

Exploring Teachers' Perspectives of Professional Development Opportunities During the Implementation of History 2166 Syllabus Reforms in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) has been a perpetual priority for education systems throughout the world. It is considered an effective way for teachers to improve their instructional practices, especially during syllabus changes. It appears that many CPD programmes have yet to be implemented and understood from the teachers' perspectives. This study seeks to turn research back to the beneficiaries of professional development – the teachers. It explores teachers' perspectives of CPD in the context of preparing them to deal with a syllabus reform in the teaching and learning of history at secondary school level in Zimbabwe. The thrust is on the professional development opportunities that were extended to them during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reforms. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with five purposively sampled history teachers from five different schools in the Glen View/Mufakose district in Harare province. This study appreciates that teachers are the chalkface implementers of syllabus reforms in any given context of change and that their views matter. The key finding was that the absence of CPD initiatives during this syllabus reform proved disastrous, and ultimately produced a teacher-proof syllabus that deskilled and disempowered history teachers, which led to tissue rejection and its ultimate failure to address key expectations. This study recommends recognising teachers' perspectives of their professional development since they are at the chalkface and are directly influenced by the initiatives. Staff development initiatives should be prioritised before and/or during any syllabus changes to acquaint teachers with the requirements of the new syllabus.

Keywords: teacher professional development; teachers' perspectives; History 2166 Syllabus; tissue rejection; teacher-proof syllabus

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Introduction and Background

Teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) has been a perpetual priority for education systems throughout the world. It is considered an effective way to prepare teachers to improve their instructional practices especially during syllabus changes (Abakah et al. 2023; Mahlase 2014; Phorabatho 2013; Tabatabaee-Yazdi et al. 2018; Tsotetsi 2013). Teacher professional development (TPD) is one of the essential components used to enhance the quality of instructional practices in schools and tertiary institutions (Ngeze et al. 2018). Professional development, also known as TPD or CPD, refers to gaining new skills for teachers through continuing education and career training after entering the workforce (Guthrie 2010). It can include taking classes or workshops, attending professional or industry conferences, or earning a certificate to expand knowledge in a chosen field. In-house opportunities are offered for professional development, such as training sessions or mentoring programmes (Amponsah et al. 2023; Muyunda 2022).

TPD is defined as “the process whereby teachers' professionalism and/or professionalism may be considered to be enhanced” (Ferrer Ariza and Poole 2018, 251). According to Ngeze et al. (2018), TPD reinforces teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge thereby improving their teaching practices. In the context of this study, TPD was also taken to refer to the in-service training given to teachers before the introduction of a new syllabus to upgrade their skills and capacitate them to deal with the new syllabus expectations. The professional development of teachers is recognised as vital in the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in schools (Dichaba and Mokhele 2012). The present study seeks to turn research back to the beneficiaries of professional development – the teachers. It explores teachers' perspectives of CPD in the context of preparing them to deal with a syllabus reform in the teaching and learning of history at secondary school level. In 1990, Zimbabwe underwent its first major post-colonial syllabus reform in the teaching of history at secondary school level after the introduction of the History 2166 Syllabus (Sengai and Mokhele 2020). The research question that this current study seeks to address is: How effective were the CPD opportunities afforded to teachers during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus?

Statement of the Problem

The necessity for syllabus reforms in developing countries is usually never met with equal enthusiasm with regard to equipping teachers with the required skills to deal with the new syllabus (Gouëdard et al. 2020; Ndebele and Tshuma 2014; Reimers and Chung 2019; Sengai and Mokhele 2020; Tedesco et al. 2014). Several studies on teachers' professional development have exposed the ineffectiveness of most of the traditional one-time workshops, seminars and/or conferences in bringing about the desired improvements in teachers' instructional practices and student achievement (De Clercq and Phiri 2013; Kennedy 2011, 2014; Levine and Marcus 2010). In some cases, the attempts at providing teachers with in-service training to meet the requirements of new

syllabuses are often half-hearted owing to internecine logistical challenges fuelled by inadequate funding for such projects. The consequence is usually the implementation of a new syllabus by ill-prepared teachers, which often leads to tissue rejection and the ultimate failure of the new syllabus. Quite often, this also leads to teachers getting deskilled by a new syllabus such as the History 2166 Syllabus in Zimbabwe (Chitate 2010).

