

ENLISTING ON TEACHER PROFESIONAL DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS OF TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are the cornerstone of teaching and learning. They hold prominent positions that dictate that schools improve based on their (teachers) skills and abilities. Having high quality teachers is therefore one of the key obligatory elements for the enhancement of quality education hence the need for teachers' continuing professional development. The purpose of Teachers Continuing Professional Development is to equip teachers with meeting the challenges and demands of not only the democratic South Africa but also globally in the 21st century. The critical issue is however, the fact that much of the literature still show how professional development has not been able to change teachers' classroom practices and that teachers are mostly not satisfied with the professional development that is offered to them. Using qualitative case study research design, this paper explores in detail the reflections of teachers on continuing professional development programmes. The findings reveal that teachers are not satisfied with their participation due to the poor planning and lack of monitoring of the programmes, which results in the programmes being non-continuous and repetitively leaving no mark of change in the education system as a whole. The paper concludes that non-involvement of teachers in the planning of their professional development results in the above findings. We therefore recommend that, teachers are provided with opportunity to not only attend but also plan the professional development programs that they believe will change their classroom practices.

Key Words: Teacher Professional Development, Teacher-led Professional Development, Effective Professional Development, Continuing Professional Development

INTRODUCTION

Many educational systems, all over the world have experienced extended changes and innovations (Hargreaves, 2000; Webb et al., 2004). This has been in response to many factors, least of which is the desire to respond to the rapid economic and social changes that penetrate every sphere of public life. Education reform has therefore become common in most societies (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). As part of the education reform processes, many nations are also investing in teacher education as a major engine for driving the changes in the classrooms to ensure learners' academic success (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Andree, 2010). Moreover, in many countries, the role and functioning of schools are changing and so is what is expected of teachers as they are asked to teach in increasingly multicultural classrooms. To place greater emphasis on integrating students with special learning needs in their classrooms; to make more effective use of information and communication technologies for teaching; to engage more in planning within evaluative and accountability frameworks; and to do more to involve parents in schools (OECD, 2009).

South Africa is no exception to this trend of education reform that is sweeping across many nations. To transform education in this country, South African teachers therefore need to be appropriately equipped to meet the evolving challenges and needs of the country (Steyn, 2008). King and Newman (2001) believe that teachers have the most direct, sustained contact with students, as well as considerable control over what is taught and the climate of learning. It is reasonably assumed therefore that improving teachers' knowledge, skills and dispositions is one of the most critical steps to improving student achievement (ibid 1)

Professional development of teachers is not new, but in recent years, the way in which it is structured and delivered has been reconceptualised (Kriek & Grayson, 2009). Professional development of teachers, often called in-service education or staff development, has recently taken different forms to achieve different purposes. In earlier times, the importance of involving teachers in professional development programs has long been favoured as the benefits discovered through various research reports done on such activities pointed towards the prosperity it conveyed to schooling at large. Many scholars agree that reviews of professional development research constantly point to the ineffectiveness of most of these programmes (Mokhele & Jita, 2012). According to the National Research Council (NRC, 2007), many teachers express dissatisfaction with the professional development opportunities made available to them in schools and insist that the most effective development programmes they have experienced have been self-initiated. Jita & Ndlalane (2009) bring to view that the search for more effective strategies for the professional development of teachers continues in many countries around the world. This paper explores the reflections of teachers on professional develop.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualisation of Professional Development

Professional development (PD) is not new but has been previously known as pre-service and in-service education or staff development. In support of the above statement, Bredeson (2000) highlights that, the term *professional development*, ubiquitous in current literature, is often used interchangeably with such terms as *staff development*, *in-service*, *skills training and continuing education*. Professional development is viewed by Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2007) as a significant issue in workplaces for dealing most effectively with the complexity of modern society. Such significance is a result of many reasons such as the unprecedented technological advancements in recent times that mean that changing workplace demands and a need for current knowledge results in on-going economic imperatives that professional development seeks to address (Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt, 2007).

Furthermore, the DOE and SACE in South Africa (2008) collaborate many aspects and broadens teacher professional development to be activities undertaken individually or collectively by teachers throughout their careers to enhance their professional knowledge, understanding, competence and leadership capacity. In particular to increase their mastery of the curriculum and their teaching areas, their skill in teaching and facilitating learning, their understanding of children and young people and their developmental needs, and their commitment to the best interests of their learners and their schools, the wellbeing of their communities and the ethics of the education profession.

