

## Educator Sentiments on How Primary School Staff Development Programmes could be Made More Effective: In Quest for Educational Excellence

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explored the sentiments of educators on how primary school staff development programmes could be made more effective; in pursuit of educational excellence. The case study design within the qualitative research paradigm was adopted. A sample of 42 educators in Zimbabwean primary schools; comprising of 36 teachers and 6 head teachers was used. Focus Group Discussions and Interviews were utilised to generate data. The major findings were that school management should consider teachers' staff development needs as the major priority and that the relevant ministry should also support staff development programmes in order to promote their effectiveness. Accordingly, the researcher concluded that the efficacy of primary school staff development could be enhanced if all stakeholders would work together in order to ensure their effectiveness while educators should be made to realise the importance of staff development programmes as being part of their professional development.*

**Keywords:** *educators, school staff development, effectiveness, primary schools, quality education*

### 1. Background and its Setting

#### 1.1 Background to the study

Literature related to school staff development has received widespread attention in educational research since the 21<sup>st</sup> Century basically because of the crucial significance of the professional development of educators within educational institutions (Brennen, 2011). As noted by Western (2010), this is particularly so in today's globalised village where information and other trends are rapidly changing largely as a result of the corresponding globalisation of knowledge; thereby consequently pressing increased demands for educators to improve their knowledge and competencies in order to remain relevant and also be able to foster high learner outcomes. Today's schools are, thus, currently facing their greatest challenge; which is to remain effective and relevant through the provision of quality education. Research has generally proved that such education of excellence results in part; from the effective staff development of teachers who will consequently be able to deliver high quality education to their students (Wideen, 2012).

In his study on teachers' professional development in Zimbabwe, Gutuza (2016, p.474), highlights that "... teachers operate in environments that are unstable due to the rapid changes in information and technology. The times when teachers relied solely on their initial teacher training are over and done with. Technological advances demand that teachers upgrade their skills and knowledge in order to remain effective and relevant". Thus, for teachers to fulfill their key functions fully, there is need to prepare them thoroughly for their work through continuing professional development as a way of enabling them to maintain and improve their contributions to teaching and learning. In order to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there is need for teachers to continually upgrade themselves in order to develop and adapt within the school system (Western, 2010).

Traditionally, the professional development for teachers simply consisted of workshops or short-term courses that offered teachers new information on specific aspects of their work. As a paradigm shift, in response to environmental changes in the educational arena, regular opportunities and experiences for contemporary teacher professional development over the past few years have yielded systematic growth and development in the teaching profession; particularly in as much as it has impacted positively on teacher competencies and learner outcomes (Champion, 2013). Notably, 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 (Connell, Klein & Meyer, 2014). Thus, 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.

In that regard, effective school staff development has also come to focus on reorienting teachers to new and emerging teaching and learning practices in order to match the dynamic educational landscape as well as to meet the demands of the ever-changing school curriculum. This is particularly so for countries like Zimbabwe which have experienced school curriculum change in recent years. For Zimbabwe, the phenomenal development that has been characterised by the recent adoption of the updated school curriculum has been a major spur for staff development for the teachers particularly due to the introduction of new learning areas (Gasva, Mutanana & Goronga, 2019). Under such circumstances, the Zimbabwean school system, like elsewhere in most developing nations, generally faces the challenge of finding ways to make the professional development of teachers more effective in order to enhance teacher competencies for the ultimate benefit of learners. This study was carried out in Wedza District of Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe. It is, against this backdrop; coupled by the researchers’ incessant interest in promoting educational excellence within the primary school sector; that this study was undertaken.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

While staff development for teachers, like most school programmes, is often shrouded with operational challenges, schools generally strive to ensure that this important activity is undertaken as reasonably effective as possible. Even though most primary schools in Zimbabwe and other countries generally conduct school staff development, the efficacy of the programmes often leaves a lot to be desired. The question at stake is what needs to be done in order to enhance their effectiveness so that the teachers and learners alike may maximally benefit. The researcher is of the view that obtaining educator sentiments would help in enhancing the effectiveness school staff development programmes and the attainment of quality education, considering that educators are central in the educational process. Unfortunately, the views of educators regarding how school staff development effectiveness may be improved are rarely sought, which is a gap that the current study sought to close.

## **1.3 Purpose of the Study**

Based on the statement of the problem, this study was essentially a quality assurance monitoring research whose purpose was to explore the views of educators on how staff development programmes could be made more effective in the primary school sector; in pursuit of quality education. Such a purpose is premised on the understanding that school educators can play a key role in nurturing quality education; hence, there is critical need for their effective professional development if education of excellence is to be realised within primary schools in Zimbabwe and elsewhere.

