Teachers' Views on the Significance of their Professional Development in Selected Zimbabwean Primary Schools

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Abstract: This study sought to explore teachers views on the significance of their professional development in two selected primary schools of Hwange district in Matabeleland North province, Zimbabwe. The study was conducted within the qualitative methodology and a case study design in the form of multiple cases was adopted. Purposive sampling was used draw a sample of twenty (n=20) participants who comprised of 2 head teachers and 18 teachers in equal proportion. Interviews were used (with head teachers) while Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used (with teachers) as the research techniques to generate data. Verbatim findings generated from the participants were presented as text data and interpretive phenomenological data analysis (IPDA) was used. The major findings of the study were that most teachers indicated that staff development was important to them in that it helped them gain knowledge and skills related to their work. For them, it was essential in that it enabled them to become better teachers which were also beneficial to learners of different needs. Head teachers concurred with teachers in their view by saying that the bottom-line for conducting staff development for teachers was help them become effective practictioners. They also avered that staff development was necessary for all teachers in the light of the dynamic nature of education in general and the demands of the teaching profession in particular. Accordingly, the study concluded that Based on the above findings, the researchers concluded that teachers felt that staff development was of paramount importance to them as educators as it enhances quality education. The researchers mainly recommended that all school stakeholders in Zimbabwe and elsewhere should work hand in glove in supporting the professional development of teachers considering its indispensable significance in general and from the teachers' perspective in particular.

Keywords: Teachers, significance, professional development, primary schools, quality education.

INTRODUCTION

With the start of the 21st Century, many societies have engaged in serious and promising developments including educational reforms. Taking from developed countries, many developing countries are also increasingly acknowledging that teachers are not only one of the 'variables' that need to be changed in order to improve their education systems, but they are also the most significant change agents in these reforms [1]. This double role of teachers in educational reforms; being both subjects and objects of change makes the field of teacher professional development a growing and challenging area, as well as one that has received major attention during the past few years [2]. This paradigm shift and new emphasis has been welcomed by teachers themselves as it represents a much needed appreciation of their work, and also promotes the concept of teaching as a profession of integrity [3, 4].

McHugh (ibid) reverberated by Mishra [5] claim that in order to survive in today's modern ociety, staff development in education is 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 teachers to adapt and develop within and outside the school system. Several authorities (e.g; [6-9] acknowledge that throughout the history of education, numerous theories and issues have been emphasised as important factors within the school system, but the need for the professional development of teachers came to the forefront since the 1960's.

In recent years, literature related to staff development has received widespread attention in research since the turn of the Century, largely because of the crucial significance the professional development of employees has in any organization [10]. This is particularly so in today's knowledge village where information and technology are rapidly changing as a

result of continued enlightenment and globalization [11]. Darling- Hammond & Richardson [12] and Steyn (ibid) concur that in the context of education, several studies confirm that educators can play a key role in making a difference in the general quality of education and that investing in teachers' knowledge and skills may have more positive effects than investing in any other physical educational resources.

In many African countries including Zimbabwe, the professional development of teachers is highly regarded and all schools, both primary and secondary, are urged to implement it for the benefit of the educators and learners. For example, in Zimbabwe, the government's concern for staff development featured in the speech of the current Minister of Primary and Secondary Education who stated that the ministry is planning a massive staff development programme for all teachers in order to improve their efficiency and the general general quality of education [13]. Writing on '*the journey to becoming a teaching professional in South Africa and Zimbabwe'*, Mukeredzi [14] also averred that the fact that the professional development of teachers largely focuses on improving the teaching and learning enterprise justifies the tremendous effort and expenditure that communities and nations should invest.

It is against the above background that teachers' views on the significance of their professional development in selected primary schools of Hwange district in Matabeleland North province in Zimbabwe were interrogated. Hwange is an administrative district in north western Zimbabwe in Southern Africa; bordering the countries of Botswana and the Republic of Zambia, with a population of 100 192 people comprising of 49% males and 51% females [15].

Statement of the problem

Notwithstanding the general significance of staff development in any organisation, the important question is 'do primary school teachers in the area under study acknowledge this significance in the context of their professional development?

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' views regarding the significance of their continual professional development in selected Zimbabwean primary schools.
In the context of the above purpose, the following specific research questions were tendered to guide this study;

- What do primary school teachers understand by their professional development?
- How do primary school teachers view the significance of their professional development?
- Why is staff development conducted in the primary school from head teachers' perspective?

