RESEARCH ARTICLE

The South African Council for Educators point system policy in promoting teacher professional development: Critical analysis of the case in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The professional development of teachers has been an interesting area for educational researchers. The educational transformation initiated in South Africa since 1994 due to the new democratic dispensation necessitated a process of reskilling the entire South African teaching corp. For schools to achieve their goals of effective teaching and improve learning, professional development should be at the top of the pedagogical agenda. Drawing from teacher professional development theory, the study explored how the Council for Educators' point system policy functions and whether the policy promotes teacher professional development. For the researcher to explore and understand the views of participants, a qualitative approach, which was analytic, descriptive and interpretive, was deployed. Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study show that there is a discrepancy between what the policy aspires to do and the teachers' praxis. In addition, the findings conclude that in the main, most teachers in this study demonstrate inadequate comprehension despite the fact that the policy has been in operation for five years. Based on these findings, it can confidently be argued that the policy does not enhance teacher professional development.

Introduction

The South African educational climate has been in a perpetual state of transition since the dawn of the democratic era. It remains characterised by spurts of change, followed by revisions and adaptations to that change. Some of these changes include the amalgamation of 19 segregated education departments into nine provincial departments, the implementation of the outcomes-based education (OBE) policy where learning areas replaced the traditional subjects, and the change in semantics from critical outcomes to specific outcomes (Schmidt, 2017). Additional policy changes were also implemented such as the National Curriculum Statement, which later became the refined curriculum policy (Du Plessis & Marais, 2015). Govender (2018) agrees that since the mid-1990s, there has been a plethora of educational policy changes in South Africa.

The school environment, including school culture and climate, is very dynamic and this calls for continual transformation of educational policy, curriculum and competencies required from teachers and other role players. These changes are requisite to prepare learners for life and the world of work that is fast changing (Stoll & Kools, 2017). Teachers are preparing learners to enter the adult world,

but is the teacher's three- to four-year knowledge acquired during training adequate to prepare learners for a world that has already changed by the time the teacher has completed his/her studies? It is no longer possible to know in advance the kinds of knowledge and skills learners will need when they enter adult life. In light of this, it becomes harder to know what expertise and current knowledge teachers need to have in order to equip learners for the world out there. In agreement with this, Kearney and Maher (2019) state that for professional teachers to be effective, they must become career-long learners of more sophisticated pedagogies and technologies.

Teachers need to have mastery of their subjects as well as knowledge of their ever-changing learners and always remain students and active learners. Section 48 of the National Policy on Teacher Education argues that all teachers need to enhance their skills, not merely qualifications, for the delivery of the new curriculum (Republic of South Africa, 2011a). This paradox reflects the difference between education and training. Education provides one with the ability to think, innovate and find solutions, whereas training merely equips one to do the same thing better (Scott, 2020).

Understanding the South African Council for Educators (SACE)

SACE is a statutory body that was constituted to uphold and strengthen the teaching profession. This body is governed by the SACE Act 31 of 2000 (Republic of South Africa, 2011b). The Council is responsible for developing a framework of professional standards for the South African teaching profession. The objectives of this body are to register teachers, promote their professional development and defend the ethical and professional standards. Sayed, Kanjee and Nkomo (2013) contend that the SACE Act ensures that quality standards of teachers are upheld. The introduction of SACE has the backing of the Department of Basic Education, the nine provincial education departments, unions and other stakeholders in education. SACE is also responsible for quality assurance in the teaching profession. In line with this, the SACE Act, the continuous professional teacher development implementation plan was approved in November 2012. The programme is responsible for regulating and promulgating the continual professional development of teachers. In light of this, this regulatory body had to ensure that this upskilling did in fact occur. SACE implemented the Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) point system to do just that. Unfortunately, due to the South African legacy of apartheid, any form of appraisal or evaluation has been viewed with distrust and apprehension. This premise provides the lens through which all current initiatives are viewed. For this reason, the purpose of this study was to explore how teachers understand the point system policy and its relation to their continuous professional development.

