

## Original Research

## Piloting a Four-Year High School Education Program: Opportunities for Change in Eswatini

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**ABSTRACT**

Eswatini embarked on a novel pilot study to find the feasibility of offering a four-year duration in high school rather than the traditional five years. A case study was done in one of the schools in the fourth year of conception. This specifically aimed to establish how the program has been going on now that it was coming to its end. Qualitative data were collected from one principal and four teachers. The findings highlighted how the program was planned, designed, and implemented. Operational challenges like a lack of Ministry support, challenges with resources, staffing, and a negative impact on students were highlighted. Nonetheless, potential opportunities and benefits from this endeavour could include reduced financial burden on the government. It could produce, too, a more robust education system that competes internationally. The study underscores that educational change is a collaborative and inclusive effort that involves many stakeholders. The study thus expands academic understanding of how educational reforms can falter when decision-making neglects infrastructural, instructional, and pedagogical support. We suggest a reflective post-piloting phase as an important step to consider the next step towards a full-scale roll-out in the country.

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Most countries, including Eswatini, have a monopolistic control over the service of education (Motsamai & Alers, 2022). Therefore, it is the mandate of the Ministry to evaluate programs that are on offer and how relevant they are in fostering quality education as well as safeguarding the interests of the country. Thus, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) determines all the policies relating to education in the country. Subsequently, a decision taken by the Ministry will apply uniformly to all public schools. Eswatini is also a signatory to several international policies on universal education that provide for high-quality basic education for all (Motsamai & Alers, 2022). Many changes have been enacted (in the past) in the same vein to make decisions that fit with current times. For example, the shift from the Cambridge General Certificate of Education (O-level curriculum) to the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) in the late 1990s and then to a homegrown and adapted curriculum in the mid-2000s. The major driving force behind this shift was the cost of running examinations, which had to be paid in foreign currency. A reduction of dependence on Cambridge curricula allowed more affordable and sustainable educational outcomes for a country where people live in poverty and have varying, limited access to education. However, some

educationists argue that Eswatini traded off more inquiry-based and intercultural learning in favour of more academic content and less global recognition. Whilst these changes were implemented, secondary and high school learning was done in five years. Then, completing students (if meeting the entry credits) would qualify for undergraduate enrolment, mostly at the local university (University of Eswatini) and other tertiary institutions like the Eswatini College of Technology and teacher-training colleges, to name a few.

The change to four years comes as a consideration because of multiple reasons. Eswatini faces socioeconomic challenges that include poverty, a lack of sufficient schooling materials, and a high toll on government amenities caused by the HIV/AIDS scourge. Reducing the number of years in high school definitely lowers the cost of education to both the government and families. Many orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs), mainly due to HIV/AIDS, are a government's social and economic responsibility. Besides faster and shorter progression to employment and tertiary education, the MOET could also offer a competitive edge to high school graduates from Eswatini who normally fall behind counterparts from other countries who do the Cambridge Advanced or Advanced Subsidiary levels (A or AS levels respectively) or International Baccalaureate (IB). AS is done in a year, whereas A-level needs two years. More schools in Eswatini could then offer these and have students finish high school in almost the same time as before (considering whether they do AS or A levels). This pilot program was set out in 32 strategic schools, and 2025 was the completion year. Many stakeholders are still keen to know the outcomes of the piloting, especially with the anticipation of what will happen in the coming years.

## 2. THE GROUNDING THEORY

Lewin's theory of planned change, in relation to the unfreezing, movement, and refreezing, is three components that show relevance to today's systems that constantly change (Cummings et al., 2016; Rosca, 2020; Stanz et al., 2022). As one of the pioneers of change management modelling, he devised (1) unfreezing as a way of identifying a need for a change to the status quo; (2) the change itself; and (3) refreezing as reinforcing the new process (Lewin, 1947). Lewin (1947) advanced his theory by claiming that a field only exists in a quasi-stationary equilibrium state. This implies that it is in a neutral state when there are no forces that act upon it or when the acting forces overpower themselves (Stanz et al., 2022). However, this neutrality is seldom met in real life, and equilibrium is only quasi-stationary because different types of forces will always act upon the situation to motivate or demotivate change (Stanz et al., 2022).

