

# Teacher development: what works?

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*Teacher [development] still has the honor of being simultaneously the worst problem and the best solution in education.*

*(Fullan, 1993, quoted in Cochran-Smith, 2001: 31)*

## Introduction

With the policy that has been developing in South Africa since the work of the Ministerial Committee on Teacher Education in 2005, there has been a significant shift in our understanding of teacher development. Instead of 'front end loading' teacher development in pre-service teacher education, with piecemeal in-service training to provide teachers with information on a particular aspect of their work or curriculum changes, teacher development is now considered to be a lifelong process for teachers – starting with their initial qualification and continuing through induction and continuing professional development to retirement. I wish to focus in further, however, and use the term 'professional development', which carries with it further useful notions.

## What is teacher professional development?

Teacher professional development is much more than 'upgrading' – which is based on a deficit model of teachers and is an inheritance from our past in South Africa. Black teachers used to be given lower pre-service requirements than whites and then were placed on the treadmill of eternal upgrading to become equal; each time they reached the required qualification the bar was raised, necessitating yet more upgrading. The problem with upgrading is that it is about catching up rather than deepening and growing. And you never catch up. 'Upgrading' suggests that it is only the initial qualification that is important, and if you have not got the right initial qualification you need to achieve it. It does not embrace the fact that all teachers need to develop professionally, whatever qualification they started with.

Teacher professional development is also much more than career development, which is qualifying yourself for a position you are not yet in. And so we get teachers doing management qualifications or information and communication technology (ICT) qualifications in order to get out of teaching. There is nothing wrong with this, per se, but it is not the goal of teacher professional development. Teacher professional development is also not simply about the individual's personal growth and learning but about how that 'growth and learning contributes to organisational performance ...

a collective good rather than a private or individual good' (Elmore, 2002: 14). Or as Villegas-Reimers (2003: 11) puts it, professional development is 'considered a long-term process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in the profession'.

The purpose of teacher professional development is the development of the person in the profession and also the development of the profession. If professional development is not centred on the link between educator skill and knowledge and student learning, it cannot be said to be working. Most writers on teacher professional development agree on this (see, for example, Elmore, 2002; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). However, as Elmore (2002) points out, beneath this broad agreement there are a number of tensions. One of these is between (a) those who favour system-wide improvement requiring centrally led professional development initiatives for school improvement, and (b) those who want to leave to teachers the responsibility for determining the focus of the professional development they need.

## Approaches to teacher professional development in South Africa

We see the above tension in the contrast between the approach of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and that of the South African Council of Educators (SACE). The DBE is responsible for systemic improvement while SACE is responsible for the professionalism of teachers.

The DBE wants sweeping, large-scale initiatives – effective solutions to the low literacy and numeracy results or the poor showing of candidates in the school-leaving examinations in maths, science and accounting – while SACE, through the emerging Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) system, has identified three types of professional development activities:

1. Teacher priority activities that are chosen by teachers themselves for their own development and the improvement of their own professional practices.
2. School priority activities undertaken by the school leadership and staff collectively, focused on whole school development, the institutional conditions for the improvement of learning and improved teaching.
3. Profession priority activities that have directly to do with enhancing the professional status, practices and commitments of teachers in areas of greatest need, as defined by the

Table 1

**The Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy mapped against three perspectives on features of effective teacher professional development**

	<b>Elmore: the consensus view (North America)</b>	<b>Report on early reading in low-income countries</b>	<b>Best evidence synthesis, New Zealand</b>	<b>Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy</b>
<b>Context</b>		Coherence between training and policies on what teachers are expected to teach.	Consistency with wider policy and trends	Aligned with the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) and the national workbooks
<b>Purpose</b>	Well-articulated purpose anchored in student learning of core disciplines or skills			Improving learner achievement in literacy in 792 low-performing schools in Gauteng
<b>Approach</b>	Derives from analysis of student learning of specific content in a specific setting		Focuses on links between teaching and its impact on student learning	
<b>Content</b>	Focuses on specific issues on curriculum and pedagogy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Derived from research and exemplary practice</li> <li>Connected with specific issues of instruction and student learning of academic disciplines and skills in the context of actual classrooms</li> </ul>	Builds teachers' specialist pedagogic knowledge as well as general pedagogy	Requires engagement with new pedagogical content and assessment knowledge and the implications of these for practice. [but underpinning curriculum knowledge needs to be adequate in order to integrate it with effective teaching strategies]	Training and materials focus on both specific methods of teaching reading and on general pedagogic skills
<b>Time</b>	Sustains focus over time – continuous improvement	Extended duration	Extended opportunities to learn	Every year for at least two years
<b>Process</b>	Develops, reinforces and sustains group work through collaborative practice within schools and networks across schools	Collective participation – support network of peers in same school or area	Meaning of new knowledge and implications for practice negotiated with provider and colleagues	Collective participation is encouraged, but not clear how it is supported
<b>Pedagogy of programme</b>	Embodies a clearly articulated theory or model of adult learning	Active learning opportunities and provision for reflection, feedback and planning of new practices; intermixed delivery formats for different learning styles	Opportunities to engage in a range of learning activities	Not only training but also mentoring and coaching, with lesson observation and discussion
<b>Support for and in practice</b>	Models effective practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delivered in schools and classes</li> <li>Practice is consistent with message</li> </ul>	School-based support from coaches trained in same method they will use with teachers; weekly programmes with learner materials and assessment guides	Support for integration of new learning into alternative forms of practice	Coaches trained to meet individual/ cluster school needs with tailored training, and school-based observation and support; strong guidance through materials

