

Research Article

Teacher Perceptions on Indicators of School Staff Development Effectiveness in the Context of Demands of the 21st Century: In Search for Quality Education

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Abstract: The current study adopted the qualitative research methodology from which a case study method which enabled the researcher to engage in personal contact with participants (teachers) and further allowed him to generate rich and first-hand information was used. The population for the study were primary school teachers at four selected schools in Hwange District in Zimbabwe from which a sample of 16 (n=16), obtained through utilization of the expert sampling technique was identified. Narratives or ‘narrative inquiry’ was used as the data generation-technique and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of generated data was done. The major findings of the study reflected through participants’ narratives led the researcher to conclude that, for teachers, staff development enabled them to become more knowledgeable, confident, efficient, relevant in the face of rapid educational changes and fulfilled their desire for continual learning and professional growth. In addition, this made them better teachers with competence and advanced pedagogic skills as well as with more positive attitudes towards their profession. Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the researcher recommended that primary school teachers should always actively participate in staff development programmes in order to effectively benefit from them and that they should implement what they would have gained from staff development so as to promote high student outcomes and the existence of effective schools. School authorities should also provide support and a conducive environment for staff development in order to promote quality education.

Keywords: perceptions, indicators, staff development, effectiveness, quality education.

INTRODUCTION

The professional development of staff members is an essential part of improvement initiatives in all professions, and teaching is no exception. Organisations the world over are essentially concerned with improving the quality of their employees’ skills and expertise with the broader aim of attaining organisational effectiveness (Lewis, 2011). One of the essential ways through which the different organisations realise this is ‘staff development’; which is of increasing significance and interest as a critical way to support the ever-changing and complex demands of the 21st Century (Lieberman and Wood, 2012). In the same vein, Reimers (2013) avers that with the start of the 21st Century, many societies have engaged in serious and promising educational reforms and one of the key elements in most of these reforms is the professional development of teachers. In that regard, today’s schools

are currently facing their greatest challenge, namely, to remain effective through the provision of quality education. This, therefore, calls for the need for effective teachers and schools which are in a huge way a result of effective school staff development programmes (Darling- Hammond and Richardson, 2009).

Teachers have the most direct, sustained contact with students, as well as considerable control over what is taught and the general climate of learning. In that regard, it is reasonably assumed that improving their knowledge, expertise, competencies and professional dispositions is one of the most critical steps to improving student performance and the general quality of education (Loucks-Horsley, et al, 2009). Today’s educational institutions, like any other organisations, are therefore, principally concerned with the

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improvement of teacher competencies for the benefit of learners and fostering school effectiveness. Research by Steyn (2011) also reveals that globally, the effectiveness of educational reform initiatives largely depends on the quality of teachers, hence; school staff development has become a major focal point of school improvement initiatives and efficacy. The Great Schools Partnership (2014) notes that staff development is considered to be the most fundamental mechanism that schools can use to help teachers to continuously learn and improve their knowledge and skills over time in order to improve student learning outcomes. Notably, with the turn of the 21st Century and in recent decades, the topic 'staff development in education' has been extensively researched and many strategies and initiatives have been developed and implemented in order to improve the quality and effectiveness of the professional development of teachers.

Even in cases where teachers were well trained in Teacher Training Colleges, with the passage of time, there is undoubtedly a chance for the development of gaps within their knowledge and pedagogic skills. This, therefore, stresses the indispensable role that staff development plays in educational institutions including the school system where learners' achievement in particular and school effectiveness in general are desirable outcomes. As noted by Showers (2008), school staff development is quite instrumental in educational institutions' improvement as the reputation of any school is, in essence, determined by its effectiveness in producing good pupil results as well as promoting general educational excellence. The researcher's keenness in undertaking the current study was prompted by several factors including his long standing professional background as a primary school teacher who had the privilege of participating in several staff development programmes. The researcher's desire to conduct the current study was further upheld by Hirsh's (2015) studies in New York, USA; which recommended that it is necessary to find out teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of their professional development as it expands opportunities for quality education.

