

Towards Equality and Equity in Education: Assessing an Initiative to Strengthen Teacher Professional Development in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa major educational inequalities and disparities in education are prevalent at especially historically black township schools due to the country's history and current contexts. Teacher training evolved from the apartheid system which was characterised by deep racial and regional inequalities with poor teacher training and low admission requirements for blacks. Most currently serving teachers received their professional education from the apartheid system which adversely impacts on national assessments and equitable teaching and learning. The poor performance of learners from township schools in national and international literacy assessments prompted the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to take proactive teacher professional development (TPD) steps to address the issue of equitable teaching and learning and chronic learner underperformance in literacy in the province. This strategy to address equality and equitable learning through TPD is called the Gauteng Province Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS). The study examines the effect of the practicing teacher professional development (TPD) on Grade 3 teachers' understanding and experiences of the implementation of the GPLMS in selected underperforming schools in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. Data on the importance and results of the programme as well as support for the GPLMS were gathered using interviews, document analysis and observation. The mentoring process stood out as the most important contributing factor for effective implementation of the GPLMS. Respondents reflected positive attitudes towards school-based Literacy teacher professional development. The fast pace of the programme, large classes, marking and lack of parental involvement were major challenges. Despite these challenges the new GPLMS provided more equitable teaching and learning opportunities and it improved the literacy assessment levels of the learners.

Introduction

Under the first democratic government in South Africa, the following mission statement was formulated by the Department of Education (2007, p.1): "It is universally recognised that the main objective of any education system in a democratic society is to provide quality education for all learners so that they will be able to reach their full

potential and will be able to meaningfully contribute to and participate in that society throughout their lives". To realize this ideal is not an easy task. South Africa, with its history of political and educational segregation, had 17 education departments located in its various provinces which were divided on the basis of race and ethnicity. Former white schools were adequately equipped in terms of financial, human and infrastructural resources (Perumal, 2009), and these learners received the kind of education that promoted "skills development, critical thinking, attitudes and understanding", whereas education for black learners was mainly "rote learning" that prepared them to be "hewers of wood and bearers of water" (Perumal, 2009 p.36). The same disparities could also be found in the training of teachers where the qualification structure of white and black teachers were dissimilar which impacted negatively on the teaching and identity of the teacher. In the context of this article, we agree with the description of Aróstegui, Ballantyne and Kerchner (2013, p.212) who maintain that teacher identity is something that is not fixed, nor imposed; it is established through experience and the interpretation of that experience.

According to Fiske and Ladd (2006, p.95) the major task of South Africa's new government was to design a more racially equitable education system using three concepts of equity, i.e. equal treatment by race, equal educational opportunity and educational adequacy. Various initiatives were introduced by the government to address these inequalities in education which include the implementation of new curricula and training programmes for teachers. These initiatives were however not very successful. Research on the training of teachers conducted by Jansen (1999); Guiltig, Hoadley and Jansen (2002); Mosia (2011) and Potenza and Monyokolo (1999) confirms that insufficient instructional materials and teachers' misunderstanding, confusion, uncertainty, lack of support and insufficient professional development impacted negatively on the implementation of new policies. Consequently these training enterprises and new policies were not able to eliminate all the disparities and the "tentacles of the apartheid past still run deep in contemporary South Africa" (Finchilescu, Muianga, Mynhardt, Pillay, & Tredoux, 2007, p.721) and are still noticeable in the education system.

To illustrate, the Annual National Assessment (ANA) of 2011 reports that in an assessment of more than 6 million Grade 3 learners the average performance in Literacy was 35% and in Numeracy 28% (Department of Education, 2011). Angie Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education, responded that "...the education sector needs to focus even more on its core functions of quality learning and teaching." She added that "...the development of the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy at foundation levels" need to be the focus of attention (Department of Education, 2011). This article will therefore discuss the impact of a teacher development initiative (GPLMS) which aimed at addressing equality and equity by developing teachers' knowledge and skills to elevate the literacy levels of Grade 3 learners (nine year old children). It will additionally report on teachers' understanding, experiences and challenges in the implementation of the teacher development initiative (GPLMS)., Teachers were furthermore interviewed in order to gauge the kind of support they received during their training and the results obtained in

terms of their personal development and the literacy levels of learners. Accordingly the investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers understand and experience the implementation of GPLMS as a teacher professional development initiative?
2. What provisions are in place to support the teacher professional development initiative (GPLMS)?
3. What are the challenges in implementing the teacher professional development initiative (GPLMS)?
4. What are the major results obtained through the teacher development initiative in terms of improvement in teachers' practices and national assessment levels of the learners?

In order to understand the current state of the education system in South Africa its context needs to be explained.

