

Bridging the Gap: Aligning Professional Development with Teacher Needs in Namibia

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Abstract

This study delves into the diverse perspectives held by teachers within Ongha Circuit, Namibia, regarding professional development initiatives. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combined a descriptive survey with in-depth interviews and document analysis. Data was collected from 20 purposefully selected teachers across five randomly chosen schools within the circuit, focusing on those with prior exposure to professional development activities. The analysis revealed a spectrum of teacher views, feelings, and attitudes towards professional development, alongside suggestions for optimizing its impact on learner outcomes. Notably, the study underscores the need for a well-structured and systematic approach to staff development, ensuring the consolidation of newly acquired knowledge and the sustainability of positive changes in teaching practices. This shift towards a more tailored and impactful professional development system holds the potential to significantly enhance the educational experience for students within the Ongha Circuit.

Key words: Teachers; Perceptions Professional development

Introduction

Since independence in 1990, Namibia's education system has prioritized boosting learner performance through various initiatives. Restructuring, program development, standardized assessments, and curriculum changes have all been implemented with significant financial investment. However, despite these efforts, learner performance has seen minimal improvement. This suggests a crucial

gap – a lack of attention to the actual classroom environment and the role of teacher professional development in driving impactful change.

This study aims to shift the focus back to the classroom, emphasizing the critical need for professional development that demonstrably alters teacher behavior and leads to improved student outcomes. As research by Thomson and Kaufmann (2013) suggests, learner achievement often stems from the recommendations of formal research conducted by educators. Therefore, this study, undertaken by an educator, seeks to contribute directly to enhancing teaching and learning, ultimately leading to better student performance.

Literature review

Definition of professional development

While Namibia transitioned from diplomas to university degrees for teachers, research indicates minimal change in actual teacher education practices. Despite advancements in pedagogy and curriculum updates, the impact on classroom realities remains limited (Namibian Vision 2030). Ipinge (2013) highlights persistent challenges within Namibia's education system, with Grade 12 learners underperforming and high dropout rates despite government efforts. This research, conducted by a rural schoolteacher, focuses on the specific struggles faced by educators in these areas. Rural teachers often juggle a multitude of unfamiliar issues, including classroom management, resource scarcity, curriculum complexities, local cultural nuances, and navigating test preparation, state standards, parent relations, and challenging living conditions.

Cranston (2016) emphasizes that significant educational improvements rarely occur without effective professional development, a crucial factor often lacking in rural contexts. While studies on teacher perceptions of professional development exist globally, a gap remains in Namibia's research landscape. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the views, feelings, and attitudes of rural teachers in Ongha Circuit towards staff development.

Professional development, as defined by Cook (2015) and Harding (2018), is a continuous learning process for teachers, occurring both formally and informally. It facilitates collaboration and knowledge sharing among educators, allowing them to analyze new teaching techniques and connect with experienced colleagues (Cook, 2015). This process can be structured or unstructured, often incorporating presentations, hands-on workshops, and collaborative teamwork organized by school or district leadership. Raman and Rathakrishnan (2018) and Shen and Shariff (2016) advocate for teacher choice in professional development, enabling them to select areas for improvement based on research-based practices.

Joyce et al. (2015, 2016) emphasize that professional development is a lifelong endeavor aimed at deepening subject knowledge, honing classroom skills, keeping pace with advancements, and enhancing learner feedback mechanisms. This study investigates the disconnect between educational reforms and the realities faced by rural teachers in Namibia. By understanding their perceptions of professional development, work can be done towards creating programs that address their specific needs and ultimately improve student outcomes in these challenging contexts.

Aims of professional development

In Namibia, teacher professional development aims to cultivate lifelong learning and address identified gaps in student achievement. Joyce et al. (2015) emphasize that effective programs should focus on subject matter knowledge, address pedagogical weaknesses within the school, and incorporate learner performance measurement.

