Teachers' perceptions on professional development at selected rural schools in the Ongha Circuit, Namibia

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Abstract

This study investigated teachers' perception regarding professional development in Ongha Circuit which is located in Ohangwena Region, Namibia. The rationale of the study was to obtain the views of teachers towards the professional development. The research was mixed method approach therefore, a descriptive survey was conducted in Ongha Circuit. Five schools were selected randomly and a sample of 20 teachers who had previous exposure to professional development were selected purposively from the five schools. Data was collected using interviews and document analysis through analysing the school records on teachers who attended workshop or who completed in-service training and census record. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and descriptive analysis. The study found out that teachers view and perceive professional development differently. Teachers had different views, feelings, attitudes and suggestions on how staff development should be managed to impact positively on learners' performance. The study recommended that there is need to have a proper and systematic

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planning of teachers' professional to consolidate the new knowledge and sustain the changes made in teaching practice.

Introduction

Ever since Namibia obtained independence in 1990, the education system has been fixated on raising learner's performance. The Namibian education system have witnessed the coming and going of many initiatives designed to achieve high learners performance through the restructuring of schools and programs and the development of standards, curricula, teaching materials, and standardized assessments. Yet, in spite of the billions of dollars spent, learner's performance has been affected very little. The main reason for such failure is that too little attention has been paid to what actually goes on in the classroom. The purpose of the study was to refocus the attention on the classroom, specifically on the urgency of providing teacher professional development that changes teacher behaviours in ways that lead to improvement in learners performance. According to Thomson and Kaufmann (2013) learners' achievement usually comes from the recommendations that came from formal research conducted by educators. As such this research, which is also carried out by an educator will contribute positively to the improvement of teaching and learning and leaner achievement.

Literature review

Definition of professional development

Although the Namibian government abolished teachers Diplomas replacing them with University degrees, while all teaching colleges were absorbed by University of Namibia, research has shown that formal teacher education has changed very little over the years in Namibia, despite a steady stream of new educational theories, constant refinement and updating of degree plans at Colleges of Education (Namibian Vision 2030). Ipinge (2013), argued that, in Namibia, the Education Sector still grapples with major challenges in delivering quality learning outcomes at all levels. Grade 12s learners consistently perform below expectation. Failure and dropout rates are high despite the good endeavour by the Namibian Government to provide distinctive education. The researcher who is also a rural schoolteacher observed that rural teachers juggle an overwhelming number of unfamiliar issues, such as classroom management, lack of instructional materials, curriculum, local culture and operations, test preparation and administration, state standards, parent relations and living conditions in the rural areas left to themselves, rural teachers may develop counterproductive behaviours and may fail to have professional growth. Cranston (2016) argues that notable improvements in education almost never take place in the absence of professional development as it is a key to meeting today's educational demands. It has also been noted that there are published studies on the views of educators about the perception of teachers on staff development in other countries, but there is a gap on researches carried out in Namibia since there is no documented study carried out to provide evidence-based data on the perceptions of teachers on professional development. Hence, this research

ought to investigate the views, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, ideas of teachers on professional development in selected rural schools in Ongha circuit asural schools face many challenges despite the numerous attempts by the Namibian government to improve the education system in the rural areas.

Cook (2015, p. 3) defines professional development as "the process of improving staff's skills and competencies needed to produce outstanding educational results for learners". According to Harding (2018) professional development can be defined as teachers' on-going learning to improve the way they teach and it occurs in both formal and informal ways. Cook (2015) also stated that professional development is a platform, which enables teachers to coach one another and work together to analyse new teaching techniques, which often connects new teachers with experienced colleagues. Teacher professional development can take place in a formal or non-formal structure and usually features a combination of presentations, hands-on workshops and collaborative teamwork that are often organised in advance by school and school district leadership. According to Raman and Rathakrishnan (2018) teaching is like any other profession such as engineering or accounting where teachers needs to be given an opportunity to select what they would like to learn from a variety of research-based ideas about improving learners' learning. Shen and Shariff (2016) noted that teachers' professional development is not a one day event or session but is a long-term, life-long activity for teachers. Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun (2015) supported Raman and Rathakrishnan (2018) who argued that teachers' professional development is a continuous process whereby teachers study and gather information about the effects of changes in their teaching

approach. According to Joyce and Calhoun (2016) teacher professional development aims to achieve important goals such as to deepen teachers' knowledge of the subjects being taught, sharpen teaching skills in the classroom, keep up with developments in the individual fields as well as to generate and contribute new knowledge to the profession and increase the ability to monitor learners' work in order to provide constructive feedback to learners.

