



## Weathering the Storm Through School-Based Teacher Professional Development

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### **Abstract**

With the advent of COVID-19 and its control regulations, most schools, particularly in rural areas, suspended teaching and learning and had yet to make an immediate plan on how to continue with the academic programme. This revealed the failure of the South African education system to step up to different and unfamiliar territories of teaching and learning in order to continue with the academic program amidst a pandemic and beyond. Responding to the question: What are the experiences of teachers and school principals in implementing SBTPD in rural contexts to survive potential crises that disrupt the teaching and learning program? Embedded in the adult learning theory, the paper was underpinned by the interpretive qualitative approach and used a multiple case study as a mode of inquiry. This study generated data in two rural primary schools through focus group discussions (FGDs) and face-to-face interviews with teachers and school principals, respectively. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the researched schools did not have customised teacher development programmes tailored to the specific needs of their schools. The findings further revealed that there was a lack of intraschool and interschool collaborative cultures among the teachers. This paper concludes that SBTPD needs to be understood and conceptualized differently by all stakeholders if schools are to be able to withstand and survive beyond immediate crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the findings, this paper recommends that schools initiate and design their own school-based teacher professional development programmes, tailor-made to the needs of the schools and teachers, to accommodate immediate crises and survive beyond unprecedented crises to ensure that the academic programme is not disrupted, and capacity building for school leaders to create a collaborative culture among teachers.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19; School-Based; Teacher Professional Development; Educational Challenges; Collaboration*

## ***Introduction***

To meet the rising educational challenges of this developing country, teachers and school principals must be involved in the accurate implementation of school-based teacher professional development, particularly in rural schools. School-based teacher professional development (SBTPD) requires that schools initiate, design, and implement their own teacher development program (Postholm 2016). These teacher development programmes must be customized and tailor-made to cater to the specific needs of the schools and teachers. Thus, schools can weather any storms that have the potential to disrupt the teaching and learning programme. Even without any immediate crisis, such as COVID-19, schools in rural contexts are confronted with multiple contextual factors that negatively affect the attainment of quality education. The advent of COVID-19 in the year 2020 compounded such challenges and exposed the failure of the South African education system to withstand any unplanned disruptors to the schools' education programmes. Over and above policies, national guidelines, and directives, schools in general, and teachers in particular need SBTPD to be able to respond effectively to diverse challenges that disturb teaching and learning.

## ***Literature Review***

In the literature review, this paper focused on the current state of teacher professional development in rural schools and the challenges encountered in implementing SBTPD.

### **The Current State of Teacher Professional Development in Rural Schools**

Rural contexts are often defined as those which are characterised by a lack of resources for normal livelihood (Myende & Chikoko, 2014). This lack poses a serious threat to the provision of education in general and the implementation of teacher professional development (TPD) programmes, in particular. The severity of challenges experienced in rural schools, which include low pass rates, poor quality in teaching and learning, and lack of professionalism among teachers, all point to the need for teacher professional development. In a study on the school-based continuous professional development of teachers: a case study of primary school teachers in Ethiopia, Tadesse and Rao (2022) found that the political, economic, and social environment also tended to affect teachers' motivation to aspire for involvement in TPD in programs. Similarly, in South African schools, teachers expect incentives for their involvement in TPD programs which are for their own benefit. Wang and Cheng's (2023) study found that school-based TPD is both a means and a result of a collaborative culture between teachers and that TPD should be conducted to build teachers' capacity to provide education effectively.

Teacher professional development and learning thrive with collaboration. Sutton and Shouse (2016) indicate that on a typical day, teachers spend most of their time teaching and in isolation from each other. Thus, establishing a collaborative culture needs to be intentional and purposeful. According to Hubers, Endedijk and Van Veen (2022) list collaboration between teachers as one of the characteristics of effective teacher professional development. The South African education policy for curriculum implementation which is the Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS) demands for collaboration between teachers for the benefit of the learners (RSA, 2012). When there is collaboration among teachers, it allows for self-management of schools for teachers and collective responsibility for learner outcomes.

### **Challenges Encountered in the Implementation of SBTPD**

Post-apartheid, schools, as the centre where the implementation of SBTPD is expected, are still confronted with a number of challenges regarding the implementation of SBTPD. The advent of COVID-19 exposed some of the challenges in some South African rural schools, where teaching and learning were completely suspended owing to the lockdowns. In their study on crisis-ready educational design,

Foster, Buckhardt, and Schonfeld (2022) found that the COVID-19 pandemic made abundantly clear how far our school systems are from being crisis-ready. The lockdowns across many parts of the world left schools and teachers scrambling to provide parents with whatever teaching materials they could find to enable some semblance of distance learning. In their study on teacher learning and innovative professional development, Caena and Vuorikari (2021) suggest innovative teacher professional development programs that could be a catalyst for resilient education systems in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors further state that this could be achieved through embedding active learning, relevance to practice, and collaboration. Du Plessis and Letshwene (2020) concur that challenges with teacher development in South Africa need to be understood in context, for example, rural schools usually experience challenges of overcrowded classrooms and lack of resources. Pitsoe and Maila (2012) argue that teachers in rural schools tend to define themselves according to the context in which they work which could account for the non-implementation of school-based teacher professional development programmes.