The Educational Context in South Africa

From 1948-1994 South Africa was governed by an autocratic regime based on a discriminatory constitution, with the result that "...this education system constituted a complex organisational structure of 17 departments, all under central state control" (Swart, 2004, p.234). Subsequently there was a reproduction in functions and services which created major disparities regarding finances and materials between the departments, especially between racial groups (Hannaway, 2012). Bettersby-Lennard and Lemon (2009, p.2) report that the per capita spending was nearly four times more for whites than blacks, with the result that when the country had a change in government the majority of black schools possessed little beyond the shell of their buildings, whereas many white state schools were comparable with the best in the developed world (Lemon & Battersby-Lennard, 2009, p.2).

With the dawn of democracy in 1994 and the subsequent adoption of a new constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996) and Bill of Rights (Act 108 of 1996), the South African government attempted to address disparities in its education system (Engelbrecht, 2006). Equal access to education for all became a fundamental rights issue in the constitution, especially for the previously marginalized groups (Daniels, 2010, p.636). From the government's perspective it was important to retrain teachers to be equipped for their teaching responsibilities whilst simultaneously improving their identities as teachers. This article investigates the implementation of a new teacher development strategy that aimed to enhance the quality of education and equitable learning opportunities in historically disadvantaged and underperforming schools in one of the provinces in South Africa.

Historical background of teacher training impacting the identity of township teachers

Teacher training in South African schools evolved from the apartheid system which was characterized by deep racial and regional inequality. The discriminatory policy of separate ethnic “development” was included in teacher training. In this regard Steyn, Steyn & De Waal (1997, p.24) mention that whites had to obtain grade 12 in order to qualify for a school leaving certificate, but blacks only needed grade 10 to obtain a Junior Certificate which allowed them to obtain a Lower Primary Certificate to qualify for a teaching career (Coetzee, 1963). According to Adikhari (1993, p.33) the “...T3 certificate, which had been the basic professional qualification for all teachers, was differentiated into two categories. The one obtained by whites was designated ‘Senior’ and the corresponding one for blacks, ‘Junior’.” Sayed (2004, p.248) furthermore asserts that educational opportunities were extremely limited for blacks, “...with very few blacks completing basic education, and even fewer completing secondary schooling, which resulted in many students enrolling in teacher education programmes in order to obtain higher educational opportunities.” (Hannaway, 2012, p.37).

The National Teacher Education Audit in 1995 which took place immediately after the abolishment of Apartheid, concluded that:

“... the quality of teacher education (for blacks) was generally poor, inefficient, and cost-ineffective. Synchronous with international trends, colleges of education were incorporated into existing universities and technikons as faculties or schools, and from 120 colleges with some 80000 student teachers in 1994, colleges were first rationalised to 50 institutions, and then incorporated into higher education institutions in 2001.”

The result of this ineffective schooling caused learners to be “underprepared” (Bradbury & Miller, 2011, p.1) for tertiary education and consequently many teachers still do not possess the appropriate teacher qualifications (SAIDE, 2007, p.11). Their personal experiences of the inferior schooling system may also contribute to the low status that this population group affords to the teaching profession as well as the low morale of teachers, which in turn cultivate a low and unhealthy professional self-image among black teachers in township schools. Townships are a legacy of the previous system of segregation where black people were restricted to areas outside cities which were called “townships”. Motseke (2005) is of the opinion that a lack of teaching resources in township schools seriously inhibited learner participation and self-discovery. Most schools in townships do not have libraries and laboratories. Vandeyar (2005) postulates that the absence of teaching and learning material in township schools is stressful for teachers as this impacts negatively on teaching, learning and learner performance.

The new government realized that an incisive intervention should take place in their

quest to equalize training and development to support teachers in township schools.

Contexts of South African schools

The striking disparities in schooling during the rule of the previous government were passed onto the post-apartheid schooling. Taylor's study (2006) refers to two types of schools in South Africa, namely "dysfunctional" or "functional".

The first type of school identified is the functional school. Townsend (1994) defines functional schools as schools of excellence. There is strong leadership and management in these schools. Learners excel in curricular, co-curricular and community activities. These schools are well-resourced and seen to produce a large percentage of learners who qualify with university exemption (Goyocohea, 1998).

The second type of school is situated in townships (black communities) and represents a dysfunctional state of schooling where a large number of the learners fail (Johnson, 2015). Christie (1998) maintains that dysfunctional schools in South Africa are the result of the breakdown of teaching and learning combined with material deprivation, poverty and disruption of communities. The author identifies four categories of dysfunctional schools and characterizes them as having:

- poor physical and social facilities;
- organisational problems;
- poor school/community relations;
- a poor relationship between the school and the department of education.