Aims of professional development

In Namibia the goal of teacher professional development is bring a lifelong learning in the teaching profession and to bridge the gaps identified in learner's achievement. Joyce et al., (2015) highlighted that the content of professional development should revolve around the subject matter, pedagogical weaknesses within the organization, and measurement of learners performance. Professional development should be viewed in terms of knowledge and skills development. Darling-Hammond (2013) explained that professional development should aim at enhancing the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of teachers in order to improve learners learning and this knowledge is related to the general teaching work such as assessments, classrooms organisation and management and teaching strategies. Joyce and Calhoun (2016) devised some 'guidelines for success' that should be used when planning and implementing professional development opportunities for teachers. These include to recognise change as being both an individual and an organisational process, think big, but start small, work in groups to maintain support, include procedures for feedback on results, provide

continuous follow-up, support and pressure as well as to integrate programmes. Evidence shows that professional development has an impact on teachers' beliefs and behaviour. As Shen and Shariff (2016) in a study involving Norwegian teachers found out that teachers' professional preparation and development have a great effect on defining teachers' goals for their learners, and these goals in turn affect the teachers' behaviour in the classrooms and schools. 'Cognitively Guided Instruction Project' (CGI), gives strong evidence that experienced teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and pedagogical content beliefs can be modified by professional development programmes and that such changes are associated with changes in their classroom instruction and learners achievement as a noted by Chan et al., (2018). However, research also indicated that some people view professional development as time consuming and unnecessary overload. They argue that professional development cannot change teachers since teacher change can is a linear process as demonstrated by Joyce et al., (2015). This belief is reiterated by Harding (2018) who argued that there is a reciprocal causative relationship that exists between teacher beliefs, learning and changes in practice. Darling-Hammond (2013) further explained that "change is driven by personal beliefs, interest, motivations and social/historical contexts and processes rather than solely through rational and logical accumulation of knowledge and skills via participation in a learning activity.

Professional development practises

A lot of research has been done by researchers regarding the features, themes or generally on how teacher professional development should be contacted. Based on these researches, issues such as collaboration, on site, decentralisation, content focus, duration and active learning are important to teacher professional development. Collaboration of teacher professional development happens when two or more schools, including the community members and administrators work together (Chan et al., 2018). According to Darling-Hammond (2013) most operative professional development occurs when there are significant interfaces, not only among teachers themselves, but also between teachers, administrators, parents and other community members. According to Joyce et al., (2015, p.151) collaboration in school also increases efficiency as it eliminates duplication and removes redundancy between teachers. She also added that through collaboration activities are co-ordinated and responsibilities are shared in complementary ways. Teacher professional development should be decentralised to be done in schools instead of having it done at circuit or regional level so that all staff members will benefit from it. Cook (2015) argued that the practice based or site/school based professional development approach is premised on the understanding that learning occurs within the normal working milieu and is largely managed by the educators in order to fulfil their immediate and specific professional development needs. Cranston (2016) argued that the site base approach to teacher professional development is effective when there are supportive mechanisms from the principals, head of department and the teachers involved. Chan et al. (2018) were also of the view that professional development should be decentralised to the lowest levels for it

to be tailor made to the teacher's needs. Furthermore, teachers' preferred professional development that is content focused to their areas of specialty.

Methodology

The study used a mixed method approach as a research design in exploring the teachers' perceptions of professional development in schools found at Ongha circuit in Ohangwena Region, Namibia. A mixed method research design was used because the investigation was focused on generating an understanding of the research topic from the teachers' perspective. Further, it was used as it places great importance on the teachers' individual attribute to their experience in the context of professional development. This model sanctioned in-depth examination of the teachers' opinions of their professional development experiences.

The population of this research consisted of 200 teachers in Ongha circuit Ohangwena Region, Namibia who were currently exposed to staff development teaching. A sample size of 20 participants, ten male teachers and ten female teachers was used for this study.

A non-probability sampling technique of purposive sampling was used to select participants. The study used semi structured interviews and documentary analysis as instruments of data collection. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic explanations and quantitative using in-depth descriptive analysis. An interview guide was used in semi-structured interviews and the guide provided a list of memory prompts of areas to be covered. In / for the research semi-structured interviews were used since it permits collection of detailed and individual information from the participants. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argued that one of the reasons for using interviews as a research instrument is the ability to gather

information that answers the research questions effectively. The interview was carried out in three phases and all three generally focused on getting answers on the research questions raised. The researcher used phases so that he could effectively interview participants and get valid information without rushing. This also increased the validity and credibility of the research.

