

## Do Teachers Perceive the Impact of Professional Development? Teachers' Experiences of their Professional Development Initiatives for Effective Teaching and Learning in Schools

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**ABSTRACT** Depending on their experiences, teachers observe the professional development initiatives they are exposed to, and what they have taken part in, indifferently in the setting of their signification. The aim of this phenomenological qualitative research was to investigate teachers' experiences of their professional development in effective teaching and learning in schools. An interview schedule was used to collect data. Ten teachers were sampled through the simple random sampling procedure to participate in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The results show that teachers are not provided with adequate time for professional development (DP) workshops and are not financially supported by both, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and their schools. Furthermore, results show that teachers are undergoing professional development initiatives in order to gain financial rewards. The survey recommends that professional development of teachers (PDT) should be associated with financial rewards such as increment in teachers' pay and promotions. It is also recommended that further research on the rationale behind teachers' further studies, as part of professional development, be undertaken.

### INTRODUCTION

Metcalf (2011) states that the South African education system has failed to transform teaching due to its failure to pay adequate attention to the professional growth of teachers. Ryan (2007) and McMillan Education South Africa (2017) suggest that teachers in South Africa are more like workers than professionals, responsible for transmitting teacher syllabus and need momentous personal development to get to the phase of being professionals. Professional development (PD) programmes have revealed evidence that the majority of teachers are unable to reflect critically on their own practice or try out new solutions to solve problems they come across daily (Steyn 2008). The Department of Basic Education (2011) and Department of Higher Education and Training (2011) indicate that the fundamental principle regarding teachers' professional development is that teachers should independently and jointly be responsible for their

own professional development. However, the Department of Basic Education seems to be more focused on the number of official workshops or the number of participants in such workshops rather than the impact of such PD programmes in classrooms or schools (Steyn 2008).

It is unfortunate that the majority of teachers in South Africa only have experience on-shot-professional development initiatives, some even conducted through a cascade model although its educational effectiveness is not obviously demonstrable (Robinson 2002). The cascade model for professional development of teachers is criticized, as the messages are sent to the next storey, with higher risks, such that critical information tends to be watered-down or misconstrued (Fiske and Ladd 2004). The majority of professional growth initiatives and programmes are extended by the nation to prepare instructors in the implementation of new curriculum policies only, than to improve teachers' classroom practices (Steyn 2008). Ryan (2007) laments that the vast majority of teacher professional development trainings rarely touch on the difficult task of implementation or on the practice of teaching, but are more targeted to inform teachers about new reforms and policies. Teachers from different schools within a district

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are sometimes expected to form clusters to work on learners' files, as part of their professional development workshops initiatives (Ryan 2007).

Most concerning is that professional development for early childhood teachers is insufficient and inadequate, undependable, irregular and inconsistent (Bowman et al. 2001). According to Economist (2010) the non-existence of professional development initiatives for early childhood teachers is affecting Grade 12 learners. Archibald et al. (2011) state that a fragmented system of standards, assessments and teacher evaluation of the professional development programmes are some of the issues that are frustrating teachers and hindering the application of their professional learning. Price (2008) states that teachers feel isolated when professional development programmes and/or initiatives are planned, something which creates one of the most serious challenges to their professional development.

Teachers have sometimes been asked to perform tasks that they have not been trained in and are not being asked to engage their own ideas, values and energies in the learning process (Elmore 2002). Teachers experience professional development initiatives or workshops, which are simply just traditionally short-term, one-size-fits-all courses, which are disjointed, and often held outside of the school day in physical locations and contexts that are far removed from the classroom (Murphy 2002; Rivero 2006; Elmore 2002). Birman et al. (2000) indicate that professional development workshop approaches are seen as ineffective as they fail to provide educators with enough time, activities and content to make a noticeable improvement in their knowledge and skills. Teachers think that they are simply being exposed to one-shot professional development schemes that have failed to provide the support necessary to sustain educational change and reform (Reeves 2006).

### **Objective**

The aim of this phenomenological qualitative research was to investigate teachers' experiences of their professional development in effective teaching and learning in schools.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenological ap-

proach was suited to this study, as it is aimed at understanding and interpreting the meaning that subjects (teachers) give to their everyday lives (De Vos et al. 2005). The population for this study consisted of both primary and secondary school teachers in Vhembe District. A simple random sampling procedure was used to select participants for this study. Ten (10) teachers were sampled from secondary schools attached to five circuit areas in the Vhembe District. An interview schedule was used for data collection purposes. Atlas.ti was utilised for qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data analysis involved identifying codes and themes from the data collected.

### **RESULTS**

This sub-section presents the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with ten (10) teachers. The results of the study are discussed in accordance with the established themes.