## **1.4 Research Questions**

In order to address the statement of the study problem in line with the purpose of the study, the following specific research questions were proffered:

- i. What are primary schoolteachers’ sentiments on how staff development programmes could be made more effective in primary schools?

- ii. What are primary school head teachers' sentiments on how the efficacy of staff development programmes could be improved for the benefit of both teachers and learners?
- iii. How does the effectiveness of school staff development programmes promote quality education in the primary school sector?

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

It is envisioned that this study would be of significance to a number of stakeholders; namely, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE), schools, educators and the learners within the primary school sector in Zimbabwe and elsewhere where the same circumstances apply. In that regard, the MoPSE is expected to consider stepping up its support for staff development programmes for teachers considering the importance of such initiatives in benefitting both the teachers and the learners. Primary schools would ensure that the conduct of staff development for teachers is a priority and all efforts to support it as well as implement them effectively are considered. Educators will benefit as a result of improvement of their knowledge and skills relating to teaching through their participation in well supported and effectively implemented staff development programmes. Finally, the learners would also benefit through the delivery of effective lessons by well staff-developed teachers whose knowledge and skills would have improved to make them better teachers.

## 2. 0 Review of Related Literature

### 2.1 Conceptualising school staff development in the context of quality education

Staff development is a broad concept that is generally considered to be a process that assists employees within an organisation in gaining increased levels of competence and growing professionally (Reimers, 2013). The process may include such programmes as employee orientation, induction, in-service education and training as well as other forms of continuing professional development and training. Broadly, it focuses on harmonizing employees' interests and those of their organisations within which they are expected to work and perform highly. In the same vein, Savardi (2012) says that staff development is a strategic organisational process of improving and increasing knowledge and capabilities of employees through access to education and training opportunities in the workplace or through outside the organisation. For Ganser (2010), this noble industrial activity covers the overall development of a person in his or her professional role; and includes both formal and informal experiences resulting in improved job performance.

In the context of education, Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (2009) assert that staff development entails those processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of school or college employees. According to the Manual of Policies and Procedures on Staff Development (2000, p.107):

*Staff development in education entails continuing career professional development; which is an ongoing programme of education and training planned to enable school staff to reinforce their knowledge and develop the required skills for the performance of specific school functions; as well as acquire additional knowledge and skills to meet educational changes including curricular, programme emphasis, enactment of related new legislation and so on.*

Thus, it involves activities that develop educators' competencies in a way that is beneficial to learners and the wide-ranging objectives of the school.

In the same vein, Glatthorn (2011) avow that the professional development of teachers involves planned activities within schools that are meant to assist educators in enhancing their professional knowledge and pedagogic skills for the ultimate benefit of learners. Lieberman (2008) reverberated by Fielding and Schalock (2011) assert that when talking about school staff development, we must essentially examine several factors, including;

- i. the key goals, objectives and values of the school;
- ii. the content and diversity of experiences of individual teachers;
- iii. the emerging needs of the teachers as individuals and groups;
- iv. the processes by which the professional development of teachers will occur;
- v. the contexts in which school staff development will take place; and
- vi. the need to evaluate the school staff development programme in line with its intended objectives so as to determine its success or otherwise.

In Fielding and Schalock (ibid)'s view, staff development for teachers should therefore focus more on improving the knowledge and skills of teachers in order to in turn improve learner outcomes and the general realisation of quality education.

Thus, the recurrence of the concept of quality education within the conceptual discourse of school staff development arguably highlights its significance in the effective continuing professional development of teachers and it is envisaged benefit to learners. This perspective dovetails well with Askling (2011, p.89) who aver that typical quality education involves the following aspects:

- i. *Education that is facilitated by qualified educators with relevant knowledge and expertise;*
- ii. *Teaching and learning that is supported by responsible authorities particularly through the provision of appropriate resources;*
- iii. *Learning programmes that are sustained by the cooperation and support of learners' families and communities;*
- iv. *Teaching and learning environments that are conducive, safe, protective and gender-sensitive;*
- v. *Learning content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and life skills; and*
- vi. *Student outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.*

The foregoing deliberation substantiates the assertion that investing in teachers' continuing professional development has more positive effects than investing in any other resources including physical infrastructure within the education system (Steyn, 2011). In that regard, it becomes reasonably correct to further accentuate the fact that effective staff development of teachers should be prioritised by schools if the teachers are to become more knowledgeable and competent in order to promote high student outcomes as well as guarantee the attainment of quality education.

