remarkable improvement in learners' knowledge development was noted (Rathi 2017). It has, however, been reported that textbooks often do not include enough photographs or visual images to support practical skills development (Rathi 2017) – a situation that is also experienced in South African Consumer Studies classrooms (Du Toit 2018). This underscores the need for teachers to utilize other visual resources, such as posters and videos, to support learners' learning, especially in preparation for practical lessons. However, a survey of South African Consumer Studies teachers' use

of resources revealed that most of the participating teachers relied heavily on textbooks to teach the subject (Du Toit 2018, 202); that other teaching-learning resources for the subject had not been provided by the DBE (206); and that few teachers used videos or the Internet as resources in the subject (202). Yet, literature confirms that videos have been used successfully as visual aids to support practical lessons in subjects similar to Consumer Studies in other countries, such as eSwatini (Celumusa 2018, 274), Australia and India (Rathi 2017, 157).

If visual aids are unavailable, or if internet- or technological access is problematic, as is the case in many Consumer Studies classrooms in South Africa (Du Toit 2018, 200), the burden of providing visual aids to support learners' learning reverts to the class teacher. In such circumstances, teachers would need to demonstrate the processes and products for practical lessons, especially when learners are unfamiliar with the products. Schoenfeld (2018) found that demonstrations substantially contribute to learners' learning-by-seeing and learning-by-doing. Demonstrations support the development of learners' understanding, knowledge and skills (Eseza 2019; Rathi 2017), making it suitable to support and prepare learners for practical lessons. For demonstrations to effectively contribute to learning, they should be carefully planned and scaffolded, implying a need for guidance to help teachers in this regard (Celumusa 2018). In addition, teachers could invite experts and stakeholders outside the school to "assist in improving the quality and relevance of senior secondary school education" (Nanayakkara et al. 2018, 11) by helping teachers to develop effective resources or well-structured demonstrations. Teachers can and should play a vital role in supporting learners to overcome the disconnect between the curriculum expectations and learners' lack of prior exposure to the products they must make. Visual aids and demonstrations are useful resources and approaches to bridge this disconnect. Next, the empirical investigation – to explore if and how this disconnect realizes in practice in schools – is described.

Empirical investigation

A case study with an interpretivist approach was used to explore if and how a Consumer Studies teacher at a school consisting of mostly African learners was attempting to overcome the reported disconnect between the Food Production curriculum expectations and learners' prior experiences of the products they had to make. The investigation focused on identifying any methods or teaching-learning support materials that the teacher provided to help her learners to overcome their unfamiliarity with ingredients and techniques used in recipes as well as to familiarize learners with the requirements for and expected appearance of the final products, since these were particular challenges identified by Ngwenya and Shange (2019) for the South African context.

The Department of Basic Education was approached to identify a school that offered Consumer Studies to mostly African learners but where learners were struggling to succeed with Food Production practical work (purposive sampling). Only one school was sampled, since this investigation was meant to serve as a point of departure for exploring if (and to what extent) attempts are made in practice to overcome the reported disconnect between the subject's curriculum expectations and learners' prior experiences. Relevant permissions and ethical requirements from the Department of Basic Education, as well as the university and faculty in which the research was based, were obtained and adhered to. Anonymity of the teacher and school in the reporting of the findings was part of the ethical requirements. Informed by the insights gained into practices (if any) used to surmount the disconnect between curriculum expectations and learners' prior experiences of products, the overarching purpose of the study was to subsequently develop recommendations in the form of practical suggestions that Consumer Studies teachers could use in an effort to surmount this disconnect.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with the Consumer Studies teacher as well as site visits to her practical classroom. The interviews comprised of several open-ended questions aimed at garnering insight into the practices the teacher utilized to implement practical lessons. Follow-up questions were asked via phone in order to clarify possible

misunderstandings or points of uncertainty, which contributed to the reliability and credibility of the research. During the site visits, the Consumer Studies teacher accompanied the researcher in and around the classroom to be on hand to explain particular layouts, positioning of equipment, et cetera. Digital photographs were taken (with permission from the teacher, the school principal, as well as the Department of Basic Education) of all areas of the classroom for further analysis and subsequent reference purposes. The site visits provided visual data about the layout of furniture and equipment, storage of ingredients and utensils as well as teaching-learning resources used as part of practical lessons.

