

School-based Continuing Professional Development: the role of school leaders

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Abstract

Zambian Education School-based Training (ZEST) is an innovative programme aimed at improving teaching in line with policy aspirations in Zambia. It draws on existing roles, structures and processes whilst making innovative use of technology and resources, to support teaching and to challenge attitudes which can limit achievement. A programme of research has been designed to better understand school-based continuing professional development (SBCPD) at a school-level. This presentation focuses on one strand of that research: school leaders. It seeks to make explicit what it is that school leaders do to support successful innovation.

ZEST is based on the policy aspiration that teaching should be more learner-centred, and defines learner-centredness in terms of attitudes, values and relationships, rather than a set of required practices. This paper will draw on the literature to suggest what 'learner-centred leadership' could look like. It will present data from interviews and observations gathered during a two-day visit to each of six schools to explore head teachers' leadership of innovation. A purposive sample of schools was chosen, based on their successful engagement with ZEST as evidenced through new ways of working, new attitudes to learners, and the successful use of technology.

The presentation will provide case studies of successful school leaders and will highlight what it means to innovate, identifying key drivers and constraints in the Zambian context. The findings will be relevant to others working on the continent. (231)

Key words

School-based continuing professional development
Learner-centred Education
Instructional leadership
Teacher learning
pedagogic change

Introduction

In Zambia, like in many African countries, the education system does not deliver good student outcomes. There is a commitment from Government to improve the situation, however, with a revised school curriculum (2015) and an embedded system for school-based continuing professional development (SBCPD) based on the belief that by improving the skills of teachers, student outcomes will also improve. This paper describes innovative enhancements to the current system which have been developed by a partnership comprising The Open University UK, World Vision Zambia and The Ministry of Education. The project – Zambian Education School-based Training (ZEST) – is funded by the Scottish Government and has been running since 2017. We have now reached over 400 schools in Central Province and have carried out research alongside project monitoring and evaluation. In our research the unit of analysis is the school. We are interested in how SBCPD is experienced by teachers and the implications for teacher agency; how technology can support SBCPD and the models for school leadership that are emerging. This paper focuses on the school leadership strand of the research.

We will present and analyse data from six schools in order to draw out what it is that school leaders need to do to exercise effective instructional leadership and support innovation. We will relate our findings to the literature on instructional leadership and learner-centred education and demonstrate how what we have found out will inform an implementation guide for head teachers. We start by providing a brief introduction to ZEST and a review of the literature which has informed our study.

The context for the study: ZEST

The revised Zambian school curriculum recognises that learners need to be supported in learning skills and values, alongside traditional knowledge and calls for more inclusive learner-centred pedagogies. However, despite the known benefits of SBCPD (Opfer & Pedder, 2011) the system in place in Zambia is not delivering the expected improvements in student learning. SBCPD in Zambian schools is based on the Japanese system of 'lesson study'. Although aspects of the system are valued by teachers (for example, collaborative planning, and a focus on teaching difficult topics) the basic premise that knowledge about teaching is objective and that there is a 'right' answer to solving problems is not helpful. Guskey, (2002) suggests that teachers need specific, concrete, practical ideas that link to practice in their context but the current system does not include extra resources so it is difficult to imagine where new ideas will come from. The current system also places an emphasis on 'demonstration lessons' with the result that most teachers are only passively involved in SBCPD as observers. Very often the 'demonstration' is not directly relevant to the subject, or age group; it disrupts normal teaching and is staged rather than being an authentic lesson, part of a normal teaching sequence.

Zambian Education School-based Training (ZEST), developed in Central Province, is an innovation which enhances the existing system for SBCPD in Zambia. It retains the aspects of the system which are valued (regular teacher group meetings (TGMs) which focus on pedagogy and a desire to tackle classroom issues); provides contextualised classroom resources; and places an emphasis on active engagement with all teachers being involved in collaborative planning and trying out new classroom approaches. Within this system, regular TGMs are held in which teachers interact with resources which provide guidance on active classroom pedagogies, identified by teachers as being important (such as pair work, questioning, story-telling, role-play and assessment for learning). They work together to plan activities to try in their classrooms and then re-convene to reflect on how they went. Where possible, without too much disruption, peer observations take place. Early results are encouraging, with reports that TGMs are more purposeful, and better attended, and that staffroom relationships are more harmonious as all teachers take responsibility for improving the quality of teaching and engage with the resources, rather than relying on a few volunteers to do a demonstration lesson which was often heavily criticised by colleagues.