## **2.2 Empirical studies on rudiments for the effectiveness of school staff development**

A number of studies have since been conducted in view of the transformational nature of school staff development and the fundamental factors that inform its effectiveness. In a study conducted in South Africa and Zimbabwe, Mukeredzi (2013) indicated that when most teachers were asked about their understanding of contemporary school staff development, they conceived it as revolving around general pedagogic knowledge, content knowledge, and knowledge of context emerging out of teaching and learning within and outside schools. Mukeredzi (2013) further revealed that policy initiatives to enhance the quality of education through the professional development of teachers may not achieve the intended results if due regard is not given to the staff development needs of teachers as well as their conceptions of staff development practices. In the same vein, Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (2009) and York (2011) concurred that for school staff development to be effective, it should largely be based on teachers' needs in line with broader school-based needs which by their nature, predominantly accommodate the fundamental academic needs of learners.

A survey by Guskey and Huberman (2014, p.98) in the United States of America, observed the following as some of the important rudiments for success that must be followed in the organisation of professional development opportunities for educators:

- i. *Directly involve teachers in the planning and organisation of school staff development activities and their evaluation;*
- ii. *Appreciate the school context within which the staff development is conducted; as well as the needs of key beneficiaries particularly the teachers and learners;*
- iii. *Recognise educational change as being both an individual and an organisational process;*
- iv. *Work in teams or groups of teachers in order to maintain support for each other and the entire school system;*
- v. *Include procedures for feedback on staff development results and to provide continuous follow-up, and support; and*
- vi. *Integrate staff development programmes for the ultimate goals of school effectiveness and general quality of education.*

Thus, for Guskey and Huberman (2014), there are a number of considerations to ensure the success and effectiveness of staff development programmes.

In another American study on ‘*Helping teachers to teach well*’, Corcoran (2011) proposed some guiding principles in order to foster the effective designing and implementation of school staff development programmes. For Corcoran (2011, p.102), the process should:

- i. *Stimulate and support site-based (classroom, schools, districts) initiatives of teacher professional development;*
- ii. *Be based on the existing and emerging needs of schools particularly of the teachers and learners;*
- iii. *Be grounded in the knowledge about teaching and learning;*
- iv. *Offer teachers with intellectual, social and emotional engagement with ideas, materials and colleagues;*
- v. *Demonstrate respect for teachers as professionals and as adult learners;*
- vi. *Be accessible and inclusive to all teachers in need; and*
- vii. *Provide sufficient time and follow-up for teacher-in-service programmes.*

These guiding principles show that it should always be ensured that staff development is grounded within the teaching and learning situation; largely focusing on the essential needs of schools, with a deliberate thrust on fulfilling the needs of teachers and learners.

In a case study on teacher professional development in South Africa, Rout and Behera (2014, p.11) revealed that:

- i. *Teachers' beliefs and perceptions about their work are deemed to be of primary importance in determining the effectiveness of their professional development;*
- ii. *Teachers' professional and practical knowledge about teaching exerts a major influence on the way in which they respond to educational change;*
- iii. *Teachers were more likely to change their instructional practices and gain greater subject knowledge and improved teaching skills when their professional development were directly linked to their daily experiences; as well as aligned with school standards and assessments;*
- iv. *Successful teacher professional development fits the socio-cultural context of the specific school and community; and*

- v. *The top-down approach to teacher professional development is not compatible with the emerging paradigm on the organisation of effective school staff development; hence, teachers' needs and decisions regarding their professional development should largely be prioritised.*

In a recent study conducted in India on teachers' preferences regarding staff development that they believed was effective in their continuing professional development, Perkins (2017, p.9) revealed that teachers; generally preferred staff development that:

- i. *Is based on their needs and that is teacher driven;*
- ii. *Is relevant to their work and context;*
- iii. *Helps them to plan and improve their instruction;*
- iv. *Includes hands-on strategies applicable to the classroom;*
- v. *Is highly collaborative and interactive;*
- vi. *Recognises that teachers are professionals with valuable insights;*
- vii. *Is aligned to promote their professional growth; and*
- viii. *Is sustainable over time, with both short-term and long-term benefits to them.*

This generally implies that school staff development endeavours should consider teachers' expectations and taking them as key players if the programmes are to be effective.