Why professional development?

Earlier, scholars such as Cheng (1996) found that having high quality teachers is important for the enhancement of quality education with Guskey (1994) viewing that teachers are the cornerstone as they hold prominent positions that therefore dictate to us that we cannot improve schools without improving the skills and abilities of the teachers within them. Recent literature therefore shows that such discoveries as of the earlier scholars are being prominent as according to Barber & Mourshed (2007) an increasing attention is being paid to the professional development of teachers as they are seen as having the greatest influence on student outcomes. With student learning and achievement being so greatly impacted by the quality of teaching, effective teacher development is important for

any educational system to remain competitive in a global arena and the continuity on teacher professional development has become one of the most common central concerns in educational studies over the past several decades (Bayar, 2014).

Moreover, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also stated that ‘at the level of the education system, professional development of teachers is a key policy lever’ (OECD, 2005). Bayar, (2014) brings to light that the impact of high quality teachers on student learning and achievement has been debated and the benefits accepted over the last several decades by many researchers, educators, policymakers, and teachers’ unions. The South African government has by far responded to the need for professional development of teachers. according to the National Policy Framework for teacher education (2007), all teachers registered at the South African Council for Educators (SACE) have to earn professional development (PD) points by selecting approved professional development activities that meet their development needs. Desimone et al (2006) further note that accumulating PD points is also an internationally acceptable technique to recognise members’ continuing professional development.

Professional development and teachers

Teacher Professional development is seen as of high significance to teachers as it is said that it plays an important role in changing teachers’ teaching methods and assisting teachers to move beyond comprehension of the surface features of a new idea or innovation, to a deeper understanding of a topic (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012). Komba and Nkumbi (2008) further add that professional development provides teachers with opportunities to explore new roles, develop new instructional techniques, refine their practice and broaden themselves, both as educators and as individuals. For Zakaria and Daud (2009), good teachers constitute foundation of good schools and improving teachers’ skills and knowledge is one of the most important investments of time and money that local, state and national leaders can make in education.

According to Soleimani & Khaliliyan (2012), professional development usually takes place after finishing formal training for the purpose of keeping up to date with advancements in different fields and it can be said that professional development is a never-ending process, a continuous process. Starkey et al (2009) and Rogers et al (2007) also note that, professional development programs are necessary not only for new teachers but for also veteran teachers with an emphasis on the importance of professional development programs to veteran teachers being for self-renewal. Moreover, ongoing research conducted in many countries has shown that professional development activities within and beyond the school day affect teachers positively (Carver & Katz, 2004; Easton, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006)

Effective professional development for teachers

Whitehouse (2011) states that an agreement between the reviews on the characteristics of an effective CPD stresses six major characteristics that should be identified which are: First, Driven by identified learning needs - Based on their review of studies of CPD that produced positive student outcomes, (Timperley, Parr & Bertanees, 2009) recommend that the students’ learning needs be identified first. This involves an audit along the lines of what students currently know and how this is measured, followed by a statement of what the students need to know and a strategy for moving from the current state of students’ knowledge to the desired state.

Secondly, Sustained - In their review of CPD that led to improved student outcomes, Timperley et al. (2009) found the CPD needed to last for at least a year. However, a long duration, in

itself, was not sufficient to produce positive student outcomes. Time was needed to challenge teachers' theories of practice, to apply new practices in their classrooms and to measure the effects (if any) of the new teaching practices. Third, Subject specific - Research shows that CPD is more likely to bring about improvements, particularly in teacher efficacy and pedagogical content knowledge, when it is subject specific (Bolam & Weindling, 2006; McCormick et al., 2008). Fourth, Based in the classroom - what goes on in the classroom presents teachers with opportunities to consider existing theories of teaching practice as well as how to change these in light of new learning about subject and pedagogy. Fifth, Collaborative - One of the strongest findings from the research is that teacher CPD needs to be collaborative in nature. Teaching is a reflective practice that improves with discussions, which challenge personal theories of practice in safe, non-judgmental environments. This can be achieved by, among others: lesson observations with feedback provided by colleagues in the same and other schools, participation in networks of professional learning or projects aimed at professional development through the improvement of students' outcomes (Cordingley, Bell, Thomason, & Firth, 2005). This also includes networking through subject associations, the encouragement of research and investigation throughout a school or department (GTC for England, 2006).

