

Reflective Practice: A Tool for Teacher Development

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ABSTRACT One of the key imperatives in South African schools is that many professional development (PD) programmes for teachers are unsatisfactory and have not met intended goals (Boyle, Lamprianou & Boyle, 2005; Huberty, 2004). Research findings reported by these theorists highlight the urgent need to transform teacher development using reflective practice in cluster systems as a tool. The difficulty has been attributed to developmental challenges such as the absence of total conceptual understanding of complex levels of critical reflection, and the lack of innovative networks and reflective practices at cluster meetings. This interpretive research project based on grounded theory included a qualitative element, namely in-depth interviews at selected schools in Gauteng province. The findings revealed that teachers did not critically reflect on their own practices for teacher development; there was a lack of capacity as well as a need for a strong district school-based component such as quality subject facilitators; leadership was uninspiring, while supporting and promoting activities at cluster systems were not well coordinated. It is recommended, based on empirical evidence that critical reflective practice could serve as a tool for effective teacher development when intensive content and practice-based knowledge in reflective practices at cluster meetings enhance the optimal adaptability towards becoming adaptive participants.

INTRODUCTION

Research has revealed that one of the key imperatives in the South African education system is the difficulty schools experience in implementing professional development (PD)

programmes for teachers. PD has generally been unsatisfactory and has not met intended goals because it was not based on research or on correct assumptions (Boyle, Lamprianou & Boyle, 2005; Huberty, 2004). Research findings reported by these theorists highlight the urgent need for transforming teacher development in cluster systems by using reflective practice as a tool. PD programmes using reflective practice are integrally involved when there is a strong school-based component and effective district clusters; when activities are well co-ordinated and participants are innovatively adaptive (Oosthuizen, 2009).

Innovative changes and on-going provision of networks influence teacher development. The primary focus is on effective teacher professionalism and lifelong learning in terms of reflective practices for acquiring new skills and knowledge. However, this study revealed the need for appropriate research to enable teacher development to meet its intended purpose. To address this concern, this article focuses on reflective practice at cluster meetings as a tool for teacher development to improve the quality of teaching.

Reflective practice could be described as the capacity to reflect on action and so to engage in practice-based professional learning contexts for teacher development. Research indicates that teacher development is most successful at cluster meetings when teachers themselves are integrally involved, using reflective practice as a tool. Kok (2004) defines school clusters as a mechanism schools can use to promote collaboration, reflection, sharing and learning among teachers who are committed to the improvement of subject content knowledge and pedagogic content knowledge.

Reflective practice: A tool for teacher development in context

Reflective practice is one of the key tools in acquiring knowledge and building adaptive expertise and professional confidence. It encourages teachers to explore their experiences in a reflective way; to write down the results of teachers' reflection; to convert what they have written into a fictional format and then to share their work with other teachers at cluster meetings. Whereas teacher development refers to the professional growth a teacher achieves as a result of gaining increased experience, professional development includes formal experiences such as attending workshops and professional meetings, for instance at clusters, where teachers reflect on their experiences and share their knowledge reflectively.

Cole (2010) mentions that teacher partnering in cluster systems is an initiative to foster community and teacher development initiatives by reflecting on practices and sharing the skills, knowledge, resources and assets that already exist in their schools. This becomes a typical community of practice in which participants share their passion for teaching and learn

to do better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2007; MacNeil, 2004). The authors mention that factors that influence programme vigour and cluster successes include the supply of support material and resources; the degree of system support and teacher incentives, which may include covering teachers' costs through payment per diem, reimbursing travel expenses, certifying teachers for attendance, or officially recognising and praising teachers' participation at cluster meetings.

The National Department of Education (DoE, 2007) recognises through its policy on continuing professional development that teachers need to reflect on their practices. The strategy claims that continuing professional teacher development succeeds best when teachers themselves are integrally involved, reflecting on their own practice; when there is a strong school-based component; when activities are well coordinated; and when employers provide sustained leadership and support (DoE, 2007). However, teachers in general have been expected to implement educational changes as well as to learn to reflect on their practice on their own since there has been minimal school-based support and mentoring from curriculum advisors (Dada, Dipholo, Hoadley, Khembo, Muller and Volmink, 2009).