ZEST is underpinned by a strong theoretical framework. Knowledge about teaching is seen as being socially constructed within a particular context (Putnam & Borko, 2000), which implies that what teachers need is a range of possibilities alongside the skills and the opportunity to reflect on teaching in their context. Teachers are expected to be expert in learning theories, but evidence from pre-service and in-service programmes suggests that as a profession, we are not very good at applying learning theories to ourselves. ZEST sees teacher learning as a social process. It aims to support a process 'by which individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation' (Rogoff, 2008). This is sometimes referred to as 'participatory appropriation' and recognises that teachers need the opportunity to make meaning of new ideas within their cultural context and learn through participating in activity. The process is as important as the 'product' (teaching strategies). The model of change for ZEST assumes that for teachers to change the way they teach, they need specific practical ideas, and they need to experience the successful implementation of those ideas. It is through experiencing changes in their learners, that attitudes and beliefs will change, which will support further changes in pedagogy (Guskey, 2002; Murphy & Wolfenden, 2013).

Within this model of social learning, expertise is seen as the knowledge and skills of teachers within the group; the organisation of tools within their environment and the ways in which information is represented by mediating technologies (Gillen et al., 2012). A crucial aspect of ZEST therefore are the contextualised resources, made available on teachers' own mobile phones, which provide a vision for effective classroom learning and are conceptualised as a teacher's 'toolbox'. The role of the head teacher therefore is to create the environment in which social learning can take place.

Instructional leadership

The literature surrounding school leadership identifies various models for describing leadership and will point to different types such as: 'situational leadership', 'charismatic leadership', and 'transformational leadership' (Wang, 2016). In the messy reality of everyday life, many different forms of leadership will be exercised by the same individual in different circumstances, depending on the issue at the time. Instructional leadership is that intended to lead to better learning outcomes and evidence suggests that high performing schools are those which successfully harness 'social capital' and collective professional learning (Harris, 2014) by 'distributing'

leadership throughout the organisation. Our thesis in ZEST is that ‘collective professional learning’ is likely to lead to ‘participatory appropriation’ if the attitudes and values that teachers are expected to demonstrate in their work with learners, are modelled by those supporting the teachers.

The Zambian Government’s Curriculum Policy Framework (Curriculum Development Centre, 2013) calls for more learner-centred teaching in Zambian primary schools, without defining what that means. Evidence suggests that it is a contested term (O’Sullivan, 2004; Tabulawa, 1997; Vavrus, 2009) and very difficult to implement (Schweisfurth, 2011). In ZEST the definition that has been used for learner-centred education (LCE) is based on Schweisfurth’s ‘minimum criteria’ (Schweisfurth, 2015) which provide a practical statement of what teachers need to do, recognising that this is accompanied by a set of attitudes and values which value the contributions of all learners, and believe that all can learn, with the right support. The minimum criteria are:

- Lessons are engaging and motivate pupils to learn.
- Classroom relationships are based on mutual respect.
- Learning challenges pupils and builds on existing knowledge.
- Dialogue is used in teaching and learning.
- The curriculum is relevant to learners’ lives and values a range of skills including critical thinking and creativity.
- Assessment tests a range of skills and gives credit for more than recall of knowledge.

(adapted from Schweisfurth (2013), p146)

We are not seeking to make the case for LCE in this paper, rather to highlight the fact that it is the stated policy of the Zambian Government, and that the successful implementation of their policy therefore requires a working definition of what LCE can mean. A strength of the ‘minimum criteria’ is that they don’t advocate particular classroom pedagogies, but do encapsulate a set of attitudes and values which are consistent with The Rights of the Child (Schweisfurth, 2013; UNICEF, 1990).