Thus, in order to survive in the 21st Century, staff development in education is, more than ever before, called for because of the increase in the complexity of the nature of educators' work which has meant that there is an added need for school staff to adapt and develop within and outside the school system (Western, 2010). School staff development particularly in the form of in-service-training (INSET) essentially focuses on teachers as central to the education system, as they are in essence; behind the attainment of school effectiveness (Wiseman, 2010). Murphy-Latta (2008) cited in Dennis and Susan (2009, p.19) notes that "Throughout the history of education, numerous theories and issues have been emphasised as important factors in teaching and learning, as well as in fostering

the general school improvement, but the need for professional development for school staff came to the vanguard since the 1960's". Thus, all this stresses the fact that in the context of demands of the 21st Century, the professional development of teachers, among other things, is arguably one of the most critical endeavours in enhancing school effectiveness and the general quality of education.

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the fact that primary school teachers are generally well trained in Zimbabwean Teacher Training Colleges and elsewhere, available literature reveals that rapid changes in the teaching and learning environment require that the same teachers continuously upgrade their knowledge and pedagogic skills in order to remain effective and relevant. The question that remains to be answered is 'How effective is staff development in Zimbabwean primary schools' in the context of demands of the 21st Century' from teachers' perspective'?

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of primary school senior teachers on the effectiveness of staff development programmes in the area under study. Based on the background to the study and its purpose, the following specific research questions were tendered to guide the current study:

- What does the concept 'staff development in education' entail?
- How do teachers in the primary school comprehend 'staff development'?
- What are the indicators of staff development effectiveness from primary school teachers' perspective?

Significance of the study

The current study would essentially be of some significance to a number of stakeholders within the educational fraternity in general and primary school education sector in particular. Those expected to benefit from the study include primary school teachers who are central in this study, head teachers, learners and school authorities. It is envisaged that all the stakeholders would benefit through the improved quality of education that will result from the implementation of more effective staff development programmes.

Review of Related Literature **Staff Development in education**

Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (2009) say that staff development in education is defined as those processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of educational employees. Mtetwa and Thompson (2000) view teacher professional development as a process and product of developing a fresh vision of being a teacher that can potentially enrich the experience of teaching resulting in high

student outcomes. The same source (p.345), say that there are three important assumptions about the teacher professional development of teachers, namely;

- Being a teacher is a holistic state that covers far more than, for instance, the teaching act;
- That fresh vision could be brought about through activation of some, though not necessarily all, aspects subsumed within the definition of 'being a teacher'; and
- That this fresh vision does not always guarantee 'better' or 'improved' or 'effective' performances in the various aspects of being a teacher including classroom practice.

Teacher professional development's thrust is, therefore, the enrichment of the teacher for effective work performance which ultimately results in quality education.

Guskey and Huberman (2014) clarify that the professional development of teachers has been described as an organised effort to change teachers' expertise with the expected result of improving their teaching practice and student learning. Professional workshops and other formally related meetings are a part of the professional development experience for teachers. Much broader in scope than career development, staff development can also be viewed as a growth that occurs through the professional cycle of a teacher. For Khosa, Mapolisa, Tshabalala and Gazimbe (2015), it is essentially about improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the curriculum delivery system, hence, is designed to foster the professional growth of teachers for the benefit of the entire school system particularly the learners.

Connell, Klein and Meyer (2014, p.97) observe that:
The turn of the twenty first Century has witnessed the professional development of teachers being considered as 'a long-term and continual process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. This shift has been so dramatic that many have referred to it as a 'new image of teacher learning', a 'new model of in-service teacher education and training', a 'revolution or new paradigm of teacher professional development.

Contemporary school staff development, therefore, involves the continual development of teachers' knowledge and expertise which is a significant shift in teacher professional development practices from the traditional discourse. Teacher professional development has, thus, moved beyond simple in-service workshops and has expanded into a more robust system of teacher continuing education and training. The same source adds that in order to advance in their careers, teachers

should seek out professional development opportunities which are ongoing and aligned with professional growth, learner success as well as educational standards and assessments. For Sparks (2003) cited in Khosa, Mapolisa, Tshabalala and Gazimbe (2015), such a conceptualisation of staff development is critical in that it combines the needs of the individual employee with those of the organisation. In that regard, the concept of staff development in education, should, therefore, entail the catering of the needs of individual educators with those of the school in order to ensure that there is no possible conflict.