All of the studies of CPD selected for review by Timperley et al. (2007) received input from external experts. Generally, the experts provided up to date knowledge of pedagogy and ongoing support in transferring pedagogical knowledge into the classroom. They were also in a position to challenge current orthodoxies in the schools they worked with (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008) and act as an independent 'honest broker'. Lastly, Effective organizational structures for effective CPD- At the school level, CPD needs to be planned and organized. Without such planning, teachers are left to organize their own professional learning, which only work for those who are highly self-directed. The individual reflective practitioner may also find that their learning goals are misaligned with those of their colleagues, their schools, education policy or best practice. Even where collaboration and learning communities are encouraged within subjects or topics, teachers may experience resistance to developing new practices in their classrooms when the school environment is not open to innovation.

A number of other scholars have touched a lot on some of these various aspects of effective CPD stated above for example, Erickson, Brandes, Mitchell, & Mitchell (2005) ; Lieberman & Pointer Mace (2008) have pointed that professional development is most relevant when it focuses on teachers' existing needs; teachers' personal needs. Reviewing collaboration, involving teacher's inputs according to Wikeley (2005) creates a strong sense of ownership and encourages active learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is a part of a larger study that explored teachers' perspectives on teacher-led professional development programmes. However, in this specific paper our purpose was to explore in detail the reflections of teachers on professional development programmes. In other words, to find out what teachers think of the professional development that is offered to them. The study was therefore, designed as a qualitative case study. Qualitative case study was more suited for this study as it produces descriptive data – generally the participant's own written or spoken words pertaining to their experience or perception and usually no numbers or counts are assigned to these observations (Brynard, 2014 & Lichtman, 2013). To collect the necessary data, we visited and conducted semi-structured interviews several times with a total number of six participants. We purposefully selected a sample of two principals, one deputy principal and three teachers who participated in the professional development programmes. Permission was sought from all the relevant stakeholders. All the participants also signed the informed consent to demonstrate their willingness to participate in the

study. This specific paper focuses on the narration of the reflections of teachers on professional development from the eyes of one teacher, Mr. Somiso (Not real name).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, we present the interview conversation we had with one of the interviewed teachers, Mr Somiso. We further highlight the themes that emerge from the case study of Mr. Somiso.

Somiso is a veteran teacher who started teaching back in 1995. He started by teaching Mathematics, but later after the curriculum changed, he added a new subject named Life Skills, which came with the Outcomes Based Education curriculum. He is currently the principal of the school and teaching Mathematics in grade 4, 5, 6 &7. Somiso also teaches Life Skills to the same grades. He has started teaching isiXhosa from 2012 to the same grades due to shortage of teachers.

Asked to share his teaching experience at his current school, Mr Somiso highlighted that it is strenuous for him now as it used to be previously because of the workload. He mentions that they have multi-grade method, which makes teaching very difficult. However, he shared that generally he likes the contribution and change he makes to the children despite the difficulties they are experience at his school:

Teaching is good and I love it. I love the fact that I am making a contribution and changing leaner's lives. But, I won't lie to you, you are a teacher yourself, the workload we are faced with makes one tired and not inspired to love and enjoy teaching at all.

Despite the challenges, Mr Somiso also shared that the atmosphere in his school and the support he receives from his small staff motivates him:

I have a very supportive staff. We are very few, only 6 teachers responsible for grade R-7, but you never hear my staff complaining. Like we don't teach only, we also do extra mural activities and they are very helpful. You know..... our school is very involved in cricket, so we are co-operating with each other very well.

Regardless of the challenges experienced by the responded in his teaching career, he also expresses how he feels supported by the staff he is working with.

Views towards Professional Development

We further asked Mr Somiso about his engagements in any kind of professional development. He has had a great deal of opportunity of being involved in many professional development activities. Some of the professional development programs have been self-initiated and he believes he has gained a lot of support and growth from all the professional development programs:

I have attended workshops that are organised by students that are attending certain universities around the country for Mathematics. I have attended trainings organised by a professional body based in Cape Town called AIMSEC. I have also attended workshops organised by the department of education. I must say, I gained so much from these workshops.

It was interesting to learn that the professional development programs that Somiso has participated in have not only been organised by the department of Education but also other professional bodies.