Planned change is a concrete thing and is classified as a deliberate effort enacted with careful calculations (Mahmud et al., 2022). Thus, the agent of change must create inspiration and, in part, mediate among the members during the unfreezing stage by exposing them to ground-breaking ideas, a shared need and perception of what could be, and a preparedness to work collaboratively in the next steps (Amina et al., 2022). Changing involves analyzing the gap that exists between the desired status and the status quo, and considering the appropriate change programmes that need to be done to provide an optimal solution and minimize resistance to change (Bhayangkara et al., 2020). Finally, the incoming shift permeates into people's mindsets, day-to-day behaviours, or activities, and the organization becomes stabilized once more (Amina et al., 2022). To reinforce these changes, it is imperative to set new rules and policies; create new ethos and cultures, and implement systems of appreciation for the changes (Basthomi et al., 2023; Bhayangkara et al., 2020).

The change as three steps (CATS) is regarded both as an objective, indisputable truth and an idea with a noble background, with a theoretical foundation on how a change theory could be built solidly (Cummings et al., 2016; Schein, 1996). This is mostly due to the fact that changes should be managed in such a manner that they meet all stakeholder expectations (Mahmud et al., 2022). However, Lewin has been criticized by other scholars for oversimplifying the change process (Cummings et al., 2016). For example, Kanter et al. (1992) criticize it because they opined that the linear and static conception of an organization as an ice cube is inappropriate. This is regarded as too rigid, and Child (2015) also opposes the rigidity, and the idea of 'refreezing' is quaintly inappropriate in today's complex world that favours more flexibility and adaptation.

## 3. A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The reduction of high school duration can become a watershed moment in a country. However, once the country reaches this decision, concrete steps must be taken so that actions justify change and lead to the desired state. At the onset of introducing an educational program, a pilot study is usually carried out so that the curriculum developers allow schools to experience the intended changes in the curriculum with their educators and students. This creates an opportunity to fully understand schools' contexts, the learning content, and pedagogy to see the results before deciding to adopt the changes (Hyler & Ubele, 2025). This literature review aims to examine why the reduction seems to be a good thing and why a country like Eswatini considers it a viable option for its future students.

The documentation of reforms that eliminated a whole year of education was effected in Ontario, Canada (1999–2003) and in German states (2001–2016) (Thomsen, 2015). In both countries, these reforms shortened secondary schooling from 13 years to 12. The motivation for the Ontario reform was a desire to bring practice that was in line with the rest of Canada and the United States of America. Although the curriculum was compressed, students were still expected to complete the stipulated same number of credits. The same author states that Western Germany had a long-standing tradition of 13 years of schooling for graduation from lower and upper secondary school (grades 5–13). The schooling length came under growing scrutiny in the late 1990s, following the reunification with East Germany, where 12 years were spent for a similar graduation period. Again, as the change was enacted, graduation requirements were not changed.

In these Global North countries, such transformations are a matter of striking a balance between rising demands of the labour markets that require high-quality education through enough time for students to develop skills and earlier entry into the labour market for a more efficient use of young people's human capital (Tobias, Thomsen, & Schneider, 2019).

The protagonists for shortening school duration believe that this move can make social security and tax systems more sustainable by increasing people's time in the workforce (Thomsen, 2015). He advances that in the process, the probability of a student enrolling in tertiary institutions is not affected, and neither does it lead to increased dropping out of college nor lower enrolments in university programs. In Eswatini, the motivation lies mostly behind two reasons. Firstly, most schools would then introduce AS/A-Levels, with an aim to make the education system more matched with international standards. This would then help students who want to study abroad and compete internationally. Secondly, a shorter high school period reduces the burden of paying fees, uniforms, and school supplies, which falls on the Government's responsibilities through paying for orphaned and vulnerable children. In doing so, dropout rates (in secondary school), which are quite high in the country, would be reduced (The Government Of The Kingdom Of Eswatini, 2018). On the contrary, antagonists oppose the shortening plan, citing that it reduces mathematics achievement, indicating some limitations on the ability of young people to accelerate knowledge accumulation (Thomsen, 2015). He further states that it can have negative effects on students' personality development due to the massive compression of the learning content to meet time frames.

