

Challenges Encountered by Communities of Practice in Enhancing Continuing Professional Teachers Development in High Schools

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ABSTRACT This paper investigates challenges encountered by communities of practice in enhancing continuing professional teachers' development in selected high schools in the Fort Beaufort Education District, South Africa. The study adopted the mixed methods research approach that concurrently integrated procedures in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. It employed structured and unstructured questionnaires as well as face-to-face interviews as data collection instruments. Teachers not having sufficient time to meet due to various workloads and unavailability of permanent space for meeting venue were the major challenges encountered by formal and informal communities of practice. The study concluded that teachers did not have sufficient time to engage in collaborative learning activities. The study recommends that teachers spend adequate time for collaborative learning activities in communities of practice and informal communities of practice activities in high schools should be supported with financial and educational resources by the Department of Education.

INTRODUCTION

Communities of practice are group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Patton and Parker 2017). Wenger (1998) posits that communities of practice are everywhere and people are generally involved in them, whether at work, school, home or for civic and leisure interest. This implies that communities of practice can exist wherever we have human beings in groups. Thus, it is a form of social group. MacPhail et al. (2014) observed that communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour. The characteristics of such communities of practice vary. Some have names, many do not. Some communities of practice are quite formal in organisation; others are very fluid and informal (Wenger 2007). Nevertheless, members are brought together by participating in common

activities and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities. A community of practice is different from a community of interest or a geographical community in that it involves a shared practice (Wenger 1998). This is also applicable in schools where some communities of practice are informal and assist teachers to develop professionally through their activities which enhance mutual support, team work and collaboration (Mashologu 2012).

Communities of practice, which is a school-based professional development programme for teachers has offered much benefits to teachers' professional development, collaborative culture, teaching and learning, and educational reforms (Hairon et al. 2014). However, despite the benefits, communities of practice still encounter some challenges in enhancing teachers' professional development in schools. Some of the challenges include insufficient time for quality professional learning activities and discussions, teachers' psychological dimension (fear of exposure or criticism by teachers), and lack of leadership support.

The main challenge facing communities of practice is insufficient time for quality professional learning and discussion among teachers.

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Lack of time has been referred to as the biggest challenge for learning communities (Hairon et al. 2014; Vangrieken et al. 2017). Teachers have a lot of work related to teaching and learning activities which is usually overwhelming (Jiang 2016). It is not easy in some schools to create extra time for teacher to collaborate in learning communities because of the tight schedule and school programmes. Thus, it is difficult to find appropriate time for teachers to meet in groups (Wang et al. 2017).

In addition, one constraining factor to teachers' participation has been shortage of time (Hairon et al. 2014; Vangrieken et al. 2017; Wang et al. 2017) due to their job demands and the schedule of their job (Parsons et al. 2017). With the tight job demands and schedules, such teachers may regard their engagement and involvement in learning communities as an infringement of their valuable time (Hairon et al. 2014). They see the little time they have as too important to spend in collaborative activities. Banerjee et al. (2017) note that teachers require more than twenty percent of their work time for learning and collaboration if they are to be successful in implementing ambitious reform initiatives as well as professional development.

Another challenge that hinders professional development of teachers in learning communities is teachers' psychological dimension (Toom et al. 2017). Some teachers who are not sure of their content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge do not want to participate in learning communities and collaborative activities. This is because of fear of exposure and criticism from their colleagues. Some teachers do not participate because they do not want invasion of their privacy. This is a challenge common in informal communities of practice where teachers are not coerced to join their colleagues. Hibbert et al. (2016) claim that in learning communities, there seems to exist a tacit agreement to expose one's weakness to others. Thus, without appropriate school culture, teachers may see collaborative involvement in learning communities as a criticism of their work. De Neve and Devos (2016) argue that this challenge can be associated with teachers' lack of trust and lack of good relations with their colleagues, as they have not taken time to familiarize themselves with the learning communities and the quality of communication offered there.