For Winston and Creamer (1997) cited in Lieberman and Wood (2012), school authorities and supervisors should ensure that there is a staff development policy that should guide the successful organisation of staff development programmes. The policy should be directed towards (p178):

- i. *Purposefully determining that staff development activities are based upon a careful assessment of school and teacher needs;*
- ii. *Clarifying expectations for the continued professional development of each teacher rather than consider teachers' expectations as a group;*
- iii. *Specifying the options available for individual staff member's improvement of knowledge and competencies;*
- iv. *Making clear the connection between teachers' continuous professional development and institutional recognition and rewards;*
- v. *Ensuring adequate funding and other forms of support for school staff development activities and initiatives;*
- vi. *Employing accepted methods of teaching and learning in all staff development programmes in order to guarantee efficacy*
- vii. *Engaging knowledgeable staff development facilitators worth participants' time for the ultimate benefit of eventual clients.*

In his international review of the documentary evidence on teacher professional development, Reimers (2013, p.109) asserted a number of pointers to suggest effective school staff development programmes. For Reimers (2013), this essentially involved determining whether:

- i. *The teachers' staff development needs in particular, identified in the context of the school, were considered in the planning for the programmes;*
- ii. *A staff development plan was developed on the basis of the harmonised needs of the school and those of the teachers;*
- iii. *The staff development programmes were implemented collaboratively; with both school administrators and classroom practitioners actively involved;*
- iv. *The staff development programmes were evaluated with feedback on their effectiveness being provided to all participants;*

- v. *The whole business concerning the professional development of teachers is sustainable for teachers' continual professional development; and*
- vi. *The ultimate goal of all staff development programmes is to benefit learners as well as promoting the general quality in education.*

To further accentuate these views, Clement and Vandenberg (2012, p.49) also say that in modern times, the most effective form of teacher professional development is considered to be one that is based in schools and is related to the daily activities and needs of the schools; with teachers and learners being the central players; among other things.

### **3.0 Research Methodology**

This study adopted the case study design within the qualitative research methodology which the researchers found to be appropriate in eliciting educators' sentiments on how staff development programmes could be made more effective in Zimbabwean primary schools. Six primary schools in Wedza District were used as the multiple cases for the study. The case study design was preferred mainly because it is concerned with a rich and vivid description of phenomena relevant to a specific case and that the researcher was able to illuminate educators' perceptions of their lived experiences of staff development engagement (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Denzin. & Lincoln, 2012). The target population of the study, which Marshall and Gretchen (2019) view as the totality of all elements that conform to a set of specifications, comprising of the entire group of persons that are of interest to the researcher, comprised of primary school educators in the area under study. The study sample was made of 42 educators (N=42), comprising of 36 classroom practitioners (six from each school) and 6 head teachers drawn from the selected research sites.

Purposive sampling technique under the non-probability sampling framework; which Best and Kahn (2009) say that it essentially entails choosing the most qualifying individuals to serve as participants; ensuring that the compositions of the sample's elements have similar or related characteristics was used. Using the technique, the researcher was, therefore, able to identify data rich sources (Steinke, 2014) in the form of primary school classroom practitioners and head teachers as they were both directly involved in school staff development programmes. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used as data generation techniques to generate data from classroom practitioners while Interviews were used to gather data from the head teachers. Consistent with qualitative case inquiries, the researcher was the primary media of data generation (Patton, 2012); which was also in harmony with Guba and Lincoln (2011, p.76) who avow that "... the qualitative researcher is as much a part of the inquiry as the intent of the study and the inquiry process". FGDs were preferred for as they were a cost effective and less time-consuming technique; considering that as many as six participants per FGD provided data at once. On the other hand, Interviews were preferred because they enabled the researcher to probe further to get head teachers' deep-rooted views on the research problem in question (Creswell & Maieta, 2013).

Before using the FGD and Interview guides, the researcher subjected them to pre-testing with teachers who were not part of the study at the research sites; which helped them to validate and improve the two data generation tools (Patton, 2012). Interpretive phenomenology was adopted in analysing the generated data as the researcher found this approach to be consistent with qualitative phenomenological inquiries involving individual perceptions and beliefs (Somekh & Lewin, 2010; Steinke, 2014). This philosophical analytic paradigm of analysing qualitative data involved carefully interpreting the generated data that was provided by the different participants and preparing the data in summary form (in the case of data generated from classroom practitioners) and excerpts form (in the case of data generated from head teachers). Thus, data from these two groups of participants were then systematically presented as the findings of the current study.

