

THE BENEFITS OF PROFESSIONAL NEEDS-IDENTIFICATION IN ENHANCING PROFICIENT CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is an integral part of teacher education because only continued learning ensures that teachers keep up to date with new research and technology on how students learn better. The purpose of the research was to explore the influence of continuous professional development in promoting quality teaching and learning leading to enhanced student achievement in South African schools. The desktop research method was engaged. Basically the desktop research involved collecting data from existing credible published resources. On the basis of the findings of this study, some recommendation was made. The primary recommendation of this study is for all CPD programmes to be driven by identified professional development needs for the educator as well as learning needs of the student. Identifying CPD needs ensures that a realistic professional development programme would be built.

Keywords: Continuous Professional Development, Needs-Identification, Desktop Research, Qualitative Research

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Being a well-performing competent teacher is one of the most crucial resources in any school. The teacher is considered the professional agent and the most directly responsible personnel in the process of teaching/learning (Opfer & Pedder, 2010). Given this, the teacher and the quality of his/her teaching tend to be under scrutiny and thus receive prevalent importance and attention. The call today is for teachers to be in constant contact with CPD programmes that would ideally improve teaching/learning practices. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is a necessary ingredient to support innovative and beneficial teaching leading to student achievement (Moonasar & Underwood, 2018).

It has been claimed in literature on CPD that it can lead to successful changes in teacher proficiency and improvement in student achievement. However, an important limitation in most of the literature is that studies rarely isolate particular characteristics of CPD that lead to the benefits being enhanced. The aim of the present research paper is to discuss the central importance of needs-identification in improving and/or boosting the quality of CPD in South African schools. The common denominator is that the staff skills and competencies are improved upon in order to produce outstanding educational results for students. Additionally, CPD is life-long in one's working life. Therefore, professional development of educators is the cornerstone for the provision of quality teaching and learning (Bernadine, 2019). It also implies that educators never cease to learn. CPD therefore, puts emphasis on lifelong learning 'zeroing-in' on student achievement (Whitehouse, 2010; Collin et al., 2012; Shaha et al., 2015; Srinivasacharlu, 2019; Visser et al., 2013).

Educational technology and curriculums, for instance, are constantly changing, making it challenging for educators to keep with trends and practices in the field (Mizell, 2010; Wilson & Easen, 1995). Continuous professional development comes handy in transforming educators into better and more apt educators by enabling them to create relevant and tailored course instructions for today's students (Huish, 2014; Tsotetsi & Mahlomaholo, 2013; Smithson, 2000). The assumption with professional development is that when educators discover new teaching strategies, they are able to go back to the classroom and make changes to suit the needs of their learners. In fact, research shows that an inspiring and informed educator is the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement, so it is critical to pay close attention to how both new and experienced educators are supported (Staff, 2008; Mestry, Hendricks & Bisschoff, 2009; Smith et al., 2003)

Successful continuous professional development experiences have a noticeable impact on educators' work or beliefs and practices both in and out of the classroom, especially considering that a significant number of educators tend to be under-prepared for their profession at the initial assumption of duty (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). The claim, according to his research evidence, is that professional development strengthened educators' knowledge, skills and dispositions. Similar results are reported by (Kettle & Sellars 1996; Kallestad & Olweus 1998; Youngs, 2001) all cited by Villegas-Reimers (2003).

In a school set up, professional development is concerned about improving upon the knowledge, attitude and skills base of principals and educators. The needs of the personnel, ideally, should be satisfied in the context of the needs of the school. The learner should equally be a beneficiary of the development efforts by learning at high levels of achievement (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Caena, 2011; Osmundson, 2016). The programmes are planned in pursuit of addressing the needs of the school in particular and the needs of the education system in general. CPD in a broad sense refers to the development of a person in his or her professional role. More specifically, Villegas-Reimers (2003) views educator development as that, "...professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically." Continuous professional development includes formal experiences such as in attending workshops and professional meetings and in mentoring, and informal experiences such as in reading professional publications or watching television documentaries related to an academic discipline. Continuous professional development can also occur in informal contexts such as discussions among work colleagues, independent reading and research, observations of a colleague's work, or other form of learning from a peer (Marcelo, 2009; Mizell, 2010; Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015; AL-Qahtani, 2015).