In practical terms, the objectives of any transformation in education cannot be achieved if the programme is not well planned and implemented (Reniko et al., 2019). Cherbow and McNeill (2022) argue that if a curriculum is to reflect the objectives of a nation and students' needs, then teachers must partake in its creation. Mpuangnan and Ntombela (2024) further advance that communities must not be neglected, too, as doing so could result in educational frameworks that fail to resonate with the unique needs and specific cultural backgrounds of students. However, OECD (2020) argues that any educational change must consider that the curriculum lacks the space to add new content, and when compression is done, it must be careful not to cause overcrowding in the curriculum. Students need to learn more deeply and not just extra; their learning time should not be prolonged, nor should they learn at a surface level (OECD, 2020; Pandya, 2020). Moreover, any reform must be met head-on with teacher development to focus on refining the quality of teaching and learning, and capacity-building that enhances professional development opportunities on methodology and resource utilization (Thomsen, 2015).

A study that falls close to what is happening in Eswatini was carried out to investigate the challenges and opportunities experienced by teachers in piloting the integrated curriculum in Lesotho as a reform to address some political and socioeconomic issues in the country (Kurata et al., 2022). These researchers used a qualitative case study research design, and data were generated through semi-structured interviews. Overall, the findings from this study affirmed that constraints experienced while piloting the integrated curriculum outweighed the prospects. The opportunities raised included the following: the development of creative skills and nurturing of students' talent, while the challenges highlighted were: content overload, lack of continuous professional development, and absence of monitoring and supervision.

There are no studies published yet in Eswatini on how the pilot schools are doing in terms of objectives and the pointers set by the Ministry. Hence, the necessity for this research. This research is meant to be evaluative research and determine how the findings currently on the ground can be traced to inform decisions and policy-making with regard to what the MOET decides.

To achieve this evaluative purpose and to generate findings that can inform MOET's policy decisions, the following research questions were set out for this study:

1. How is the four-year high school program being implemented in public schools?
2. What are teachers' and school leaders' experiences and perceptions of the pilot study in public schools?
3. What opportunities do teachers and school leaders identify in the unrolling of a four-year curriculum model in public schools?

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1. The research process

This study was done through a qualitative approach. We wished to collect and analyze non-numerical data to understand opinions and experiences and to make sense of the unfolding social realities (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The most fitting research design was a case study to gather in-depth insights into a research problem and generate a contextualized understanding of prevailing phenomena (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was done in one school, although we had intended to collect data from four purposeful schools in one of the provinces. The school was one of the selected schools (for piloting). It had both sets of students (the normal and the piloting classes). Data collection at this school provided a vast opportunity to get insights from people experiencing the sought-after information. The intention was to carry out the study in the last year since the conception of the program. Permission to get into the selected schools was granted by the MOET in good time. However, getting to the schools proved a difficult task. Two principals did not want to talk about the program, and hence, data collection was not going to be possible from them (who were paramount participants). Another principal downplayed the chances of doing research in her school due to bad timing. It was a time for mid-year and mock examination, and I felt that teachers were preoccupied with that engagement.

At the eventual school, a principal and four teachers took part in this study. Nevertheless, the participants were not very free to answer some of the questions. They would say, “I hope I will not be quoted here,” and then laugh. We explicitly explained to them about confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms in the write-up (Cohen et al., 2018) before the interviews started, but perhaps that did not allay their concerns. We got a sense that there is information that they could have shared with us, but had a fear that they might be victimized. The teachers suggested having a focus group discussion rather than one-on-one interview sessions. We figured out that somehow talking as a group provided a ‘comfort in numbers’ and a freer environment to talk. The selected teachers were purposively selected as teachers involved with both normal classes (and having experienced teaching the normal classes) and the pilot classes.