On documentary analysis, the researcher used schools records kept regarding information about teachers who have attended workshops, training as well as professional development courses. The researcher requested copies of records of attendance of professional development courses and the teachers' job description of those who participated. This helped in obtaining general information and an understanding of teacher professional development courses offered to educators and its importance to the educators' professional development needs. A review of documents was done and an analysis through coding and theme development was conducted. Creswell (2008) explained that these types of documents "provide valuable information helping researchers understand phenomena in qualitative studies as they assist researchers to identify key issues or problems in the area being examined". The data was analysed using thematic analysis to evaluate with analytical or statistical tools to discover useful information (Grant 2020).

The researcher observed all ethical consideration ie protecting participants from harm, ensuring the confidentiality of research data and deception of subjects, confidentiality etc. Using the two research instruments increased the validity and reliability of the research project since the weakness of one instrument was complemented by the other instrument (triangulation). The

researcher also used different phases to interview participants so that he would have ample time to gather information. He also ensured validity and reliability by gaining the confidence of respondents through assuring confidentiality and by employing respondent validation.

Results and Discussion

Demographic data of participants showed that most research participants (60%) have six to ten years working experience. On the one hand, less than 30% of research participants have work experience between one and five years. Only 10% of research participants have working experience of above 15 years. Most research participants were holders of a Bachelors' Degree in Education, thus contributing 70% of research population. The below a table shows the teacher qualification.

Table 4.2: Qualifications of research participants

Qualification	Number
Diploma in education	4
Degree in education	14
Master in education	2
PhD	0

Only 20% of the research population were holders of Diploma in Education. The below information revealed that teachers of different age, experience and qualification perceive professional development programmes differently.
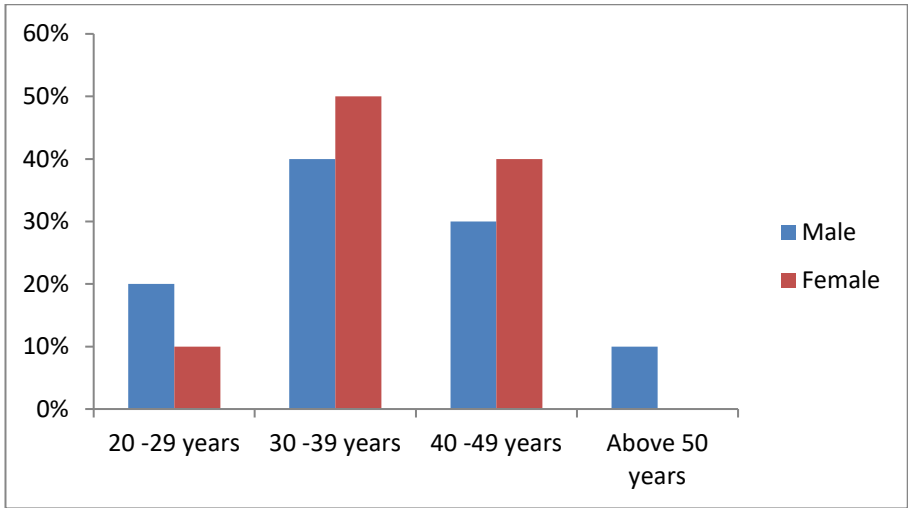
Table 4. 3: Age structure of participants

Table indicates that most of the research participants where within the age of 30 and 39 years. There was no female participant above the age of 50 years.

The documentary analysis on school documents revealed that Ongha circuit have been attending professional development workshops and showed that teachers have been educated in various professional development courses in the areas related to the revised Namibian Curriculum. Documents reviewed showed that since the adoption of ICT Policy of 2007 and the new curriculum, teachers attended professional development programmes focused that focused on implementing new curriculum. Furthermore, teachers attend professional development courses on ICT integration in teaching. The professional development was facilitated by external providers and most of them were donor funded. Professional development programmes attended by teachers included Postgraduate courses and

Literacy Professional Development Programme. The table below showed the professional programmes attended by teachers.