Significance of the Study

The researchers considered that this study would be mostly significant to primary school educators as its findings are expected to expose their perceptions on the significance of their continual professional development with the hope of fostering more positive views. In addition, it is envisaged that the study findings will have ripple effects to other education stakeholders including learners, parents, the community, School Development Committess (SDCs) and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) in general. It is thus, anticipated that other education stakeholder will benefit as educators' positive views regarding their professional development are generally expected to promote school effectiveness and quality education in the primary school sector.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
Conceptualising 'School Staff Development'

Staff development is generally viewed as 'a continual process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in one's profession [16, 17]. In the context of education, Sparks & Loucks-Horsley (2009) posit that it refers to those processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills and values of school employees.

As put by the Manual of Policies and Procedures on Staff Development [18];

Staff development in education generally entails continuing career professional development; which is an ongoing programme of education and training planned to enable educators 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 and enactment of new legislation.

In the same vein, Halliday [19] elucidates that;

Staff development in the teaching fraternity involves the continuous acquisition of skills and knowledge, both for the teaching staff and other school personnel, career advancement encompassing all types of facilitated learning opportunities, ranging from programme to subject meetings, workshops, seminars, conferences and informal learning opportunities. It comprises a planned process whereby the effectiveness of school staff, collectively or individually, is enhanced in response to new knowledge, ideas and changing educational circumstances in order to improve directly or indirectly the quality of pupils' education and development.

The professional development of teachers has precisely been described as an organized effort to change teachers' expertise with the expected result of improving their teaching practice and student learning.

It involves planned activities within and outside schools that are meant to assist teachers in attaining knowledge, new skills, attitudes, values and dispositions; thereby gaining increased levels of professional competence for the benefit of learners [20-22].

Significance of the Professional Development of Teachers

The underlying principle for staff development is conceptualized within the context of its indispensable significance within every organisation. For Brennen (ibid), staff development programmes are considered an economically viable way to improve institutional outcomes and the continuous growth and development of professionals' knowledge and skills is an essential part of improvement initiatives in all professions. This implies that the teaching profession is not an exception. Boyle & Boyle [23] contend that school staff development is about improving the efficiency and quality of pupil learning and should, therefore, focus on improving or extending the ability of teachers to undertake specified roles in relation to the delivery of the curriculum and the work of the school in general.

Steyn [24] asserts that "the effectiveness of any educational reform largely depends on the quality of teachers, hence, the need for school staff development". For Williams [25] cited in Doll [26], "staff development in education should aim at relating the needs of teaching staff, ancillary staff and those of pupils, with those of the school within which they function". Thus, school staff development efforts should meaningfully be channelled towards school goals which are largely characterised by the school's efforts to achieve effectiveness and student achievement. In the same vein, Showers [27] ricocheted by Sparks and Loucks- Horsley (ibid) adds that that teacher professional development is generally intended to improve student learning and achievement as well as the general school effectiveness through the enhanced teacher performance.

Brennen (ibid) contends that as teachers have the most direct, sustained contact with learners, as well as considerable control over what is taught and the general school climate, it is reasonably assumed that improving their knowledge and expertise is one of the most critical steps to improving student performance and the general quality of education. To resound the sentiments, Rout and Behera [28] affirm that good teachers constitute the foundation of good schools and improving their skills and knowledge is one of the most important investments of time and money that local, national and international communities can make in education.

As concurred by a number of authorities, the professional development of teachers is very essential as it inculcates curiosity, motivation, and new ways of thinking and delivering their teaching functions (Johnson, & Golombek, 2002; Lewis, 2011; McLaughlin & Oberman, 2012; Zakaria & Daud, 2012). Lieberman (2008: 107) is also of the view that among other reasons, teachers' professional development is essentially important in that the demands of the classroom are continuously changing; and teachers must, therefore, be prepared to meet the ever-changing needs of their students.

To further substantiate the significance of the professional development of teachers, Desimone *et al.*, [29] studies in Europe reported that the European Union (EU) Member States are very keen to ensure the promotion of quality education and training systems; and accordingly takes responsibility for stimulating and supporting teacher professional development policies and practices. Thus, the foregoing shows that there is need for concerted efforts in supporting teachers' professional development as it is central in fostering school effectiveness and quality of education.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted within the qualitative methodology framework which entails a situated activity that locates the observer in the world and consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that makes the world into a series of social representations [30, 31]. Consistent with qualitative methothodology, the study adopted a case study design which essentially focuses on understanding social phenomena and its dynamics present within specific social settings [32, 33]. This study used the multiple case study design of two selected primary schools in Hwange district.