Whitehouse (2011) and Timberley et al., (2009) recommend that students' learning needs be identified first in designing CPD programmes. Procedurally, once the students' learning needs are identified, a similar audit of their educators' professional development needs is then enforced. The thinking behind it all is to gather information for the national government, local government, school, class or subject/department to use the results to focus on areas requiring/demanding improvement (Alzahrani, 2016; Bowen, 2009; Cole, 2004).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To establish if educators as intended beneficiaries are consulted and involved in identifying professional development needs appropriate for promoting quality teaching and learning.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Professional development of educators is a focal point of school improvement initiatives (Steyn, 2010; Vracar, 2014; Huish, 2014). The National Framework for Teacher Education and

Development (2007) attempted to address the need for suitably qualified educators in South Africa. Hence, it is on record that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in the Republic of South Africa challenges schools to accelerate progress in student achievement to meet stakeholder expectations. The DBE (2017) analysis of the 2016 matric results for the Pietersburg Circuit in Polokwane indicates an average circuit pass rate of 78.4%; however, further analysis shows a worrisome low pass rate with some schools. For instance, Mango High School had 36%; Guava School 42.9%; Lemon 36.4%; Orange 57.2%; Apple 59.2%; and Grape Fruit Secondary School with 39.7% pass rate. Hence, this study was conducted to explore the influence of CPD programmes in enhancing student achievement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a desktop research method that involved collecting and examining information that already exists on the internet, libraries, published journals and periodicals, magazines, published government reports and theses. It also draws on recent academic papers, books and reports from international organizations. Desktop research is secondary research where the researchers reviewed what other researchers had established. The data was found to be pertinent in providing baseline information in understanding CPD.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION OF RELATED LITERATURE

In order to have more insight into the problem under investigation, a review of the related literature that focuses on the key concepts used in the current studies is necessary. The literature is based on what has been said by other authors about professional development. The purpose of the literature review is to acquire insight into the various literatures based on professional development of the teaching personnel. The assumption being that the body of evidence accumulated over decades would ideally provide research-based conclusions that can guide the development of effective continuous professional development programmes (McDonough et al., 2010; Salo & Ronnerman, 2013; Cooper, 2016; Ruiz, 2017).

PROFESSIONAL NEEDS-IDENTIFICATION

In order to make appropriate investments in the professional development of educators, one must first establish what the competences of each educator are, and then identify the skills, knowledge and teaching experiences required for each educator or groups of educators. The gap between the two may be met by professional development or training of some sort; whether on-the-job, through distance learning or attending workshops specifically designed for that purpose. In the absence of adequate information from the job, it becomes difficult for principals, head of departments or educators themselves to identify the range and scale of professional development needs to be met (Moeini, 2008; Killion, 2009).

One of the most common viewpoints of needs is that articulated by Harris (2000) who defined needs as subjective perceptions of something useful for a purpose that a person or community is able to specify. The perception or view of needs the researchers hold in this study is that of the discrepancy. According to the definition above, a need exists where there is a gap between present and some desired state or condition that can possibly be corrected or remedied (Goe et al., 2012; Haslam, 2010). In other words, in continuous professional development, information about training and learning-needs has to be gathered. Instances when an educator or principal might feel needs are numerous. Thus, when an educator embarks on something new or unfamiliar; be it a new subject area, methodology or new technology, he or she has identified a need.

Goe et al., (2012) further state that continuous professional development needs-identification is based on the belief that evidence collected for educator accountability (as in performance appraisal) can also be used to determine the focus and strategies for professional growth for all educators. However, particularly for those educators who are not meeting expectations in terms of their classroom performance or their students' learning. The alignment of educator assessment or evaluation results with professional growth opportunities can be considered in terms of the collection and use of evidence. It begins with identifying sources of evidence that will be used for evaluating educators. This brings us to the issue of professional development needs emanating from different sources. Some of the sources from which needs may be derived are, for example, one's teaching experience, one's personal or professional level or standard of education, or one's personality and personal experience.

A novice educator or probationer might require a systematic programme of professional initiation, guided experience or study of some management aspect of class control. As such, the probationer would have an induction, orientation or familiarisation need. This need would be to enable the new entrant into the profession to settle into the new job as soon as possible so that he or she can be effective in the classroom right from the start (Harris, 2000; Killion, 2009; Gates & Gates, 2014).

Similarly, a need exists when one moves into new areas of untried sphere of instructional activity such as, movement from one school to the next, promotion to head of department, vice-principal, principal or moving from the foundation phase section of a primary school to the intermediate section of the school. The discrepancy between the actual and the ideal situation or need may result from inexperience or lack of confidence. It may also arise from sheer ignorance of what the task to be undertaken is, as in attempting to use a laptop in power-point presentation for the first time without prior training (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Killion (2009) hereby attempts to clarify the distinction in concepts of “needs” and “wants” to dispel what he perceives to be some misunderstanding and confusion. By asking educators, for instance, to identify their needs for professional learning, the thinking behind is that their needs are more likely to be met, and in turn translate fulfillment of the needs into student achievement. Needs identified by educators could come in the form of, for example, fewer students or more textbooks. These indeed would be the educator needs. Nevertheless, the big question is, “*Would address those needs necessarily promote student achievement?*”

Killion (2009) states that, “*Needs are data-driven, evidence-based areas for improvement. Wants are wishes that describe what we hope for, and in many cases, based on personal preference or desires.*” An educator may desire or “want” to pursue a Bachelor of Education degree in Career Guidance and Counselling; but would that necessarily, for instance, upgrade the pass-rate in the Mathematics subjects that educator is teaching? All educators deserve opportunities to pursue their wants and many opportunities exist to fulfil those wants; often mistaken for needs. According to Killion (2009) the priority for professional development investment for educator learning is based on student achievement data. Asking educators, “*What would you like to study?*” is redundant when analyses of data from multiple assessments of student achievement reveal gaps in student learning. Those gaps are the professional learning needs. In other words, what an educator needs in as far as professional development is concerned, is defined by what the students need to be successful learners.