The value of engaging in reflective practice activity is almost always enhanced if it can be carried out in association with other colleagues in cluster systems, be they trainees reflecting on their practices, teaching assistants, teachers or tutors. Williams (2011) supports this statement by mentioning that reflective practice is a new development seeking to explore feelings and understanding across the boundary between one's profession and the outside world in cluster systems. One of the ways of approaching teacher development is a new paradigm of establishing school communities where teachers reflect on their practices by sharing their experiences and knowledge in cluster systems. Reflective practice is viewed as a means by which teachers can develop a greater level of self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth. Furthermore, reflective practice allows teachers' natural instincts to interact with a professional approach.

Dornbrack (2008) describes Dewey's notion of reflective practice as a process that occurs when participants deliberately and intentionally engage in thinking about a specific problem with the intention of solving it or improving the situation identified. Postholm (2008) argues that reflection goes beyond what has already been thought about ideas and actions—it is to think of something in a new way or to see things from alternative angles, pointing the way to development.

Schön (1983) developed Dewey's notion of reflective practice by making a distinction between reflecting on action and reflecting in action. Brooks and Sikes (1997) and Postholm (2008) posit that reflection on action can occur before or after an action. Reflecting before action includes planning and thought about one's teaching, whereas reflecting after action includes the conscious thinking about the action, usually with the intention of making improvements. Dornbrack (2008) and Brooks and Sikes (1997) also refer to Adler and Reed (2002), recalling, explaining and evaluating foundations for critical reflection to make paradigm shifts away from operating as routine and technically oriented teachers.

Adler and Reed (2002) investigated what counts as evidence of the reflective practices of teachers and the factors that enabled and constrained the development of reflective capability of the teachers in their study. They used the attributes identified by Schön (1983), as well as Zeichner and Liston's model (1987) of a reflective teacher. They also attempted to align teacher's reflections with various forms of reflection and highlighted the difficulties of distinguishing between technical and reflective responses of teachers (Adler & Reed, 2002; Dornbrack, 2008). It is evident that there was no easy correlation between teacher development programmes and improved teaching and learning in the classroom. The most important finding in their study is that improving teachers' conceptual knowledge alone will not necessarily lead to improved teaching and learning, but also requires critical reflection. Cluster meetings, a form of community of practice, may be a mechanism to promote collaboration specifically in a particular professional development practice through sharing of best practices and, as a result, development of new knowledge.

Reflective teaching requires attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and dedication. According to Pollard (2005), open-mindedness is an active desire to listen to more sides than one, to give heed to facts from whatever source they come, to give full attention to alternative possibilities, and to recognise the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us. Furthermore, Dewey (1933) also mentions that open-mindedness is an essential attribute for rigorous reflection because any sort of enquiry that is consciously based on partial evidence, only weakens itself. Thus, the willingness to reflect on and challenge one's own assumptions and prejudices can lead to conceptual and philosophical understanding, critical thinking and the application of reflective practices in research activities. .

Neethling (2010) supports this statement by mentioning that to deal with a rapidly changing environment, people in general need the right tools, insights, attitudes and eyes on a future destination. This teaches that our thinking, emotions and attitudes determine our success, not our circumstances. Following from this, it can be asserted that the leaders in cluster systems

need to change their own culture and support teachers, and then adapt the culture of teachers from critical thinking to levels and stages of critical reflective practice.

Murgatroyd and Morgan (1993) mention that schools need to create a climate or culture in which the range of shared values is high and commitment to these values translates into innovation and effective use of scarce resources for reflective practices. Furthermore, Morrow (2007) as well as Slabbert, De Kock and Hattingh (2009) propose that teachers should act as agents for the improvement of teaching and learning because there are many of them whose professional competence and commitment leave much to be desired.

The theory and literature reviewed for this study, as discussed above, led to the choice of case study methodology in selected schools in the Soshanguve district of Gauteng province.

METHODOLOGY

The main question in the study was the following: how can reflective practice at cluster systems serve as a tool for teacher development? For this purpose, a case study design and qualitative approach were employed to generate data in an investigation of the perceptions of teachers regarding reflective practice and teacher development. Nine teachers, three heads of department and three subject facilitators in the district Soshanguve of Gauteng province in South Africa were respondents who were reliable insiders purposefully selected based their experiences of teacher development and reflective practice in cluster systems. To protect their identity, teachers were labelled from T1 to T9; HoDs were labelled from HoD1 to HoD3 and subject heads were labelled from SH1 to SH3. After the interviews were conducted, the data was coded and analysed with the help of an independent coder for the purpose of trustworthiness. The interpretive design, based on secondary schools in the Soshanguve district, led to the following findings and discussion.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings relied primarily on the literature and the empirical evidence as lenses for understanding the participants' lived experiences regarding reflective practice as a tool for teacher development. Based on the questions posed, the following themes and subcategories emerged:

Programmes regarding cluster meetings for teacher development

Analysis of the interviews showed that although there are programme schedules for the cluster meetings, these merely indicate the dates of the meetings. Furthermore, teachers indicated that subject facilitators and cluster leaders were solely responsible for compiling the programme. The data reported below reflect mainly those that are useful for the study because there was duplication in the responses from participants. For example, the following were some of the responses:

We are given dates in advance for the meeting and which portfolios to bring with. Facilitators and cluster leaders are responsible for drawing up the programme. (HoD2)

Teachers are given dates for the meetings and which portfolio to moderate and the dates are prepared by subject facilitators and cluster leader. (T1 and T8)

We only receive the dates of the meeting and which portfolio to bring. (T7)

Teachers receive the programme at the beginning of the year which indicates the dates of the meetings. (SH3)

From the above remarks, it is clear that the programmes are given to teachers. It is significant that participants are only responding about the dates and which portfolios were to be submitted at the meetings. It can be assumed that the programme for the meetings has no connection with the purpose of the cluster system because there is no mention of the development of teachers. It is evident that teachers do not have a say in cluster systems but are simply given instructions by their supervisors to submit portfolios. It can be assumed that only subject facilitators have a link with the cluster leaders, whereas teachers do not have any say in the design and content of the programmes. Instructions are given to teachers without their inputs and suggestions. Furthermore, it can be inferred that teachers are simply complying with the instructions for meeting attendance but do not have any say concerning the content of the programmes for the meetings.

As Cohen, Hill & Kennedy (2002) argue, professional development should respond to teachers' self-identified needs and interests in order to support and inspire them. This study found that this was not the case for these teachers. Their needs and interests were totally disregarded. Their individual and organisational needs were not considered; even worse, a needs analysis for continuous improvement was ignored, whereas they are the ones who are involved in class and who best know their weaknesses and strengths. Teachers emphasised that there was no correlation between cluster systems programmes and teacher development to improve teaching and learning in the classroom; instead, teachers were using the cluster

system for moderating learners' portfolios and setting common question papers rather than reflecting on their practices for teacher development.

Interventions used in the cluster meetings for teacher development

The purpose of this question was to assess whether or not there were any interventions when implementing cluster systems at Soshanguve secondary schools so that teachers could reflect on their practices for teacher development. Analysis of the interview responses indicated that no interventions were used for teacher development and reflective practice in cluster systems. Subject facilitators only mentioned that when schools' "performance drops", they usually visited schools regularly to monitor what was happening and to assist them. Furthermore, respondents indicated that there were no interventions in the implementation of reflective practice as a tool for teacher development. Consequently, one can assume that at these clusters there was no vigour or success in motivating teachers to attend the meetings. The following are examples of the responses received:

We do not get any support from our leaders. We don't have resources even at cluster systems.
(T4)

No intervention from our leaders. We don't receive support from our principals and district facilitators. (T5)

There is no intervention at all. Maybe if principals were attending with us cluster meetings, they will know our problems and they will support us. (HoD1)

There is intervention because we visit schools that are not performing well with their matric results. (SF3)

From the above responses it could be inferred that the supply of support material and resources, the degree of system support, and teacher incentives – which may include covering teachers' costs – are needed at cluster meetings to work as intervention for teacher development. According to teachers, HoDs and subject facilitators, none of the interventions were provided for cluster systems in this district. It could therefore be assumed that there was neither enthusiasm for nor success in using reflective practice as a tool for teacher development in the Soshanguve secondary cluster systems.

Teachers' reflections on their practices at clusters

Emerging from the analysis, the majority of respondents indicated that there was no teacher development in cluster systems: teachers did not reflect on their practices and there was no sharing of knowledge and experiences to improve the quality of teaching. Webber (2008) and

Kok (2004) emphasise that the purpose of cluster systems is to improve the quality of teaching and learning by breaking silos to facilitate networking with other teachers, allowing them to reflect on their practices and share their experiences, and thus creating interest and enthusiasm and collegial support through the frameworks provided by clusters. Contrary to this ideal, both teachers and HoDs re-iterated that the purpose of cluster systems was to coordinate the moderation of learners' portfolios and set common question papers. The majority of teachers and heads of department felt that reflective practice could serve as a tool for teacher development if they could have their meetings during the day while they were not exhausted.