Professional development should equip teachers with both knowledge and skills. Darling-Hammond (2013) argues that it should target enhancing teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes to ultimately improve student learning. This knowledge encompasses core teaching areas like assessments, classroom management, and diverse teaching strategies. Joyce and Calhoun (2016) propose "guidelines for success" in planning and implementing professional development:

- i. Recognize change as both an individual and organizational process.
- ii. Start small and gradually scale up.
- iii. Foster support through group work.
- iv. Integrate feedback mechanisms to track progress.
- v. Provide ongoing follow-up, support, and gentle pressure.
- vi. Integrate professional development programs seamlessly into the school system.

Research demonstrates the positive impact of professional development on teacher beliefs and behavior. Shen and Shariff (2016) found that teachers' professional preparation and development significantly influence their learning goals for students, which in turn shape their classroom behavior and ultimately student achievement.

The "Cognitively Guided Instruction Project" (CGI) provides strong evidence that experienced teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and beliefs can be modified through professional development programs, leading to changes in classroom instruction and improved student outcomes (Chan et al., 2018).

However, some perceive professional development as time-consuming and unnecessary, arguing that teacher change is not a linear process (Joyce et al., 2015). Harding (2018) further suggests a reciprocal relationship between teacher beliefs, learning, and changes in practice. Darling-Hammond (2013) emphasizes that change is driven by personal factors like beliefs, interests, and motivations, rather than solely through the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Professional development practices

Extensive research has explored the optimal design and implementation of teacher professional development programs. Several key features consistently emerge as critical to their effectiveness: collaboration, decentralization, content focus, and active learning.

Collaboration fosters a vibrant exchange of knowledge and experiences. Chan et al. (2018) highlight the benefits of collaborative professional development, where multiple schools, administrators, and even community members work together. This collaborative approach, as Darling-Hammond (2013) emphasizes, maximizes the impact by fostering meaningful interactions not just among teachers but also with a broader network of stakeholders. Additionally, Joyce et al. (2015) argue that collaboration within schools enhances efficiency by eliminating duplication of efforts and promoting coordinated activities with shared responsibilities.

Decentralization, as advocated by Cook (2015), positions school-based or site-based professional development as a more effective approach. This ensures programs directly address the specific needs of each school and its teachers, maximizing their relevance and impact. Cranston (2016) further emphasizes the importance of supportive leadership from school administrators and colleagues in ensuring the success of this site-based approach. Chan et al. (2018) reiterate this point, stressing the need for decentralization to the lowest levels to tailor programs to individual teacher needs.

Furthermore, teachers demonstrably prefer professional development that focuses on their specific areas of expertise and the content they teach (Chan et al., 2018). This content focus ensures that acquired knowledge and skills have immediate and practical application in the classroom, potentially leading to positive changes in teaching practice and student outcomes.

Finally, effective professional development programs move beyond passive lectures and embrace active learning strategies. Engaging teachers in discussions, problem-solving activities, and hands-on workshops, as highlighted by the aforementioned research, fosters deeper understanding and promotes the application of new knowledge in real-world classroom settings. By incorporating these key features, professional development programs can evolve from mere training sessions to transformative experiences that empower teachers, strengthen collaboration, and ultimately lead to improved student outcomes.

Methodology

This research employed a mixed methods approach to investigate teachers' perceptions of professional development within schools located in the Ongha Circuit, Ohangwena Region, Namibia. This design was chosen due to its focus on gaining a holistic understanding of the topic from the teachers' perspective. Additionally, it acknowledged the potential influence of individual teacher characteristics on their experiences with professional development, allowing for an in-depth examination of their opinions and experiences.

The target population for this study comprised 200 teachers currently engaged in staff development programs within the Ongha Circuit. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select a representative sample of 20 participants, ensuring equal gender representation with 10 male and 10 female teachers.

Data collection relied on both semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Interviews provided detailed and individual insights, facilitated by an interview guide that outlined key areas of inquiry. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) highlight the effectiveness of interviews in gathering information directly relevant to research questions. The interview process was conducted in three phases, each focusing on obtaining comprehensive responses to the research questions. This phased approach ensured thorough data collection and minimized the risk of rushing participants.

Documentary analysis involved examining school records detailing teacher participation in workshops, training sessions, and professional development courses. Copies of attendance records and job descriptions were obtained to gain a broader understanding of the professional development opportunities offered and their perceived

value by teachers. The analysis involved coding and thematic development, as described by Creswell (2008), who emphasizes the value of such documents in revealing key issues and patterns within qualitative studies. Data analysis employed thematic analysis techniques to extract meaningful information through analytical or statistical tools (Grant, 2020).