### ***Research Question***

This paper responded to the following question: What are the experiences of teachers and school principals in implementing SBTPD in rural contexts to survive potential crises that disrupt the teaching and learning program?

### ***Problem Statement***

Rural contexts are confronted with several challenges that hinder the accurate implementation of SBTPD (Shelile & Hialele, 2014, Mpahla & Okeke, 2015, Oduaran, 2015, Ajibade, 2016). This causes a lack of motivation among the teachers in rural schools to implement teacher development programmes, since they do not see its influence on their teaching (Okeke & Mpahla, 2016). As managers, school principals are mandated to provide support, monitoring, evaluation and overall management of professional development programmes. Yet, according to Ajibade (2016), they do not execute their responsibilities as they should, particularly in schools in rural contexts. According to Liu and Hallinger (2017), there is not enough knowledge regarding the quality of school-based leadership that establishes a collaborative culture among teachers and promotes schools as learning organisations, particularly in rural contexts.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

To mirror the implementation of SBTPD in rural schools and wage war against any challenge while providing crisis-proof education beyond the storm, this paper used Speck's (1996) and Knowles' (1984) adult learning theory (ALT) and the theory of learning-centred leadership (LCL) (Liu and Hallinger, 2017) as the theoretical framework. The ALT emphasizes that adult learners want to shape their own learning and want to ensure that their professional development learning and their day-to-day activities are linked. Lastly, the LCL requires school principals to lead, direct, and provide for the process of learning for teachers and learners in their schools, to withstand any crisis that can potentially disrupt teaching and learning. Although the theories are different, they offer significant contributions to the interpretation of how SBTPD can be implemented in rural schools to provide crisis-proof education. It is worthy to note that adult learners want to shape their own learning and want to consider that their professional development learning and their day-to-day activities be related to each other. The synergy between the theories proves that education coexists with life which is unpredictable, and therefore promotes life as an exploratory experiment that must be prepared for by relevant stakeholders.

## Methodology

A multiple case study grounded in the interpretive qualitative paradigm was used for the study. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions were used to gather qualitative data for this study. A small number of closed questions were asked to gather background and demographic information, such as the highest qualification and teaching experience. However, most of the questions were open-ended in order that the participants could talk freely and share their experiences. This paper used multiple data sources, namely interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), as the main sources of data generation. After obtaining permission from the school principals as gatekeepers and detailing my research procedure, I depended on them to each assemble a group of seven teachers to form the focus group. The participants comprised 14 teachers and two school principals from two purposively selected primary schools. Teachers were purposively selected as participants because they are the implementers and practitioners of SBTPD in their respective schools. The school principals were participants due to their function as custodians and managers of programmes, which are designed to enhance the professional competence of teachers in their respective schools.

## Findings

The findings revealed two themes which are: a restricted understanding of what school-based teacher development is and, a need for collaborative practices among the teachers. These themes are discussed in the following section. It is worth noting that the following pseudonyms are used to indicate participants in this study. Group A (Thato Primary School) and Principal A (Pa), Group B (Thuto Primary School) and Principal B (Pb). The views presented for the groups are the collective voices of the groups, however dissenting voices are presented as such.

### A Restricted View of SBTPD

When asked about their experiences in implementing school-based teacher professional development, the teachers and the school principals displayed a restricted view of SBTPD. These were their views:

*We attend workshops that are provided by the department, and we also have our own internal workshops as well, we have QMS which we do every year, we also have staff development programs, subject meetings, we are all signed up for CPTD and some of us have gone as far as submitting activities on that website, but some of us are just signed-up members. Group A*

*The department provides workshops for us for every subject, so we attend them and get developed. We also have our own internal workshops where the SMT develops us or outsource someone to capacitate us. We also have staff development meetings, IQMS, subject meetings, phase meetings. Group B*

*I am furthering my studies and currently I am doing my PhD with UNISA, I also encourage my teachers to further their studies as part of their teacher professional development which is school based. Pa*

*Apart from attending workshops that are organised by the DBE which are at a central venue for all teachers of a specific subject, mine is to make sure that all teachers receive the information by providing opportunity for the attendee to give feedback and making sure that everything is implemented accordingly. Pb*

These findings reveal that participants had a limited understanding of what SBTPD is. Their responses reveal that they were convinced that implementing departmentally driven programmes such as Quality Management System (QMS) and Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD),

attending workshops, and furthering their studies, was SBTPD. The researched schools did not seem to have their own teacher development programmes, which were initiated, designed, and implemented by themselves. These are programmes that provide crisis-proof education and the researched schools. SBTPD did not seem to develop beyond the prescribed, departmentally-driven activities. Teacher development is about learning and the school as a learning organization. The adult learning theories argue that adults want to align their learning with their day-to-day activities. Therefore, teachers in schools need to use these departmentally-driven programmes as a springboard to develop and launch their own programmes, allowing teaching and learning to continue even when situations disrupt the teaching and learning process.