Furthermore, it was found that principals did not play any role and were not even members of the cluster system. It can be inferred that cooperation and mutual assistance between cluster communities did not enhance links in the clusters to reflect on their practices for teacher development. According to both the groups of respondents, it could be inferred that this district did not enable a number of good practices for improving the quality of teaching and learning; quite the opposite: teachers, HoDs and subject facilitators mentioned that cluster meetings were used merely for monitoring purposes and supervision of teachers. The following comments illustrate the nature of responses:

Teachers are moderating learner's portfolios at cluster systems and subject facilitators are monitoring the progress of teachers in terms of the syllabus. (HoD1)

We are just moderating learner's portfolios and setting up question papers at cluster meetings. We don't reflect. (T6)

Cluster meetings for us is for moderation of portfolios no reflection of teachers. (T8)

Reflective practice: a tool for teacher development

This section posed a question about the respondents' understanding of whether or not reflective practice could serve as a tool for teacher development. Analysis of the interview responses indicate that teachers, heads of departments and subjects facilitators all believed that reflective practice could indeed serve as a tool for teacher development. The following are examples of the responses:

Reflective practice could serve as a tool for teacher development if teachers could get support from the district officials and principals and if we could have resources like photocopying machines at cluster systems. (T6)

Yes, reflective practice could serve as a tool for teacher development if we can get the support of district officials and the principals. (HoD3)

Reflective practice can serve as teacher development if teachers can be committed to cluster meetings and attend regularly. (SF2)

Teacher development is the essential driver of quality education systems. International evidence shows that the professional development of teachers works best when teachers themselves are integrally involved, reflecting on their own practice; when there is a strong school-based component; and when activities are well co-ordinated (DoE, 2006). Cohen, Hill & Kennedy (2002) support this statement by mentioning that professional development should respond to teachers' self-identified needs and interests in order to support individual needs and organisational improvements. Furthermore, evidence points to the fact that professional development is more meaningful to teachers when they exercise ownership of its content and process.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a need for subject facilitators to involve teachers in drawing up the programmes for cluster meetings because teachers are the ones who are involved in class and they know their weaknesses and strengths. Furthermore, cluster systems should be linked with teacher development since a cluster system is a group of participants who are geographically close to one another and can therefore reflect on their practices and share their experiences on how to improve the quality of education. Consequently, cluster meetings can be used as a place where teachers can come together regularly in terms of collaboratively defined programmes to reflect on their practices and share their experiences for teacher development.

This study confirmed that this district does not have quality leadership who can stimulate, direct and coordinate groups of teachers to interact and use reflective practice as a tool for teacher development. For this reason, they are unable to intervene because they lack efficacy in the capacity for reflective practices. These shortcomings also confirmed that while teachers are confronted with the need for change and for being innovative, they are becoming frustrated and therefore are unable to perform optimally.

The overwhelming majority of teachers are not involved in critical reflection or communities of practice. Failure to reflect on competences, skills and knowledge is tantamount to an inability to understand and adapt to change. Hence, critical adaptive teacher development where teachers should reflect on their practices is thwarted in this district. The challenge remains that teachers, including subject facilitators, have become routine experts as well as frustrated novices who fail to provide resources and materials required for quality teaching.

Although respondents agreed that reflective practice is a tool for teacher development, it is evident that their classroom practice suggested otherwise. It was empirically evident that in this district, the reality and needs that teachers construct for them are not considered as central to effective innovation within the changing environment. This has led teachers to operate routinely as frustrated novices, even if they have years of experience in the classroom. It can thus be inferred that the preparation of teachers to use reflective tools for critical reflective practices has not been sufficient for teachers to be adaptive experts.

The purpose of the research reported on in this article was to determine how reflective practice at cluster meetings serves as a tool for teacher development. Evidence emerged both theoretically and empirically that the strength of a reflective practice may systematically assist teachers to move away from being routine experts to critical reflective adaptive experts in the on-going process of professional development. This article revealed that giving future intensive content and practice-based knowledge at clusters in reflective practices, critical thinking and constant engagement could enhance learning and incremental stages of critical and reflective practice for teacher development to succeed. The alignment of teaching, learning and constant assessment of the practice may enhance teachers' optimal efficacy and adaptability towards becoming adaptive experts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that for teachers to be adaptive experts, they should use reflective practice as one of the tools for their development. Without reflective practice, a component of communities of practice, it is doubtful whether efforts to improve teacher development would yield successful results, since effective reflection involves innovative networks, integrated frameworks, the capacity to engage and collaborative expertise building. A tool that utilises such elements is capable of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning if it is applied thoughtfully.

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