

When Professional Development Works: South African Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT Despite the general acceptance of continuing professional development (CPD) programmes as essential to the improvement of education, reviews of professional development research constantly point to the ineffectiveness of most of these programmes. Furthermore, many teachers express dissatisfaction with the professional development opportunities made available to them in schools and insist that the most effective development programmes they have experienced have been self-initiated. There is consensus that many CPD programmes have yet to understand professional development from teachers' perspectives. Such perspectives will enable one to understand what drives teachers to enlist in these programmes and how such programmes make a difference to them and their classrooms. This will help to throw light on how professional development programmes can be improved upon. This paper, therefore, returns the emphasis of professional development back to the teachers. It explores the perspectives of a group of South African teachers on CPD in general, their personal meaning of CPD, and its meaning in the context of their work. By interviewing a sample of teachers who were part of a science and mathematics professional development intervention, the researchers explored the teachers' opinions of the intervention; its meaning to them and their work; and its impact on their classroom practices. The researchers present data from a longitudinal study of the teachers in greater detail. In discussing the data, the researchers argue that CPD, however well-intentioned and executed, is received differently by each teacher as a result of their personal circumstances and investment in the programme. The researchers then conclude that the greater the unity between the personal circumstances and motivations of the teachers and those of the CPD intervention, the more likely the outcome will be meaningful for the participating teachers. In turn, the ability to sustain the benefits of the intervention will be enhanced by such unity. An emergent recommendation is for policymakers and other providers of CPD to strive for such a unity of purpose.