Delegates’ Experience of a Professional Development Workshop for Staff of Nigerian Independent Schools: An Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

Collaboration between the Director of Accelerated Learning Systems in Nigeria education management lecturers and The University of South Africa since 2008 has led to professional development workshops for staff from Nigerian independent schools. This study, which is a follow-up from a previous study (Steyn, 2010) describes the experiences of delegates of Nigerian independent schools participating in a professional development workshop in South Africa in October 2009. A qualitative study based on appreciative inquiry (AI) identified aspects that participants appreciate: what is current, ‘the best of what has been and what is’ (‘discovering’), and also aspects based on their experience of the workshop and what they desire for future workshops (‘imagining’). The aim of the study was to use the findings to design future workshops that address Nigerian staff’s professional development needs more appropriately.

Keywords: Professional development; workshops; Nigerian independent schools; qualitative study; appreciative inquiry; adult learning theories

1. Introduction

Global societal changes demand that all professionals learn in order to cope with the changes that are rapidly taking place in their environments (Brouwer 2011; Fulton & Britton 2011; Nehring & Fitzsimons 2011; Printy 2010; Retna, 2007; Vemiü, 2007). This also applies to the teaching profession (Doring, 2002). Studies confirm that professional development is the best possible solution to address complex challenges which have benefits for both individuals and schools (Boyle, Lamprianou & Boyle, 2005; Desimone, Smith & Ueno, 2006; Katz & Earl 2010; Nielsen, 2005; Teachers for the 21st Century - Making the Difference, 2008; Vernić, 2007). Research on school effectiveness undoubtedly recognises the link between quality teachers and their professional development (Printy 2010; Teachers for the 21st Century - Making the Difference, 2008; Van Veen & Sleegers, 2006). Sparks (2003a) and Van Eekelen, Vermunt and Boshuizen (2006) believe that effective professional development programmes will expand teachers’ understanding, transform their beliefs and assumptions and guide their classroom actions that change their teaching practice. The dire need for quality teachers to meet educational objectives for continuing professional development is particularly critical in the case of developing countries, such as Nigeria (Ololube, 2008; Garuba, 2004). Moreover, education for sustainable development also requires ‘a life-wide and life-long endeavour’ that challenges staff and schools to meet global aims (Ololube, 2008, p.44).

A democratically elected government came into power when military rule ended in Nigeria in 1999, which resulted in considerable decentralisation of administrative and financial responsibilities (Ikoya & Onoyase, 2008; Okoroma, 2006; Geo-Jaja, 2004). Education has been part of this political reform. The studies of Ofogbho (2004) Osunde and Osunde and Izvevbige (2006) and Omoruyi (2005) show that there is a lack in interest in and attraction to the teaching profession in Nigeria as a result of the low status of its teachers (Ofogbho, 2004; Osunde & Omoruyi, 2005). Poor conditions of service as well as society’s negative influence are fundamental factors that have impacted this low status of Nigerian teachers and have led to teachers’ poor morale which has negatively impacted teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom (Garuba, 2004; Osunde & Omoruyi, 2005; Ogunyemi, 2005). It is therefore important to acknowledge the need to motivate staff in order to produce desirable educational outputs (Ofogbho, 2004; Osunde & Izvevbige, 2006). The study of Olalekan (2004) furthermore suggests that there should be relevant professional development programmes for Nigerian teachers so that they can deal with professional stress successfully.

Limited literature exists on private schooling in Nigeria (Tooley, Dixon & Olaniyi, 2005). In this study all schools were run by such school owners (Tooley et al., 2005). Garuba (2004) determined that many factors can play a dominant role in determining the professional and teaching needs of teachers. He therefore suggests that teachers should be
supported to participate in professional development workshops in order to reflect on their everyday problems experienced in practice and with the assistance of such workshops to seek for solutions to such problems. Effective professional development programmes are those which are embedded in staff's practice, tailored to meet the specific circumstances or contexts of teachers, and sustained over a period of time (What is Professional Learning, n.d.; Lee, 2005).

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of delegates from Nigerian independent schools regarding a professional development workshop conducted by lecturers from a South African university.

2. Conceptual Underpinnings

In this article the researcher uses different theories as a lens for understanding principals' and teachers' positive experience of professional development and the strategies that they recommend to support their professional development. These include the appreciative inquiry technique and adult learning theories.