Similar categories of dysfunctions also emerged in Bergman, Bergman and Gravett's (2011) study of dysfunctional schools in Gauteng. Most of the dysfunctional schools operate with dysfunctional rules where, for example, teachers fabricated learner's marks. There was chronic unpunctuality and absenteeism of learners and teachers. Dysfunctions were found and teacher incompetence which included teachers' inability to teach a subject, was evident. School context plays a formidable role and many schools located in disadvantaged communities inherited a legacy of dysfunction and this dysfunction continued despite governments' attempts to rebuild a culture of teaching and learning (Weeks, 2008). This dysfunction further inhibits learning and the building of strong classroom communities.

Initiatives of the South African Department of Education to address equality and equity through teacher development

In order to improve the quality of teaching and learning to provide an education system that builds democracy, dignity, equality and social justice, the Department of Education introduced several broad educational reforms in South Africa (Meier, 2011) which focused on the Foundation Phase (grades 1, 2, and 3 or the first 3 years of schooling). These reforms will be briefly discussed below whilst mentioning reasons why

they were not always successful.

Outcomes Based Education (OBE)

Outcomes Based Education (OBE) was the first initiative introduced by the post-apartheid government in 1998 to transform education. OBE implementation in schools demanded new approaches to teaching, learning, assessment and management within the classroom and school and focused on a decentralised curriculum.

These outcomes were not achieved in the township schools due to intricate past policies that allocated limited funds to these schools. Mboyane (2000) ascribes poorly trained teachers with limited proficiency in English who struggled to understand complex language used in OBE documents, to past education policies. Another problem was that OBE training did not adequately train teachers for the implementation of the new curriculum (OBE) as their professional training was not aligned with the OBE approach (Onwu & Mogari, 2004; Taylor & Vinjevd, 1999). This non-alignment of professional training created gaps in the execution of critical activities such as lesson preparation, methods of lesson facilitation and assessment strategies.

Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS)

The National Curriculum Statement was the second initiative introduced in 2002. The policy aimed to transform teaching and learning. It was then referred to as the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (DoE, 2002a). According to the RNCS (DoE, 2002a) the Early Childhood Education teacher had to teach learners to read and 40% of the teaching time in the phase had to be dedicated to the teaching of literacy. According to Mankveld and Pepler (2004) the Revised National Curriculum Statement emphasised language development for the Foundation Phase without clear directives given to teachers on how to teach and facilitate language acquisition. Most of the emphasis was placed on communicative language and literacy teaching. Therefore, due to a lack of guidance and pedagogical skills of teachers, the teacher envisaged by the policy was different from the teacher in the real classroom situation (Mudzielwana, 2012).

The National Curriculum Statement (NCS)

The RNCS was revised once again in 2006 to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE, 2006). The NCS was introduced as the third initiative aimed at improving teaching and learning. The time allocated for reading in the Foundation Phase increased and guidance on a balanced approach to teaching reading was provided. The NCS included a yearlong schedule, a learning programme, lesson plans and assessment guidelines. The outcomes emphasised skills, knowledge and values that learners should acquire and demonstrate during the learning process. However, the NCS was not

effectively implemented in the classroom as PIRLS (2006) reports that South African learners were placed at the bottom of the list internationally in the reading assessments. This low achievement suggested that South African learners had reading problems (Mullis Kennedy, Martin & Sainsbury, 2006).

Low reading levels among South African learners continued to exist. According to JET Education Service (2010) the main weaknesses identified were the lack of specificity and examples as teachers were required to develop learning programmes based on the National Curriculum Statement. The lack of support and guidance to teachers made this activity an almost unattainable task in most township schools. Additionally, Mudzielwana (2012) reports that teachers in township schools were unable to interpret language in policy documents. These initiatives required in-service training of teachers. Wai-Wan (1996, p.43) also reports that training spanned short periods of time during which teachers were meant to acquire new knowledge and skills of teaching and learning. However, the process had not proved successful since the goals were difficult to attain in just a few days.

Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)

In 2012 the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement was introduced to the Foundation Phase first 3 years of schooling and it is the current curriculum used in South African schools. CAPS is a refinement of the NCS. It therefore follows a similar rationale of aligning the curriculum with the aims of the South African Constitution. The main skills for Language include listening and speaking, reading and phonics, and writing and handwriting (DoE, 2011). Teachers are expected to model fluent reading and work on metacognitive skills in order to teach learners to monitor themselves when reading. The teachers should use the text to develop vocabulary and decoding skills and also to further the understanding of text structure, grammar and punctuation.

