

Perceptions of Teachers towards School-Based Staff Development Activities.

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Abstract: *Educational innovations and pupils' individual educational needs place demands on teachers which go beyond teaching skills that teachers acquired during their pre-service training. This gap in teaching skills is supposed to be addressed through school-based staff development workshops. My purpose was to establish how teachers view school-based staff development workshops. I used a qualitative methodology, where data were generated through focus group discussions with purposively sampled primary school teachers. I concluded that teachers view school-based staff development workshops positively since they contribute to their teaching skills making it possible for teachers to effectively deal with didactic challenges they may come across as they interact with pupils during teaching-learning transactions. I advanced a number of recommendations that school heads should consider in order to make school-based staff development workshops effective.*

Key terms: *Perceptions; teachers and school-based staff development and workshops.*

I. Introduction

Today's classrooms are inundated with a lot of challenges and changes linked to children's demographic differences, policy, legislation and agendas being peddled by pressure groups on children's rights and human rights. These challenges and changes call for the need to constantly equip the teachers in the classrooms with relevant teaching skills, knowledge and attitudes. Schools can achieve this important task through staff development. The purpose of this study is to establish the views of teachers towards school-based staff development. It speaks to the following four questions: a). What do teachers understand by school-based staff development? b). What are the perceived benefits of school-based staff development? c). What are the limitations of school-based staff development? d). How can the effectiveness of school-based staff development be enhanced?

II. Review Of Related Literature

2.1 The concept staff development

There is convergence in the manner in which different scholars define staff development. Robinson (1994) in Boaduo (2010) see staff development as activities taking place physically within a school in which the team consists of teaching staff colleagues; and the problems tackled are arising in the school. Montgomery County Public Schools (2015) define staff development as providing teachers with the professional learning and coaching support necessary to transport staff and pupil learning to ensure that pupil achievement is not predictable by race and all pupils are college and career ready. Staff development is also referred to as professional development in popular literature. Learning Forward (2015) view professional development of teachers as a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and school heads' effectiveness in raising pupil achievement. It fosters collective responsibility for improved pupil performance and must be comprised of professional learning that:

- is aligned with rigorous state pupil achievement standards as well as related local agency and school improvement goals;
- is conducted among teachers at the school and facilitated by well-prepared school heads and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentor teachers, or other teacher leaders; and
- primarily occurs several times per week among established teams of teachers, school heads, and other instructional staff members where the teams of educators engage in sustained cycle of educator improvement.

2.2 Benefits of staff development

The correlation between staff development, teachers' acquisition of new and relevant skills and pupil achievement has long been documented by a number of scholars globally. The success of any education reform effort is contingent upon effective teacher professional development (Nagel, 2013). Acheson and Gall (1987) view staff development as satisfying the following three functions: providing direction for instructional and professional development, determining if the minimal standards of competent performance for certified teachers are being met and providing a uniform basis for the teacher evaluation programme. Montgomery County Public

Schools (2015) perceive staff development as addressing two key issues: First, it meets system-wide and local school initiatives to improve the academic performance of pupils. Second, it reflects emerging research on best practices in professional development, professional community, equity and diversity, and instruction. Similarly, Learning Forward (2015) advances six ways in which staff development is beneficial. These are: First, it evaluates pupil, teacher and school learning needs through a thorough review of data on teacher and pupil performance. Second, it defines a clear set of learning goals based on the rigorous analysis of the data. Third, it achieves the pupil learning needs by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidence-based learning strategies, such as lesson study and the development of formative assessments that improve instructional effectiveness and pupil achievement. Fourth, provides job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the class. Fifth, it regularly assesses the effectiveness of the professional development in achieving identified learning goals, improving teaching, and assisting all pupils in meeting challenging academic standards. Sixth, it informs ongoing improvements in teaching and pupil learning.

Villegas-Reiners (2003) in Ono and Ferreira (2010) views professional development of teachers as one of the key elements in most of the educational reforms being implemented throughout the world. She further posits that educational reforms that do not include teachers and their professional development have failed to yield the desired outcomes. However, staff development is not without its own challenges. The related challenges are the focal point in the next section of this article.