The teachers (as people on the ground) experienced the pilot study and had their criticisms towards what was happening. Their frustrations could be based on the pilot program itself or broader issues that come with the teaching service. Despite these hitches, we managed to collect quite revealing and tangible information from this work. We kept on reminding them that their names (and the name of their school) would not appear in the document. Later on, we used member checks (Mertens, 2019) to verify the exactness of what we had captured in the interviews. The participants were also asked open-ended questions so that they would elaborate on their points with what, why, and how questions. Both the principal and teachers were asked similar questions for data triangulation (Schlunegger et al., 2024).

### 4.2. Thematic analysis

We conducted thematic analysis for the data collected. We conducted thematic analysis for the data collected. After the initial process of transcription, we read and reread the transcripts as a precursor to get a generic understanding to generate themes of discussion (Cohen et al., 2018). Interesting initial codes included aspects like program planning and design, ministry support, national interests, resource mobilization, staffing, teaching and learning, and impacts, to name a few. Thus, some of the related codes were grouped as stand-together themes. The sequences involved were theme recognition through serial phases, which were data familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing, and writing (Miles et al., 2020; Moses et al., 2024). Therefore, the findings section presents five major themes that were produced. The themes appear with the researcher's interpretation and suitable quotations from the data. To ensure anonymity, the participants are not named. Instead, the teachers are referred to according to the order in which they appeared in answering questions in the focus group discussion. The principal is designated with his title.

## 5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The participants gave a background on how the pilot program was implemented. Sufficient information was highlighted because they were in the system and had been involved with teaching and learning for some time before the change came. Thus, they described that all the public schools originally had a five-year high school program that was divided into three years of a junior certificate and two further years to culminate with a general high school certificate. Therefore, post-primary school, students get a Junior Certificate (JC) and an Eswatini General Certificate of Secondary Education (EGCSE) certificate. The compression is thus about the JC level being covered in two rather than three years, and replacing the JC exam with a Checkpoint examination in four subjects: Mathematics, General Science, SiSwati, and English. To differentiate the classes, we were notified that the pilot classes adopted the ‘grade system’ (from grade 8 to 11) whilst the conventional classes maintained the traditional ‘form 1 to form 5’.

Beyond this background, five themes encapsulate the major findings in this study. They are discussed in detail as follows:

### 5.1. Program Planning, Design, and Implementation

This theme highlights how the program was/is being implemented. The major talking points from the participants were that the program was executed in a hurry and most haphazardly. Resultantly, significant challenges besides overwhelming the students, especially in the first two years, were experienced. Teacher 2 revealed this information:

I think it was done haphazardly, if I were to say. There was too much rush because the compression, as it were, in this case, is just compression in the literal sense. You have everything, but you put it in a small space. Everything was just squashed, because it is like the last two years were not supposed to be touched. However, the lower had a lot of pushing things.

On curricular enactment, Teacher 1 gave a detailed exposition:

The two years in the lower grades are not enough. There are more objectives to cover within the two years. So by the time the students have to write their checkpoint examination, the syllabus is not done. Basically, they're not ready for the examination. I think the removal of some objectives in the syllabus for grades 8 and 9 left a lot still. At the same time, when you go through the syllabus, there are things that you would not want to remove because if you say at grade 8 and 9, you are going to remove all of this, then you are not giving any science to the student. Basically, I would say the 2 years are not enough. But at the same time, you cannot actually re-identify what can be removed from the syllabus.

An inadequacy in the new curriculum was highlighted by Teacher 3 in this manner:

And in the Mathematics, we found ourselves having some of the important components thrown away. There is a component of Additional Mathematics that ends up not being touched, and yet it forms a very strong basis for high school mathematics. That has put the students in a very, very serious challenge. So I think the compression was not done well.

Other major problems emanated from additional subjects that were added in the lower grades, which added pressure to teaching and learning. For example, ICT was made a compulsory subject in all 32 schools, with obvious challenges in resource provision. The Principal mentioned this concern:

We still have the same subjects in grade 8, except that ICT was introduced as a core subject. Then we have electives, which are Design and Technology, History, and Consumer Science. It means overall, we have students who are taking 10 subjects, which is too many for most. And with ICT, schools still have challenges of a few teachers and a specific student-to-computer ratio and other challenges.