Jita and Ndlalane (2009) in their study on teacher clusters in South Africa found that there were barriers to sharing among teachers as most of them preferred to work in isolation and not to share their classroom challenges with their colleagues. Through the cluster and collaborative activities, teachers realized that almost all of them had the same challenge. The challenge related the exposure of their weakness and their fear of being criticized by their colleagues.

Lack of leadership support is another problem that has been identified in communities of practice. Leadership support is very important and plays a major role in the creation of supportive conditions that encourage effective learning communities (Hairon et al. 2014). Teachers cannot collaborate in schools without the leadership support of school heads for learning activities to be coordinated. As stated by Hairon et al. (2017) the quality of school leadership support particularly assumes major importance in establishing and sustaining professional learning communities through the school systems.

Leadership support within learning communities plays an important role for the creation of helpful conditions that would inspire the function of learning communities in school settings. Shifting traditional patterns of interaction to collaborative one, building networks of trust and helping teachers from isolating themselves from collaborative learning require appropriate leadership support (Steyn 2013). It is not sufficient to simply create opportunities within a school day or in addition to teachers' traditional work for teachers to come together as a Professional Learning Communities (PLC). Teachers actually need support in the processes of inquiry and the creation of an environment that models, nurtures, and embodies an inquiry stance (Nicholson et al. 2016). School leaders are members of a learning community and are entitled to engage in its most important enterprise (Northouse 2017). The enactment of professional learning communities will be hindered without appropriate leadership support.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper was to investigate challenges encountered by both formal and informal communities of practice in enhancing continuing professional teachers' development (CPTD) in high schools in the Fort Beaufort Education District, South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed the mixed methods research approach and used concurrent triangulation design using face-to-face interviews and questionnaires as instruments for data collection. Mixed methods were preferred because it ensured that biases potentially inherent in any single method are neutralized by the use of other methods. Some methods also provide strengths that offset the weaknesses in the use of either the quantitative or qualitative approach alone (Creswell 2014).

Research Instruments and Participants

Semi-structured interview which had features of both structured and unstructured interviews and structured and unstructured questionnaires which have both open-ended and closed questions were used to solicit views and get information from teachers, principals, heads of departments, cluster leaders, subject advisors and education district officials. Both research instruments were used to solicit information on encountered by communities of practice in enhancing continuing professional teachers' development in high schools. Face-to-face interviews enabled the researchers to get greater depth of information as the researchers had the opportunity to probe the interviewee during the interviewing process to get in-depth and rich information on the phenomenon under study (Morris 2015). The semi-structured questionnaires also enabled the researchers to get more useful and detailed information from teachers on the phenomenon under study (Edwards and Talbot 2014). The use of the questionnaires enabled the researchers to get large quantity of data over a short period of time from the ten sampled schools.

Samples for qualitative data were fifteen participants and consisted of three principals, three teachers, three heads of departments (HoDs), three cluster leaders, two subject advisors and one education district official (EDO). Samples for qualitative data were purposively selected because of their understanding and information about the phenomena under study. The samples for quantitative data consisted of sixty-four participants and included sixty teachers including principals and HoDs, and four cluster leaders. Samples for quantitative data were

selected using stratified random sampling in order to address the problem of non-homogeneous populations in the sense that it attempts to represent the population much better than can be done with simple random sampling (Creswell 2014).

Procedure

Permission for data collection was sought at the provincial Department of Education and from each principal of the ten sampled high schools. A digital voice recorder was used to record the interviews the researchers had with all participants, subsequent to the granting of permission by the respondents prior to the recording. Each participant signed a consent form to show their voluntary involvement and participation in the study. It was clearly stated in the consent form that the participants could withdraw from the study at any stage. Credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative data was taken into account through member checking for verifying, confirming and validating the research findings as un-biased and to also determine whether these participants feel that they were precise (Creswell 2014). Reliability and validity of the quantitative data was also considered.