2.1 Appreciative inquiry (AI)

In the seminal work of Cooperrider and Srivasta (1987) they outlined the AI technique which concentrates on what works satisfactorily in situations and organisations instead of concentrating on problems (Bushe, 2007, p.37; Billings & Kowalski, 2008; Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). Stowell (2013:15) views AI as an approach to ‘finding out’ about issues of concern’. The assumptions and processes that AI theorists support can lead to positive transformation (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Bushe 2007; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006; Stowell 2013:15) since AI builds on the basic strong points of situations or people and requires an inquiry that begins with an appreciation of that which is constructive and positive. Furthermore, the AI approach is collaborative, stimulating and applicable to a wide variety of situations and organisations (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987) and has also been successfully applied to education (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). The AI model consists of a 4D cycle as illustrated in figure 1, although the focus of this study is in particular on the first two phases. Since Nigerian delegates were only from different Lagos schools and not other independent schools in Nigeria, the other two phases were not applicable and appropriate for logistical reasons, although they are mentioned.

2.1.1 Discovery (inquire)

In this phase the focus is on an appreciation of what currently exists, ‘the best of what has been and what is’ (Dunlap, 2008; Lehner & Hight, 2006). The suggestion is to ‘build on the positive core’ (Schutt, 2007, p.27). People describe their personal experience of a particular phenomenon (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004; Ellevén, 2007), in this case delegates’ experience of a professional development workshop. The researcher then endeavoured to uncover and reinforce the positive in a phenomenon/situation, in this case future workshops (Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

2.1.2 Dream (imagine)

In the second phase the focus is on dreaming or imagining what could be, and it involves the building of a new vision for the future (Dunlap, 2008; Ellevén, 2007; Lehner & Hight, 2006), in this case future workshops. By establishing new positions, new possibilities can become apparent (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004).
2.1.3 Design (innovate)

The third phase focuses on what should be by co-constructing how it could be (Schutt, 2007; Dunlap, 2008) and on destiny (creating what will be) (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Lewis & Van Tiem, 2004; Schutt, 2007).

2.1.4 Destiny (implement)

The fourth phase involves creating what will be (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Lewis and Van Tiem, 2004) and identifying barriers that need to be dealt with (Schutt, 2007) for future workshops.

2.2 Adult learning theories

Adult learning theories and constructivist learning theories may present an understanding of adult development (Grado-Severson, 2007). Adults bring numerous life and work experiences to their learning which also shape their perspectives on learning (also professional development) (Grado-Severson, 2007; Kegan, 1982; Kegan, 1992; Knowles 1984; Mezirow, 1991). They also want their learning to be meaningful and valuable. This implies that social context should be understood when supporting adult learning. Moreover, adults approach learning as problem-solving and they learn experientially. Constructivist learning theories suggest that learning is a constructive process in which an individual learner builds an internal illustration of knowledge, a personal interpretation of experience, a ‘sense-making process where the individual builds new knowledge and understanding from the base of existing knowledge and perceptions’ (Chalmers & Keown, 2006, p.148).

Knowles (1984) emphasises that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for their own decisions. As such, professional development programmes have to accommodate this fundamental aspect. Moreover, a meaningful amount of teacher learning occurs through their collaboration with other staff members such as sharing ideas, discussion, observation and working in teams (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005).

In this article I primarily rely on the above theories as a lens to understand how Nigerian delegates experienced a professional development workshop to maximise their opportunities for professional growth.

3. Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed to gain an understanding of the experiences of the 20 participants who attended the workshop. The interpretative research paradigm that focusses on ‘verstehen’ formed the basis of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2012, p.36). Data were collected by means of naive sketches (Giorgi 1985:1) of the workshop and a focus group interview after the workshop. The naive sketches and the focus group interview predominantly focussed on the following questions, which are based on core questions used in appreciative interviews of the AI model (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). (1) Think back on your experience in the workshop and tell us how it helped you to learn and understand the content of the sessions. What made it effective? (2) If the entire workshop were to be redesigned to be more effective, what three wishes would you offer the workshop designers to make it possible? These questions in particular focused on the first two phases of the AI model: discovering and dreaming. In the focus group session participants reported on these questions. The facilitators of the workshop were also requested to view their experiences of the workshop. The researcher ensured that the following ethical principles were adhered to in doing the research: confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy.

The data collected from the naive sketches and focus group were read, reread, segmented and inductively coded considering the AI approach. Meaningful comments were then classified into categories and units of meaning were grouped into these major categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2007). Trustworthiness was ensured by transcribing all the written comments verbatim to ensure an accurate reflection of the participants’ views and by cross-verifying field notes made during the focus group session.