Most studies on TPD programmes during syllabus reforms have focused on the generic causes of the challenges encountered during such programmes without paying much attention to the views of the teachers (Abakah et al. 2023; Borg 2015; King 2014; Shriki and Patkin 2016). Chitate (2010) blames the failure of the History 2166 Syllabus reform on the procedures and conflicts that arose because of the government's move to implement the syllabus unilaterally. Chisholm (2015) highlights a similar scenario that occurred in South Africa when the Curriculum 2005 draft was released by the Department of Education for public comment in October 2002 and provoked vociferous petitions, letters and appeals from a wide range of the religious constituency which flooded the Department of Education. But still the main question remains about what the teachers think given the curriculum changes. In this current study, the opportunities and challenges faced during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reforms in the teaching and learning of history are examined by using critical theory as the theoretical framework.

Related Literature

In spite of the justifications for teacher TPD activities, scholars critically noted that participation in TPD programmes does not simultaneously lead to the desired effects of changes in classroom practice (Abakah et al. 2023; Shriki and Patkin 2016). Once-off workshops, in-service training, seminars and continuing education are all commonly lambasted for not being the proper prescription to facilitate changes in teacher practices since they fail to create authentic learning opportunities for participating teachers (Abakah et al. 2023). Nonetheless, TPD has proven to be a crucial avenue for the improvement of teaching and learning since, if properly implemented, it improves teacher quality and upgrades the quality of student learning (Abakah et al. 2023; De Vries et al. 2014; Opfer and Pedder 2011). Several countries have subsequently prioritised investment in TPD programmes hoping to ensure quality education (Abakah et al. 2023; Borg 2015; King 2014). However, in Zimbabwe, policy pronouncements appear to pay little attention to TPD initiatives as part of educational improvement efforts.

The primary focus of attempts to improve educational quality have prioritised the provision of “infrastructure such as classroom, equipment, teaching and learning materials, and the supply of an adequate number of teachers, but less on how teacher education can promote teacher competencies that meet the learning needs of students in real classrooms” (Pryor et al. 2012, 411). Predictably, this has led to the failure of several educational reforms to have the anticipated impact on teaching and learning as

well as the subsequent learner performances, as was the case in Zimbabwe (Chitate 2010; Mapetere 2015; Moyo 2014). This is caused by the glaring failure by teachers to fully implement the requirements of the new syllabuses owing to a lack of proper in-service programmes to upgrade their skills to adequately deal with the new expectations.

Scholars have written several works on themes related to teachers' perspectives of the TPD opportunities that they are afforded during syllabus reforms and also their effectiveness. In this study, the construct of perspectives was applied to examine TPD and defined teacher perspectives as "personal attitudes, values, and beliefs that help teachers interpret their classroom decisions". The term also embraces how such interpretations are revealed in teachers' actions and beliefs in the classroom. Mokhele (2011) used the construct of perspectives to explore the opinions of the science teachers who took part in a TPD programme (the Mpumalanga Secondary Science Initiative) and to determine the extent of its influence on their classroom practice. The study concluded that if all students are to succeed in their educational endeavours, they must have teachers who know how to teach every student to attain a high standard. Unfortunately, many teachers, especially in developing countries, lack the necessary skills to achieve this and are inadequately equipped to deal with the challenges and adverse conditions they face in trying to improve the quality of education in the schools (De Clercq and Phiri 2013; Kennedy 2011, 2014; Levine and Marcus 2010). This confirms the finding by Hirsh (2005) that it is necessary to find appropriate professional development approaches to ensure that all the teachers, even the most experienced ones, are equipped with the new knowledge and skills necessary to improve learner performance.