RESULTS

This paper reports on the challenges encountered by communities of practice in enhancing continuing professional teachers' development in high schools in the Fort Beaufort Education District, South Africa. The teacher (T), principal (P), cluster leader (CL), head of department (HoD), subject advisor (SA) and education district official (EDO) participants are abbreviated in this paper as T1-T3, P1-P3, CL1-CL3, HoD1-HoD3, SA1-SA2 and EDO respectively. The findings are presented below.

Challenges Encountered by Communities of Practice in Enhancing Continuing Professional Teachers' Development

Communities of practice in high schools have enjoyed a lot of support and teachers who are group members have benefited much in terms of their professional development from group members and Department of Education (Hairon et al. 2014). Despite the benefits, communities of prac-

tice still encounter some challenges in enhancing teachers' professional development in high schools.

Challenges Encountered by Formal Communities of Practice

The researchers investigated the challenges encountered by formal communities of practice in high schools. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Challenges encountered in formal communities of practice

Challenges encountered in formal communities of practice	Frequency	Percentage
Insufficient time	21	32.81
Teachers not feeling safe and free with group members	13	20.31
Lack of meeting venue	10	15.63
Distance to the meeting venue	5	7.81
Insufficient material resources	6	9.38
Lack of support from departmental officials and facilitators	9	14.06
Total	64	100.00

Data from Table 1 shows that 21 (32.81%) respondents did not have sufficient time for formal communities of practice, 13 (20.31%) did not feel free with group members, 10 (15.63%) lack meeting venues, 5 (7.81%) respondents had challenges with the distance to the meeting venue being far, 6 (9.38%) respondents did not have enough material resources, while 9 (14.06%) did not get support from departmental officials and facilitators in the formal communities of practice.

All the teachers interviewed pointed out insufficient time as a major challenge they encountered in formal communities of practice along with other challenges. However, TS2 was the only teacher who said the only challenge he encountered had to do with time. Time available to teachers was not sufficient for them.

TS2 observed that:

We have issue of time. Time is usually a major challenge to us. We do not have enough time to meet and learn together and we have lot of activities to engage with. Things are so tough that in the process we sacrifice the little time we have, the work load are much to the extent that we come to school during weekends sometimes, just to make sure things are order.

TS1 and TS3 also revealed that insufficient time was one of the challenges they encountered in communities of practice along with other challenges.

TS1 pointed out that:

Time is our main challenge for meeting with others school and for cluster meeting. Then fund is also a challenge because sometimes we will want to go for meetings and money is not available.

TS3 noted that:

We do not have enough teachers so the issue of a teacher teaching more than two subjects is always a challenge. We need to assist teachers with their lesson plan. Time is not sufficient also, so we try to do our best with the time we have.

HoD1 and HoD3 in their responses also revealed the challenges encountered in communities of practice as insufficient time, unavailability of experts to handle some subject or topics and some teachers not feeling safe to express their challenges with their colleagues because they do not trust them.

HoD1 remarked:

Time is a challenge as we do not have enough time to meet and learn together with other schools. Also, at times there are some topics that we need an expert to handle and it is difficult to get an expert on time to facilitate training session for group members.

HoD3 said:

Yes, the challenges we encountered, you have asked the question that do I feel free or safe when discussing my challenges with other teachers. Then I answered you by saying that it depends on individual. So even in this, it depends on individual, because sometimes you discuss something trying to correct that thing and then one takes that thing negatively, then that is why I am saying it depends on individual. Because when you approach someone about a problem, it depends on the understanding of the person. Time is a challenge to everyone. So that is really a challenge for us too as a group.

The responses from the cluster leaders were an indication that they were also aware that there are some challenges encountered by group members in communities of practice.

CL1 mentioned:

Insufficient time for meeting activities is a major challenge. The time available for us is limited. Transportation is sometimes an issue especially for schools that do not have an offi-

cial vehicle. When the teachers are going to the district office for our meeting, they have to organize among themselves on how to get to the meeting venue and most times they arrive there late.

CL3 disclosed:

I think the main challenge we have is funds to get enough materials that are of standard to the new modern technology that we are in. There is nothing stopping us to have laptops for all teachers to use during our meeting. It will make things easier.