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research, including participant protection from harm, data confidentiality, and informed consent. The combination of two research instruments enhanced the validity and reliability of the project by addressing potential weaknesses inherent in each method (triangulation). Additionally, the phased interview approach and emphasis on building rapport with participants further strengthened the research's credibility and trustworthiness.

Results and Discussion

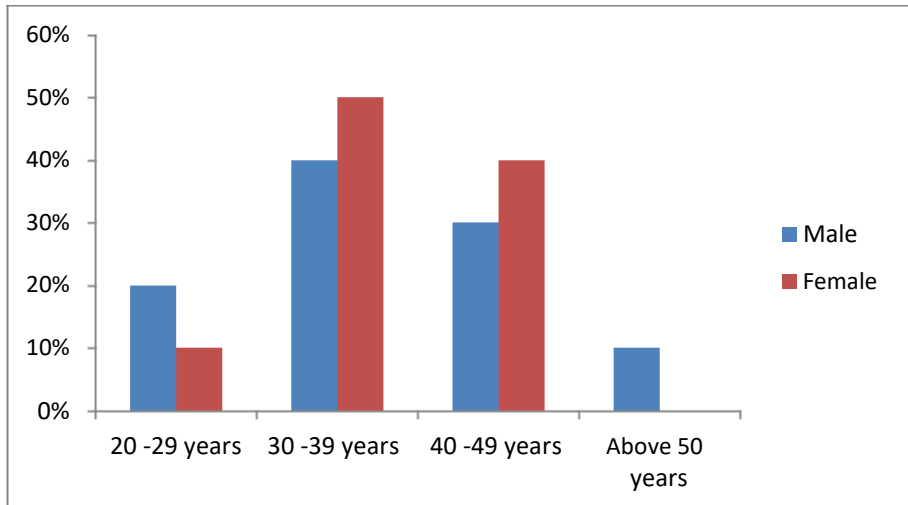
An analysis of participant demographics revealed that the majority (60%) possessed work experience ranging from six to ten years. Conversely, less than 30% of participants had between one and five years of experience, while only 10% boasted over 15 years in the field. The dominant educational qualification among participants was a Bachelor's Degree in Education, accounting for 70% of the research population.

Table 1: 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 held Diplomas in Education, highlighting the shift towards higher educational qualifications within the teaching profession. This diverse group of participants, encompassing varying ages, experience levels, and qualifications, provided valuable insights into the diverse perceptions surrounding professional development programs.

Figure 1: Age structure of participants



An analysis of the table reveals that the majority of research participants fell within the 30-39 age range. Notably, there were no female participants above the age of 50. Documentary analysis of school records confirmed that the Ongha Circuit has been actively engaged in professional development workshops. Documents revealed teacher participation in various professional development courses aligned with the revised Namibian Curriculum. Following the adoption of the 2007 ICT Policy and the new curriculum, records indicate a focus on professional development programs specifically designed to support the implementation of these changes. Additionally, teacher participation in ICT integration in teaching courses was evident. These professional development programs were primarily facilitated by external providers, often with donor funding. Notably, some teachers also pursued postgraduate courses and participated in the Literacy Professional Development Programme.

Table 2: 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

An analysis of interview data revealed diverse perspectives among teachers regarding professional development programs. The majority of participants (80%) acknowledged the fundamental role

such programs play in equipping them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and expertise to effectively impart knowledge to learners. This aligns with the findings of the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century (2000), which emphasizes the importance of professional development in deepening teacher subject knowledge and refining classroom teaching skills.

Specific participant responses highlighted various perceived benefits of professional development. One teacher emphasized the role of these programs in enhancing time management and organizational skills, leading to greater efficiency in lesson delivery. Another participant valued the opportunity for knowledge sharing within the context of a rapidly evolving educational landscape, echoing Thomas Cheok's (2017) assertion that professional development is crucial for meeting contemporary educational demands. Additionally, a participant noted the potential for professional development to foster a stronger sense of self within teachers, suggesting that such programs can boost self-esteem and motivation within the profession.