Research and assessment results confirmed that post 1994 educational policies failed to positively influence teaching and learning in most overcrowded and under-resourced black township schools. The expectations reflected in new policies were challenging and demanding for teachers in township schools given the realities of the South African context. "While qualified, experienced teachers at well-resourced former model C schools were able to reflect OBE principles and adapt their practice, teachers in poorer under-resourced schools experienced challenges" (Guiltig, Hoadley & Jansen, 2002). Misunderstanding, confusion, uncertainty and lack of support impacted negatively on curriculum implementation (Guiltig, Hoadley & Jansen, 2002; Jansen, 1999; Mosia, 2011).

A sub-category of dysfunctional schools are "underperforming" schools which refer to schools that have underperformed in the Annual National Assessment and are now given the opportunity of uplifting the achievement of Literacy through GPLMS. The GPLMS is an intervention strategy which supports teachers by providing training, coaches

(mentors) and teaching and learning material for the effective teaching of literacy to Grade 3 learners to improve their achievements in the national assessments.

Initiatives Focusing on Addressing Inequalities in Literacy

Despite all these attempts by government to address inequality, the literacy levels of learners at township schools remained low and specific initiatives were launched to uplift literacy levels of the learners.

The first initiative was the Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC) aimed at increasing learner achievement in literacy. Research conducted by (Meier, 2011) on the practical implementation of FFLC highlighted an implementation reality in the country where well-resourced schools with relatively small classes and well-trained and experienced teachers are able to successfully implement FFLC, while under-resourced schools with large classes and less experienced teachers still had learners struggling with literacy as revealed by the 2009 ANA results. The National Reading Strategy was the second initiative introduced to improve the teaching of literacy and reading but the Department of Education (DoE) identified teacher competency as one of the greatest challenges in implementing the National Reading Strategy (DoE, 2008b). The DoE claimed that teachers in South Africa had an underdeveloped understanding of teaching literacy, especially reading and writing (DoE, 2008b). For this reason the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) initiated and introduced the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy 2010-2014 (GPLMS) in one of the provinces to provide a supportive approach to teachers and to ensure that all learners in underperforming schools are exposed to high quality resources and teaching instruction, thus making it possible for learners to read and write (DoBE, 2014).

Learners' repeated underachievement in literacy shows that current policies have not been effectively and fully implemented (DoBE, 2014). To improve the implementation of policies the GDE introduced the GPLMS (DoBE, 2014, p.5). The introduction of the GPLMS aimed to bridge the gap in inequality and inequity by attempting to improve literacy teaching in 792 identified underperforming schools and to ensure that 60% of the learners in the province perform at 50% and above.

Implementing the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS)

The most important principle of the GPLMS was teacher training to uplift learner achievement and transform classroom practice. Each component of the strategy was designed to offer teachers opportunities to learn aspects from the ANA results by following departmental directives and using resources (DoBE, 2014).

The teaching of reading and writing was at the centre of the GPLMS, therefore the focus shifted to valuable resources in the targeted 792 schools. The interlinked components such as textbooks, workbooks, readers and teacher guides provided detailed

guidance to teachers, not only regarding the logical sequence of lessons, but also by making available distinguished and developmentally appropriate classroom activities. These activities included new knowledge and consolidated learning through class tasks and moreover provided appropriate homework assignments. The advantage of a single set of textbooks, workbooks, readers and teacher guides across the entire primary school was that it allowed for consistent and planned progression. The sets of material or programmes that followed the simple literacy approach required integrating “decoding” and comprehensive word recognition and language cognition processes (DoBE, 2014).

Provision of coaching to support textbooks

Although the primary sources, highlighted for the purpose of capacity building for improving the teaching of literacy, were enforced by the aligned curriculum guidelines and literacy materials, teachers also participated in direct teacher training. The teacher training approach according to the DoBE (2014) focuses on improving literacy achievement. In the past, the top-down cascaded material proved to be unsuccessful and the GDE then opted for the mentoring and coaching approaches to capacity building. It resulted in incorporated groups of teachers working closely and effectively together and individually around new teaching practices under the guidance of a coach or mentor.

Improving the Management of Literacy Teaching and Learning

The main element of the strategy was to improve classroom teaching and the Annual National Literacy Assessment (ANA) results. Therefore strong leadership and management of classroom practice were stressed to provide support and to emphasise the purpose of accountability (DoBE, 2014). The GDE ensured that all the requirements for the strategy were in place. Teachers had continuous support and guidance from their coaches and they were provided with resources and structured lesson plans.