Table 4.1: Professional development programmes attended by teachers

Behaviour management courses	Attendance
Postgraduate courses	20
Literacy Professional Development Programme	5
Assessment for learning	35
ICT integration in teaching	10

Data gathered form interviews revealed that teachers had different perceptions on the way they view staff development programmes. 80% of the participants revealed that staff development played a fundamental role in the education sector as it equips teachers with all the necessary skills, expertise, and knowledge on how to impart knowledge to learners. This is in line of the research done by National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century (2000), which postulates that teacher professional development aims to achieve important goals such as to deepen teachers' knowledge of the subjects being taught, sharpen teaching skills in the classroom. Among these participants one participant said that professional development programmes are important as they help teachers to become better at planning their time and staying organised and this will automatically made teachers more efficient in lesson delivery. Another participant echoed that staff development allow teachers to share knowledge

in a more profound way especially on this ever-changing world. This has been supported by Thomas Cheok (2017, p.4) who argued that professional development is a key to meeting today's educational demands. Another participant said staff development make teachers realise or evolve a strong sense of themselves. The participant argued that when the teacher is staff developed he/she develops self-esteem and becomes motivated in the profession. Two participants state that professional development is good as it allowed teachers to keep up to date on curriculum standards and the latest teaching strategies. This is in line with how Shen and Shariff (2016) viewed professional development since they argued that it enhances the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of teachers in order to improve learners learning and this knowledge is related to the general teaching work such as assessments, classrooms organisation and management and teaching strategies. However, 20% of the participants were against professional development. One participant said it's a mere waste of time since the ministry is overemphasising on these sessions leaving learners unattended in the classrooms. Another participant said he hated these programmes because of the way they are handled. The participant argued the programmes are time consuming and the same time he wanted the programmes to be more collaborative and decentralised so that they can be done in schools. According to Joyce and Calhoun (2016) issues such as collaboration, school based training, decentralisation, content focus, duration and active learning are important to teacher professional development. The researcher observed that the perceptions of teachers differ according to the type of professional development offered which included school based professional

development, Collaborative professional development, Decentralised professional development, Content focused professional development, and professional development that involve active learning.

Table 4.6: Views on how professional development should be contacted.

Theme	Rank
On-site professional development (School based)	1
Collaboration	2
Decentralisation	3
Active learning	4
Duration	5
Content focused	6

Six participants who preferred the site-based approach to teacher professional development argued that it is the most effective since it forces educational managers to pay attention to professional needs of their teachers for that particular school in question of participants. Some perceive Collaborative Professional Development as the best way since it gives teachers more opportunities to learn from each other's practice as teachers discuss their teaching and experience during the programme. This is supported by the research of Darling-Hammond (2013) who conducted a comprehensive research examining 1egarding the entire landscape of professional development research and concluded that the most effective and efficient form of teacher professional development is through collaboration.

Decentralisation of professional development was considered to be a platform to prepare teachers and head of departments for managerial post. 75% of the participants had a perception that decentralisation of professional development activities enhances teaching quality on account of innovation needs of particular school. One participant commented that when professional development is decentralised, school principals and head of departments will focus on issues that will enhance the result of their school. Furthermore, teachers get the opportunity to develop their talents by taking initiative which will also make them ready for managerial positions. 70% of the participants were of the view that professional development should involve activities for participants to be active learners. One participant commented that professional development should involve active participation by teachers such that they increase their critical thinking skills, thereby enabling teachers to show their initiative". This in line with the findings of Joyce et al. (2015) who concluded that active professional development includes opportunities to observe and be observed teaching. 68% of the research participants noted that they prefer professional development held over a long period of time rather than a once off activity as it gives opportunities to learn new things and most importantly allows the teacher to relate prior knowledge to new experiences. 60% of the research participants were of the view that professional development should be content focused should aiming at enhancing the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of teachers in order to improve learners learning. This is line with the research finding of Joyce and Calhoun (2016), who concluded that

professional development is an opportunity to enhance the training and the life-long learning for teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After analysing data collected from the interviews and school documents concluded that professional development if effectively handled and managed, they contribute in improving staff's skills and competencies needed to produce outstanding educational results for learners and also enable teachers to coach one another and work together to analyse new teaching techniques which can improve the way they teach The research also concluded that a lot has to be done for schools to effectively implement professional both at school and circuit level.

The researcher came out with different recommendations. The study makes the recommendation that there is need to have a proper and systematic planning of teachers' professional development programmes to prevent professional development overload, ensure coherence with previous professional development experiences and to consolidate the new knowledge and sustain the changes made in teaching practice. Furthermore, schools need to focus on strengthening its professional learning communities to provide teachers the platform for continuous learning opportunities where they can learn from each other. The researcher also recommends the need to do more school based professional development so that all members of the educational sector benefit.

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