Furthermore, two participants valued the role of professional development in keeping teachers updated on curriculum standards and the latest teaching strategies, reflecting the perspective of Shen and Shariff (2016) who argued that such programs enhance teacher knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes related to core teaching practices such as assessment, classroom management, and diverse teaching strategies.

However, 20% of participants expressed negative views regarding professional development programs. One participant perceived them as a waste of time, arguing that the Ministry's emphasis on these sessions detracts from time spent directly with students. Another participant criticized the program delivery, finding them time-consuming and lacking in collaboration and decentralization, advocating for school-based approaches as

suggested by Joyce and Calhoun (2016). This participant's critique highlights the importance of considering factors such as collaboration, school-based training, and content focus when designing professional development programs.

Overall, the research underscores the diverse perceptions of teachers regarding professional development programs. While the majority recognized their value in enhancing knowledge, skills, and teaching effectiveness, some participants expressed concerns about time management, program delivery, and the need for greater collaboration and decentralization in program design. These findings emphasize the importance of tailoring professional development programs to address the specific needs and preferences of educators within their local contexts.

Table 3: 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

Analyzing teacher preferences within the study revealed a strong endorsement for specific types of professional development programs. Six participants favored a site-based approach, arguing that it compels educational managers to directly address the

professional needs of teachers within their specific schools. This aligns with the notion that tailoring programs to the unique context of each school can enhance their effectiveness.

Collaborative professional development emerged as a preferred approach for some participants, valued for its potential to foster peer learning through shared experiences and discussions. This finding resonates with Darling-Hammond's (2013) research, which highlights collaboration as a highly effective and efficient form of teacher professional development.

Decentralization of professional development was perceived by participants as a platform for preparing both teachers and heads of departments for potential leadership roles. 75% of participants believed that decentralizing professional development activities could enhance teaching quality by addressing the specific innovation needs of each school. One participant specifically noted that decentralization empowers school principals and heads of departments to focus on issues directly impacting their school's performance, while also providing opportunities for teachers to develop their leadership skills through initiative-taking.

Furthermore, 70% of participants emphasized the importance of active learning within professional development programs. One participant advocated for activities that promote critical thinking and encourage teachers to demonstrate initiative, aligning with Joyce et al.'s (2015) conclusion that effective professional development includes opportunities for observation and reflection on teaching practices. The research also revealed a preference for extended professional development programs over one-time events. 68% of participants valued the opportunity to learn new things over a longer period and connect new experiences with prior knowledge.

Finally, 60% of participants favored content-focused professional development programs aimed at enhancing teacher knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes towards improving student learning. This aligns with Joyce and Calhoun's (2016) perspective that professional development serves as an opportunity for ongoing training and lifelong learning for teachers.

In conclusion, the study highlights diverse teacher preferences regarding professional development programs. While specific approaches like site-based, collaborative, and content-focused models garnered significant support, the overall emphasis lies on active learning and extended program duration to maximize the impact on teacher knowledge, skills, and ultimately, student learning outcomes.

Conclusion

This research investigated teacher perceptions of professional development programs within the Ongha Circuit, Namibia. By analyzing data collected through interviews and documentary analysis, the study concludes that effectively designed and managed professional development programs can significantly contribute to: Enhancing teachers' skills and competencies, leading to improved educational outcomes for learners. Fostering a collaborative environment where teachers can coach one another, share best practices, and analyze new teaching techniques to refine their instructional approaches. However, the research also highlights the need for further improvements in program implementation at both school and circuit levels.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Systematic Program Planning:** Implement a systematic and comprehensive planning process for professional development programs to avoid overload, ensure coherence with previous experiences, and facilitate the consolidation of new knowledge and sustained changes in teaching practice.
2. **Strengthening Professional Learning Communities:** Schools should prioritize strengthening their professional learning communities to provide teachers with ongoing learning opportunities through peer collaboration and knowledge sharing.
3. **Prioritizing School-Based Development:** Increase the focus on school-based professional development programs to ensure that all educators within a school benefit from tailored programs that address their specific needs and context.

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