A research project by Mumhure (2017) studied the perspectives of teachers to establish the effectiveness of subject panels in history as a vehicle for TPD from the views of the teachers who participated in the workshops. The thrust of the study was on gaining perceptions of their understanding of the role and effectiveness of the learning activities undertaken by teachers during their meetings as well as whether the history subject panels have proven to be an effective tool for TPD (Mumhure 2017). The study also examined the trials and tribulations faced by the teachers who participated in history subject panels together with what could be done to improve the history subject panels to make them viable platforms for TPD in Zimbabwe. Despite their potential, there is still inconclusive debate on the efficacy of subject panels in the thrust to improve teachers' instructional practices together with learner achievement.

A study by Gashaw et al. (2014) considered the views of teachers to investigate how secondary school mathematics teachers perceive continuous assessment and how they implement it in Dera Woreda general secondary and preparatory schools in Ethiopia. The quantitative study concluded that the mathematics teachers were not using different assessment methods and techniques of continuous assessment in their schools. It recommended the frequent conducting of workshops and seminars by the school and district authorities to develop teachers on the practices of continuous assessment in their schools. This in a way shows the importance of TPD as a way of upgrading teachers'

practices to match new expectations in different subjects across the curriculum especially after first considering their views.

Another study on teachers' perspectives conducted by Handal and Herrington (2003) examines the part played by the beliefs of mathematics teachers and how this had an impact on the changes to the curriculum in Australia. The study argues that teachers' views and perceptions on how mathematics is taught and learned critically determine the pace of the curriculum reform. Handal and Herrington (2003) maintain that curriculum reform and implementation may only occur through tolerance as many teachers are suspicious of reform in mathematics education given its unclear success over the past decades. They add that

It is not surprising then that many teachers when they come to enact the curriculum in their classes, rely more on their own beliefs than on current trends in pedagogy. (Handal and Herrington 2003, 59)

In as much as teachers' beliefs might appear conservative, they still have their own level-headedness in the practical and daily nature of teaching as a job, and in the convincing effect of educational systems which ironically produced these teachers. Teacher perspectives consider how the prevailing situations in schools and classrooms are experienced, how such situations are understood in view of the different circumstances, expectations, beliefs and previous experiences of the teachers, and how their interpretations are manifested (Mokhele 2011). Interestingly, such beliefs are common to most teachers in other subjects such as History and these ought to be factored in when designing and implementing TPD initiatives to match syllabus changes.

In subsequent research studies, the subject of perspectives continues to be more complex since many scholars appear not to consider defining the concept of teachers' perspectives. This is because they appear to be occupied immediately with the issues concerned without considering the understanding and defining of the concept itself. Nonetheless, most of these scholars still consider teachers' perspectives as what the teachers, being the active participants, think about the issues they have studied. Such scholars appear to hold the opinions and beliefs of teachers in high regard. The conclusions of such studies are therefore based on what the teachers think while leaving out the key aspect of how they act. The study by Lee et al. (2008) is a typical example and explored a five-year professional development programme that was designed to upgrade the understanding, views and classroom practices for teaching Science, English and Mathematics for English Language Learning to learners in urban schools in the United States. They concluded that the teachers considered the intervention, together with the curriculum materials and teacher workshops, as having effectively improved the learners' acquisition of Science, English and Mathematics.

The cases cited above indicate that although studies on the perspectives of teachers have been done many focus on the teaching and learning of mathematics and science (Jung