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<b>Assessment/ evaluation</b>	Uses assessment and evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active monitoring of student learning</li> <li>Feedback on teacher learning and practice</li> </ul>	Assessment – teachers trained to assess in classroom, not only rely on external tests of progress	Using assessment to focus teaching and review effectiveness (but in analysis of results, must look at teaching-learning relationship)	External evaluation commissioned and feedback on teacher practice provided
<b>Whole school/ community focus</b>	Involves active participation of school leaders and staff	Community participation – recognition that schools are embedded in social contexts	Participation in a professional community that supported the new ideas and practice while challenging existing ones and focused on teaching-learning links	Strategy has four pillars: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Measuring literacy</li> <li>Improving teaching</li> <li>Homework and parent support</li> <li>Improving management of literacy teaching</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability</b>		Capacity-building of district personnel so that they can sustain the intervention	In-depth pedagogical content knowledge together with evidence-based skills of inquiry in supportive school contexts	

Department of Education, SACE, national teachers’ unions or other national professional bodies. (SACE CPTD Task Team, 2008: 5)

These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. While the DBE must engage in system-wide initiatives for school improvement, it must also recognise that ‘much professional learning is informal and incidental or occurs in meetings after school. In such situations, neither the process nor the outcomes are typically documented’ (Timperly et al., 2007: xxiv).

However, the quality of teacher priority activities will be dependent to a large extent on the quality of teachers’ own education and their ability not only to evaluate their own needs but also to find appropriate opportunities to meet those needs. The quality of school priority activities will be a function of the effectiveness of the school and the commitment of the school leadership to making the schools they lead into learning organisations.

We have to be careful that the system of operationalising the three priority areas does not, through overly bureaucratic requirements, stifle the very independence and autonomy that it is aiming to instil.

### Learning from teaching

In my view, the way to deal with the tension between providing for autonomy at the individual and school level and introducing programmes that are designed for large-scale systemic improvement is to incorporate into the latter real attempts to build understanding, active engagement, local leadership and local

shaping of activity within the broad agenda. Cochran-Smith (2001: 25) is correct when she says that, ‘Learning from teaching ought to be regarded as the primary task of teacher education across the professional lifespan’. This underlines the importance of inquiry as stance, where ‘teachers and teacher educators [are prompted] to construct their own questions and then begin to develop courses of action that are valid in their local contexts and communities’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, quoted in *ibid.*: 27).

Although this is often regarded as at odds with national programmes for systemic improvement, I would like to argue that national programmes will fail unless we build the capacity of teachers to systematically learn from their own teaching as they work on the materials and programmes that are nationally determined in response to systemic priorities. We want to avoid the descent into compliance that Elmore (2002: 12) describes:

*To the degree that people are being asked to do things they don’t know how to do and, at the same time, are not being asked to engage their own ideas, values and energies in the learning process, professional development shifts from building capacity to demanding compliance.*

### Understanding what works

According to Elmore (2002), there is a large degree of consensus on what works if the goal is improvement of student learning through the improvement of the skill and knowledge of educators.

To test this assertion, I thought it might be useful to develop a table of comparison between three sources of what works for

teacher professional development: Elmore's own North American perspective; the perspective of a report on early reading in low-income countries (Gove et al., 2010); and the perspective of a synthesis of research on teacher development that has a positive effect on student learning undertaken for the Ministry of Education in New Zealand (Timperly et al., 2007). In addition, I have included the features of a South African initiative – the Gauteng Primary Literacy Strategy (GPLS) – to see whether it is aligned with what is generally understood 'to work'.

