Education practitioners’ understanding of professional development and associated competencies

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Abstract

The recent revision of the norms and standards of educator education suggests a new direction in education policy in South Africa. Educator education is now viewed as lifelong learning with the ongoing development of professional competencies. The Committee of Teacher Education Policy (COTEP) considers the professional development of practitioners as one way to improve the quality of professional practice. An analysis of the literature on professional development in education indicates a wide range of interpretations of the concept from the narrow interpretation accepted by COTEP of improving classroom practice, to a broad idea of improving organisational and occupational conditions. This paper explores how education practitioners view the concept of professional development and what competencies they associate with this concept. The author argues that practitioners view professional development as a much broader concept than that accepted by COTEP and suggests that teacher education policy is unlikely to lead to the improvement of professional practice as envisaged by COTEP.

INTRODUCTION

The present revision of the norms and standards of teacher education takes place within the parameters set by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in a context within which historical inequalities continue to exist in a largely under-resourced system. The revision of norms and standards of teacher education suggests a new direction of education policy in South Africa. Teacher education is now viewed as lifelong learning with the ongoing development of professional competencies. The process of implementing educational change to improve the quality of professional practice will be difficult and the dissemination of new ideas and improved professional practice will largely depend on the professional development of practitioners, according to the Committee of Teacher Education Policy (COTEP 1998).

The different interpretations of the concept professional development identified in the literature and by COTEP, led to an investigation to inform the definition of professional development. The investigation set out to determine firstly, how practitioners understand the concept professional development; secondly, what
competencies they associate with professional development; and lastly, how their understanding relates to the interpretations described in the literature and by COTEP.

The aim of this paper is to problematise the concept professional development provided by COTEP. This paper argues that practitioners view professional development as a much broader concept than that adopted by COTEP and that the key roles of leader, administrator, manager, assessor, scholar and researcher normally expected of an educator (COTEP 1998 and 2000), are not considered by practitioners to be associated with professional development. These omissions seem to suggest that educator education policy is unlikely to lead to improved practice unless the complexity of the concept of professional development is recognised and a shared understanding of the concept, which takes into account the broader context within which practitioners work, is developed.

The concept professional development

There are many different interpretations of the concept professional development and different authors use different terms when referring to the concept. In addition, research into educator professional development reflects a variety of points of departure from educators’ progress in mastering classroom practice to the organisation and occupational conditions that affect educator opportunities to learn (Little 1992). It would seem that COTEP adopts the former, since the Department of Education (1997, 72) defines ‘professionalism’ as ‘the manner in which a practitioner executes his/her practice, and incorporates the concepts, knowledge, skills and values and judgements involved therein’. This definition supports COTEP’s (1998, 115) assumption that ‘South Africa’s most pressing problem is improving the quality of educators rather than simply improving quality’ and requires educator education programmes ‘to focus on developing the competencies required in the workplace’.

COTEP initially identified six roles and their associated competencies that educators are expected to perform. These six roles are: mediator of learning; interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials; leader, administrator and manager; scholar, researcher and lifelong learner; community, citizenship and pastoral role and learning area/subject/discipline/phase specialist (COTEP 1998, 68-80). The seventh role of assessor was later added by COTEP (2000). These seven roles serve as a guideline for the achievement of professional development. Whilst COTEP (1998) acknowledges that there are a variety of uses and meanings for terms like ‘profession’ and ‘professional’ neither of the COTEP documents (1998 and 2000) make the meaning and use of these terms explicit. COTEP refers to professional development as ‘lifelong learning that is conceptualised and regulated by occupational, professional and academic requirements’(COTEP 1998, 59)
Stenhouse (1975, 144) introduces the idea of ‘extended professionalism’. He identified ‘systematic questioning of one’s own teaching as a basis for development: the commitment and the skills to study one’s own teaching and the concern to test theory in practice by the use of those skills’ as key elements of ‘extended professionalism’. Kuiper and Wilkinson (1998, 208) state ‘professional development is a broad concept which includes more than changing teaching approaches’. These authors mention some of the factors that need to be considered when changing teachers’ approaches to teaching, but do not mention what more is included in the concept. McCormick and James (1983, 34) distinguish between ‘professionality’ which is designed to improve professional practice of educators and ‘professionalism’ which sometimes refers to improving the image and status of educators with little or no reference to improved educational practice.

Accepting the need for professional development in educator education, the importance of the role of the educator as a social being, who is innovative and capable of intelligent action, is implied. If professional development is to improve the quality of education in South Africa where the majority of practitioners are either under-qualified or need to be retrained (EduSource 1995), then a shared understanding of the meaning of professional development needs to be developed so that practitioners and stakeholders in education will be motivated to work towards improving education through the professional development of practitioners.