### 5.2. Lack of Ministry Support and Communication

The participants expected the MOET to be a central pillar of strength around the piloting program. However, they cited being let down in countless ways. The issues mentioned were a significant lack of support and effective communication. The participants felt they were left to their own devices to manage a new program with minimal guidance. On questions that ranged from support provided by the ministry and other leaders, firstly, the participants decried the lack of proper training and direction given. The participants mentioned that they had workshops about the programs, but they were few and not ongoing. For instance, the Principal remarked:

If I remember very well, four years ago, when it started, the Ministry of Education only organized some workshops for the teachers to discuss how to compress the syllabus and the like. And even there, those workshops were not thorough enough to prepare the teachers because they were done rashly, just when the program was about to start, just a week before, or some days before the start.

The information (from the Ministry) was not and still is not properly disseminated, as cited by Teacher 2:

I think it may be important to introduce the program, but in one of the workshops that I personally attended, some questions that we had were not answered. We were told that they would be answered at a later stage, but we were just left with those questions. Up to now, no answers have come.

Teacher 3 recounted his frustrations in this citation:



We cannot run away from discussing the Ministry of Education because it is the one that is piloting the program. So they should play a pivotal role in making sure that the program is a success. So if it is not in the loop of things, then it becomes a bit difficult for you to implement the program. At the end, they are going to ask, is the program successful? How am I going to be successful if you do not give me proper implements for me to make the program a success? And do not even communicate with us on the ground to ask how it is going?

Teacher 4 also added:

There is no support for this program. I will say we were just left there on the island to sort ourselves. Because even the promises that were made met with a number of challenges that were not addressed. It is a problem. So the only thing that is still there is the workshops, though even now they come so rarely. And do not address the issues that we deal with daily. I think just last year we did not have any workshops. Maybe this year they will come, or they are still addressing teachers in other subjects we do not know.

Some of the support was expected from the National Curriculum Centre (NCC). This was especially related to aspects concerned with curricular and textbook content. Participants also cited another lack, as mentioned by the Principal:

The support that we were supposed to receive (because they promised that it would be supported by the NCC as well) never came. So they rarely call us, even to update us, or to get our concerns. But even if we are to have those meetings...the concerns are not addressed at all.

Teacher 3 and the principal also alluded to the fact that poor information dissemination affected the nation at large, too, in that some parents were not fully informed about how the piloting was going to be done. This misnomer is highlighted in this Principal's quotation:

Parents were not well-informed about what the program was all about. Such that a parent would bring a child to school with the mentality of the old system. Some insisted that they came with an understanding that they were bringing their children for five years. And then now you are telling them otherwise.

### 5.3. Challenges with Staffing and Resource Provision

The interviews highlighted momentous problems with teacher availability and qualification, and other operational resources. Whilst additional human and other resources were naturally expected, the school had to operate with its existing members of staff. Some of whom were not suitably qualified to teach the advanced curriculum. Without new textbooks and infrastructure, the going has been tough for them.

The Principal cited irregularities with teacher provision and underlined that:

In one of the principal's meetings, the principal secretary in the ministry was there to raise our concern about the issue of staffing, because we have been promised that we will have enough teachers for us (schools) that are piloting. The issue of staffing, it came as a challenge to schools because now we have to see how to operate with the numbers we have. For instance, if they are saying ICT is now compulsory... it is a problem.

Staffing posed operational challenges as Teacher 4 raised these concerns:

We have teachers who were teaching junior science, and their qualifications do not allow them to go into senior classes. So, how are we going to address it when these students have already been given classes, but there are no teachers? Because if you start the program, we are going to be running two programs side by side, concurrently, and how exactly?

Teacher 2 also corroborated this information:

We are running two programs at the same time. There are no new teachers who were brought. So the teachers that we had had to be now distributed amongst the classes. We had to look at the subject allocation and see how to work with those who could be there. This is always challenging.