et al. 2018; Gashaw 2014; Mokhele 2011; Lee et al. 2008; Handal and Herrington 2003). The lack of literature on TPD programmes and teacher perspectives in the teaching and learning of history is quite glaring thereby justifying this present study. In this current study we are informed by the views expressed in both early and later explorations which state that the term “perspectives” means personal attitudes, values and beliefs that help teachers interpret their classroom decisions. The term also includes how such interpretations are exhibited in the teachers’ actions (Mokhele 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Among models for implementing educational reforms and training interventions, the cascade model can be considered the best choice. The cascade model of professional training is a top-down model of professional development characterised by a flow of information from “expert” teachers or primary trainers (PTs) to secondary trainers (STs) or multipliers at different levels (Abeysena et al. 2016). It is a top-down approach to deliver training, which is also regarded as a method to transfer or diffuse knowledge in an organisation (Jacobs 2002; Jacobs and Russ-Eft 2001). The cascade model encompasses training the trainers who then have to train other trainers and the process is repeated to lower levels until the target group is reached (Ngeze et al. 2018). The first level involves the selection of trainers from a pool of teachers based on a certain criterion. This first cohort of trainers is trained in a specific subject and after they have qualified or have been considered adequate or proficient as trainers, they become the trainers of a second cohort (Cheese 1986; Hayes 2000). This procedure can be repeated for subsequent cohorts, subsequently increasing the numbers of beneficiaries. This is the reason that the cascade model is associated with the multiplier effect or is sometimes referred to as the train-the-trainer model. The strong expanding nature of the model, with regard to the number of final recipients, is the reason that it is also known as a multiplier approach to training (Dichaba and Mokhele 2012; Ono and Ferreira 2010). It is easy to systematically monitor the progress of the training received via this model since it takes place in stages (Ngeze et al. 2018).

Engelbrecht et al. (2007) observed that the most probable challenge of cascade training is that it may result in the dilution of the teaching content as the content moves from the PTs to the lower levels since it is bound to attain multiple modifications from STs to fit their own ways of teaching. To mitigate the challenges and ensure the effectiveness of the cascade training model, Hayes (2000) suggests measures that include making the cascade training experiential, reflective and open to reinterpretation, diffusing expertise through the system and ensuring the active involvement of stakeholders in the preparation of training materials. The effectiveness of the cascade model can be further ensured by making use of STs with the ideal characteristics such as experiences from past workshops, knowledge of content area, ownership of the content, good management of time and active participation in workshops facilitated by the PTs (Ngeze et al. 2018). Furthermore, PTs should be encouraged to attend some of the sessions facilitated by STs. After every session, STs should hold debriefing sessions with PTs

and STs should foster discussions among themselves to share experiences before and after the sessions.

The cascade model was critical to the current study because the researchers wanted to explore the extent to which ideas from the model had been applied during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus in Zimbabwe. If well applied, the cascade model can yield positive results in the implementation of syllabus reforms since it can lead to the effective training of teachers thereby adequately preparing them for the successful implementation of the new syllabus. The use of history teachers as PTs and STs would effectively lead to their professional development since they are the ones who would be the chalk-face implementers of the new syllabus.

Research Methodology

This article is part of a larger study that qualitatively explored the perspectives of the history teachers on the History 2166 and 2167 Syllabus reforms in Zimbabwe. This particular study used a phenomenological design to explore the history teachers' perspectives of the professional development opportunities that were extended to them during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reform. We listened as teachers expressed their real life experiences of teaching the subject during the time of the History 2166 Syllabus reform. Creswell and Poth (2016, 48) ascertain that “we conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories [and] hear their voices”. Myers (2019) adds that data generated under qualitative research can be useful in understanding people's behaviour and actions, and the broader context in which they live and work. To generate the necessary data, a total of five history teachers were purposively sampled from five secondary schools in the Glen View/Mufakose district in the Harare Metropolitan Province.

The participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews which were audio taped and then transcribed, coded and categorised into meaningful major themes. These themes were about the history teachers' perspectives of the professional development opportunities that were extended to them during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reform. Telephonic interviews were used to follow up on issues that either were not clear or emerged during the transcription of the data (Farooq and De Villiers 2017). The data generated were further analysed using thematic analysis, a research method which allows the qualitative data collected in research to be analysed systematically and reliably so that generalisations can be made from them to the categories of interest to the researcher (Hamad et al. 2016). To deal with the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, we used a pilot study and refined the interview protocol for relevancy (Ismail et al. 2018). All the selected participants signed the informed consent to illustrate their willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. The anonymity of participants was also ensured through the use of pseudonyms to conceal their identities (Flick 2015).