The school principals also confirmed that insufficient time and insufficient teaching materials were challenges.

PS1 said:

Time is a big challenge we encountered in our group meetings. Teachers are busy with school work and have to attend some meetings within the cluster or district. Teaching materials are also part of the challenges as they are not adequately available as we want them to.

PS2 stated:

I will say time and money are the major problems we have. If for instance we have to go to Fort Beaufort to the subject advisors, schools do not always give educators money to go there, so teachers will spend from their own pocket. But sometimes when the school has money we do assist teachers with money. Money and time are the challenges we encountered. We also have problem with where to meet especially when we are meeting with other schools. Sometimes we end up meeting in restaurant to discuss on some of our work.

District officials (subject advisors and education district official) also concurred with the responses given by other participants. They said insufficient time was the major challenge encountered in communities of practice. They went ahead to list other challenges which included shortage of teacher and content gap among some teachers due to changes in curriculum. Their responses were as follows.

SA1 pointed out:

Time is our main challenge here. No matter how you struggle to meet up, time is not sufficient for our meetings and programs. Also, schools mainly are facing shortage of teachers because you know in South Africa it is a ratio of 1 to 35, so that is how they are granted educators in terms of the number of students. You will find that there are schools without teach-

ers, then you find that those schools are struggling because they have to wait for a district official when he has finished all his work at the district office then he will go now and support learners by himself.

SA2 commented:

Mostly the noticeable is inadequate time which we still struggle to manage. Another one is content gap. Just because the curriculum is new due to curriculum changes, the curriculum come up with new content and therefore you find that teachers are having content gap. They do not know somehow with the content. Besides that, the method I have mentioned, they do not master the best method of delivering the subject.

EDO revealed:

Material resources and time are the challenges we are encountering. Materials resources are not evenly distributed in all school. You found that some schools have more resources than the other and teachers are having challenge to improve themselves. Even when they come for cluster meetings, they complain on those materials they did not have. Time is also a factor. The workload is tight and they just have to sacrifice the time available to meet together and learn, so as to improve on their work.

The findings of the study show that time was the major challenge encountered in formal communities of practice at cluster level and within schools. The responses from the respondents also revealed that insufficient funds was another problem encountered in communities of practice. Some schools which did not have official vehicle sometimes had to take money from their pocket to transport themselves to the venue of the cluster meeting. This has implication on learning activities as some teachers who do not have money may not be able to go for the communities of practice meetings when the meetings are supposed to represent continuous learning with other teachers.

Information gathered also showed that some teachers were unable to share their problems with group members as they were not free with them, so they did not feel safe to discuss their problems. Distance to the meeting venue was another challenge identified by the respondents. They saw it as a problem because the distance to the meeting venue was far and getting transport to the venue was an issue, especially with schools that did not have official vehicles or

with schools where most teachers did not have cars of their own. Some teachers identified insufficient educational materials as one of the challenges encountered in formal communities of practice. Educational materials that aid learning activities in communities of practice are very essential, and if such materials are not sufficiently available, learning activities among group members may be hindered. Some of the respondents did not get enough support from departmental officials and facilitators of communities of practice. This hindered learning activities as some group members felt neglected by the cluster leaders and the facilitators and were not able to relate well with them and confide in them.

Challenges Encountered by Informal Communities of Practice in Enhancing Continuing Professional Teachers' Development

The researchers investigated the challenges encountered by informal communities of practice in high schools. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges encountered in informal communities of practice

<i>Challenges encountered in communities of practice</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Insufficient time	18	28.12
Insufficient material resources	11	17.19
Teachers not feeling safe and free with group members	3	4.69
Insufficient funds	8	12.50
Lack of space in terms of meeting venue	24	37.50
Total	64	100.00

Table 2 shows that 18 (28.12%) respondents did not have sufficient time to meet in informal communities of practice, 11 (17.19%) stated that they did not have sufficient material resources, 3 (4.69%) said teachers did not feel safe and free with group members, 8 (12.5%) indicated they did not have sufficient funds in informal communities of practice and 24 (37.50%) said they had difficulty in terms of finding venue for meetings for informal communities of practice.