The Principal gave a detailed account of the resource status concerning textbooks:

So the program came with a heavy bearing on the resources for schools because there were no books for some subjects. Taking, for instance, if I can make a classic example with Maths. In the book shelves at the stores, they still have book one, book two, and book three. So we had to see as a school how to make things work by picking things from each of the three. So we had to do a lot of photocopying at times. So the resources, it became very hard for us.

Regarding the textbooks, Teacher 1 shared her experience to corroborate the principal's assertion:

The textbooks are a challenge because we are still using the textbooks for the five-year program. So grades 8 and 9 are supposed to use three books instead of two. It creates confusion by jumping from one book to another, due to the way the topics have been structured.

Other challenges with resources were concerned with the number of students who would be examination candidates and the physical spaces required. The principal and Teacher 2 highlighted this problem. Precisely, the Principal cited:

So you see right now, as we speak, we are having a challenge as a school on how we are going to run the examinations because now with the four-year program, they are now in Form 5 (grade 11). And we are still having those in the old system who are also in Form 5, which means we are having two groups of Form 5 as candidates. We do not have space to accommodate all of them, as they are to write an English exam where everyone sits for it.

#### 5.4. Negative Impact on Students

Some challenges that were cited by the participants were also related to student motivation and psychosocial issues. All the participants had mixed feelings and felt that the curriculum was too demanding, and it did not give students a good chance to explore their options and enjoy learning the subjects. For instance, Teacher 2 said: "There is a lack of...I could say psychosocial support for the students. This thing is heavy for them, and there is no support on their side." We asked the participants how the students were prepared for the pilot program, and the responses showed that there was very little that was done, as shown in this response from the Principal:

Unfortunately, the students are coming from primary schooling. So when they get here for high school, they find that they are going to do this program. So they have to swallow it, no matter how big it is. And then we do have orientation, of course, and they are told that now they are having new subjects and the like. Otherwise, for them, because they cannot compare with anything else, they just take it like that. They are doing these subjects (ten at a time). With the guidance of their parents, they just select one from those electives.

Teacher 2 also added more detail:

Otherwise, the students we started with just came fresh from primary school, and they got into the system. We found a lot of challenges again there, because now there are quite a lot of subjects that these students have to do in a short space of time. So, combining the subjects, or in terms of how we structure our curriculum, it then causes some challenges for most of us. We have to relook at our curriculum because now we have this short space of time, and we have a large number of subjects. So you cannot just choose for them, maybe before they have a taste of what you are talking about. For instance, how do I decide that this one is not going to do history, or this one is not going to do consumer science, because they are just new?

Teacher 1 also remarked:

So they have to go through this thing, but in a very short space of time. So that caused a challenge, such that some of the students probably went to the upper grades with maybe subjects that they would not have done. There is no instrument for testing them. There is an aptitude test (conducted by the MOET) that is supposed to be done as soon as they come into grade 8. But these tests come so late (in grade 9) when they are already on their way.

When the piloting program started, there was a policy that none of the students who were part of the pilot program was going to fail and repeat a grade. But according to teacher 3, it changed later on, and she recounted that:

What happened to these students in grade 8? They were already aware of the fact that they were not going to fail, and they became very difficult to teach. Because they knew that there was nothing you were going to do to them. They told themselves that they were going to move on to grade 9 with

their 20 % grades. So there was a reluctance among some of the students. For a student, sometimes knowing that I am going to repeat a class is going to push that student to perform.

Another concern raised was that some students finished high school much earlier, and that could affect their coping mechanisms in either tertiary schools or workplaces. Teacher 2 recounted:

They finish school at a very young age. If they go to the university. How prepared are they? Now, if they fail, it becomes a very serious catastrophe. Look at these young ones who now have to start working at this tender age. They are 16-years old (when they finish). When the results come, maybe in January, they will be 17. And then we are taking that 17-year-old to a tertiary school or to a university, which may be a bit challenging. They may not be mature enough.