Theorising teacher professional development

Professional development is about supporting teachers in building their pedagogical content knowledge and enhancing the quality of their teaching (Besser, Leiss & Blum, 2020). To Noonan (2019), teacher professional development involves shared practices, with many teachers inhabiting the same learning environment and encountering the same material. Further, the advent and adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) in the South African education system demands teacher professional development in digital literacy (Dlamini & Mbatha, 2018). These views are corroborated by Jää-Aro, Josefsson, Lundmark and Mutvei Berre (2020) when they posit that the increase use of ICT in schools to support learners has placed a new demand on teachers.

The descriptions of the concept by these scholars encompass the crucial aspect of professional development, which is the learning of teachers. Jita and Mokhele (2014) maintain that South Africa faces the challenge of finding effective professional development that translates into students' learning.

De Corte (2016) maintains that teachers need to have adaptive competences. This refers to the flexible application of skills and knowledge in varying contexts which teachers require. The concept of teachers' learning also refers to teachers' pedagogical content knowledge. Deng (2018) refers to this pedagogical knowledge as a special kind of knowledge that embodies all aspects of the content, including pedagogical representation and strategies for instruction. Deng also argues for the inclusion

of learners' prior knowledge and learning difficulties. The link between pedagogical content knowledge and professional skills in the role of the teacher is imperative (Makovec, 2018). This argument is important because South Africa has gone through a process of curriculum policy changes. These changes overwhelm the teachers who are at the forefront of curriculum delivery. For this reason, Shalem and De Clercq (2019) argue that historical factors of poor schooling and unequal training systems have contributed to the demonstration of weak professional knowledge.

A significant aspect of continuous professional teacher development is the translation of theoretical knowledge into a practical situation. This speaks directly to the theory-practice divide. The gap between these concepts has to be narrowed to ensure an efficient and effective continuous professional teacher development system. Munhar (2019) asserts that in spite of all the literature on the importance of narrowing the theoretical-practical gap, the existing unsuitable blend of theoretical, practical and experiential knowledge calls for teacher professional development.

Statement of the problem

The education system in South Africa has gone through various phases of curriculum transformation, and this has impacted negatively on the academic outcomes (Bell, Goga, Mondliwa & Roberts, 2018). A further challenge is that teachers have not realised that the continuous professional teacher development system as a policy imperative is not an option, but an obligation (Gumede & Biyase, 2016). Schools in the 21st century also have to respond to the challenges of globalisation. Technological innovations are so fast paced that teachers cannot keep up. They are expected to engage in a number of advanced pedagogical practices that require continuous upskilling. They also have to contend with administrative processes such as recording, reporting and assessment techniques that have changed drastically. This transformation has necessitated the professional teacher. The Department of Basic Education considers continuous professional teacher development as a solution to these challenges (Republic of South Africa, 2011a).

To ensure that teachers keep pace with the changes in the education sector and to encourage professional development, the SACE point system was introduced (SACE, 2016). Teachers were expected to register on the system themselves using their computers and then continue to record points whenever they attended a workshop, seminar or training of any sort. Unfortunately, since its inception in 2012, there are still teachers who either are not registered on the system or are not updating their points. This makes it difficult to trace whether they have attended any mode of upskilling. This study investigated the teachers' understanding of the point system and its relation to their professional development. For this reason, the main research question was: Do teachers have an understanding of the SACE point system and does this ensure their professional development in the Gauteng Department of Education? In line with the main question, the guiding research sub-questions were:

- How exactly does the SACE point system work?
- What are the perceptions of teachers and other stakeholders regarding this form of evaluation?
- How effective is the SACE point system in ensuring the professional development of teachers?

Methods

Research methodology

This research was undertaken the against the background of the challenges regarding the understanding and implementation of the SACE policy and its intended purpose, namely contributing to teacher professional development. This necessitated the researchers to consider the use of a qualitative study located within the constructivist paradigm. The approach was chosen since researchers interfaced with participants. Interactive qualitative inquiry is an in-depth study using face-to-face techniques to collect data from people in their natural settings (McMillan & Schumacher,

2006; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The researchers aimed at exploring the views of the participants on their understanding of the SACE point system and its effect on their continuous development.