An analytical framework

The minimum criteria provide a practical statement of a set of beliefs: that all learners can learn, given the right support; that the most productive relationships are based on mutual respect; that all learners bring relevant knowledge, experience and skills to their learning; and that the teacher’s role is to help them build on these to incorporate new knowledge and skills. Learners are more likely to be able to do this if teaching is engaging and relevant to their everyday lives.

Our thesis is that if the implementation of ZEST is to be successful, then these attitudes and values should be modelled for teachers by those in leadership positions. Effective instructional leadership will be learner-centred and will focus directly on the needs of teachers.

Some of the literature about learning outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Bold et al., 2017) highlights concerning statistics about schools, and suggests that only 1 in 5 children will be taught by a teacher who is present, knows the subject and has some idea about how to teach it. The evidence they present is robust, but perhaps unhelpfully presents a deficit model of teachers as being feckless and uncaring. Work by (Tao, 2013) reminds us that teachers in sub-Saharan Africa often have difficult lives, with low pay, poor working conditions and limited access to relevant training. International research (Harris, 2014) suggests that school improvement requires teacher improvement and effective school leadership.

We can therefore adapt Schweisfurth’s minimum criteria for teachers (positioning the teachers as learners), to provide an analytical framework for effective instructional leadership in this context. The implication is that SBCPD should:

1. be engaging for teachers by being relevant to the issues they face everyday. This means that there should be opportunity to focus on what it is they need to teach in their classroom and should help them tackle the specific issues they face in their class (for example, mixed ages, large numbers of students, scarce resources).
2. support relationships between teachers and leaders which are based on mutual respect;
3. challenge teachers to extend their knowledge and to build on their existing skills;
4. provide opportunities for professional dialogue about issues rather involve listening to lectures from experts;
5. focus on issues that are directly relevant to the needs of the teachers;
6. recognise that ‘success’ can take a variety of forms.

The role of the head teacher is to create an environment in which teachers feel valued and professional development is directly relevant to their needs.

The study

In this study the aim was to visit schools where ZEST has been shown to be delivering positive changes and to find out more about the role of the head teacher. Within the Zambian model, each school has a School In-service Co-ordinator (SIC) who takes responsibility for the School Plan for Inservice Training (SPRINT). The role of the head teacher is less clear (beyond supporting the SIC) yet international evidence suggests that effective leadership is crucial in supporting teacher learning (Cullen et al., 2012; Oduro & MacBeath, 2003; Postholm, 2016). What do effective school leaders do to support SBCPD? In order to consider this question, we chose a purposive sample of six schools. The schools were all in the same District and had been introduced to ZEST in December 2019 (Cohort 3). During the global pandemic (2020) head teachers and SICs were supported through regular online meetings which proved to be very successful (Stutchbury et al., 2021).

Two World Vision researchers visited each school in March 2022, and spent two days interviewing the head teacher, the SIC, the school IT champion and a teacher. Where possible they observed a lesson, a TGM and took part in a learning walk with the head teacher. The interview schedules were agreed in advance by the OU and WV team. They were 'semi-structured' with possible follow-up questions being identified in discussions between the two teams. Notes were made during the interview on Kobo and the discussion was recorded. The OU research team accessed all the notes and listened to the recordings. The analysis process is on-going and will involve both teams; in this paper we present some initial findings for the school leadership strand of the research.

Research questions

Main question: What models of school leadership have emerged and how are teachers supported in developing new pedagogic approaches?

Sub-questions: To what extent can leadership said to be 'learner-centred'? Does the leadership model learner-centred attitudes and values?

Data analysis

All the evidence from each school was converted into a 'school narrative'. These were designed to bring all the data into a form which was easy to digest and told the story of that school. Each one was 10-15 pages long. This is a form of 'data reduction' (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and provided a holistic picture of the school, not just the perspective of one role. Drawing on the minimum criteria for 'learner-centred leadership', we analysed each narrative using codes generated from the revised 'minimum criteria'. We also brought together key points from lesson observations and evidence about the impact on learners. The aim was to find out to what extent the attitudes and values which underpin the policy aspiration are present and to learn more about the role of the head teacher in SBCPD.

Findings

The findings are presented under four headings: Engagement (points 1,3,5 of the LC criteria above), Relationships (point 2), Collaboration (point 4) and Impact (point 6, lessons and impact on learners). Finally we will reflect back on the narratives on what seems to be missing (Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014) and the implications for further progress.