### 5.5. Potential Opportunities and Commendations for Improvement

In spite of the numerous challenges, the participants saw potential benefits from the pilot program. Such benefits included those that came with students finishing school earlier, and also cost-cutting for the government in paying fees. Teacher 2 recounted:

If you also look at it from the positive side, they (the students) will finish early. But there are some other supports that are needed for what I am going to say next. They have an opportunity to go for A and AS levels. It creates an opportunity for them. Yes, but on that side, we do not know how far the government will go to support them. But unlike the previous groups, who had to finish form 5 and then have another year or two years to go for the advanced levels, which are required by the other countries. So this one is going to provide them with that extra year.

Nonetheless, Teacher 4 pondered that:

It poses other questions. Where are they going to do the AS levels? How prepared are they? How many schools will be ready to offer it? If the government worked on the issue of AS and A levels, this program would provide us with an opportunity to spread out the AS and A levels in the whole country, as other countries do.

On improving the education system of the country, the teachers highlighted that they saw opportunities for growth, especially by revisiting the syllabuses and the composition process. Teacher 2 also added that local educationists could also partake in curriculum development through textbook publishing, as cited:

I do not know what the MOET, or NCC... on what opportunities they can create for the locals to contribute, especially in textbooks. I do not know how, but maybe support them and give them opportunities to write the textbooks.

Teacher 4 added this information:

Besides providing much-needed resources and teachers, the ministry must intensify workshops and training where we share ideas with other schools on how we are coping and finding the program. We could learn from each other in that way.

The Principal mentioned a very positive benefit from unrolling the four-year program in all Eswatini schools:

A four-year high school program can benefit, if I may say so, almost all the stakeholders. For the government, we know the government these days is forking out a lot of money for OVCs. So now paying for one child for four years instead of five years is a huge cut.

## 6. DISCUSSION

From time to time, countries change their educational systems. This is usually in line with adjusting to changing times, meeting certain international and national standards. Educational systems cannot remain stagnant and continue to serve preset intentions. Consequently, governments, through relevant ministries, evaluate them and come up with recommendations. Steps are then taken to bring forth the desired outcomes. This study presented an opportunity for Eswatini to examine the feasibility of changing its high school duration by reducing the total number of years by one year. Likewise, Ahmadi and Lukman (2015) found it important to review the status quo and pilot to consolidate new education programs in Nigeria. Generally, the findings in the current study show that educational change is not an insurmountable undertaking. As depicted, the school operated from a position of uncertainty because of improper guidance, explanation and provision. A major insight of this study is that it recognises that educational program reform in a resource-constrained environment can create systemic disarray, especially where there is top-down decision-making



that ignores infrastructural and pedagogical support. Again, a systemic detachment between policymakers (MOET) and implementers (schools) can encumber successful educational reforms. These proclamations are supported by the fact that whilst the intended is foreseeable, operational undertakings need more systematic considerations.

The participant's actions and understanding align with Lewin's theoretical framework that underpins the study. A change to the status quo represents the unfreezing stage, and several participant actions done to navigate the changes unpack the next stage, which is the 'movement'. The Eswatini education system could bolster its education system by creating opportunities for all schools to have more challenging and internationally accepted curricula like the Cambridge AS and Advanced level. Students leaving school early also gives advantages of joining employment earlier and contributing to economic and industrial development.

Whilst there is a dearth of studies done on piloting in similar contexts, literature still has reports on studies that examined assessing new educational programs (Buabeng & Amo-Darko, 2025; Hopkins & Levin, 2010; López-Torres et al., 2019). Nonetheless, literature is awash with information on how resources shortages limit the potential of educational programs (especially in countries in the global south). The participants in the current study complained about both human and material resources and wished that the MOET could do more than what prevailed. Comparably et al. (2024) and Moses et al. (2024) had studies on resource inadequacy. The first researchers' findings indicated the negative effects of resource limitations in implementing a new national school curriculum in South Africa and created barriers of teaching and learning. Moses et al. (2024) specifically listed the lack of textbooks, library facilities, and dedicated study rooms as hindrances to the effective implementation of a new Mathematics curriculum. Thus some educational programs fail to start or remain viable because the primary tools are not made available.