Findings and Discussion

To explore teachers' perspectives of the CPD opportunities afforded to them during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus, the current study presents data and discusses the findings from the in-depth interviews with the five history teachers. The data are presented under the two main themes that emerged from the findings. It emerged from the data that the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus was punctuated by persistent internecine challenges right from its inception. Two glaring challenges emerged from the current study, namely, inadequate in-service training of the history teachers in the new History 2166 Syllabus and the skills-based thrust of the History 2166 Syllabus which appeared to deskill the ill-prepared history teachers.

Inadequate In-Service Training of the History Teachers in the New History 2166 Syllabus

The participants' views converged on the insufficient in-service training in some provinces in the country and its absence in the other provinces, and this weighed against the History 2166 Syllabus reforms. Three participants said the following:

A working committee appointed by the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) to oversee the implementation of the new syllabus had included the conducting of in-service courses for history teachers as one of its priorities but this was never implemented according to the book. (Mr Mapfumo)

In-service workshops on the new syllabus were held in only four out of Zimbabwe's ten provinces. It was hoped that history teachers in all the provinces would have been 'in-serviced' by the end of 1988 but this was not possible due to many factors including financial constraints, staffing, pressure created by the localisation of the marking of 'O' level examinations, and the occasional reluctance by Provincial Education Officers to take part in the in-service training programmes. (Mrs Murakani)

Even the teachers who attended some of the in-service workshops did not benefit much from the poorly planned programmes. (Mr Chitondo)

It is evident from the submissions of the participants that the history teachers were not sufficiently prepared to handle the new History 2166 Syllabus. This confirms the observation of this study of a concoction of challenges in the implementation of the new syllabus since a new syllabus was being taught by ill-prepared teachers to equally bewildered learners. To further add to the above claims, Chitate (2010) referred to the ensuing complications as a "crisis of expectations" because the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus and the subsequent reception did not live up to the expectations. Abakah et al. (2023) claim that once-off workshops, in-service training, seminars and continuing education are hardly adequate to facilitate changes in teacher practices because they fail to create authentic learning opportunities for participating teachers. Consequently, the popularity of history plummeted to rock-bottom levels owing to the poor performance by learners in the subject.

Skills-Based Thrust of the History 2166 Syllabus

This study indicates that the history teachers were deskilled by the skills-based thrust of the History 2166 Syllabus owing to the differences in what they had learned in teacher training colleges and the syllabus requirements in the history classroom. There was a mismatch between the teacher training programmes and the syllabus expectations in the history classroom. All five teachers interviewed in this study were trained using the History 2158 Syllabus yet they had to adopt the History 2166 Syllabus when they began to teach. The participants linked the diminished role of history teachers during the planning and design of the History 2166 Syllabus to the challenges that they later encountered in teaching the syllabus:

The major challenges faced by the history teachers had to do with the interpretation of the syllabus since they were out of touch with its requirements having been omitted from the inception stages. . . . The skills-based thrust of the new syllabus (2166) was rather very challenging for most history teachers who had not been adequately prepared to deal with such demands. (Mrs Murakani)

When we went to the teacher training college, the thrust was on the content-based History 2158 Syllabus. Even when we went for teaching practice, we taught the History 2158 Syllabus. When I joined teaching in 1988, the history syllabus being used was still 2158. Suddenly, in 1990, we were told that there was a new history syllabus. This was quite unfair on us as history teachers since we were asked to switch to the new syllabus without even prior staff development or in-servicing. (Ms Masara)

At college, the thrust was on the History 2158 Syllabus which emphasised more on helping pupils to remember content more than skills. The level of analysis that we had done at college therefore fell short of the expectations of the History 2166 Syllabus. (Mr Chitondo)