2.3 Challenges associated with the mounting of staff development workshops

While acknowledging, the importance of staff development, some studies allude that the effectiveness of staff development is hampered by a number of barriers. Nagel (2013) argues that the steepest learning curve for teachers is to do with implementing new teaching techniques and not learning about the new techniques. The challenge is that teacher mastery of a new teaching technique takes on average twenty separate instances of practice, yet the time to do the practices is not there. Many a times, staff development of teachers fails to achieve its intended goal (school improvement) as a result of its implementation which is contrary to key conditions for teacher learning (Newmann, King and Youngs, 2001). Seltzer and Himley (1995) also point out that outside assistance and resources may be needed by many schools for school-based workshops to be effective. Some of the challenges that dog school-based staff development initiatives are shortage of qualified facilitators, lack of resources and lack of support from relevant stakeholders (Boaduo, 2010).

2.4 Strategies for enhancing the effectiveness of staff development

Nagel (2013) proffers three suggestions that can be employed to address barriers to staff development. First, staff development needs to be ongoing and carried out over time, rather than presented in one day workshops. Second, it should be delivered in the context of the teachers' subject areas. Third, peer coaches and mentors have been found to be highly effective in assisting teachers to implement new teaching skills. Therefore, peer coaches and mentors should be employed where this is possible. Newmann et al., (2001:2) argue that:

Researchers tend to agree that to promote the kind of teacher learning that leads to improvement in teaching, professional development should concentrate on instruction and student outcomes in teachers' specific schools; provide opportunities for collegial inquiry, help, and feedback; and connect teachers to external expertise while also respecting teachers' discretion and creativity. Finally, these experiences should be sustained and continuous, rather than short-term and episodic. . . professional development is more likely to advance achievement of all students in a school if it addresses not only the learning of individual teachers, but also other dimensions of the organizational capacity of the school.

In order to be effective, school-based staff development workshops should emphasize the importance of school-level teams and their involvement in a comprehensive needs assessment and planning process (Seltzer and Himley, 1995). Sparks (1994) in Seltzer and Himley, further posits that effective school-based staff development must be driven by a coherent strategic plan, and should include multiple forms of job-embedded learning for example, study groups and peer coaching. In addition it should promote both individual and organizational development. Boaduo (2010) views the following premises as central to the implementation of successful and effective school-based staff development workshops:

- Involving teachers in the identification and articulation of their own training needs;
- Individual teachers should experience the growth from staff development;
- Viewing the individual school as the largest and most appropriate unit for educational change; and
- Members of the school management should perform a leadership role and ensure that a positive environment exists where teachers and other relevant stakeholders can feel comfortable to share their concerns and views.

III. Research Methodology

The study was informed by the constructivist philosophy, since the purpose was to construct the meanings participants had on the phenomenon under investigation from the emic perspective as opposed to the etic perspective. I made use of qualitative methodology, since I wanted to interact with participants while in their own working environments. I adopted a case study method for the following reasons as suggested by Kumar (2005). First, it provides an opportunity for the intensive analysis of many specific details often overlooked by other methods. Second, the approach rests on the assumption that the case being studied is typical of cases of a certain type so that, through intensive analysis, generalizations may be made that will be applicable to other cases of the same type.

My aim was establishing primary school teachers' views on school-based staff development workshops. I worked with a sample of 24 primary school teachers who were purposively sampled from three schools in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. The purpose of adopting purposive sampling was informed by the need to identify data-rich sources (Punch, 2009; Johnson and Christensen, 2014). Data were generated through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). I also took down some field notes during visits to the three schools for focus group discussion – a process referred to as memoing (Creswell, 2014). I recorded all the three FGDs verbatim with the permission of the participants. I analysed data through thematic content analysis. The process involved transcribing, member checking, segmenting, coding, enumeration and arranging of data into themes and sub-themes.

3.1 Measures to ensure trustworthiness of data

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, I took the following measures as suggested by Silverman (2010) and Creswell (2014). First, careful sampling decisions were done during the identification of study participants. Second, I homogenized the samples by ensuring that only those individuals who were at the teacher grade level were part of the sample. This created an environment where teachers discussed issues relating to school-based staff development openly and honestly without being afraid of victimisation by school administration. Third, I recorded the FGDs verbatim, transcribed them and sent them for member checking before data analysis. Fourth, I addressed my own biases by engaging in a process called reflexivity (Johnson and Christensen, 2014).