Killion (2009) further clarifies his point by stating that needs assessments for professional learning are embedded in student achievement data. The needs continue to be refined by conducting research to identify the teaching or instructional practices and specific curriculum enhancements that have demonstrated impact on addressing those gaps in contexts similar to those where the needs exist. The US National Staff Development Council (NSDC) quoted in Killion (2009:1-2) offers a guide to help identify professional development needs; hereby referred to as, “*Back- mapping Model for Professional Learning*”.

First, analyse student achievement data to develop goals for student achievement to know the specific knowledge and skill areas in which students are underperforming and in which students are most often underperforming. Secondly, understand the context in which those needs exist so that educator, principal, school, and district factors that influence successful change initiatives based on professional learning are identified and ready to be addressed. Thirdly, develop clear educator learning goals that specify changes in knowledge, attitude, skill, aspiration and behaviour to ensure attainment of the student achievement goals. Thereafter, research professional learning designs, programmes and or content to identify ones that have successfully achieved similar goals in similar contexts to identify core components to include in our programme.

What follows is planning professional learning, the implementation of professional learning and its evaluation to ensure success not only in implementation but also in results for educators and students. Then one must support, monitor and evaluate implementation of professional learning. Finally, assess student progress and reflect on educator practice to assess the effectiveness of professional learning before implementing the process again.

In a nutshell, the Back-mapping Model stresses that the role of professional learning is deeply connected to the work educators do each day in their classrooms, driven by the needs of their students, and measured in terms of results for students. It requires educators to examine, change and reflect on their content knowledge and instructional strategies with colleagues to refine and extend their practice throughout their career (Killion, 2009). In sum, student-achievement needs should define educator continuous professional learning needs. The authorities on continuous professional development needs identification have so far attempted to indicate what needs are. The researcher briefly examined the concept of needs analysis. It indicates that needs analysis comprises the processing of information about training and learning needs. Put more precisely, the difference between the present condition of the staff knowledge, skills and attitudes needs to be studied, and compared to the conditions of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary for task accomplishment (Moeini, 2008; Gates & Gates, 2014; AL- Qahtani, 2015)

Such a study or needs analysis would help determine whether there is need for introducing in-service education and training solutions or non-training solutions. In other words, several questions should be asked when continuous professional development needs identification and analysis is carried out. Harris (2000) supplies such questions as:

- Does a performance discrepancy exist?
- Is the identified discrepancy important to the school, region or to the whole education system?
- Can we correct the discrepancy in performance through professional development?
- Is professional development the most cost-effective solution that can be applied?

This brings us to some of the purposes of identifying continuous professional development needs supplied by Harris (2000) as to;

- Improve understanding of the community or group you serve.
- Build a realistic training programme.
- Set training goals and objectives.
- Determine training subjects or content.
- Involve trainee (educators) to remove suspicion and promote co-operation.

Continuous professional development needs identification and analysis or simply, needs assessment, as has been indicated earlier, is a vital step in undertaking professional development. However, one needs the relevant knowledge and skills in carrying out need assessment.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research report provides significant findings regarding CPD participation among educators. The research results highlight some key areas where further research could be carried out in the future.

- Future research is needed to establish the extent to which educators in the Republic of South Africa access and participate in informal learning opportunities, particularly given the increasing emphasis on this type of learning in CPD literature.
- Studies also highlight how lack of sufficient time is a factor influencing educator take-up of CPD. Future research could explore this issue in a Republic of South Africa context, in order to identify ways in which CPD participation could be incorporated into the school year and relief could be provided for educators to attend.
- This research was restricted to Pietersburg Circuit secondary schools. Future research could venture and encompass rural schools and primary schools in exploring the impact of CPD on learner performance. By so doing, it would broaden perspectives in the relationship between socio-cultural and economic realisms.
- Future research must consider incorporating the students' views. The students' views in addition to performance analysis by educators may just provide an amplification of how best CPD can connect to students' learning.

CONCLUSION

Ideally, any type of CPD should meet a need that has been identified beforehand. In other words, all CPD programmes should be driven by identified professional development needs for the educator as well as the learning needs of the student. This approach would ensure positive outcomes for both the educator as the chief curriculum implementer, as well as the student as the resultant recipient of the teaching process. Identifying CPD needs ensures that a realistic professional development programme would be built. This also assists in setting training goals and objectives against which the CPD programme can be evaluated at a later stage.

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