Engagement

The innovation has increased teachers' enthusiasm for SBCPD.

Before ZEST there was time wastage but the situation has now changed and it is good. (School 6)

Becca's opinion of TGMs is that it was not being done and never taken serious. Since starting ZEST, TGMs have changed for example teaching using available local resources (School 1)

ZEST spurs people to discover more, it has encouraged teachers to seek for more knowledge... (School 3)

Teachers appreciate the resources and the opportunity to learn skills that are directly relevant to their everyday lives. The focus on pedagogic approaches that can be applied across subjects and age groups enables teachers to use TGMs to undertake collaborative planning which they can use the next day.

There are things that are in ZEST that must be incorporated in the mainstream, the approaches ensure that everyone participates. Very good and positive impact, (School 2)

In all schools, the amount of planning undertaken by teachers has increased, and SBCPD is seen as more worthwhile than it used to be.

Brenda collaborates with other teachers to support her teaching by planning during TGMs . Since ZEST was introduced, she plans lessons more. She has noticed considering learners when planning lessons and a teacher giving guidance. (School 5)

There is astute planning and implementation of SBCPD. It has made it easier for teachers to relate reality to the things they teach. (School 3)

Relationships

All six headteachers position themselves as learners. They regard it as their responsibility to make sure the TGMs take place and to provide the relevant resources. But they also take part.

I do monitor of course with the SIC but I also attend some of the meetings – when I am in the meeting I say now don't call me the head colleagues - they put me in one of the groups. (School 4)

It was also suggested in all the schools that the atmosphere has changed. The old system of demonstration lesson, which often attracted robust criticism, was unpopular. The new approach to TGMs provides a safe space for teachers to seek advice and admit when they need help. Relationships are more harmonious.

There is increase in attendance in TGMs ... We had the situation where the attendance was very bad, because what they thought when we start to plan for TGM before... it was all about attacking a teacher or maybe they wanted to attack a certain teacher, so they want to see does that teacher know how to teach. But people used to run away, they never used to attend TGMs. But this time because we have developed an approach of peer observation, we have developed an approach of how we can help one another using the approaches (School 3).

Collaboration

A key aspect of the old system was collaborative planning. But without extra resources to provide new ideas, this was often dominated by more experienced teachers. All the head teachers reported an increase in the amount of productive collaboration taking place; teachers value the opportunity to work with their friends and find peer observation to be a non-threatening and productive activity.

Collaborative planning is easy, as a teacher you may be looking at the lesson differently and others when you put lesson together you come up with a better way. (School 4)

The use of discussion on the approaches has helped us to start using the approaches that we have forgotten. (School 6)

Impact

Head teachers reported significant changes in their schools which they are aware of through monitoring, observing and listening to staff. All schools reported similar impacts on learners: as teachers plan more effectively and make a more deliberate attempt to engage learners, participation in lessons and school attendance have improved.

Since she started the ZEST SBCPD work, learners enjoy and participate more. Learners are more confident..... There is improvement in learner collaboration skills. She has noticed learners' improvement in academic performance due to high level participation. (School 5)

A slightly more mixed picture came from the six lesson observations.

The lesson did not include any pair work or group work activity. The teacher referred to local resources and used a range of open and close questions: what is this? How do you sound this? The teacher did not use games/songs/roleplays, She used the whole class approach and was only centred at the board. (School 1)

Learners were involved in group work: ... activity of making words in groups took 20 minutes. ...the tasks were appropriate for group work: learners were asked to make words using phonics and syllables they learnt in the lesson. She also gave examples of how to make words using syllables. Group work was effective because almost all learners were able to participate in making and reading words despite groups being bigger which led to the activity taking more time than expected. ...A song was used to introduce the lesson. All children sang the song led by the teacher. The teacher used the story to introduce the lesson and learners participated actively. (School 5)

Only half of the lessons involved approaches specifically developed in ZEST resources. Accounts from teachers of their experience of peer observation suggested that discussion of learning and teaching remains superficial, focusing on practical details, rather than the learning. For example, one teachers received feedback on a resources she had made suggesting that the writing was too small. Whilst the size of the writing on a resource is clearly important, some feedback on how it supported the lesson objectives, provided challenge, or linked with previous learning would be more helpful.