## 4.0 Findings of the Study

### 4.1 Teachers' sentiments

The data that follow indicate a summary of findings generated from the use of focus group discussions (FGDs) with teachers (classroom practitioners) regarding how staff development programmes could be made more effective within primary schools:

*FGD<sub>1</sub>: The time frame and need for conducting staff development programmes for us as teachers should not be determined by school management but by us as teachers because we are its primary beneficiaries. In fact, if school management would want staff development to be useful, they should consider our needs rather than to impose staff development initiatives on us as some of them are just but a waste of time for they don't add value to our work.*

*FGD<sub>2</sub>: School management should ensure that useful or new information that is meant for teachers is disseminated while it is still relevant. For example, we have noticed that our head teacher may attend a District meeting but will conduct a staff development to share information from the meeting when there is pressure to report back on our reactions or when we start beseeching for feedback.*

*FGD<sub>3</sub>: There is need for the school head to clarify to us as teachers on whether a specific staff development programme is a requirement by the school, a matter of policy by the Ministry or its primarily meant to benefit us as teachers. I think this will help in motivating us to participate actively especially if we appreciate that the staff development programme will result in us benefitting though of course the school and learners will also benefit as a result.*

*FGD<sub>4</sub>: The Ministry should consider our staff development as valuable continuing education and training that needs to be rewarded in some way such as being given special school duties related to one's acquired expertise or being given first preference when it comes to promotions within the school. This will go a long way in motivating us to see the importance of staff development which will also guarantee their usefulness.*

*FGD<sub>5</sub>: There is need to ensure that every primary school in rural areas such as this one is electrified, has some computers and is connected to Internet in order to enable us as teachers to research and find current information. This will help to complement what we learn during staff development sessions which will also be useful in getting information for the new learning areas of the curriculum.*

*FGD<sub>6</sub>: The school should consider that as teachers, we have areas of expertise in the form of areas we majored in at college. So, we should be given the opportunity to be facilitators in those areas of the curriculum based on our specialties unlike the current situation where the head and his deputy are often the only facilitators; yet they did not specialize in all the subject areas during their training.*

These findings generally show that teachers were of the view that a lot needs to be done in order for staff development programmes to be effective. In harmony with Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (2009), one of their important views was that their needs should be prioritised in all staff development programmes as they are central to the educational process and its intended outcomes.

#### 4.2 Head teachers' sentiments

The excerpts that follow indicate what the head teachers said during interviews concerning how the efficacy of staff development programmes could be improved within primary schools for the benefit of teachers and learners:

**Head, school A:** *Considering the indispensable importance of teachers' staff development within schools, I suggest that our Ministry should support our staff development programmes by allocating funds and other resources strictly for that purpose. With such support, teachers' professional development would no doubt be effective, and learners will inevitably benefit.*

**Head, school B:** *There is need for teachers to appreciate the importance of participating in staff development programmes particularly the fact that they make them remain knowledgeable and relevant in the face of the ever changing education system. In the current situation, the teachers need to be reminded that such programmes help them to better understand the new curriculum.*

**Head, school C:** *Our schools should be authorized to come up with teacher retention schemes such as school-based allowances or fees payment facilities for teachers' children. This will help to retain experienced teachers who are also qualified in different areas of the school curriculum and who will then be utilised by the schools as staff development facilitators basing on their expertise.*

**Head, school D:** *Like we do here, all primary schools should identify teachers' main subjects which they studied at college and then train the teachers as facilitators in those areas. This will help the schools to have a pool of competent staff development facilitators in different areas of the curriculum.*

**Head, school E:** *The Ministry should authorise schools through the SDCs to come up with fundraising programmes in order to secure funds for financing staff development programmes. This will enable schools to generate funds which they can use to buy stationery or even hire qualified staff development facilitators from elsewhere.*

**Head, school F:** *There is need for primary schools to work very closely with local communities which will allow for free engagement of some knowledgeable community members as external staff development facilitators. This will help in securing suitable facilitators particularly for areas of the curriculum that are based on indigenous knowledge systems like African Traditional Religion.*

Notably, head teachers also believed that more could be done in order to enhance the efficacy of staff development. They concurred with classroom practitioners on capitalizing on teachers' main subjects which can, therefore, make every teacher a resource person in his or her area of expertise. For Barth

(2011), the bottom-line is that the school head is in a unique position to influence the effectiveness of staff development programmes as well as foster the attainment of education.

### **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the findings, the researcher concluded that both teachers (classroom practitioners) and head teachers in the area under study believed that staff development could be made more effective through implementing a number of initiatives. Their sentiments were predominantly anchored on the fact that if Ministry authorities, head teachers, teachers (classroom practitioners) and communities work hand in glove, the edification and efficacy of staff development would undoubtedly, be realised, while also guaranteeing quality education. In addition, educators should be made to realise the importance of staff development programmes as being part of their professional development.

Based on the findings and conclusions, the researcher recommends that schools should ensure that teachers' sentiments and those of head teachers are harmonised in order to come up with a comprehensive approach meant to further enhance the efficacy of the professional development of primary school educators. In addition, the MoPSE should come up with a policy that clearly guides the organisation of school staff development programmes in order to ensure their effectiveness as well as guarantee the delivery and attainment of quality education within the primary school sector.

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