4. Findings

Based on the appreciative inquiry approach, the researcher identified a number of categories and subcategories in the data analysis. The main categories included the following: Uncovering the positive of the professional development workshop; and Going forward.
4.1 **Background of the study**

Collaboration between Nigerian staff in independent schools and academic staff in Education Management at the University of South Africa started in 2007. The main aim was to improve teaching and learning in Nigerian independent schools. A delegation of proprietors (school owners) from Nigerian independent schools visited the University of South Africa and shared their concerns about their schools. Based on these concerns the workshop content for 2008 was discussed by a team of facilitators from the University. Two similar workshops (March and October) were presented after which a mixed-method study was done to explore the experiences of Nigerian delegates from independent schools (Steyn, 2010). Delegates expressed the need to focus on strategies to improve staff motivation and self-management for the sake of their professional effectiveness. After lengthy discussions the team identified the following topics for the next workshop: Invite to inspire through invitational education; Positive discipline: an instrument towards staff motivation and empowerment; Inspired through change; Teaching from the heart; Empowering teachers through shared instructional leadership; Motivating your staff: Practical guidelines; and Managing: yourself: be motivated. Twenty delegates from independent schools in Lagos, Nigeria attended the workshop in October 2009. All delegates had more than five years of experience and included teachers, school administrators, a proprietor and an executive director.

4.2 **Uncovering the positive of the professional development workshop**

4.2.1 **The workshop: an eye opener**

Many participants referred to the workshop as being an ‘eye opener’. Two appropriate examples of responses were: ‘My experience on the workshop was so unique, it has given me the opportunity to rediscover myself and to rediscover my passion for teaching’; and ‘The workshop make to now to see myself as an agent of change and also a better teacher in managing myself, my students and my school’. For many, the workshop also succeeded in equipping them with skills to apply in their teaching practice as another participant stated: ‘The workshop made to now to see myself as an agent of change and also a better teacher in managing myself, my students and my school’. Some of the participants expressed their views on the overall nature of the workshop: ‘The workshop was highly rewarding, educating and interesting'; and ‘The workshop was not only informative, but also very educative, it has taught me new things'.

A few participants also referred to the ‘warm climate’ of the workshop and the ‘very pretty’ venue. In the venue was a number of placards with educative messages and drawings of students and a vase with fresh flowers with a small exhibition of relevant educative books on a table. Two participants also commended on the informative visual and music used during the workshop.

Both adult learning theories and constructive theories are supported by the findings. The work experiences and needs shaped delegates’ perspectives on their learning during the workshop (Grado-Severson, 2007). Delegates also experienced learning to be meaningful and valuable. According to constructivist learning theories, learning is a constructive process in which individual learners can build new knowledge and understanding from existing knowledge and perceptions (Chalmers & Keown, 2006). Yu, Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) are even of the opinion that professional development should develop certain characteristics of teachers’ beliefs such as the fact that teachers must believe that they are competent to accomplish professional goals.

Location and setting of professional development are ‘key parts of authentic practice’ (Hodkinson, Colley & Malcolm, 2003, p.316). Delegates’ responses also referred to the environmental and physiological set-up. Environmental factors include a comfortable and well-equipped venue indicated as well as physiological factors referring to auditory (hearing) and visual (seeing) elements which delegates commented positively on (Vincent & Ross, 2001). By implication, delegates’ experience of the workshop also referred to its content.

4.2.2 **The workshop content: practical and relevant**

The participants expressed their gratitude about the content of the workshop. Many of them referred to the content of the workshop as being ‘very appropriate’, ‘very practical and very relevant to my work’; ‘well presented and informative’; and of relevance to the Nigerian education system. It was also obvious from the data that participants regarded all the topics in the workshop as very relevant, as illustrated by the following comment: ‘All the topics have broadened my thinking/knowledge and have enabled me to see possible approaches that I can make to make it more effective in my school’. Many of the participants also elaborated on the value of the content of particular sessions in the workshop which included the following:
The lecture on teaching from the heart was great and of great relevance, very inspiring and motivating. It has made me see that each child is a gift and I have a great opportunity to impact a life. I am really inspired through the change especially the new change that takes into consideration the existing practices in our schools... I see myself as somebody groping in the darkness of ignorance. But now I see that change is inevitable in my teaching life.

This topic [Motivating your staff] is quite indispensable because motivated members of the staff can take an institution to a higher level.

Invite to inspire through IE [invitational education] was very passionate and inspiring and will help me with my challenges.

The topic on discipline was wonderful. Positive discipline of pupils brings about a positive change. Recognise the good behaviour and attach a relevant reward.

Empowering teachers through shared instructional leadership meant a lot to me.