Likewise, the most popular topic recalled from TGMs is making resources from local materials. This is important and encouraging. But it is also relatively easy. Focusing on the details of pedagogy and the impact on learning is more difficult, and the research has raised many questions about how TGMs can be better supported so that discussions go deeper into classroom practice.

Discussion

There is emerging evidence from our research that the atmosphere in schools has changed, leading to a more productive programme of SBCPD which actively involves all teachers. There are some perceived benefits for learners and teachers report renewed enthusiasm for SBCPD. The head teachers delegate effectively to the SICs yet have the humility to take part in TGMs themselves, positioning themselves as learners alongside the teachers. Facilitation is democratic, with opportunities and support being available to those who would like to run a meeting. There was only one of the six schools in which the researchers suggested that some teachers seemed 'fearful' of the head teacher; everywhere else relationships are based on mutual respect and teachers appreciate the support provided for SBCPD and the opportunity to facilitate meetings.

The model of learning at the heart of ZEST is social. It is perhaps helpful at this stage to highlight what this means. One conceptualisation is provided by Vygotsky (1978) who suggests that a more knowledgeable person can enhance someone's learning by guiding them through the zone of proximal development (ZPD). He encourages us to think in terms of 'skills that I have' and 'more skills that I can develop with help'. In ZEST the resources are designed to provide that guidance. They provide specific examples of teachers carrying out activities in their classrooms which actively engage learners and promote thinking. Experience and research on similar programmes (Harley & Simiyu Barasa, 2012; Murphy & Wolfenden, 2013; Wolfenden, 2015) have shown that resources like these need to be mediated for teachers. Some of the comments from the researchers about the lessons they observed and the reports from teachers about feedback they received during peer observation may suggest that there is still progress to be made in terms of the quality of teaching. Teachers perhaps need more help with their pedagogy.

As part of the research, the head teacher took the researchers on a 'learning walk'. The idea was to find out what aspects of school life they were really proud of. In the five learning walks that took place, the emphasis was mainly on buildings, and occasionally on teaching resources. Such walks can be a helpful way for the head teacher to review classroom teaching and they perhaps need to be encouraged to focus on the quality of learning as well as the infra-structure.

The TGMs provide a collaborative space in which teachers can grapple with issues and difficulties, and the TGM activities and classroom examples in the ZEST resources are important in facilitating discussion and collaborative planning. Our evidence suggests, however, that teachers need more support. One way to provide

this would be for more in-depth engagement with the resources from the head teacher and SIC so they could coach teachers according to individual needs.

Conclusion

From an initial tentative look at the rich data that this work has generated, there is emerging evidence that the attitudes and values consistent with learner-centred teaching, prevail in our six schools. TGMs are democratic with all contributions being valued. SBCPD is engaging for teachers and reflects the reality of their classrooms. They can use the time in TGMs to plan classroom activities, thus saving time elsewhere. Head teachers are very supportive, providing a framework to ensure meetings take place, resources to support the meetings and taking part themselves as learners. Perhaps most importantly, staffroom relationships have changed, and teachers are more collaborative, more supportive of each other and recognise the benefits of working together.

However, pedagogic change is demanding, especially when educators are being asked to work in ways which they have not experienced for themselves. In order to build on this research and further develop the project, the intention is to produce an implementation guide for school leaders. This guide will emphasise the benefits of coaching conversations, in which leaders use the resources to focus on the details of classroom pedagogy and learning walks in which school leaders deliberately focus on the quality of teaching taking place in their school, with tools to intervene to provide extra support. Instructional leadership is perhaps about more than providing the conditions to support teacher learning, but also about providing instruction in the form of coaching and mentoring. Further analysis and discussion with the WV team will provide more insights and in the presentation we will share case studies that capture different models of school leadership across our six schools. (4002 words)

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to the research team from World Vision who worked with the OU team to develop the research instruments and went out into the field to collect the data.

The work was funded by an Impact Accelerator Grant, awarded by The Open University, and ZEST is funded by a grant from the Scottish Government.

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