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed by means of thematic analysis and were interpreted. The focus was on (1) the teacher's knowledge of and insights into her learners' prior experiences of the products they had to make, and (2) her attempts or practices to clarify curriculum expectations for her learners. Photographs of the practical classroom were analyzed visually to identify any teaching-learning media that might help learners to overcome the disconnect between the curriculum expectations of the products they must make and their unfamiliarity with those products. The interpretation of the data was informed by existing literature on accepted standards for and approaches to practical lessons as well as reported techniques to clarify expectations in support of learners' learning experience. The transcripts and photographs were analyzed separately by the researcher as well as by a class of Consumer Studies student teachers (as part of their training). Subsequently, the analyses were compared and refined, and recommendations were made.

Findings, discussion, and recommendations

It emerged from the interviews that this teacher recognized that many (if not most) of the learners in her classes often struggled with Food Production practical lessons. The learners' poor levels of success and inability to complete food products in Food Production at this school were subsequently confirmed by an independent official of the Department of Basic Education. The Consumer Studies teacher gave several reasons for the learners' poor performance, including that she knew that her learners "did not know what they are making" and that "[t]heir end products sometimes are not good because they cannot interpret their recipe correctly." Follow-up questions revealed that her learners confused ingredients (for example, sugar and salt; icing sugar and flour) and that they did not realize the importance of correct measurement, order of work, and correct execution of techniques in recipes. She further mentioned that her learners perhaps had not "seen or eaten the product that they had to make" before the lesson, such as Swiss roll or éclairs, which indicates that the learners did not have prior experiences to inform their ideas of what the final product should look like, its texture and taste. Her comments are similar to the findings of Ngwenya and Shange (2019), who reported that Consumer Studies learners often do not know what properties or appearance the final product should have. This finding also echoes the findings of a previous study in which numerous teachers across South Africa reported a disconnect between the curriculum expectations and learners' prior experiences of products (Du Toit 2018).

It also emerged that the teacher had made no specific efforts to overcome this disconnect, despite knowing that it negatively affected her learners' success in Food Production practical lessons. Eseza (2019, 60) reports that Ugandan teachers of subjects that are similar to Consumer Studies in South Africa were similarly "not concerned about their learners understanding during the [practical] lesson." Therefore, there seems to be a need to reiterate the importance of learners' preparation and understanding for practical lessons to teachers as part of their preparation for such lessons. In other words, practical lessons entail much more planning and preparation before the day the learners make the product than on the day.

Informed by findings of scholars like Schoenfeld (2018), who noted that demonstrations deeply affect learning-by-seeing and learning-by-doing, the teacher was asked if she had demonstrated techniques or complete procedures for recipes, and her answer was as follows: "No, I don't, uhm, sometimes I...uhm, sometimes I demonstrate in class." Rather than showing the learners what to do,

she gave verbal instructions: “So I will read instruction number one that they have to do, especially Grade 10, but they do something that is different.” Therefore, not only were learners often unfamiliar with the expected outcome(s) (such as products’ appearance or qualities) but they also experienced ingredients and/or techniques used in recipes as unfamiliar. Ngwenya and Shange (2019) shared similar findings, reporting that when learners misinterpret recipes, their final products’ outcomes are unsuccessful. The need to train and guide Consumer Studies teachers to plan and scaffold effective demonstrations was apparent and should be addressed in subsequent research.

Visual inspection of the practical classroom showed a space devoid of color, with not a single poster or picture (or other visual aids) related to the practical lessons that took place in the classroom displayed anywhere (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The practical Consumer Studies classroom in the case study