#### **Teachers Who Have Undergone Professional Development Programs**

Even though the results show that teachers have undergone PD programs, teachers perceive that they are being partially developed.

#### **The Importance of Professional Development of Teachers in Promoting Quality Teaching and Learning**

The results show that teachers perceive the importance of PD for promotion of quality teaching and learning in schools. Participants expressed the importance of professional development initiatives in helping them to cope well with curriculum dynamics.

#### **Teacher Professional Development (TPD) Increasing Teachers' Knowledge to Engage with Learners in the Classroom**

The results show that teachers recognize the importance of PD in increasing their knowledge to engage well with learners in the classroom. However, they are critical of such initiatives and trainings.

### **Enhancement of Teaching Skills to Teach Better Through Further Studies**

The results show that teachers perceive those teachers who are furthering their studies as teaching better. However, the majority of teachers are furthering studies in other areas and not in their area of specialization or teaching subjects.

### **Teachers' Experiences with Professional Development Initiatives**

#### ***Lack of Support (Financial Support and Bursaries) from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Schools***

The results show that the majority of teachers think that they should be supported by the DBE and their schools in their endeavor to study further in their learning areas, as part of their PD in promoting quality teaching and learning in schools.

#### ***Lack of Salary Progression and Increments***

The results show that teachers are undertaking professional development programs to improve their living conditions through better salaries.

#### ***Inadequate Time for Teachers' Professional Development***

The results show that teachers perceive that there is not enough time for them to attend workshops for their PD since there are shortages of teachers in some schools, which implies that teachers cannot be at the workshops for long periods of time. Teachers expressed their shock at a PD workshop that is pedagogically structured to be conducted in one to three years being conducted in one to three days, which does not help teachers at all in acquiring the much needed knowledge and skills.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Teachers Who Have Undergone Professional Development Programs**

Even though the results show that teachers have undergone PD programs, teachers perceive

that they are being partially developed. The following reasons were given. PD programs are only in the form of workshops and seminars, PD programs are haphazardly conducted in a day or two or a few hours, and there are no adequate and proper support strategies such as orientation, induction, and coaching for new appointees. *"Such workshops and seminars cannot be regarded as the means to develop teachers professionally."* The results show that teachers are frustrated with the facilitators at the workshops whom they think are clueless regarding what they are doing. One participant who is a Deputy Principal at a secondary school had this to say.

*SDP: No, I don't think teachers are being professionally developed. Taking for an example, I'm the deputy principal of the school. From a 30-minute interview, I was taken directly into the office, not even being orientated, not even shown how to do the work, but from just an interview for the work. I was never brought through the system of induction, no orientation, and no coaching provided and was just shown the office to start working and that was all. And that is what is normally done when new educators are coming into the system. The only thing that is done is to show them the classes they are going to teach and allocate them the subjects they are supposed to teach. There is no time to sit with them and show them how the subject is supposed to be taught.*

In line with these results, Steyn (2008) notes that the majority of teachers' PD programs and workshop initiatives in South Africa are only utilized to train teachers in the implementation of new policies such as Outcomes Based Education (OBE), National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and now Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) and not improve the teachers' classroom practice.

### **The Importance of Professional Development of Teachers on Promoting Quality Teaching and Learning**

Participants expressed the importance of professional development initiatives in helping them to cope well with curriculum dynamics. One participant who is a primary school Deputy Principal stated the following.

*PDP: I see it as important that teachers need to be developed time and again to match up with the immediate education changes that we*

are facing now. If you look, for an example, we were trained under a Bantu Education system. We have gone through Curriculum 2005, RNCS, NCS and now CAPS, which we are not adequately trained for. This means that we are approaching the system without its knowledge, so professional development of teachers is important to address these kinds of pitfalls. But little has been done that would suggest that indeed, teachers need such PD initiatives.

These results are supported by Hustler et al. (2003) who note that teachers' perceptions of continuing professional development have shown that teachers want to continue to update their skills and knowledge, both for their benefit and their pupils, but that they were reluctant to give up their time for training, which did not meet their criteria, with the criteria being focused, well structured, presented by people with recent and relevant knowledge and provision for active learning.

#### **TPD Increasing Teachers' Knowledge to Engage with Learners in the Classroom**

Even though teachers recognize the importance of PD in increasing their knowledge to engage well with learners in the classroom, they remain critical of such initiatives and the training they receive. One participant who is a secondary school Head of Department (HOD) had this to say.