Activities in professional development programmes

Asked about what was done in the professional development programs he has attended, Mr Somiso commended that they have been basically rooted to the Mathematics curriculum, pedagogical styles of teaching Mathematics and the relation thereof to a child. The programs according to Mr Somiso have also taken into account the issues of diverse backgrounds children bring to their Mathematics classroom or schooling at large:

Basically in all these programs what has been shared was mostly the strategies on how to teach Mathematics to the children and with specific reference to the development of a child and how does the development of a child relate to Mathematics knowledge of a child. As well as how Mathematics relates to the background of the child, the context from which the child comes from.

From the above quotation, it was also intriguing to learn how some of the professional development programmes not only focus on the content and pedagogy but also on the background context of the learners.

Who organises professional development programmes?

In the discussion as Mr Somiso shared his involvement in such a variety of professional development programs, the issue of who organises such programs came into context. Somiso mentioned that the programs were mostly organised by the universities, the cluster leaders of the Department of Education, by the Department of Education in which he himself has also had an opportunity of being a cluster leader for his circuit, however at times the programs were organised by the teachers themselves:

Ok, most of the time it has been teachers and also lecturers from universities if it is a university organised workshop. But most of the workshops are organised by cluster leaders of the circuits for Mathematics to be specific. Because I had a period when I was a cluster leader, until 2013, so I used to attend workshops organised by the DoE as a cluster leader so that I can be able to filter the information to the other teachers at large. It's always the DoE and I as the cluster leader and other cluster leaders, like in each circuit you'd find that there are four cluster leaders assisting in terms of dissemination of information in each circuit.

Mr Somiso as a cluster leader in his circuit at the time had a responsibility of making sure that the information and knowledge gained in the various workshops he attended is dispersed to all the teachers in schools. This is evidently a general expectation from the cluster leaders. Exploring further on the matter of being a cluster leader who had to go back and share with fellow teachers the knowledge gained, Mr Somiso lamented how uneasy and challenging the expectation was. He shared that:

Well, I will be honest with you, not all the time did I share the information back with the teachers because sometimes you find that you attend a workshop and you still have

your own load at school and because there's no follow up by the department to make sure that indeed the workshop that was supposed to be organised is organised. Sometimes you just go to that workshop and it becomes your own information and development and you never find time to call other teachers to come to a workshop. So that is the reality of it and I would say that out of maybe five workshops that I would have attended, you only end up calling one workshop for the teachers,. The next you won't be able to call.

Professional development programmes by non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

Mr Somiso had shared that he has even attended some professional development programs out of his own interest as a teacher, mentioning an example of workshops organised by universities and independent bodies such as AIMSEC. As researchers, we were fascinated by this finding and decided to follow up further to find out how he came to attend such programs.

Ok, not all of them I attended in a similar way. First one I attended was in fact two of those workshops I attended were out of my own interest. I felt that I needed to develop myself so that my learners could be able to learn Mathematics better. In fact I was having challenges with my learners understanding what I'm teaching. They had a lot of questions and once I saw that there were those programs within those universities then I started to initiate a process of joining them. Then there is another one that I mentioned a body that is in Cape Town, AIMSEC, with that one I got invited by the department to attend, I was willing, and then I attended the program.

From the issue above, it become interesting to learn that some teachers do enlist in professional development programs that they feel could improve their classroom practices even though they are not initiated by the Department of Education. This will however, be practical to those teachers who are self-directed.

Pursuing the issue of these professional development programs further, the discussion explored what exactly is covered in the programs, their operation and the role played by the teachers. Mr Somiso specified that they almost work the same way. The focus of all the programs is Mathematics and its teaching and learning. The teachers are very much involved as they also bring to the collaboration their experiences and challenges for exploration amongst the groups with an aim of developing each other. Mr Somiso also distinguished that there is a continuous link between the teachers and the group of experts provided by each development program.

Well, it is different programs but I will just give you briefly. With AIMSEC, they bring professionals from England to come and share their experiences. So basically once they have shared some of their experiences they allow us to work in groups, share our ideas. Then once an idea has been shared, we discuss it as a group. Even with the university organised ones we share as groups. What is important with all these programs is that you are getting thorough information as they run for a longer time unlike with the departmental ones. You are able to go back to class and see what works well and what does not. You are able to come back and say for me this is not working. At the end of the day they will have an assessment of how to tackle the various problems we experience in our schools. We give each other advices here and there.