Research on professional development literature supports the importance of relevance and practice-based professional development programmes (Guskey, 2002; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Lee, 2005; Maaranen, Kynäslahti & Krokkors, 2008; Somers & Sikorowa, 2002). Moswela (2006:623) succinctly indicates that workshops should ‘blend through with practice’. It is also important that staff members who attend workshops value the content of such workshops and realise the possibility of integrating what they have learnt into their classroom practice (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). As regards the content, the main focus should be on the acquisition of knowledge and skills and the improvement of teaching practice (Hodkinson et al., 2003). Apart from appropriate workshop content, the facilitators can also play a key role in ensuring effective professional development and in facilitating the learning of delegates.

4.2.3 Facilitators of the workshop: ‘Seasoned educationists’

The participants agreed on the expertise of facilitators of the workshop as succinctly described by one participant: ‘The seminar instructors for the workshop was a wonderful team. They were well grounded in the topic they handled and the good mastery of what each delivered second to none... They are professionals and should be encouraged to spread their experience to others more’. A few participants attributed the success of presentations to a facilitators being ‘fully prepared and touched the bothering areas in my teaching profession’; facilitators being ‘well knowledgeable about the topics presented’; the ‘enthusiasm of presenters’ which was ‘excellent’; facilitators being ‘friendly, passionate’ and ‘very courteous’. Participants also valued the interactive nature of the workshop: ‘I loved and enjoyed the interaction that flowed amongst the participants and the facilitators’.

One of the facilitators wrote that she changed her attitude towards her presentation and focused less on academic and factual information compared to her presentations of the two previous workshops. ‘It seems as if my approach by focusing on more practical issues this time allowed more participation and was better received’.

The findings support the views of Vincent and Ross (2001), and Mewborn and Huberty (2004) who assert that effective professional development programmes require facilitators who are knowledgeable and well prepared and should encourage active participation during the workshop. Furthermore, facilitators need to be aware of the actual problems staff experience in their schools (Moswela, 2006). Apart from the negotiations that took place between the Director of Accelerated Learning and the proprietors, a better understanding of Nigerian independent schools is required. Future workshops in Nigeria with accompanying school visits may equip facilitators to better understand the circumstances in Nigeria.

During the discovery phase of AI the idea is to appreciate what exists, ‘the best of what has been and what is’ (Dunlap, 2008, p.26) and to ‘build on the positive core’ (Schutt, 2007, p.27). Delegates explained their positive experiences of the workshop which may assist the team to strengthen the positive for planning future workshops.

4.3 Going forward

Participants were requested to think about redesigning future workshops based on their experience of the workshop. Although participants had positive experiences of the workshop, they had raised a number of areas for the improvement of workshops.

4.3.1 Proposed time and duration of workshops

Participants and facilitators agreed that time and duration were a real concern. This is also in line with recommendations
of previous research done on the effectiveness of workshops for Nigerian participants from independent schools (Steyn, 2010). Unfortunately the planned three day workshop had to change to a two day workshop due to cost and logistical reasons. Although the participants valued the interaction during the sessions, they would like to have much more time for interaction as illustrated by the following comment: ‘More interactive sessions, more group discussion and more time for each session are needed’; It is therefore understandable that many participants recommended a longer workshop. The following comments were made in this regard: ‘More days should be allocated to such training’; and ‘Increase the number of days as to make room for more practical sessions and groups activities’. One participant succinctly explained her stance: ‘I would like to have three days for sessions to assimilate content better’. All facilitators also expressed the desire for more discussion and participation during the workshop.

Although short courses may be effective on occasions (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005), Smith and Gillespie (2007) maintain that professional development is more effective in changing teachers’ practice when it is of longer duration. The duration influences the depth of teacher change (Lee, 2005; Continuing Professional development of Teachers, n.d). A longer duration also allows more time for delegates to learn about their own practice, which implies that workshops require a contextualisation of content.

4.3.2 Proposed contextualisation of workshops

Participants expressed their wish to have more discussion on issues in Nigerian schools; ‘We need to talk about the challenges in Nigeria, and we also want practical sessions for discourse’. Participants also wanted workshops to be presented in Nigeria: ‘I wish it could be possible for the facilitators to come to Nigeria in order to have a larger house of participants’. As a result of this, planning for visits by facilitators to Nigeria started to provide a better understanding of the needs and challenges faced by the education system in Nigeria. It will also be more cost effective to send seven facilitators to Nigeria.

The literature supports the findings of the importance of contextualising professional development programmes for the schools (Guskey, 2002; Hirsh, 2005; Mewborn & Huberty, 2004) since the development and learning of staff are affected by variables within the school context which may either enhance or obstruct their professional development (Heaney, 2004; Hirsh, 2005; Katz & Earl 2010:29; Van Eekelen et al., 2006). As such it is important that teachers value the workshop content and recognise the possibility of integrating what they have learnt into their practice (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2005). This implies that the main focus of professional development workshops should be on the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the sake of improving practices (Hodkinson et al., 2003).