Quality Education

Quality in education is defined by different authorities as the expression of significant range of educational effectiveness and reflection of a new approach in which need of systematic evaluation of undertaken activities is taking essential meaning including improvement and making endeavours towards accreditation with the aim of confirming that all the standards of educational effectiveness are provided (Dobrzanski and Roszak, 2007). Asking (2011, p.89) is of the view that quality education involves a number of key aspects, namely:

- *Education that is facilitated by qualified educators with relevant knowledge and expertise;*
- *teaching and learning that is supported by responsible authorities particularly through provision of appropriate resources;*
- *learning programmes that are buttressed by the cooperation and support of learners' families and communities;*
- *teaching and learning environments that are conducive, safe, protective and gender-sensitive;*
- *learning content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic learning skills; and*
- *student outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are linked to goals for education and positive participation in society.*

The above aspects indicate that quality education is a multi-faceted concept that encompasses several quality issues that surround the field of education.

Grisay and Mahlek (2011, p.105) avow that the evaluation of quality education largely entails examining the following aspects:

- *The extent to which the products or the results of the education provided meet the standards stipulated in the educational system's aims and objectives;*
- *The extent to which the knowledge, competencies, skills and values acquired by*

learners are relevant to human and environmental needs; and

- *The extent to which the acquired education is generally utilised by individuals and groups as well as their communities to solve micro and macro problems in life.*

Thus, the evaluation of quality education, therefore, enables us determine whether education is valuable or not to the institution, learners and stakeholders. As noted by Dobrzanski and Roszak (2007), the idea of quality education is relatively youthful; and has since the dawn of the 21st Century; come to be used in replacement of the concept of 'effectiveness of education'.

Indicators of the Effectiveness of School Staff Development

While the conduct of school staff development is generally being experienced at most Zimbabwean primary school and elsewhere, there are some known indicators that underline its effectiveness. For Fullan (2013, p.193), these include the redefinition of:

- Staff development as a process of continual teacher-learning;
- The nature of teaching as a profession and the role of leadership at the school level;
- The organisational culture of the school and relevant government ministry; and
- The role of external stakeholders including parents, School Development Committees, government and other agencies in complementing the school in the promotion of teacher professional development and quality education.

For McLaughlin and Oberman (2010) cited in Asking (2011), the most effective professional development for teachers essentially:

- Focuses on the analyses of student learning, especially the examination of differences between actual student learning outcomes and goals and standards for student learning;
- Involves teachers identifying their own needs and developing learning experiences to meet those needs;
- Is school-based and embedded in teachers' daily work with learners;
- Is organised around collaborative problem-solving of teaching challenges;
- Is continuous and on-going with follow-up and support for further teacher learning;
- Incorporates evaluation of multiple sources of data detailing student learning and teacher instructional practices;
- Provides opportunities for teacher to link the theory that underlies knowledge and skills they are learning; and

- Is connected to a comprehensive change process focused on improved student learning.

Thus, to be effective, teachers' professional development must, among other things, directly involve them in its organisation and also provide them with a way to apply that which they would have learnt directly to their teaching for purposes of improving school effectiveness.

According to Houston (2011, p.1), the indicators of effective staff development practice include:

- Staff development that is conducted in school settings and linked to 'school-wide efforts';
- Teachers in active roles, choosing goals and activities for themselves;
- Emphasis on self-instruction, with differentiated training opportunities;
- Teachers participating as helpers to each other and as planners, with administrators, of in-service activities;
- Emphasis on staff development demonstration, supervised trials, and feedback;
- In-service training that is concrete (related to teachers' actual work);
- Staff development that is continual and evaluated over time; and
- Ongoing assistance and support to teachers available on request.