The case study design was considered appropriate because it is concerned with a rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case while it also studies phenomena in their natural settings [34, 35]. Thus, in the present study, the design enabled the researchers to get a rich and vivid picture of teachers' views on their professional development. It is envisaged, therefore, that the participants were free to share their views as both interviews and FGDs were conducted in their natuaral environment, namely, the primary schools. Accordinly, the population of the study comprised senior primary school teachers and head teachers in Hwange district.

A Purposive sample of 20 (n=20) was considered from two schools in the area under study and the purposive sampling method was preferred as it essentially involved choosing the most qualifying individuals to serve as participants; which ensured that the entire sample's elements had similar characteristics who were also rich in the sought information [36-38]. Generally, teachers are considered experts in their own right [39], hence, engaging senior teachers and school heads ensured that both groups of participants well qualified as study participants as they were both well

experienced in staff development practices which, therefore, gave credibility to their views.

Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used as research techniques to gather data and the researchers personally administered the Interview guides with 2 head teachers and moderated FGDs with 18 senior teachers at the two research sites. The participants were drawn from the research sites in equal proportions (i.e. 1 head teacher and 9 senior teachers per school). The use of two data research gathering techniques served to compensate for each other's weaknesses while ensuring rigour in the data generation process [31, 40, 41]. Verbatim findings (excerpts) generated from the participants were presented as text data in harmony with qualitative case inquiries [42, 35, 43].

To add meaning to the findings, interpretive phenomenological data analysis (IPDA) which is a form of Content analysis (CA) was used and was noted to be appropriate in that the data had been gathered through qualitative media, namely interviews and FGDs [44-46]. The researchers acknowldge that even though the findings applied to the research sites in particular and the area under study in general, their generilisability to the rest of the primary schools in Zimbabwe is somewhat negligible; which they, however, found to be consistent with qualitative case inquiries [47, 48, 43].

STUDY FINDINGS
Data generated through use of different research techniques were presented separately in harmony with Hutchinson (iid) and O' Leary [49] who advocated for data differntiation based on data sources. In order to get detailed views from participants, the researchers also captured verbatim data in order to accurately report findings [50].

From the two FGDs conducted, teachers gave several definitions of teacher professional development as revealed from the excerpts that follow;
- "As far as I am concerned, teacher professionaldevelopment is about us as teachers coming together in order to share ideas on how to improve our teaching";
- "Teacher professional development entals formally organised learning activities for teachers which are meant to promote effective teaching";
- "For me, it involves the way we gain knowledge and skills about teaching and other ways of handling school children";
- "Though I cant give a precise definition, I think it is about helping each other as teachers in areas of need regarding our work and growth";
- "Our professional development involves us work-shoping each other at school or outside in areas that are relevant to our work with learners";

- "Since there are often changes in the school system, I teacher professional development is about the way we enlighten each other as teachers on certain areas of importance and new to us";
- "I think it is encompasses all programmes that are meant to equip teachers with teaching skills in specific subjects of the school curriculum or even some specific topics that we teach";";

From teachers' perspective, staff development is an array of activities or programmes for teachers which are meant to enhance their knowledge and teaching skills. In other words, teacher professional development involved the sharing of ideas relating to the teaching profession which is meant to improve the teachers' performance [51, 4, 19].

During the different FGDs, most teachers were of the view that their professional development was important to them as teachers in that it helped them gain knowledge and skills related to their work. Some went on to say that it was essential in that it enabled them to become better and efficient teachers; which was subsequently beneficial to the learners of different needs.

The following were some of the notable excerpts from senior teachers;
- "I think staff development in important in that it helps us to share information as teachers on different issues regarding our work and other issues relevant to our profession";
- "As far as I am concerned, staff development is important because it gives us teachers an opportunity to meet and share ideas about best practices in teaching as well as other tasks expected of us";
- "I think that staff development is the engine of our work as teachers because without it, we can become old-fashioned, outdated and irrelevant particularly in the face of so many educational changes including the introduction of the new curriculum";
- "Through staff development, I have come to understand several issues that were difficult in my work before. In that regard, I learnt a lot from other more qualified and experienced teachers";
- "I view staff development as important to us as well as the pupils we teach. I say so because it helps us to grow as teachers which then benefits the learners whom we will teach with improved expertise";
- "As far as I am concerned, the most important thing about staff development is that it helps us to continue learning which keeps us abreast with new information pertaining to our work";
- "I think staff development is important in that it helps us to update each other as teachers on new ideas regarding our day to day work as teachers. I

am sure that my colleagues will agree with me that staff development is important now more than ever before because of the recently introduced new curriculum which requires that we learn and apply new things; such as interpretation of new syllabi and the teaching of new learning areas";

- "Staff development is crucial in that it helps us revisit all that we leant at college as we grapple with how best to apply it. More importantly, however, we also learn new things as without staff development, we can be left behind by the wave of changes in the teaching profession".