Methodology

Research paradigm and design

A qualitative interpretive paradigm was undertaken. The research aim was to qualitatively ascertain the reality regarding the implementation of GPLMS from teachers’ understanding, experiences, teaching practices and challenges in their classrooms (Niewenhuis, 2007, p.55). The research was conducted in a naturalistic setting, specifically at their schools where diverse as well as similar understandings of their perceptions of the implementation of GPLMS were gained (Creswell, 2003; De Vos, 1998).

Informed by the interpretivist paradigm we considered a qualitative case study design as an appropriate approach for the study. The in-depth analysis of the “bounded system” which refers to the schools as case studies consisting of Grade 3 teachers,

provided significant data during this qualitative research design via the data collection strategies discussed below (McBurney, 1998, p.128). The knowledge gained and challenges from the schools are contextual as various factors do have an influence on the way in which teachers are able to teach and the way in which learners learn. However, it was not scientifically possible to generalise the findings and conclusions reached in this research report to other similar studies, but the emergent conclusions are nevertheless important in terms of added knowledge.

Research sites and participants

Three Grade 3 teachers and three Heads of Department (teaching Grade 3) in underperforming schools in the Mamelodi township were purposefully selected for the study. All three schools were selected based on their involvement in the GPLMS and the availability of information-rich participants pertaining to the topic under study. Teachers were trained at teacher training colleges during the apartheid era and received the Primary School Teachers Certificate (PTC) which is a two-year teacher training certificate that qualifies them to teach. Only after 1994 were black teachers urged to improve their qualifications. All participants for the study included teachers who had more than 20 years of teaching experience at previously disadvantaged schools and who were in the age group of 40 years and above. There were no younger teachers teaching in Grade 3 at these schools. Presently all participants have three years of experience with the GPLMS programme that is aimed at exposing teachers to pedagogy that will improve classroom practice and eventually learners' literacy levels in the national assessments.

Data collection and analysis

The methods used for data collection in this study were influenced by the research questions and design. Four questions guided the interviews and served as themes from which valuable data on the topic under study were identified. Interviews were conducted with three Grade 3 teachers and three Heads of Department (teaching Grade 3) from the selected underperforming schools to determine how they understood, experienced and implemented GPLMS, and also to examine the support, challenges and results obtained through the school-based teacher professional development initiative (GPLMS). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, thus enhancing validity by providing accurate and complete record of each interview session. Thereafter, the recordings were listened to and the transcriptions compared so as to include relevant nuances that might have been missed or found extraneous. Subsequently the relevant extract could be coded thematically to reinforce the analysis and discussion. The identified themes enabled us to reflect on the purpose of the study as well as answers to the research questions (Algozzine & Hancock, 2006). This process provided us with the opportunity to become fully immersed in the data while generating emerging insights.

Reflexive notes, semi-structured interviews and audio-tape recordings were used to crosscheck and confirm the accuracy of the collected data. The analysed data was taken back to the participants to be checked for accuracy and to obtain their approval (Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p.13). Finally, the data analysis included “thick descriptions” (Anzul, Ely, Downing & Vinz, 1997, p.70) and direct quotes from the interviews.

Observations were included to strengthen interviews and it became an important source of data. Professional Learning Groups training sessions and school-based workshops, classroom practice and peer learning group discussions were observed to enhance our understanding of how teachers experience literacy implementation according to the GPLMS. The Department of Educations’ guidelines and workbooks had been reviewed as criteria to establish whether the GPLMS policy guidelines regarding the implementation of Literacy in Gr 3 were followed in the classroom. These various methods of data collection contributed towards the achievement of triangulation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p.322).

The findings will be discussed in the next section according to the research questions which include: a) Understanding and importance of GPLMS; b) Experiences and support for GPLMS; c) Challenges faced by teachers in the classroom; d) Results in terms of improvement in teachers’ practices and national assessments achievements of the learners.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study in correspondence with the themes developed during the analysis of results. The qualitative data was analysed to examine teacher’s perceptions and experiences of the school-based teacher professional development (GPLMS) and its influence on the quality of education and equitable teaching and learning.

Understanding and importance of GPLMS

The participants demonstrated an understanding of the Gauteng Department of Education’s (GDE) goals, intentions and motivation behind the introduction and development of the GPLMS. The initial meetings and road shows scheduled to disseminate information about the strategy alerted teachers to the poor state of literacy in township schools. Therefore, all teachers were aware that the GPLMS was introduced with the intention of raising literacy levels of township schools. Some perceived the teacher professional development as advancement in the field of teaching which improved them professionally. Others described it as a new way to adapt to changes, to acquire new methods for teaching literacy and to enable them to serve learners better by improving the standard of teaching and learning. Teachers at all three schools supported the introduction of the GPLMS as they believed the strategy would improve literacy standards in township schools. A participant from school A verbalised her understanding of the GPLMS goals as

follows:

“This programme has been designed for the underperforming schools in the township with the aim of trying to uplift English standards and with this programme they want to improve the reading of the learners.” (SA-P2)

The Head of Department of school A responded in a similar way:

“This programme supports us teachers to improve our skills and literacy levels in the class. The reason why learners fail ANA is because they can’t read.” (SA-P1)

Participants in this study are recipients of the Department of Education’s “one size fits all curricula” (Clasquin-Johnson, 2011) and past ineffective innovations introduced by the Department of Education. The introduction of the GPLMS was seen as a breakthrough after previous interventions that were not effective in township schools. The design of the GPLMS for underperforming township schools convinced teachers that the initiative was designed to address teaching challenges in Literacy unique to township schools. Participants were well-informed about the goals and principles of the GPLMS and they shared the GDE’s vision on the implications of change toward equitable teaching and learning in township schools.

The intention to support teachers to use the correct pedagogical approaches was accepted as a priority in township schools. A participant at School B mentioned that the disparity that existed in teacher training during the apartheid years seriously affected the teaching quality in township schools. This participant showed readiness to embrace the GPLMS by stating that:

“The standard in township schools is very low because most of us teachers did not get the same training like teachers in the former model C schools did, that is why we are unable to teach literacy as well as they do. They need to empower us to change and become better teachers, so we need to use the correct methodology; so now is the time.” (SB-P4)

Experiences and support for GPLMS

The teacher participants in this study had both positive and negative experiences with the implementation of and support for GPLMS, but their overall responses were positive. They were positively inclined because they were guided throughout the implementation process and felt empowered as they were capacitated to teach Literacy according to the guidelines and support provided by the GPLMS. The availability of good quality resources supported the implementation of the GPLMS. When the GPLMS was introduced the GDE made arrangements to have all materials needed for implementation delivered to schools. Participants were satisfied with the lesson plans, readers, Department

of Basic Education (DBE) workbooks and phonic plans they received. According to the participants the resources were of high quality and improved learner participation. A participant from school B's evaluation of the DBE books was as follows:

“I think the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) books are extremely good. The materials are extremely good. DBE books are well illustrated. A variety of activities that a learner can use to improve the literacy levels in FAL (First Additional Language).” (SB-P4)

Teachers mentioned that they understood and were able to use the resources effectively when teaching group or guided reading, shared reading, language and reading activities. Participants expressed appreciation that the resources are available to support teaching and learning. A participant from school C mentioned that the provision of resources was a good strategy because:

“We are now using GPLMS for three years and this is a good strategy because they give us all the resources to teach literacy like the DBE (Department of Basic Education) books, posters for listening and speaking activities, reading lists, lesson plans, graded readers and a library trolley for each class. The lesson plans have daily lesson plans so we are no longer writing preparation.” (SC-P5)

The rigorous quarterly formal training that teachers were exposed to enabled them to acquire knowledge and skills critical to the teaching of literacy. The workshops conducted by coaches during Professional Support Group sessions were to equip teachers with knowledge and skills so that the GPLMS could be effectively implemented (DoBE, 2014). At these training sessions learner support materials like reading lists and posters for the term would be distributed and explained. Teachers were given the structured lesson plans. Clear teaching directives on the use of learner support materials and lesson plans were given to teachers. The coaches discussed the overview of lesson plans. Participants responded positively to the training sessions held. A participant from school C responded:

“I was adequately trained. With this GPLMS we get a lot of training and support. At the beginning of every term we get our training from the coach. She gives us the lesson plans, the reading lists, the phonic plans and the flash cards. She trains us on how to use the lesson plans. We were trained on how to use the listening and speaking activities using big posters.” (SC-P5)

The coaching of teachers is a new initiative introduced by the GDE to support and intensify the implementation of the GPLMS (DoE, 2010-2014). Coaches were recruited on the basis of their experience and knowledge in the field of education. All coaches were professionally trained teachers who were appointed by the GDE to provide coaching

and technical support to teachers in schools. They accepted and responded positively to the support from their coaches. Teachers interacted with coaches to clarify uncertainties and misconceptions. Participants found the presence of the coach to be effective and supportive because they were assisted in managing and implementing the GPLMS. The coach was considered to be a mentor according to one participating HOD:

“She coaches us. She supports the teachers. She even workshops them, demonstrates during workshops. She is our mentor.” (SC-P6)

A participant from school B confirmed that the coach was helpful and supportive with their teaching and visited the school regularly:

“The coach has been there throughout this programme to support the teachers to make sure they are implementing this programme according to its requirements. The teachers share a very close relationship with the coach because they have realised that she is there to support and encourage them.” (SB-P4)

The challenges that the teachers experienced with the implementation of the GPLMS are discussed in the following theme.