Asked about the type of skills emphasised by the History 2166 Syllabus reform for development in the learners, the participants responded:

The new syllabus called on teachers to inculcate the historical skills of empathy, extrapolation, interpretation, judgement, imagination, and analysis among others. These were very high-order skills considering the mental development levels of most of our pupils. (Mr Mapfumo)

Most of our pupils enter secondary school while still operating at the concrete operational stage where it becomes very difficult to master abstract concepts. Despite being too abstract, the socialist thrust that dominated the History 2166 Syllabus was unpopular with the learners and their teachers due to its overdose of the ideological thrust. (Ms Masara)

The intention to equip history pupils with the skills of historians was noble but in the end, the subject's popularity plunged to rock-bottom after teachers failed to properly impart the necessary skills. (Mr Chituku)

To worsen the situation, teachers had not been fully equipped with these highly abstract skills so they struggled to rise up to the challenge. (Mrs Murakani)

A participant revealed how he suffered owing to the subsequent unpopularity of history:

Due to the unpopularity of the subject, our school Academic Board asked history teachers to share classes with other unpopular subjects. For example, if we had four classes per form, then two would do history and the other two would do religious studies. In the end, this practice had serious consequences for history teachers since our teaching loads fell drastically. (Mr Chitondo)

The Academic Board consisted of all the heads of departments and the head and deputy head of the school and it deliberated on all key academic issues in the school. The fate of the History 2166 Syllabus and the history teachers at the school in question rested with the Academic Board. Consequently, the history teachers ended up either being redeployed to other subject areas or being transferred from schools altogether.

This study found that the complex skills required by the History 2166 Syllabus deskilled the history teachers and confused the learners; this confirms Chitate's (2010) findings. If adequate opportunities for professional development had been provided to the history teachers, this could have served to fill up the glaring mismatch between their teacher training programmes and their syllabus requirements in the classroom. Many teachers will continue to struggle with syllabus changes, partly because they are directed to implement something which many of them may never have experienced in their own training (Sengai and Mokhele 2020).

Conclusion

In explaining the challenges and pressures under which post-colonial curriculum reforms took place, and the need to formulate new policies, Schoole (2003) equates the challenges involved with "changing the wheel of the car whilst the car was moving". This appears to be an accurate description of what transpired in Zimbabwe during the implementation of the History 2166 Syllabus reforms. The government was determined to ensure the teaching of the new syllabus and used workshops, subject panel discussions and even ministerial circulars to try and get history teachers acquainted with the syllabus while its implementation continued. However, effective TPD initiatives could have ensured the successful implementation of the new syllabus. The many challenges in the implementation of the new syllabus included the syllabus being taught by ill-prepared teachers to equally bewildered learners (Sengai and Mokhele 2020). Chitate (2010) referred to the ensuing complications as a "crisis of expectations" owing to the mismatch between expectations and deliverables on the ground.

Consequently, the popularity of history plummeted to rock-bottom levels owing to the poor performance by history learners in public examinations accompanied by the subsequent high withdrawal of candidates registering for the subject in the Ordinary

Level examinations. This study concludes that the staff development initiatives afforded to history teachers were inadequate so the complex skills required by the History 2166 Syllabus deskilled the history teachers and confused the learners. This ultimately led to the inevitable failure of the syllabus and its subsequent withdrawal in 2000; which demonstrate the key role of effective professional development of teachers before the introduction of any syllabus reforms.

This study therefore recommends the acceptance and recognition of teachers' perspectives of their professional development because they are at the chalk-face and are directly influenced by the initiatives. TPD is recognised as vital in the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in schools, therefore working with suggestions from teachers may improve the programmes and make them more acceptable, consequently facilitating their effectiveness. We also recommend that syllabus changes be preceded by staff development initiatives to upgrade the skills of the teachers and match them with the competences expected by the new syllabuses. The failure of the History 2166 Syllabus in Zimbabwe should therefore be a typical case of what may happen if a new syllabus is introduced before adequately developing the teachers.

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