The results (Table 1) not only bear out Elmore's point that there is a broad consensus about what works in teacher professional development, but also show that a local initiative like the GPLS is informed by this consensus.

I have deliberately picked the GPLS because the external evaluation report is not yet ready; the strategy has only been going for just over a year and the evaluation is still in process. The question about whether or not it will prove successful is therefore still open. The concern of the members of the province's Executive Council is that learners' results in the Annual National Assessments for literacy improve significantly as a result of the strategy. There is every reason to expect this, because a similar approach taken over a number of years in the Western Cape has yielded results that show steady improvement over time (see Table 2).

So what will happen if the GPLS does not show a positive effect on learner results? Do we say that the strategy is not working and look for another one? We have done far too much of that in South Africa. As Elmore (2012: 13) pointed out: 'Schools are accustomed to changing promiscuously and routinely – without producing any improvement'.

The big question for us is not what strategy to implement. That can be developed relatively easily. The big challenge for us is how to implement it, and what to do when it is not doing what we want it to do. It is insufficiently recognised that each instance of a model or an approach or a programme is an innovation. It is also insufficiently recognised that innovation is not simply getting a new idea and playing with it to 'test' whether it works or not. What we want is to embed innovative practice, and this requires diverse strategies and styles:

*Exploring* (discovering new perspectives, assumptions, and uncharted territory; *Visioning* (developing a clear sense of long-term purpose, with bold, ideal solutions to achieve it); *Experimenting* (combining and testing existing elements in

*novel combinations*); and *Modifying* (building on and optimising past and present achievements).  
(Jasinski, 2007: 6 – italics in the original)

## Conclusion

What works is thus known in general terms, but each iteration of what works has to not only be imagined anew for that context but also understood as a process rather than a specific outcome. As Samoff et al. (2011) note, those directly involved in the reform must understand it as a continuing process and must structure it to embed learning at its core. They also point out that there is a myth in the development literature that we have to find out what works and then replicate it, or pilot an innovation and then take it to scale. They conclude after a thorough analysis of the literature that 'rather than replicating the specific elements of the reform, what must be scaled up are the conditions that permitted the initial reform to be successful and the local roots that can sustain it' (ibid.: 18).

### Box 1

#### How to maximise the benefits of teacher development

To maximise the benefits of teacher development, the discipline of improvement has to be practised at three levels:

- 1 There need to be evidence-based, large-scale systemic interventions to meet particular goals (which should be thoroughly monitored and evaluated, with the emphasis on modifying rather than experimenting) and with a strong sense of vision. For these initiatives, results in terms of improved student learning are critical. But at the same time, lest we look for results too soon in the process, the 'innovation' that goes into developing the organisational expertise to run these programmes has to be recognised and given space. Modifying is a highly creative and rigorous activity. There needs to be proper resourcing in order to manage this effectively, persistently and consistently so as to produce the desired results.
- 2 To invigorate the system and do detailed inquiry-based work with teachers, research-based and school-based innovations should be nurtured where the emphasis is on experimenting and the evaluation emphasis is on 'getting to maybe'. These should not be judged on their direct impact on learner achievement, as this will place the innovation in a straitjacket. Other outcomes should be explored and identified.
- 3 Teacher-led development initiatives such as professional learning communities should be encouraged and facilitated but not directed. The character of these learning communities is essentially local, specific and voluntary – as soon as you try to systematise them, you kill them. So it has to be accepted that they will not be uniform or uniformly successful. Resources should be put into supporting these initiatives, but immediate results – especially improved learner achievement – should not be expected from them.

**Table 2** Grade 3 results

#### Grade 3 standardised test results in the Western Cape 2009 and 2010

	Numeracy (%)		Literacy (%)	
	Pass rate	Average	Pass rate	Average
2009	35.0	39.5	53.5	50.5
2010	48.3	48.0	54.9	50.7
Change 2010/2009	+13.3	+8.5	+1.4	+0.2

Source: Western Cape Education Department, 2011

Improvement is, as Elmore (2002: 13) points out, 'A discipline, a practice that requires focus, knowledge, persistence and consistency over time'. In teacher development, to maximise the benefits, this discipline has to be practised at three levels: at the level of the system; in smaller-scale school-based programmes; and at the level of the individual teacher (see Box 1). Ideally, the systemic and the school-level initiatives should insist on and develop the capacity of individual teachers for disciplined study of practice. It is on the professionalism of individual teachers and schools that system-wide improvement is built.

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