Responses from teacher respondents interviewed also confirmed the responses from Table 2. Some of their responses are as follows:

TS1 revealed that:

Having sufficient time is a problem we have as teachers. We find it difficult to have sufficient time to meet and discuss our work and see how to help each other. Apart from that some teachers still find it difficult to really come out clear about their weaknesses with their school work. They did not really make things easy for other teachers to assist them, they hide some of their problems, I don't know why they find it difficult to share their problems with others.

TS2 said:

The main problem we have in this school is the meeting venue. We do not have a particular space we can refer to as our meeting venue. If we meet in classroom A today, it will be classroom D for our next meeting. We keep on moving from one venue to the other. This is because we make use of available classrooms that will be convenient and accommodate all teachers. You can imagine adults looking for meeting venue each time they have to meet. The stress of moving with our writing materials and other things we need is much and it is not convenient at all. Also, we don't have enough time for our meetings. We meet mostly after school hours and we spend maximum of 2 hours and this is not a meeting schedule for every day. We meet once a month or twice a month.

HoD1 noted:

Time is one of the challenges we have in this school. We do not have adequate time to meet as group in our school and with other schools. Also, we do not have sufficient educational materials to be used for learning activities when we meet as group.

PS2 stated:

I think time is the main challenge we have. To get enough time to meet is difficult. There is no crime if we have the time to meet every day. We know if this is possible, it will be good for us. Things are so tight with lot of school works, commitments within the school and at the district level. So we have no choice than to maximize the little time we have and see how we can help and develop ourselves. Fund is another problem we have. We sometimes contribute money among ourselves in case we need to buy writing pads or other materials that we enhance our learning. The funds are not sufficient because most times we fund the programme ourselves, we don't have sponsors.

CL2 said:

Meeting venue is a problem for us in this school. We don't have a fixed venue for this

meeting because there is no space within the school specifically built for this meeting. What we do is that we make use of any available space, mostly one of our classrooms. Time is also another problem; I don't know the amount of time we can spend that will be sufficient for learning activities. We don't have the time to meet every day, so it is somehow difficult to have sufficient time to meet as a group with other teachers

The responses from the respondents showed that the main challenges they encountered in informal communities of practice was insufficient time. Teachers had many commitments related to their school work, so they found it extremely difficult to have sufficient time to meet for communities of practice. It also emerged from the study that meeting venue was another challenge in informal communities of practice. There was no space meant for meeting activities in those schools, so teachers only look for available classrooms which were conducive for the learning activities. However, they had to move about with their equipment and facilities since they did not have a permanent meeting venue for that purpose. Insufficient funds also emerged as one of the challenges encountered in informal communities of practice as teachers contribute money from their pockets whenever the need arose for them to go for communities of practice meetings. The findings also showed that some teachers found it difficult to relate with other teachers in areas where they were having problems because they did not trust and feel safe with some of their colleagues. The responses from the respondents also showed that most informal communities of practice were faced with the problem of insufficient educational materials and this affected learning activities which were supposed to be continuous, as those teachers did not have enough educational materials to enhance their learning activities.

DISCUSSION

The current study revealed that teachers encountered challenges in terms of space and location for formal communities of practice. Some teachers noted that the distance to the meeting venue was far and sometimes they did not have money for transport fare to get to the venue. The findings were in accordance with Cameron's (2016) observation that opportunities for pro-

fessional development and exchange in professional learning communities were aided by physical structures and close proximity. These challenges potentially hindered CPTD in formal communities of practice in such schools and clusters.