Challenges faced by teachers in the classroom

In response to the question, “What are the challenges that you face while teaching Literacy?” four challenges were mentioned by almost all the participants: fast pace for curriculum implementation, lack of creativity with lesson plans, overcrowded classrooms and marking. The GPLMS provided teachers with structured lesson plans. This initiative freed teachers from spending long hours with planning. Teachers experienced the training and coaching as advantageous as it improved their understanding of the implementation of Literacy, however a major problem teachers experienced with GPLMS was the pace at which they had to work with the structured lesson plans and schedule for the completion of the curriculum. A teacher from school B said: *“We are told to follow lesson plans and keep pace”*. Teachers from schools A and B specifically mentioned that most learners in township schools experienced personal problems at home. The majority of learners came from poor backgrounds as some lived in shacks (a corrugated house with one room) and lacked support due to illiteracy and long working hours of their parents which impacted negatively on children’s ability to do homework and to study. Therefore, teachers struggled to keep up with the pace of the GPLMS as required by the coaches. One respondent reported that a range of social and economic inequalities reduced teachers’ capacity to keep pace with lesson plans:

“Well the teachers can keep pace but the problem lies with the learners we have.”

One must understand that the school has been declared as underperforming so most of these learners underperform because they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. We have high levels of poverty, unemployment, orphans and single parents in the townships and it's a struggle for most of these learners to concentrate fully in the classroom so it's easy for a teacher to fall behind...." (SB-P4)

A teacher from school C mentioned that orphaned children and children living with grandparents also present barriers to keeping up with the fast pace of the programme:

"I try my best but sometime it's a challenge because lessons are fast tracked to make sure we cover everything for the term. So most learners in the township are slow learners. They come to school with their own problems. Some of them live with grandparents, and there are no parents. So emotionally the children are not strong. So it's a challenge to follow these lesson plans in the correct sequence but all the teachers are trying their level best." (SC-P5)

Teachers had to account to the coach on how they utilised every minute. According to one participant from school A this was *"a strict programme, was fast-paced and it had no time for "fun" in class"*. Teachers argue that the time allocated to some of the written activities and group guided readings was not adequate.

Teachers were also of the opinion that structured lesson plans reduced their ability to be creative in the classroom. The marking and administrative work of teachers increased due to large classes and the requirements of the GPLMS, but the fact that they received lesson plans, resources and guidance helped the teachers to manage the administrative work. Teachers nevertheless experienced the teaching of Literacy according to the GPLMS as effective and as a strategy that could improve learners' literacy performance.

Results obtained in terms of improvement in teachers' practices and achievements in national assessments

The empirical data revealed that teachers perceived and experienced the implementation of Literacy according to GPLMS as an effective approach to improve learners' literacy levels and they subsequently adapted and adopted their teaching according to the requirements of GPLMS. They gained knowledge and skills to teach Literacy effectively and were confident in their teaching abilities and competence.

Teachers experienced training as advantageous, as it improved their understanding of the implementation of literacy. The knowledge and skills gained from regular training sessions encouraged teachers to enter the classroom being more confident with the methodology. The benefit of the training was highlighted by a participant from school B:

"Training was beneficial because we take back what we learn at the training and put

into practice in the classroom. We know the correct methodology to teach reading. I will never forget this methodology. The learners benefited from our teaching because we know what to do in reading and there is progress, good resource.” (SB-P5)

Teachers from all 3 participating schools accepted the teaching of literacy according to the GPLMS with a positive attitude and revealed that learners benefited. The enthusiasm and active involvement by teachers to implement the GPLMS made the goals outlined for it achievable, as stated by a participant from school C:

“Learners are reading confidently. They are speaking with confidence. They now understand English better. They cope with comprehension activities. They have a good understanding of the language. Their vocabulary is increasing.” (SC-P5)

They mentioned that they had the knowledge and skills to incorporate listening and speaking activities, group guided reading, shared reading and the phonic approach to teach Literacy. Teachers showed commitment and taught Literacy with enthusiasm as they were empowered and fully supported by coaches to implement the GPLMS effectively. They made optimal use of resources which contributed to an improvement, not only in reading, but also in the quality of written work.