THE INVESTIGATION

Gathering the practitioners’ views on professional development

The author sought the views of the thirty-five educators registered for a two-year, part-time Further Diploma in Education, majoring in Technology at the former Rhodes University, East London Campus. These students were chosen since the author had already negotiated access and started participant observation with this group of students as part of her doctoral studies. All the educators were African and Xhosa speaking, who taught in both rural and urban schools in the Eastern Cape Province.

The author asked the educators to respond to two open-ended questions on a free-form sheet:

1. What do you understand by the concept professional development?

2. What observable skills, knowledge, values and attitudes do you associate with professional development?

The forms were numbered and the responses for each question collated. For Question One (What do you understand by the concept professional develop-
ment?), the researcher highlighted words, phrases and/or sentences that conveyed key ideas. Related words, phrases and/or sentences were grouped and regrouped under possible headings until six headings finally emerged. Next, a broad statement under each heading was developed as a ‘theme’ to capture the responses under the headings.

For Question Two (What observable skills, competences, knowledge, attitudes, values etc do you associate with professional development?), the researcher highlighted words, phrases and/or sentences that conveyed key ideas, then listed the responses in three categories: skills, knowledge and values and attitudes. The frequency of responses in each category was recorded by counting how often the educators mentioned a response. The responses were arranged according to the frequency that they were mentioned as an indication of their importance (the higher the frequency the greater the importance). The most frequently mentioned responses were then grouped in each category and linked to the roles in COTEP (1998 and 2000).

Limitations of the investigation include: firstly, that all the participants were registered for an in-service educator education programme and that these practitioners might have viewed professional development and its perceived benefits in a more positive light than practitioners not registered for further study; secondly, that the number of participants was small and may not be representative of the views of the majority of practitioners; and lastly, the interpretation of participants’ responses rests with the author, since time constraints did not allow for a follow-up interview with participants to clarify their responses and/or to comment on the author’s interpretation thereof.

The practitioners’ understanding of professional development

Practitioners understood professional development to embraces six themes. The six themes were:

1. Personal development of the teacher, including the empowerment of the individual, exemplary behaviour, and working, sharing and learning with others.
2. Teaching practice proficiency, which includes having the knowledge and skills to be an effective and competent teacher.
3. Professional concerns, including the ability to face the challenges of a dynamic profession, as well as career and status issues within the profession.
4. Being knowledgeable and adapting to challenges of a technological and global nature.
5. Development into a role model, who improves educational standards for the benefit of the community.
The practitioners’ responses to the first question seemed to suggest that they viewed professional development as a broad concept like Kuiper and Wilkinson (1998, 208). The practitioners’ understanding of professional development also incorporated aspects of ‘professionality’ and ‘professionalism’ discussed by McCormick and James (1983, 34), but did not include ‘extended professionalism’ described by Stenhouse (1975, 144). In other words, educators did not associate being a reflective practitioner with professional development. In addition, practitioners did not view teaching practice as the only focus of professional development, but rather as one of six important aspects of professional development. This is a much broader interpretation of the concept than that adopted by COTEP (1998 and 2000) which focuses on the improvement of teaching practice.

The six themes may be grouped to represent four different inter-related areas contained within the concept professional development. The first area may be described as the educator as practitioner, who improves his/her qualifications, and in the process, works with others to develop into a lifelong learner who becomes a role model in the community and society through his/her exemplary practice. The community and broader society represent the second area contained in the concept professional development. The third area represents the challenge of keeping abreast of a dynamic profession (with its accompanying status) that the educator adopts as part of his/her career. The fourth area is the global and technological context that forms the backdrop within which the educator, the community and teaching profession operate. These areas are diagrammatically represented in Figure 1.

In order for the Department of Education to succeed in improving the professional practice through the professional development of practitioners, policy makers will have to consider incorporating factors like the Community, the teaching profession and global issues, which impact on practitioners and their work within the classroom, into their definition of professional development. Clearly, practitioners view the broader context as being part of their professional development, whilst COTEP (1998 and 2000) focuses mainly on the roles practitioners are expected to play in order to improve classroom practice. COTEP (1998 and 2000) does not indicate how classroom practice is related to the broader context within which the practitioner functions.

The competences practitioners’ associated with professional development

The educators’ identified a large number of observable competences associated with the concept professional development. These responses were broadly grouped into three categories: knowledge, skills, values and attitudes. Of the observable competencies identified by practitioners, ‘being knowledgeable’, ‘having a good understanding’ and being ‘a specialist in your field’, were most frequently listed. All of these responses fell into the category concerned with knowledge. In the
skills category, ‘observation’, ‘listening’, ‘designing’, ‘ability to teach’, “evaluate”, “thinking’ and ‘problem solving’, were identified most frequently as observable competences associated with professional development. ‘Helping others’ and ‘exemplary behaviour’ were the most frequently mentioned competences among the values and attitudes.