IV. Findings And Discussion

4.1 Teachers' understanding of school-based staff development

Most participants fully understood what staff development meant to them. In most of their responses, the notion that school-based staff development is about teacher development is very loud and clear. Following are a few definitions that were put forward by participants:

It is whereby teachers come together to resolve problems, e.g. a teacher might have problems in teaching a certain concept. It is brought forward and resolved, also teachers come together to learn certain things about their profession, e.g. teachers' rights.

To revive teachers on what they are supposed to do, their duties.

It is whereby the schools try to equip, motivate and educate their teachers to become better in what they do.

The teachers' understanding of the concept staff development is consistent with definitions from a number of scholars such as Boado (2010), Learning Forward (2015) and Montgomery County Public Schools (2015). In my view, such knowledge of teachers about staff development can only spur teachers to attend and participate in staff development workshops, since they will be aware of benefits that are likely to accrue to them. In addition, the teachers' knowledge boarded well for this research since teachers were aware of the phenomenon under discussion. All other things being equal, their contributions were likely to be trustworthy.

4.2 Benefits of school-based staff development workshops.

Participants mentioned three areas in which school-based staff development workshops benefit them. These areas are: equipping teachers with new and relevant teaching methods and skills; equipping them with relevant class management skills; and helping them meet the needs of individual needs since all schools are being encouraged to become inclusive schools.

4.2.1 Improvement in teaching methods

Most teachers categorically stated that staff development workshops help to improve their teaching methods. Some of the teachers' sentiments on the improvement of teaching methods were that:

I have learnt some good approaches to certain concepts I did not well understand before.

It has made me to be aware of different methods of resolving a problem. It has given me different approaches to a problem.

I have gained some methods that I did not know and I am implementing them in my class. The methods assist me and my pupils.

Participants were cognisant that the skills that they acquired during pre-service training may no longer effectively meet today's teaching demands. This view is corroborated by Nagel (2013) who argues that new standards of education require teaching techniques that are substantially different from practices that are in place today. The skills' gap is addressed by staff development workshops.

4.2.2 Developing of effective class management skills

Teachers also reiterated that staff development activities have immensely assisted them with effective class management skills. Teachers pointed out that effective teaching-learning transactions are only possible in a well managed class. They postulated that effective class management's cumulative benefit is more time on task, which translates into improved pupil performance. Below are some of the teachers' responses on the contribution of staff development to effective class management:

Staff development has equipped me with up-to-date class management skills that are required by the school management.

It has helped me to maintain order in the classroom and how to reduce noise during lessons.

It has benefited me on how to have order in my class.

These findings are consistent with observations by a number of scholars among them, Gareth, Porter, Desimone, Birman and Yoon (2001) where teachers who took part in their study reported that staff development results in increase in knowledge and skills and changes in classroom practice. Teachers' submissions indicate that if well conducted, staff development workshops have the potential to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes that are relevant in today's teaching activities.

4.2.3 Meeting the needs of children with special educational needs

The general trend nowadays in most schools world over is to have children with special educational needs learning side by side those without special needs, thereby creating inclusive classes as encouraged by The Salamanca Statement. In Zimbabwe, the challenges of such an arrangement are well documented by a number of scholars among them Mafa (2012), Mafa and Chaminuka (2012) and Mafa and Makuba (2013). Cognisant of the challenges posed by inclusion, teachers who participated in the study expressed the views that staff development workshops equip them with teaching skills that are necessary for the effective teaching of inclusive classes. The following sentiments resonated in all the three FGDs:

It has equipped me with skills to meet the individual demands of children with special educational needs.

It has enlightened me on how best I can teach pupils with special educational needs.

Given handouts on such cases, i.e., on how to handle such pupils. In other words, there has been progress there.

The benefits of staff development that were frequently mentioned by most participants in this study are consistent with functions of staff development that were identified by scholars such as Acheson and Gall (1987), Newmann, et al., (2001), Villegas-Reins (2003) and Boaduo (2010). I view the teachers' awareness of benefits of staff development as pivotal to attendance and participation in such activities. Therefore if school management teams lay proper groundwork for staff development, I think teachers will attend and derive the necessary benefits, all other things being equal.