Firth (2011, p.221) further suggests that if today's school staff development programmes are to be effective, there is need to consider the following indicators; among other things:

- It must be accepted as a continual and long term commitment by school authorities;
- It should be considered as the key hallmark of professional growth by the teachers;
- Basic staff development purposes must be reconciled in terms of programme for the school and of instruction for teachers;
- Common priorities must be squared between those expected by the school officials and those accepted by the teachers;
- Its strategies must foster changes in the learning environment as well as relationships among teachers;
- Inducements must be established in which the school offers suitable rewards for teachers as they increase their skills for assignments judged appropriate by both the school and the teachers;
- Participation must be encouraged in reasonable terms by the school to promote appropriate involvement by individual teachers;
- Progress must be sustained despite restrictions on officials and the inertia of some teachers;

- Incorporation of new school programmes must be placed to coincide with the acquisition of knowledge and skills by the teachers who must implement the programmes;
- Alternatives must allow schools to protect appropriate elements of the programme and teachers to continue to use proven competencies'; and
- Assessment and evaluation must address staff development programme innovations, teachers' competencies and learner success.

Dufour and Berkey (2005) cited in Fielding and Schallock (2011) suggest that focusing on people is the most effective way to change any organisation; for them, organisations do not change; only individuals do. The same source (p.2) offer a number of suggestions for ways in which school heads can promote effective school staff development, namely:

- Creating consensus on the school and what it is trying to achieve and become;
- Providing staff development programmes that are purposeful and based on needs analysis;
- Identifying, promoting and protecting shared values within the school;
- Monitoring the critical elements of the school improvement effort;
- Ensuring systematic collaboration throughout the school;
- Encouraging initiative, improvisation and experimentation by teachers;
- Developing a notable commitment to teachers' professional growth;
- Providing one-on-one staff development to needy teachers;
- Promoting individual teachers and school self-efficacy; and
- Staying committed to continuous school improvement and the goal of becoming a learning organisation.

In defining indicators of effective staff development for teachers, Johnson and Fargo (2014) reviewed 35 United States of America studies that featured a careful experimental or comparison group design and revealed that such professional development (p.453);

- was content focused;
- incorporated active learning, utilizing adult learning theories;
- supported collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts;
- used models and modeling of effective teaching and learning practice;
- provided coaching and expert support to teachers;
- offered opportunities for feedback and reflection on teachers' performance; and
- Was of sustained duration.

Thus, the indicators of effective teacher professional development are a reflection of the need to consider a number of factors in the planning and implementation of school staff development programmes. From the foregoing, these indicators, therefore, focus more on the need to address the strategic needs of the school; particularly those of the teachers and the learners; which if effectively considered and addressed, are bound to influence the attainment of quality education.

Research Methodology

Method, Population & Sample

The current study adopted the qualitative research methodology from which the case study method which enabled the researcher to engage in personal contact with participants and further allowed him to generate rich and first-hand information (Denzin and Lincoln, 2012) was used. The case study also allowed detailed, in-depth data generation which involved multiple sources of information (Creswell and Maietta, 2013). The population for the study were primary school teachers at four selected schools in Hwange District in Zimbabwe from which a sample of 16 (n=16) was identified; with four teachers being from one school. The sample was obtained through utilization of the expert sampling technique, which is considered to be a useful form of sample in that it is made up of experts or individuals knowledgeable in a specific field (Wegner, 2011). In the case of the current study, these individuals were senior primary school teachers all of whom were well-informed in staff development practices.

Data Generation Techniques and Analysis

The researcher utilised narratives or 'narrative inquiry' as a data generation-technique. Primarily, 'narratives' are personal views that are given as accounts or descriptions based on individuals' lived experiences. The use of the narrative approach in the current study allowed for the provision of brief narratives or personal accounts which reflected key issues relating to primary school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of staff development in the context of their schools. Narratives have been placed at the centre-stage in the field of education as both a method in and an object of inquiry; providing a narration of educators' lived and shared experiences (Johnson and Golombek, 2012).