Sample selection

The choice of relevant and information-rich participants is critical because unsuitable participants will compromise the data collection process (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The researchers interviewed twelve participants. To be included in the study, participants had to have a minimum of five years' experience in the education system. Only public secondary schools participated in the study. The six teachers who were selected for participation in the study had to be registered with SACE as a requirement. The sample was also characterised by a mix of genders and was obtained through purposeful sampling. This helped the researchers to select informative participants from the population who were able to provide data which was critical to the problem under investigation.

Data collection procedure

The process of the collection of data for synthesis and analysis is critical. Maree (2003) and Phelps, Fisher and Ellis (2007) maintain that data collection is at the heart of the research process. Semi-structured interviews were the main tools used to collect data. Observation and document reviews formed part of the strategies used to gather data because one of the researchers is a teacher and responsible for managing the point system at her school. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) emphasise that participant observation is critical because it is a day-to-day observation of the behaviour of individuals related to the phenomenon that is under investigation. During this process, field notes were taken to bolster the study's dependability and trustworthiness. Participants were interviewed over a period of two school terms of the school calendar. Appointments were secured with participants and conducted in venues convenient for the interviewees. The researchers made sure that participants were not disrupted during their working hours. The language used was English and the interviews were recorded.

Data analysis

For data analysis to be conducted effectively, researchers need to be focused and rigorous. Yin (2011) describes data analysis as a tedious, laborious and long process of organising, structuring and making sense of the vast amount of data collected in a study. Qualitative data analysis is characterised by overlapping phases. The researchers progressed from the simpler fields to the more abstract fields of analysis.   However, there was persistent refining and double checking of analysis and interpretation. On different occasions, researchers sought permission to re-enter the field to ensure that trusted analysis is done based on trusted data provided. Data was analysed in relation to the research question of the study to avoid the use of irrelevant information. All data was coded and then categorised and recategorised and evaluated as the need arose. Through the process of inductive analysis, observations and inferences were made and the emerging patterns were recorded.

Results, analysis and discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the teachers' understanding of the SACE point system and its contribution to their professional development. Data was collected from six teachers, one principal, two deputy principals, one official from the Department of Education who dealt directly with matters related to continuous professional teacher development and two SACE officials whose portfolio included continuous professional teacher development. To maintain the anonymity of participants, they were allocated numbers ranging from 1-12 as follows: Educators (P1- P6), principal (P7), deputy principal 1 (P8), deputy principal 2 (P), SACE official 1 (P10), SACE official 2 (P11) and Department of Education official (P12). The views of the participants were captured and the following themes emerged:

Professional development for improved classroom practice

One of the overarching aims in this investigation was to unpack the term 'professional development' as understood by educational professionals. Besser, Leiss and Blum (2020) posit that the main goal of professional development is to support teachers to improve their teaching. They are further of the view that all professional development programmes have to encompass learners' improvement as their ultimate goal. A host of definitions of professional development arose from interviews. From the sentiments expressed by participants 9 and 11, it was evident that participants viewed professional development as having improved classroom practice at its core.

> "... all professional development activities respond to the needs that teachers are faced with in the classroom" (P11)

> "To make, to develop me to such an extent that I would be an asset to the profession that I am in, in all spheres... managerial, teaching, strategising, strategic planning so that in essence what I am saying is that it develops me so that I am an asset to the profession and in this case the teaching profession" (P9)

The new buzzword in the educational sector is 'lifelong learners'. Participant 9 expressed it clearly when he stated,

> "That is extremely important if we are going to be lifelong learners". (P9)

This acceptance of the teacher as a learner, and now a lifelong learner, came through quite strongly in the data captured. However, a cause for concern is that not all teachers actually realised that professional development has to equate to improved learner performance. Some teachers could have a personal agenda which could ultimately negatively affect the learners. SACE as the legislative body in control has to put in place mechanisms that ensure that all teachers have improved learner performance as their key aim of professional development. Stemming from this observation, the next crucial concept that emerged was: How is this relatively 'new' and definitely vast system managed? Therefore, the continuous professional teacher development management system came under scrutiny.