The participants in the current study also complained of a lack of requisite training and workshops. This resonates with Buabeng & Amo-Darko (2025), whose study on a new curriculum revealed critical challenges like insufficient training, lack of practical and professional development. In a pilot study on a pedagogy for teaching innovation, collaboration, and co-creation, Androutsos & Brinia (2019) unearthed that educators needed incremental pedagogical support to help students acquire intended skills and remain motivated. Where this capacity-building is lacking, student engagement and educational attainment suffer greatly.

Educational change should not only be about what the Government wants (as seen in the current study) but must be collectively agreed upon by all stakeholders who are affected by the change. For instance, El-Hamamsy et al. (2023) discovered that three stakeholders (students, teachers, and research practitioners) played a critical role in conducting a pilot program that aimed to introduce computer science in secondary schools. Similarly, in an earlier study, Kobiah (2021) discovered that new curricular implementation depended on teachers who stand not only as the implementers but also as stalwarts who provide invaluable feedback to the curriculum developers. Without their feedback, probable improvements to the curriculum would remain elusive and subsequently, not be made. Kobiah's (2021) study findings also established a statistically significant relationship that existed between teachers' involvement in curriculum piloting and implementation. The findings in the current study showed that participants had ideas that could help the MOET in going forward with their intention of rolling out four years of high school. We strongly think that it would be advisable to set strategic contact sessions with various stakeholders at different stages of planning and implementation. The MOET could also need to undergo a reflective post-piloting phase to evaluate the suitability of the pilot program. When all operational factors have been factored and if the program gets unrolled into national policy, then the last (refreezing) stage in the theoretical framework will be attainable.

Despite the limitations that come with case studies, specifically transferability issues (Miles et al., 2020), this study had other drawbacks. Firstly, we are fully aware that more schools could have brought in more perspectives and bolstered the study to build a more succinct story. Secondly, more participants from the same school could have had the same effect as highlighted in the first point. Lastly, another limitation is cited from the participants' holding back in giving information in fear of victimization.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study provided valuable insights into the practicability of reforming Eswatini's education system by reducing the school year by one year. The major findings were on how the piloting was being carried and showed critical challenges in terms of resource provision in line with curriculum compression. Coupled with this were other barriers to teaching and learning, like teacher training and professional development, pedagogical support, and teacher shortage. Another precarious issue was the communication gap that existed between policymakers and implementers. These major issues underscore the essential aspects that need to be addressed if the reform is to become successful. The study reinforced the fact that educational

change remains a collaborative and inclusive effort that must involve, especially, teachers and students, who are key to the success of an educational change.

This study aligns with Lewin's theoretical framework of change management. The "unfreezing" phase began by embarking on the pilot program, and the critical "movement" stage still requires more strategic planning for resources, capacity building, and inclusive stakeholder engagement. The eventual refreezing banks on the possibility of a successful implementation, having addressed areas of concern.

A reflective post-piloting phase is considered an important step that the MOET could contemplate to assess the feasibility of a full-scale rollout in the country. This could counteract possible systemic inefficiencies and demoralized teachers that grossly debilitate reform efforts. In sum, an educational reform in this regard is both desirable and feasible to bring forth responsiveness to both global standards and national realities.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings of this study, it is thus recommended that:

- Curriculum planners should work towards a curriculum compression that is balanced and maintains educational integrity, but without overwhelming students.
- Before unrolling the compression, there should be systemic support from the MOET, which focuses on ongoing training, resource provision, and transparent communication.
- Student motivation and psychosocial health must be emphasized by teachers and gatekeepers when considering educational reforms.
- Stakeholder involvement (teachers and parents) in curriculum planning and implementation must be prioritized to match teaching goals and parents' aspirations for their children.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

## RESEARCH FUNDING

No external funding.

## ETHICAL STATEMENT

The Ministry of Education and Training (Eswatini) gave an ethical clearance letter to conduct research in schools.

## AI USE STATEMENT

We did not use any AI in this study.

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