Consistent with qualitative data analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of generated data was done and in that regard, direct quotes from senior teachers during the narrative inquiry were considered in the form of excerpts (Sanders, 2013). This was done in order to capture the more relevant views of the participants in verbatim form. Consequently, the researcher was convinced that there was great value in these narratives as they presented what the senior teachers in the four schools actually said in response to the research problem. Thus, the

researcher interpreted both the overt and covert meanings as well as ambiguities in narrative data which all began while the data generation was in progress (Laverty, 2013). This was consistent with Chakanyuka, Chiome and Chabaya (2010) who opined that in qualitative research, data analysis is carried from the beginning of the study in order to make sense of what the researcher observed, heard and read. Meloy (2012) also recommends that when planning the presentation, analysis, discussion and interpretation of qualitative data, the researcher should consider that the data are generally subjective, interpretative, descriptive, holistic and often copious. Ethics were also considered as they relate to human conduct, which in the current study were concerned with how to handle the senior teachers as professional participants during the study.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The demographic data of the study showed that there were 13 (81%) female teachers and 3 (19%) male teachers which revealed that the number of female teachers was much higher than that of male teachers in the area under study. In discussing the data, the main thrust was to address the theme 'indicators of staff development effectiveness in the primary school from teachers' perspective'. In that regard, teachers' views at School A were expressed through the following excerpts:

Due to staff development, I have become a more knowledgeable & skilled teacher; with lots of confidence to facilitate children's learning (P₁).

I have been helped to keep abreast with new things within my teaching career including new teaching methods as well as ways of making my teaching more interesting and effective (P₂).

I now perform better in the different teaching tasks that are expected of me; such as scheming, lesson planning and preparation, lesson delivery, marking of learners' work and general classroom management (P₃).

I can now do my work better, including confidently preparing and delivering effective lessons to my class which I think is the most important thing expected of me as a teacher (P₄).

Teachers' views at School B were expressed through the following excerpts:

As someone who trained long back, I have been invigorated and made to become a better teacher and relevant even though so many changes have taken place in the school system (P₁).

My involvement in staff development has enabled me to adapt to the ever-changing demands of the teaching and learning situation including the high demands of the new curriculum (P₂).

As far as I am concerned, staff development has met my personal needs particularly through fulfilling my desire for continual learning and professional growth (P₃).

I have been helped to master things that were a challenge to me before such as interpretation of the syllabi for some subjects, planning for some lessons as well as teaching certain challenging subjects (P₄).

Teachers' views at School C were expressed through the following excerpts:

I am now able to handle learners with different learning characteristics including those with special learning needs & behavioural disorders (P₁).

I think that the most important indicator is whether or not SD is based on our needs as teachers which I think this school has managed to do (P₂).

I am now a different teacher from the way I was before staff development; meaning to say I have been changed for the better professionally (P₃).

I think that the knowledge of the SD facilitator mostly determines the effectiveness of any staff development programme. Surely with a good facilitator, teachers would definitely benefit more (P₄).

Teachers' views at School D were expressed through the following excerpts:

The level of our motivation and morale as teachers is the most important indicator which determines the effectiveness of staff development (P₁).

I think one of the most important indicator is whether or not proper planning has been done before the staff development session (P₂).

Administrative support particularly the provision of appropriate resources and a conducive environment are key indicators (P₃).

I think our attitude as teachers since we are the primary beneficiaries of any staff development session is a key indicator (P₄).

A summary of the teachers' narratives above indicate that teachers were generally positive about the

indicators of staff development effectiveness in the primary schools they were stationed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above findings, the researcher concluded that, for teachers, staff development enabled them to become more knowledgeable, skillful, confident, efficient, relevant in the face of rapid educational changes and fulfilled their desire for continual learning and professional growth. For them, this made them better teachers with increased knowledge and pedagogic skills as well as more positive attitudes towards their profession.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the researcher recommended that teachers should always actively participate in staff development programmes in order to effectively benefit from them as well as implement what they would have gained in order to promote high student outcomes. In addition, schools should consider teachers' staff development needs and use them as a basis for the planning of staff development programmes in order to enhance their effectiveness while school authorities should provide support and a conducive environment in order to promote quality education.

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