4.3.3 Proposed composition of workshop delegates

A few participants aired their views on the delegates who attended the workshop in 2009. They believed that ‘more members instead of Lagos alone’ should attend ‘as to get new educational drive to spread across the Nigerian schools’. The criticism is acknowledged, but logistics, in particular acquiring visas for South Africa, played a key role in the finalisation of the team of delegates.

The literature supports the findings that when staff have opportunities to work with other professionals in schools and have access to the expertise of researchers and facilitators, learning and development are most likely to occur (Robinson & Carrington, 2002). Staff also value collaborative opportunities with staff members outside their own schools (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). Collaboration between the Director in Nigeria and the facilitators started and they plan in their visit to Nigeria to reach more staff in schools and to also visit Nigerian schools to provide a better understanding of the needs and challenges faced by the education system in Nigeria.

4.3.4 Identification of delegates’ needs

Since the delegates included both managerial staff and teachers it was expected that their needs would differ. School administrators suggested ‘more managerial aspects and training in administrative duties’, ‘work ethics’ and ‘human resource management’ while teachers expressed the need for ‘curriculum development’; and ‘how to effectively deliver a lesson’.

For both managers and teachers the idea of developing good relationships among role players was important as illustrated by the following: ‘The additional topic I would like to include is ‘Developing a good rapport among teachers and parents’. Facilitators felt that the needs of managers and teachers differ and that it would therefore be more appropriate to accommodate them in different sessions that would have an influence on the content of the workshop. The initial
arrangement between the organisers was that the target group for the workshop will predominantly include delegates on a managerial level. As mentioned before, logistics played a key role in the final selection of delegates to attend the workshop.

Literature on adult learning theories, constructivist theories and professional development confirms that professional development workshops should meet the needs of individuals if professional development programmes are to be successful (Fratt, 2007; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Kegan, 1992; Kegan, 1994; Lee 2005; Mezirow, 1991; Robinson & Carrington, 2002). Moreover, as also indicated by the findings, delegates prefer workshops that are related to their practice and that aim to meet their specific needs (Robinson & Carrington, 2002; Somers & Sikorova, 2002).

The ‘Imagine’ phase on which the study was also based involves the construction and creation of a new vision for the future (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Lehner & Hight, 2006; Schutt, 2007). The category ‘Going forward’ enabled the researcher to collect evidence of imagining how future workshops could be designed to meet the expectations of delegates (Dunlap, 2008:26). As such, responses to question asked to delegates have guided the development of planning future workshops (Schutt, 2007).

5. Conclusion

With the growing dynamism in the world of teaching and learning and the increasing demands and social expectations on teachers, professional development of teaching and managerial staff in Nigeria is a major concern. The current study indicated that the workshop succeeded in meeting the majority of delegates’ expectations. The first two phases of the AI approach served as a guideline in grounding the research.

The first phase: delegates expressed their appreciation on a number of aspects. These aspects also indicate the quality of the workshop. However, planning and implementing professional development through appropriate workshops can be regarded as complex and poses some difficulties. Furthermore, assuming that professional development workshops that worked previously, will not necessarily be appropriate for other settings, workshops should be modified and the fact that individual staff members will respond differently to similar workshop opportunities should be acknowledged. The following aspects are considered for designing future workshops (figure 2).

• Continue and also improve aspects that delegates viewed positive about the workshop.
• Prolong sessions and extend the duration of the workshop. This can be possible when facilitators run workshops in Nigeria over an extended period rather than two days.
• Allow for more contextualisation. Workshops with a longer duration allow for more time to discuss Nigerian issues. It allows delegates to focus on their particular problems and equip them with the necessary skills to ‘own’ their problems and address them effectively. Planned visits by facilitators to independent schools will also help them to understand the needs of staff in Nigerian schools.
• Adapt the composition of workshops to allow for separate sessions for teachers and managers. The needs of managers and teachers differ and conducting separate workshop sessions will be more effective in addressing their needs.
• Address the needs of individuals expressed as far as possible. One should keep in mind that in designing effective professional development workshops the focus should not only be on the individual, but also on the school. In this regard Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005:123) say that the focus should not be ‘on individual learner responsibility, on targeted needs, or learning outcomes, but rather on creating a more expansive learning environment at work.’ Such an expansive environment provides diverse and wide-ranging learning opportunities which support and value learning.

References