Comprehending SACE as a professional development structure

It is critical for teachers to have an in-depth understanding and knowledge of the body that is responsible for attending to their professional needs. One of the intentions of the interviews was to establish whether teachers are aware of its existence and the mandate of SACE, which is responsible for their professional development. The Basic Laws Amendment Act 15 of 2011 gave SACE overall control of the continuous professional teacher development management system (Republic of South Africa, 2011a). Teachers must possess a sound and working knowledge of the body that is controlling their professional development needs. In examining the understanding and knowledge of the participants regarding SACE as the structure administering the professional development of teachers, participant 1 expressed herself as follows:

> "I know that they are a professional ethics council and they also help us as teachers to improve ourselves. To continuously improve ourselves. And also they are there for us to know exactly what we need to follow as teachers in a classroom" (P1)

This response is significant as it implies knowledge of the content of the SACE annual report (2016). This report states clearly that the aim of the programme "is to promote ethical conduct among teachers and stakeholders through workshops, seminars, 'izimbizos' and the distribution of material that sets the standard of professional conduct and to render support to schools, teachers and stakeholders on ethical matters". The report elaborates that this is done in an endeavour to make teachers aware of the mandates of SACE and the Code of Professional Ethics.

The comments of participants 5 and 11 below further endorse this view of SACE as a body that renders support.

> "I am assuming, you know the basic function as a unit is a body for teachers to fall back on, in need of support, in need of development" (P5)

> "..it was to support provinces and schools and teachers. Through some interventions, through the establishment of the support structures be it at provincial level, be it at district, circuit and school level" (P11)

These views reveal that participants had a deep understanding of SACE. The observation during interviews also confirmed that to a large extent, the majority of participants, particularly teachers, had an understanding of SACE. These views are further cemented, after having gone through the minutes of the staff meetings, that one of the schools visited had workshopped teachers on the SACE position regarding teacher professional development. The Department of Basic Education also conducted seminars and workshops and further issued circulars in which schools were informed of the SACE point system. The views of participants demonstrate that learning together took place because they clearly had a common understanding of the mandate of SACE.

The bulk of responses analysed indicated an emerging pattern. It was discovered that many teachers considered SACE as a supportive structure. This is in direct contrast to how professional development structures were historically viewed in the past. Sayed, Kanjee and Nkomo (2013:103) are of the view that when South Africa achieved "democratic status in 1994, it inherited an education system that was profoundly discriminatory". Despite the views of the participants indicated above who demonstrated knowledge of SACE, there were some who held contradictory views.

Continuous professional teacher development administration

The next theme that emanated from the rich textual data focused on the administration of this particular system. The question that arose is how exactly this system of point allocation works. The principal aim of this particular research was to discover how the SACE point system policy impacts the professional development of teachers. The thematic perspective indicates that teachers can acquire professional development points by embarking on a variety of activities. The nature and scope of these activities can be quite varied. Perusal of the minutes of new educator meetings at one particular secondary school under investigation indicated that the above training of new teachers did in fact occur. The system of continuous professional teacher development, point allocation and the importance of obtaining a valid SACE certificate were explained to teachers. Some educator responses, as indicated below, depicted extremely poor knowledge of the functioning of this system.

> "No idea. No idea at all. No idea. None whatsoever" (P5)

Other responses indicated a fair knowledge of the system.

> "So I think if you attend certain meetings or workshops like the road show or the SIS meetings or anything that goes beyond your hours at school then you should be getting professional development points" (P4)

In contrast, some teachers were extremely knowledgeable about the system.