The teacher also declared that she did not keep recipe books in her classroom that learners could use, which the Consumer Studies curriculum states as one of the minimum requirements for presenting Food Production (DBE 2011, 10). She further commented that she did not use videos because internet access was expensive and unstable at the school and that she only had her laptop, with no accessories (such as a projector) to display its content to learners. From this case study, it emerged that, despite knowing that her learners’ prior experiences did not prepare them for the expectations of the curriculum, the teacher did not adjust her teaching methods, nor did she use visual aids, to surmount this disconnect, as recommended in the literature. As mentioned by Therrell and Dunneback (2015), expectations should be clarified to meet the teaching-learning needs of learners and to support them in obtaining successful learning outcomes. In order to “reconcile the educational expectations of students, [and] educators,” and therefore also the expectations of the curriculum, Schoenfeld (2018, 188) recommends that links be provided between theory and practice, particularly by way of visual support and also in the form of demonstrations to provide connections between prior learning and new experiences. Despite unlimited videos being available on the Internet that could have been used instead of actual demonstration by the teacher, unreliable internet access and a lack of technological devices to support its implementation ruled out this resource. Nevertheless, it should be noted that videos can save time and energy, provide a variety of learning for learners (Eseza 2019, 86) and would be more cost-effective when compared to the financial expenses for physical demonstrations of food products.

In the light of the findings and informed by the literature (which recommends visual support in this regard), two recommendations were made to the teacher. The first recommendation was that she should include more demonstrations as part of her teaching practice to prepare learners for practical lessons. Demonstrations to inform learners about aspects such as

correct measuring of ingredients (especially dry versus wet ingredients), correct techniques for combining ingredients (such as kneading dough or beating egg whites), or preparing cooking equipment (such as lining a baking sheet) would go a long way toward helping learners understand and visualize clearly what is expected from them. Should the teacher herself be unable to do a particular demonstration, the investigating team were of the opinion that she would be able to find virtually anything in this regard, such as video clips on the Internet, and that she could then show such video clips to her learners. Suitable video clips could be stored digitally for subsequent years of teaching the same lesson to new groups of learners.

The second recommendation to the teacher was that learners should be provided with clear visual images of the expected outcomes of the products they have to make in practical lessons. Photographs of completed successful products would clarify curriculum expectations for learners and contribute to providing a pathway to success, as recommended by Therrell and Dunneback (2015). Furthermore, photographs of products that were not successful should also be included in order to provide learners with insight into why some of their products were unsuccessful so that they can learn from their mistakes (Schoenfeld 2018) and have more success in future attempts of making the same product. Informed by the recommendations of Nanayakkara et al. (2018, 1) that external stakeholders should be involved in “in improving the quality and relevance of senior secondary school food [preparation] education,” this particular recommendation of the current study was then followed through with action when student teachers designed and made visual aids, as described below.

Consumer Studies student teachers who were at the time in training for their future careers were viewed as sincere stakeholders who needed to contribute to overcoming the challenges associated with implementing the Consumer Studies curriculum. The Consumer Studies student teachers who analyzed the case study data developed several posters depicting products that were included in the Food Production curriculum, including successful and less successful outcomes. As part of a giving-back-to-the-community initiative, these posters were printed and gifted to the participating teacher to use in her classroom as visual aids. Examples of these posters are provided below (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Examples of posters of products developed by Consumer Studies student teachers

The teacher was pleased with these posters and immediately put them up in the practical classroom. She expressed that the posters would “really help the learners” to visualize and understand what is expected from them. In this manner, a small contribution was made to support the learners at this school to surmount the disconnect between the curriculum expectations and learners’ prior experiences of the products they must make. After the study, the posters were made available (without charge) to all South African Consumer Studies teachers.

Conclusion

The disconnect between curriculum expectations in practical lessons and learners' prior experiences is an ongoing problem in South African schools. Awareness of the problem is mounting, as is teachers' willingness to address it, but they need support in this regard. Inviting external stakeholders (such as students in training) to develop informative visual aids (such as the posters presented above) contributed to supporting this teacher in her effort to surmount the disconnect and addressing this problem without changing the curriculum. The recommendations and posters that were made for this investigation would also be useful to other South African teachers facing similar challenges and will be distributed nationally, without charge. Moreover, videos can contribute greatly to preparing learners for practical lessons, but until the digital divide is reduced, this resource is still out of reach for many South African teachers. Nonetheless, in the long run, it would be beneficial to include more food products with an African origin or slant in the Food Production curriculum, which would add to the variety of food products that Consumer Studies learners could potentially develop into entrepreneurial opportunities. Efforts should continue to develop and expand the opportunities embedded in Consumer Studies so that learners can create their own employment.

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