“Learners are more motivated to learn because of the availability of resources and we see the quality of written work has improved. They write more confidently.” (SC-P5)

Important evidence presented by all three heads of department during the interviews revealed that the Annual National Assessment results of their schools improved. The Head of Department of school A confirmed the improvement:

“Gradually we are getting there because you know the ANA results have shown that there has been an improvement because previous years ANA results were not good and this year the results have improved.” (SA-P4)

A Head of Department from school B proudly presented the ANA results and stated: *“There has been an improvement in our results in 2012 and 2013. We noticed a big improvement in our ANA results. I am pleased to note that in 2013 the literacy average for Grade 3 was 62%.” (SA-P4)*

This improvement in the Annual National Results is a positive step towards equality in the education system of South Africa.

Conclusions

In order to address the inequalities experienced by underperforming schools and to improve the quality of teaching and learning to provide an education system that promotes equality and equity, the Gauteng Education Department Education introduced the Gauteng Province Literature and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS). Despite the challenges experienced, the respondents reflected a positive attitude and regarded the teacher professional development strategy (GPLMS) as important because it focused on three core issues – teacher professional development, improvement of the quality of teaching and learning in underperforming schools and improvement of the learners’ achievements in the national literacy assessments.

Teachers viewed the school-based teacher professional development (TPD) as a means by which they may cooperate and collaborate to improve the quality of teaching and learning. They reported that the TPD with its coaches facilitated the easy flow of information and feedback among teachers, cluster schools and the school management. Teachers were provided with adequate support from their coaches. There were multiple opportunities for interaction with the coach, colleagues, professional development and availability of resources of a high quality. The training and support given to teachers enabled them to succeed with the implementation. Teachers continued to grow over time with the support and resources they received (Sweeny, 2003).

The extent to which teachers focussed and engaged in monitoring and evaluating their own work and development was examined. Teachers proudly disclosed that they were confident and trained to teach Literacy effectively which they ascribed to their cooperation with their coaches and school management and their regular attendance of support sessions. The results proved that the new teacher development and training programme met the challenges of more equitable teaching and learning in underperforming schools.

Although all the participants were older than 40 years and had many years of teaching experience they all assessed the coaching or mentoring as an important contributing factor for teacher professional development in underperforming and historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa. High levels of interest and commitment as well as positive attitudes and a willingness to cooperate and collaborate were found among the teachers. It seemed that the driving forces behind the teachers’ cooperative attitude were not only their desire to overcome the unfavourable labelling as “underperforming schools and teachers”, but also their intrinsic motivation to raise their learners’ achievements in the national assessments and to become excellent Grade 3 teachers.

In a few instances teachers disclosed negative experiences about the programme. The results showed that the new teacher development strategy was too aspiring and pushy in terms of what is expected of the teachers. Teachers expressed that some factors like overcrowded classes, high volumes of marking, the fast pace of the programme and a lack of teacher creativity due to the strict prescribed lesson plans presented overload problems

and barriers to effective teaching and learning.

Finally, this study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of teacher professional development in the developing South African context where the education system is flawed with inequalities deriving from its history in education. Many teachers currently teaching in black historically disadvantaged schools started their careers during the Apartheid era. Several interventions from the Department of Education to address equality and equity in education have been introduced in the past with limited success. The new teacher professional development strategy (GPLMS) is effective and affordable to sustain.

Recommendations

TDP should be incorporated in the South African national strategic plan at all levels and budgeted for. Since the use of coaches has been halted in 2014 it is recommended that the Department of Basic Education continues to employ the coaches who provide teachers with guidance, support and insight into teaching of literacy (GPLMS) in Grade 3. By doing so, teachers will continue to grow professionally and be able to teach the various components of literacy. The training from coaches will ensure that teachers will implement the GPLMS according to policy. Teachers will remain positively motivated towards the implementation of literacy and the Annual National Results will improve. TPD should target the enhancement of teachers' professional development and pedagogical growth while local governments should address the infrastructural and logistical support.

The Gauteng Department of Education should review the pace of lesson plans since all participants indicated that they were not able to cope with the pace of the structured lesson plans. Teachers should not be given specific literacy tasks with rigid timeframes to complete within a week, but they should rather be provided with suggested guidelines on how to teach the different components for literacy within the unique context of the school and learners. Schools situated in townships could extend the school day by an extra hour to allow learners to complete homework in class. Many children live in poor housing conditions where there is no space for doing homework and they moreover lack parental support.

The data gathered from teachers indicated that they collaborated with each other in their schools and in their clusters. They were co-operative and committed towards achieving goals. They regularly attended Professional Learning Group sessions and they enthusiastically participated in training sessions, discussions, demonstrations and shared resources. It is therefore recommend that schools should work collaboratively in Professional Learning Groups (PLG). During these sessions concerns regarding assessment, recording, classroom management, pacing and preparation for the Annual National Assessment should be addressed. Mentoring, cluster and school in-house workshops and collaboration should continue.

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