*TSH: To be honest with you, it is very much pathetic. I don't know whether I can call it a program or just another ordinary meeting where we were/are gathered to be told to do things which need to be completed in three to five years and enforced in one day, and you cannot say that is a development program because development programs take different stages. That is why I don't even know whether to call it a course or a meeting or whatever. You are only taken there for just a day and facilitators who are clueless enforce the whole work in one day with only ten-minute breaks or intervals and at the end of the day, you don't know what you have learnt from such meetings.*

In support of these results, Robinson (2002) states that teachers frequently complained that even the district trainers did not always understand the curriculum they are expected to explain to them. Furthermore, Adewumi (2012) notes that teachers are critical of their trainers,

as they show little teaching knowledge, little knowledge of didactic methods in a learning area or subjects, and little knowledge of the current conditions in schools and classrooms and did not seem to comprehend the problems in contemporary classrooms.

#### **Enhancement of Teaching Skills to Teach Better Through Further Studies**

Teachers perceive that teachers who are furthering their studies teach better. However, the majority of teachers are furthering studies in other areas and not in their area of specialization or teaching subjects. One participant who is a primary school Principal stated the following.

*PP: Because teaching is an ongoing process, teachers should acquire new ideas, more knowledge and skills on how to deliver the subject content in their classes effectively and that can only be achieved if teachers are furthering their studies.*

However, one participant who is a primary school Head of Department had this to say:

*TPH: We no longer want to specialize, but we are just developing ourselves, not aiming at development, but aiming at increasing a little bit of our salaries and that's why we no longer go for specialization. We only go for something that can help us for the time being...and that will increase our salaries.*

#### **Teachers' Experiences with Professional Development of Teachers**

##### ***Lack of Support (Financial Support and Bursaries) from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Schools***

Teachers indicated that they should be supported by the DBE and their schools in their endeavor to study further in their learning areas as part of their PD in promoting quality teaching and learning in schools. In line with these findings, Opfer and Pedder (2010) state that teachers need to be supported at school in developing more collaboration and research-informed approaches to their professional development. In addition, such PD provision needs to involve teachers in more active forms of learning with a clear link to classroom teaching and learning. Lastly, schools also need to emphasize on continuous, long-term, sustained professional learn-

ing of their teachers. However, teachers indicated that they are not being supported to undertake PD initiatives, and one participant who is a secondary school teacher added the following.

*TS<sub>2</sub>: Unfortunately, there is no effort from the Department of Education, unless if you could stand up and feel it in your heart that you have to develop yourself, nobody is going to help you.*

Another participant who is a CS1 secondary school teacher added:

*TS<sub>1</sub>: Look here, the education system is promoting the idea that we are already trained as teachers and the new curriculum won't be a problem to us. Teachers are assumed to be in a position to learn on their own. The education system is confused, and the teachers are confused and this is making learners also confused. Learners are asking questions that I cannot answer because I'm confused. This is pure injustice to the learners.*

#### **Lack of Salary Progression and Increments**

The results show that teachers are undertaking professional development programs to improve their living condition through better salaries. One participant who is a CS1 secondary school teacher said:

*TS<sub>1</sub>: In my case, the reason behind the upgrading of my qualifications, to be fair, is money.*

The results also show that the majority of teachers are frustrated with the DBE, as one of the participants who is a primary school Deputy Principal had this to say:

*PDP explains: The Department of Basic Education is only able to give us a 'once off' cash bonus, which is not even worth the money spent when one is furthering his or her studies.*

This was supported by another participant who stated that the sole reason for him to upgrade his qualification is:

*PDP: Money and not necessarily professional development.*

#### **Inadequate Time for Teachers' Professional Development**

The results show that teachers perceive that there is not enough time for them to attend workshops for their PD since there are teacher shortages in some schools, which implies that teach-

ers cannot be at the workshops for a very long time. The teachers expressed their shock that the PD workshop is meant to be spread over 1 to 3 years but is done in 1 to 3 days, which does not help teachers at all in acquiring the much-needed knowledge and skills. In disagreement with these results, Wayne et al. (2008) argued that having teacher professional development initiatives extending over a longer period of time may result in teachers leaving their classrooms more often, which may cause more disruptions to the students' learning.

### **CONCLUSION**

Teachers are critical of their professional development as they are not being supported adequately by DBE and their schools. Teachers are furthering their studies as part of their professional development initiatives in order to gain financial rewards and not necessarily to develop themselves professionally for effective teaching and learning in schools.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Teachers should be provided with adequate time for PD workshops and supported by the DBE and their schools. TPD should be linked with financial rewards such as increment in teachers' salary and promotions. Teachers should be involved in the planning and conception of their PD, taking into consideration their own classroom needs and be involved in the implementation thereof. Teachers should be subjected to voluntary classroom observation as part of the PD. It is also recommended that further research on the rationale behind teachers' further studies, as part of professional development, is undertaken.

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