> "There are 3 different things that people can do. You go to an outside provider and they will, they have to be registered and they are some of those people who are registered. So, just by going they will register you and you will earn your points. The other thing is if we have meetings at the school and it's of proper content and if there's real value in it. I kind of registered and I can actually allocate to teachers and then the other thing is that teachers can do it themselves by doing other things, attending meetings or even reading certain things or whatever and that's how they can accumulate more" (P7)

The responses from participant 7 confirm the coherence of theory and practice. What became abundantly clear from the participants' views above is that knowledge of how this system is managed ranged on a continuum from very poor to average to actually quite good. As stated earlier, SACE needs to aggressively market this relatively new system to teachers. It is obvious that what is being done presently is just not enough.

Digital literacy

The advent of ICT in the schooling system is critical and teacher professional development should target this critical area. These assertions are made by Jää-Aro, Josefsson, Lundmark and Mutvei Berre (2020) and Agustini, Lian and Sari (2020) who point out that the increased use of ICT in schools to support learners has placed a new demand on teachers. Flowing from that, teachers have additional pressure to embrace professional development geared towards digital literacy. The implementation of the system requires connectivity, electronic access and knowledge of the digital world. All responses elicited from teachers indicated that they were computer literate and had access to a computer. However, not all participants had continued access to the internet. Connectivity is key to point reporting. Participant 10 indicated that the education sector has a large component that is not technologically advanced.

> "… we have the born before technology, who might say, this ICT thing is very difficult. You know young teachers they are ICT savvy. They can do anything with ICT but the old teachers don't know how to do this. I don't know how to get this" (P10)

This point was further emphasised by participant 11 who stated that,

> "The technical part is signing up" (P11)

Participant 10 encapsulated it perfectly when he stated,

> "The Fourth industrial revolution is coming" (P10)

Data analysis indicates that the foundation of this particular management system rests solidly on technology. Jones and Dexter (2014:368) state that "the unprecedented growth of digital technologies and the rate at which technology now evolves creates a need for greater flexibility in teacher professional development". Technology-driven professional development is the key to unlocking the most current and updated solutions to improve learner performance.

Credible data set

Having credible data sets is central to quality control. SACE needs access to teachers' particulars as it needs to be well versed in the quality, calibre and status of teachers employed. Participant 10 supported the above statements by asserting,

> "I think it also provides the council with a sense of what quality of teachers are there…we then have a more credible data set about our teachers" (P10)

He further elaborated,

> "Whatever information that we have, we don't have to really go to the department to request information. Or go to the Department of Home Affairs to check who has passed on or not. Once we have those linkages, we know that whatever plans from the side of the council and whatever decisions are informed by a credible data set which is our continuous professional teacher development information system" (P10)

Participant responses did in fact indicate that quality assurance processes and procedures are firmly embedded in this system. SACE has access to educator information at their fingertips. This access includes all nine provinces. From this dominant position, SACE can have an uninterrupted view of what is happening on the ground. From this position of authority, they can manage and control effectively, but as stated earlier, there appears to be a gap between what should happen and what is happening.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the contribution of the South African Council for Educators point system policy to teacher professional development. Put differently, the aim was to understand whether teachers are professionally developed through the South African Council for Educators point system. A varied number of participants were interviewed, and different findings were made. These findings contribute significantly to the body of knowledge on teacher professional development. It can be concluded that this system does not necessarily ensure professional development of teachers. The professional development management system presents considerable challenges to teachers as many lack the advocacy and orientation that is a prerequisite for engaging constructively in these programmes. In the main, the teachers, who are critical in the delivery of the curriculum, continue to perceive the system as characterised by several challenges.

The researchers suggest that in attempting to resolve the constraints regarding the SACE point system, the Department of Basic Education as the authority should reconsider enforcing compliance by all teachers and stakeholders in the system. They should further hold principals accountable for the system failures particularly at school level. Another recommendation is that at the heart of the problem is also advocacy and training of teachers regarding the implementation of this policy and as such a new strategy should be reimagined by the education authority. Schools should also be requested to develop fit-for-purpose site level guidelines for the implementation of the policy.

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