Other competences mentioned by more than three practitioners were ‘knowledge of development’; ‘communication”; ‘social skills”; ‘the ability to make do”; ‘good attitude’ and ‘a willingness to learn’.

The competences, which practitioners most strongly associated with professional development, related mainly to knowledge. They appeared to consider knowledge very important possibly because they were all registered for an Further Diploma in Education to either improve their qualification, and/or to re-skill in the area of technology. Knowledge may not be rated as highly by other practitioners not involved in upgrading their qualifications. The need to be knowledgeable in ones discipline is confirmation of the role of the practitioner as a learning-area specialist, one of the seven roles in COTEP (1998).
The skills identified as being most important to practitioners were, not surprisingly, those skills considered essential for a competent practitioner in the area of technology, given that these practitioners were studying technology at Rhodes University. These competences may not be as important to practitioners in other learning areas. However, when one considers the skills mentioned, they support three roles identified in COTEP (1998), namely: interpreter and designer of learning programmes and materials, mediator of learning, and lifelong learner. The competences mentioned in the values and attitudes category correspond with the role of community, citizenship and pastoral role in COTEP (1998).

The roles that were not evident in the educators’ responses were those of leader, administrator and manager; assessor; scholar and researcher. These omissions have serious implications for classroom and professional practice.

Firstly, being an effective administrator and manager in the classroom is fundamental to the success of the teaching and learning situation and without these competences the practitioner is unlikely to improve the quality of classroom practice the main focus of the Department of Education for professional development.

Secondly, outcomes-based education requires that practitioners are competent assessors who are able to assess whether learners have/have not achieved the stated outcomes. These practitioners did not associate this role with professional development, which could impact negatively on the effectiveness of teaching and learning: learners will not know if they have learned well and the practitioners will not know what the learners have learned.

Lastly, educators need to be reflective practitioners who reflect on their own practice, relate theory to practice and purposefully seek to improve their practice through scholarship. The fact that these practitioners did not associate these competences with professional development is in line with their understanding of professional development which did not include what Stenhouse (1975, 144) refers to as ‘extended professionalism’. Professional practice is not likely to improve if practitioners do not become reflective practitioners who are able to reflect on ‘what they do’ and ‘why they do it in that particular way’.

**What are the implications for improving classroom practice?**

The participants viewed professional development as a broad concept that includes teaching practice, the community, the teaching profession, and the global context within which teaching occurs. It is understandable that during the apartheid era, practitioners were preoccupied with broader educational issues and less concerned with classroom practice since many educators were at the forefront of the struggle, which necessitated that they abandon their classrooms and look to broader society for solutions to their problems.

The educators’ view of professional development is a much broader interpretation of the concept than that adopted by COTEP (1998 and 2000).
COTEP’s narrow interpretation focuses on improving classroom practice, without taking the other factors identified by the practitioners into consideration. COTEP’s interpretation belies the complexity of the concept professional development and seeks to further the narrow agenda of the Department of Education – to improve the quality of classroom practice. In post-apartheid South Africa, educators need once again to focus their attention on the classroom yet, policy alone will not make this a reality. Relying on the rhetoric of professional development is unlikely to lead to improved classroom practice unless all stakeholders, including practitioners, reach consensus on the meaning and purpose of professional development and implement strategies to support the development of competent practitioners in a holistic way.

The participants recognised that classroom practice forms part of professional development, however, they did not consider competences associated with roles like leader, administrator, manager, assessor, scholar and researcher to be aligned to classroom practice. Yet these roles are crucial if the education policy is to fulfill its promise of improving classroom practice. Whilst practitioners recognize that professional development is linked to the improvement of education at community and national level, they did not appear to connect the skills of being an effective and competent practitioner to competences such as effective administration, management and research. Effective administration and classroom management are a fundamental part of effective teaching and learning and researching one’s teaching as a reflective practitioner is essential if one is to improve one’s practice. It is unlikely then that classroom practice will improve unless practitioners purposefully and consciously direct their attention to developing the skills necessary to improve classroom practice.

CONCLUSION

The practitioners’ viewed professional development as a broad concept that encompasses their practice, the community and the teaching profession within a global context, which is a much broader interpretation of the concept than that accepted by COTEP (1998 and 2000). In addition, the competences practitioners associated with professional development were linked to only four of the seven roles mentioned in COTEP (1998 and 2000). The three roles not associated with professional development were: leader, administrator and manager; assessor; scholar and researcher.

The different interpretations by practitioners and COTEP of the concept professional development and the competences associated with the roles described by COTEP (1998 and 2000) means that it is unlikely that the new education policy will lead to improved practice, unless educator education programmes ensure that practitioners are made aware of and acquire the necessary competencies that will
translate into improved practice. Given the limitations of this investigation, further research needs to be conducted to ascertain whether the professional development of practitioners translates into the improvement of their classroom practice.

REFERENCES


COTEP See