4.3 Limitations of School-based Staff Development Workshops

Most teachers concurred that while school-based staff development workshops are very useful they are however dogged by a plethora of critical challenges. These challenges are chronicled and discussed below:

4.3.1 Lack of knowledgeable and resourceful facilitators

The general feeling was that at times facilitators meant to develop teachers may not add any value since they may lack the necessary skills and knowledge. In this regard one teacher quipped: "It has to be done by experienced people who want to help improve teaching. Unfortunately such people are not readily available". In a different school, another teacher retorted: "At times you spend a whole afternoon listening to a facilitator repeating what you were taught at college. If you ask the facilitator a question, you will be lucky to get a response". Our findings are consistent with observations by Ono and Ferreira (2010). They also found out that resources persons lacked knowledge and skills, leading to watering down and/or misinterpretation of important information. It goes without saying that such actions may result in teachers developing a negative attitude towards school-based staff development.

4.3.2 Congested curriculum and time factor

Most teachers felt that the congested primary school curriculum makes it difficult to get enough time for meaningful school-based staff development activities. The following comment from one of the teachers

succinctly captures sentiments that were conveyed by most participants: “The curriculum is packed with a lot of activities as a result there isn’t enough time to hold staff development workshops”. Teachers also pointed out that there were too many sporting activities that require teachers to be always with pupils.

4.3.3 Too much paperwork

Teachers lamented that in today’s teaching, there is too much paperwork that interferes with teachers’ actual teaching time. As a result, teachers concurred that even if they were to attend staff development workshops, they may find it difficult to put the acquired knowledge and skills into practice because of paperwork. The following sentiment from one of the teachers sums up the teachers’ general concerns: “There is more paperwork than time for pupils because now the teacher is supposed to attend to a lot of records than to teach pupils”. Their assumptions were that, new methods of teaching acquired from staff development may be a departure from what they are currently doing, calling for more and intense lesson preparation. Yet time for intense lesson preparation may not be available.

4.3.4 Theoretical staff development workshops

Some of the teachers pointed out that at times staff development workshops are too theoretical, devoid of hands-on application of teaching solutions. One teacher commented that:

There is a lot of paperwork – handouts and less practice. There is more talk, theory and less implementation. We will be more interested in demonstrations, for example how to draw up Individual Educational Plans when dealing with pupils with special educational plans.

In my view, it is this theory dominant nature of staff development activities which led one teacher to say that: “I have not benefited so far from school-based staff development activities”. Mafa (2004) in a study he conducted in Botswana also documents that teachers lamented the theoretical nature of most school-based staff development activities. Most of the challenges that were raised by participants are also documented in several studies (Seltzer and Himley, 1995; Newmann et al., 2001; Boaduo, 2010; and Nagel, 2013). While the central role played by staff development in teacher development cannot be over-emphasised, efforts in developing teachers may come to naught if these and other related challenges are not addressed.

4.4 Participants’ suggestions on how to make school-based staff development activities effective

I asked participants to suggest strategies that they felt should be taken on board in order for schools to run effective staff development workshops. A number of strategies were brought up. However, the following strategies surfaced repeatedly FGDs:

- The primary school curriculum should be unpacked to pave way for staff development programmes.
- The staff development workshops should be held early in the term so as to give teachers ample time to implement the suggestions during the rest of the term.
- Needs analyses should precede staff development workshops so to enable teachers opportunities to identify professional areas in which they require staff development.
- Staff development workshops should be facilitated by individuals who are knowledgeable, so that the workshops become exciting and will motivate teachers. In addition, the workshops should not be theoretical.

V. Conclusions

Teachers perceive school-based staff development activities positively due to the activities’ contribution to the teachers’ skills in the following areas: teaching methodology, class management and dealing with pupils’ individual learning special needs. However, the effectiveness of school-based staff development activities is compromised by a number of limitations which include lack of knowledgeable and skilled facilitators, congested school curriculum, time factor, too many school activities which compete for teachers’ time and the theoretical nature of most staff development activities. The effectiveness of school-based staff development activities can be enhanced by inviting knowledgeable facilitators, ensuring that the workshops are practical, decongesting the primary school curriculum, among other strategies.

VI. Recommendations

Basing on the perceptions of teachers, I recommend that:

- School-based staff development workshops should be taken seriously because they are an important part of teacher development.
- Teachers should be involved in needs assessment so that they identify the professional areas in which they need assistance.
- School heads should invite knowledgeable facilitators for staff development workshops so as for schools to realize value for their money.

- Staff development activities should be given ample time so that more meaningful activities are done.
- Future research should explore how school heads in their capacity as instructional leaders view school-based staff development and ways in which it could be made more effective and beneficial to the teachers, pupils, schools and other stakeholders.

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