Professional development programs and classroom instruction

Several professional development programs repeatedly failed to consider the ultimate end, which is the learners and learning in general, and focus solely to the teachers. The effect of the programs Mr Somiso has attended on teacher's classroom practices and most significantly on learner involvement and the bigger picture of learning in general began to be of significance to the discussion. Mr Somiso revealed that the obstacle in getting an effective and desired outcome in the classroom is the lack of resources their schools experience:

What we do in the workshops do relate to our classrooms but I would say partly. Why do I say partly, because you'd find that you attend a program and you find that in order for the learners to understand certain concepts you need resources and yet there's no provision out of what you have been developed in terms of having subject resources. So that is why I'm saying partly because at the end of the day some of these strategies need resources, so without them you are just dropped.

Despite the benefits, the professional development programs provided to teaching and learning, Mr Somiso fingered that teachers do not have adequate resources to enhance their teaching in their classrooms. This evidenced a continuous factor that has been viewed by literature as a critical factor that hinders teaching and learning in schools and therefore needs to be considered in the planning of professional development programs. Once again, the times as well as the importance of continuity were also raised. Mr Somiso responded as follows:

I think it is also important that in terms of time, eh..... one day workshops are not giving enough information. Maybe if we get more lengthy workshops or even go to as far as using weekends and see how teachers are then compensated for that, ja we would then be getting more information and not at the expense of the learners. Also most importantly they must be on a continuous basis and not once in a year as they are now.

It was not surprising to find Somiso expressing his concern towards the time engagement of the professional development. Much of the literature on effective professional development advocate for more longer and continuous professional development instead of one time one day workshops with teachers.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

As Harewell (2003) argues, professional development can succeed only in settings, or contexts, that support it. Any form of professional development designed to be driven by the teachers needs a support by the leadership. However, Mokhele (2011) establishes that many teachers, especially in developing countries, do not have the necessary skills to do this nor are they equipped to confront the challenges and adverse conditions they face in trying to improve the quality of education in the schools.

With relations to what literature claims the teachers have voiced out cries of dissatisfaction and challenges that makes professional development programs less effective as they should be. The problems alleged by the participants in a nutshell involve poor planning and lack of monitoring which results in the programs being non-continuous and repetitively leaving no mark of change in the education system as a whole. Such lack of administration leads to many teachers not bothering

themselves with attending such programs as they view them as delaying the teaching and learning process.

In order to make informed policy and programme decisions regarding professional development, district and school leaders need to know whether professional development programmes are currently reaching the teachers who need them most (Desimone *et al* 2006). The National Research Council (NRC) 2007), also supports that many teachers express dissatisfaction with the professional development opportunities made available to them in schools. However, an argument on such ineffectiveness may come to rise out of looking at whether policy makers and high ranking stakeholders of the education system are ready to listen to what the teachers are saying.

Harewell (2003) declares that the main reason for the failure of many professional development approaches is that too little attention has been paid to what actually goes on in the classroom. The findings of the study have fairly showed how teachers are dissatisfied with, for example, leaving their classrooms to attend a professional development program and therefore calling for issuing of resources for further use in school when the teacher is individually tackling the day to day challenges. In a justification of how professional development is failing teachers in South Africa, Steyn (2008) further argues that the current emphasis on professional development (PD) as an imperative for continuous improvement of teachers' skills has an inherent danger of becoming nothing more than a state-funded skills development programme in the South African context. Steyn's argument therefore provides a clear warning that disregarding these teacher's voices as to what they view as effective professional development programs for them would mean seeing a nation that continues having a failing education system in its entire future.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the Continuing Professional Development is to equip teachers to meet the challenges and demands of a democratic South Africa in the 21st century (National Policy Framework for teacher education, 2007). As such, professional development (PD) programmes should emphasise the integrated development of learning area/subject content knowledge and pedagogical skills; teachers' competence in the language of teaching and learning; the Continuing professional development for teachers in South Africa changing social character of schools; and skills required for the teaching of diverse classrooms (National Policy Framework for teacher education, 2007).

The ultimate aim of Continuing Professional Development for teachers is to enable learners to "learn well and equip them (leaners) for further learning and for satisfying lives as productive citizens, for the benefit of their families, their communities and our nation" (National Policy Framework for teacher education, 2007). It is therefore imperative that teachers are provided with the professional development that they will be willing to enlist in and that they believe will change their classroom practices.

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