### **A Lack of Collaborative Practices Among the Teachers**

Responding to the question of whether teachers collaborated for the continuity of the teaching and learning programme, it emerged that there needed to be both interschool and intraschool collaborations and that school principals needed to develop a collaborative culture among teachers. Group A revealed that they were satisfied with how they were working. This is how the participants responded:

*Sometimes collaboration is time-consuming because you know the methods, you attended the TD workshops, and when you have all the material that you need for the subjects, then you are good to go. **Group A***

Group B indicated that the geographical location of the schools from one other was the determinant of whether collaboration took place or not, this is what they said:

*Collaborating with other schools, it is the distance and time factors. We are in a rural area and our schools are far away from each other. Also, most colleagues do not show up for cluster meetings. **Group B***

From the school principals, it emerged that their teachers were not used to the collaborative culture through which any program of teacher development thrives. His were their views:

*Time constraints is one major challenge because the people are willing, but most people are not willing to sacrifice their time and remain after school hours and discuss work matters. Also, the lack of facilities and resources is another challenge. **Pa***

*Some schools and teachers are not keen on collaboration; they just want to work alone. I think because when you have all the material that you need, you will not be keen on the human resource that might be available. Some collaborative meetings are planned, and people do not show up. **Pb***

The findings reveal that teachers were not yet used to the culture of collaborative practice, leaned to, and were complacent with the traditional practices of working in isolation. Some teachers avoided collaborating with others because they felt it was time-wasting. Learning-centred leadership (LCL) demands that school principals provide for the process of learning for teachers. For the success of SBTPD, school principals need to have more intimate and collaborative management styles, be part of the team, and lead from within so that they can offer teachers the direction and support needed in the implementation of SBTPD to weather any storm.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The advent of COVID-19 demanded for the closure of schools, and teaching and learning was interrupted. Schools were found not to have programs that provided for continuity of teaching and learning. Schools in rural contexts were the most affected schools. Through the implementation of

SBTPD, this could have been circumvented. The findings indicate that teachers and school principals did not understand what SBTPD was and could not implement it to prevent loss of teaching time. School-based programs are those that are initiated, designed, and implemented in the school (Nhlumayo 2020). In times of crises, such as COVID-19, which may be a threat to the teaching and learning program, properly executed SBTPD programs may provide potential improvement opportunities that may offer a more practical, all-inclusive, and impartial education during and even after the crises. The researched schools reveal that they did not have their own programs customized to their schools' specific needs. Schools are supposed to continue from what the department has provided and initiate their own teacher professional development programs. Mpahla and Okeke (2015) suggest that the professional development needs of rural schools should be addressed differently because of the unique contextual factors that rural contexts are faced with. COVID-19 compounded the challenges that rural schools had already faced, and the sudden change that came with it demanded a complete overhaul of the provision of education, for which the researched schools were not ready.

The findings further revealed that there needed to be more collaborative practices among teachers. School-based teacher professional development thrives with collaboration (Methlagl 2022), and there is a positive relationship between the two. In the researched schools, it emerged that this lack of collaboration resulted in the teachers working in isolation and using traditional practices of teaching that did not improve learners' academic outcomes. To weather any storm and provide crisis-proof education, Ghousseini *et al.* (2022) indicate that collaborative professional learning must support teacher professional development, which supports learning and improves outcomes. Almusharraf and Bailey (2021) state that during the pandemic of COVID-19, teaching and learning succeeded due to the collaborative practices between teachers. Effective collaborative practices enhance the learning environment. Through learning-centred leadership (LCL), school leadership has a role in increasing and promoting a collaborative culture in the school (Burton, 2015). Chance and Segura (2009) identified three key elements for collaboration that rural schools could use for improved and enhanced teaching and learning, even in times of crisis, and these are: scheduled time for teacher collaboration, structured and focused collaboration time devoted to improving instruction and learner achievement, and leadership behaviors that focused on learner-centred planning and accountability. Effective teaching and learning continue to thrive when the school principal constantly behaves in a way that promotes both leadership for learning and collaboration, particularly in rural schools.

Rural schools, generally have smaller populations and can more readily involve all learners and most stakeholders in attempts to create a collaborative culture that allows for continued teaching and learning amidst crises and pandemics that have the potential to disrupt the teaching programme. This paper recommends capacity-building for all role-players to be able to use SBTPD to initiate their own programmes to ensure continuity in teaching and learning amidst crises. This paper further recommends capacity-building for school principals to use LCL to create a culture of collaborative practice among teachers, and eventually improve learner performance.

### **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that SBTPD needs to be understood and conceptualized differently by all stakeholders, if schools are to be able to respond positively to unprecedented crises such as COVID-19 and that teaching and learning processes are not to be suspended to the detriment of schools' effectiveness and learners' academic outcomes.

### **Disclosure Statement**

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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