The study also established that venues for informal communities of practice were not appropriate for effective learning activities and venues were not permanent spaces, and so, teachers changed venues each time they had to meet. It was revealed that informal communities of the meeting venues used for communities of practice were not appropriate as the venues were not specifically meant for communities of practice activities. The venues were not well equipped. Each time teachers had to meet, they had to move about with the materials like laptops, projector, etc. which was not be convenient for them. This potentially affected the learning activities as the venue were not conducive for the learning activities they wanted to engage in.

Insufficient time was the major challenges encountered in formal and informal communities of practice. Banerjee et al. (2017) observe that teachers require more than twenty percent of their work time for learning and collaboration if they are to be successful in implementing ambitious reform initiatives and participate in professional development. Teachers did not have sufficient time to collaborate with their colleagues within the schools and in other schools. Despite the challenges encountered by formal and informal communities of practice teachers still sacrificed the little time they had and met after school hours for informal communities of practice, some during weekends for formal and informal communities of practice.

Katz and Earl (2010) argue that collegial interaction is not adequate to change the status quo in communities of practice. "The type of interaction that may influence knowledge creation and conceptual change includes collegial dialogue between teachers who openly share their differing opinions, values and views on teaching" (Katz and Earl 2010: 45). Collegial dialogue explores teaching and learning more deeply, and not friendly discussions which are surface and superficial. In order to be effective collegial dialogue "assumes a level of personal confidence and trust which allows teachers to be willing, honest and transparent to review their

own practices and beliefs" (Steyn 2013: 284). Nelson et al. (2010: 175) argues that for this to occur "a circle of inquiry is required on a particular topic in which they identify a shared vision for that aspect and then start identifying gaps in this vision and their current practice." The acquired knowledge should in turn be implemented and data collected and analyzed to determine the impact on learning (Steyn 2013). This is what Kennedy (2005) refers to as transformative CPTD model. The model includes Action Research model which is a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level (Mertler 2016). It involves teachers in research and the evaluation of their own performance. Action research as a model of CPTD has been acknowledged as being successful in allowing teachers to ask critical questions of their practice (Kennedy 2005).

However, the findings of the study establish that lack of support from departmental officials and facilitators was experienced in formal communities of practice. Departmental officials should support teachers in cluster meeting to enhance their professional development. Such support is to be extended to schools where the subject advisors are expected to do on-site support and classroom visits to assist teachers with their content and methodologies. The findings of the study revealed that some schools were never visited by the subject advisors. Teachers had to seek support from colleagues when they had problems. It was also revealed that some teachers do not receive support from facilitators of formal cluster meeting which are mainly the subject advisors. The subject advisors saw their roles as more of monitoring than supporting teachers and they assigned the roles of facilitating to experienced teachers from various schools. This meant teachers had to depend on their colleagues for support on learning activities in communities of practice.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as indicated from the study, there were some challenges encountered in formal and informal communities of practice regarding the space used for meetings. Lack of space brought another challenge of distance to the meeting venues, most of which were not permanent spaces. That in turn led to teachers changing venues each time they met and using venues which were not well-equipped for communi-

ties of practice activities, which consequently hindered the learning activities. Also, due to work load on teachers, it was very difficult to have sufficient time to meet as communities of practice. Support from some departmental officials and facilitators was lacking in formal communities of practice. This also hindered professional development among teachers as most of them could not share with their leaders their various problems which they could be assisted with. It was also revealed that lack of trust among some group members was a challenge impacting formal and informal communities of practice. Lack of trust among group members was despite the fact the group members showed willingness to assist and support colleagues in whatever subject areas they needed help.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that time allocated for communities of activities in each high school should be increased and each high school should meet at least once a week for communities of practice activities. Likewise, the Department of Education should ensure that cluster meetings for all high schools in each cluster should be organized at least once a month and sufficient time for all teachers in each cluster to collaborate should be availed. Informal communities of practice activities in high schools should be supported with financial and educational resources by the Department of Education. Regular on-site support should be provided to teachers by the subject advisors with follow-up as a process of supporting and monitoring the activities of teachers in the communities of practice. School heads and district officials should go on regular class visits to monitor if teachers are implementing what they have learnt in the communities of practice.

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