Many of the participants concurred that staff development was important in as much as it assisted them to remain relevant and up to date with the demands of their profession, as well as the expectations of the ministry and employer. In other words, the generality of senior teachers felt that staff development made them better teachers who remain up to date and relevant in today's global knowledge village [52, 53, 13].

Regarding why primary schools conducted staff development for teachers, head teachers had somewhat similar responses to those given by senior teachers. The head teachers generally indicated that the bottom-line for conducting staff development for teachers was to improve their knowledge and pedagogic skills so that they become effective practitioners. Individually, some head teachers had more to say on why their schools conducted staff development for teachers; as shown by different excerpts from in-depth interviews;

- "We conduct staff development for teachers at this school mainly to help them gain new knowledge and skills which are relevant to their work and appropriate for their personal development as professionals";
- "At this school, we have professional development for teachers so that we give them an opportunity to share ideas and challenges regarding what they do day in day out with learners. These ideas may be known by some of the teachers so it will be a matter of 'reviving' what they know, while for some, it will be new information. In most cases, however, we focus on new ideas and challenges related to teaching and learning so that we boost our teachers' expertise and confidence in their work";
- "In my view, we conduct staff development for our teachers at this school so that they keep abreast with the fast changing information which their pupils are also accessing from different electronic-learning media such as the Internet. We find this to be in line with the notion that learning for the teacher should be a continuous process rather than an end in itself";
- "The professional development of teachers is important in that it helps teachers to keep on upgrading themselves in content areas that are new and ever changing within the teaching profession"
- "In my view, without staff development, I think our teachers can end up teaching outdated information as well as becoming irrelevant in this 21st Century where knowledge is dynamic in nature";
- "As far as our school is concerned, staff development for teachers aims at helping them to become better at their work. In other words, our school conducts teachers' professional development with the major aim of sharpening their teaching skills. This helps the school to have good teachers at the end of the day who are capable of promoting improvement in learners' performance";

In addition, head teachers concurred that staff development was necessary for all teachers, whether they were senior or junior teachers, considering that the learning journey of a teacher is endless in the light of the dynamic nature of education in general and the demands of the teaching profession in particular [54, 55].

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Based on the above findings, the researchers concluded that;

- Both senior teachers and head teachers were of the general view that staff development is of paramount importance to educators
- School staff development was critical in as much as it enhanced teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which makes them more effective in their work with leaners;
- The professional development of teachers was significant in the face of the ever-changing teaching and learning landscape including the demands of the school new curriculum

The above conclusions may be substantiated by Lipowsky and Rzejak's [56] research work at the University of Kassel which revealed that that recent studies in both the developed and developing world generally indicate that school staff development is crucial as it serves to produce better teachers who are capable of improving the general effectiveness of the school system and quality education.

In the light of the above findings and conclusions, the following recommendations were submitted;

- As classroom teachers sounded very passionate about their professional development, school authorities should always involve them in the design of the school staff development plan (SSDP) as well as its implementation in order to foster the effectiveness of staff development programmes;
- Primary schools need to reward teachers for active participation in staff development programmes

which results in improved service delivery. Such rewards may include provision of acknowledgement letters or mini-certificates to teachers concerned, prioritizing them for school leadership positions and recommending them for promotions where appropriate;

- As a way of promoting the effectiveness of staff development, primary schools need to have pool of facilitators through keeping a database of teachers who majored in different subject areas at college who will be given responsibilities to facilitate different sessions based on their expertise;

- Teachers should be given opportunities to participate in staff development at different levels, such as at schools, cluster, district, provincial and national levels to enable teachers to share wider teaching experiences and standards which would be more beneficial to learners;

- In spite of the loaded school time table largely as a result of the adoption of the new curriculum, staff development should be included on the morning school time-table rather than have it simply as part of an afternoon activity as it consequently leads to passive participation by teachers due to fatigue and also rushing to plan for the next day's lessons;

- Primary schools should strive to provide a conducive environment as well as the necessary resources particularly stationery needed to promote effective staff development programmes;

- The school management, School Development Committees and Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education work hand in glove in supporting the professional development of teachers;

- As this study was based on selected Zimbabwean primary schools, further research studies in this area may need to be conducted in the secondary school sector as well as other parts of the country in order to have a broader picture of teachers' views on the significance of their professional development.

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