

Teacher Professional Development Through Distance Education: The Ghanaian Experience

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Abstract

In spite of the global interests in teacher continuing professional development (CPD), Ghana is yet to institutionalise and implement a well-designed CPD policy to guide teachers' professional practice. At present, CPD opportunities entail participation in hardly organised in-service training and workshops activities. Consequently, continuing education through the distance mode of learning has emerged to be the most viable means for teachers to update professional knowledge in order to improve practice, but this approach is without a challenge. This study uses qualitative interviews to highlight issues involved in teachers' use of distance education for their professional development. The study identifies teacher absenteeism, loss of instructional hours and a general effect on students learning as teachers engage in distance education programmes. The study recommends a much repertoire of CPD activities for Ghanaian teachers and the regularisation of CPD as on-going learning activities for teachers.

Keywords: Professional development, distance education, and basic schoolteachers

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Introduction

In education literature, the Continuing professional development of teachers is seen as an important potential way to improve schools, increase teacher quality and improve the quality of student learning (Day, 1999; Opfer and Pedder, 2011) thus, making CPD policy priorities in efforts to ensure quality education and educational effectiveness (Borg, 2015). Yet in Ghana and other Sub-Saharan African countries, CPD is yet to receive maximum attention in teacher development and educational improvement efforts (Pryor, Akyeampong, Westbrook, & Lussier, 2012).

This is in spite of Ghana's struggle to address quality issues in its educational system. While many attempts have been made over the past three decades through the implementation of various educational reforms and policies (MOE, 1994; Akyeampong, 2002), Ghanaian school child is found to be learning very little (Mereku, 2003) as reforms have had minimal impact on students' learning outcomes. For instance, the OECD (2015) report on Universal Basic Skills in Science and Mathematics ranked Ghana as one of the worse countries to have participated in the international assessment (Ghana was ranked 74th). A study by the Ministry of Education (MOE), (2012) also suggest that less than 25% of primary six children in Ghana are able to read and write and attain basic literacy skills after six years of public schooling.

The lower returns on students learning outcomes is partly because educational reforms and initiatives in the past decades have paid too little attention to what actually goes on in the classroom by way of looking at teachers' professional learning and development. Researches into teacher quality in Ghana suggest that teachers have weak knowledge in content and pedagogies, which undermine effective students' learning and achievements (Akyeampong, Pryor, & Ampiah, 2006; Moon, 2007). To raise the teachers' performances in the classroom to support effective learning of students, Ghanaian teachers must be supported through systematic and ongoing professional development.

Currently, even though the in-service training and workshops activities are current themes in policies and programmes for teachers' development, it all too rarely expands into a larger and more comprehensive idea of CPD (Atta & Mensah, 2015) as it is also hardly organised (Esia-Donkoh, 2014; Essel, Badu, Owusu-Boateng, & Saah, 2009). Consequently the distance education and the sandwich educational programmes have increasingly become avenues for teachers' to upgrade their knowledge and skills (Baiden-Amisshah, 2006) as away of their professional development. As teachers engage in distance education for their professional development as a professional development, there are consequences that affect the teaching and learning of their students. Ananga, Tamanja, and Amos (2015) report in a study that teachers' participation in DE affects teaching and delivery, students' academic progress, monitoring and evaluation, inadequate teacher preparation and the entire school administration systems. Tamanja (2016) also found in a study that, by participating in sandwich programmes as a way of professional development, an average of 264 hours each of classroom instructional time is lost with their students in an academic year.

Yet, the fundamental purpose of CPD is to bring about desirable changes in teachers' practice for improved students learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Guskey, 2002). Therefore CPD enactments of teachers should not in anyway affect the learning of their students. It is against this background that the study examines issues involved in teachers' engagement in distance education programmes as a way for their professional development.

Literature Review

Teacher continuing professional development (CPD)

Literature suggests varying definitions of CPD, but in its simplest form, CPD is seen as the development of a person in his or her professional role (UNESCO, 2003). In teacher education, CPD is perceived as a long-term process, which extends beyond teacher education at the tertiary level to in-service training at the workplace (Putnam & Borko, 2000). It is the "processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might in turn, improve the learning of students" (Guskey, 2002, p. 16). Through participation in CPD activities, teachers are equipped with new knowledge (in content and pedagogy), skills and attitudes, which leads to teacher change for effective students learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

Teachers' participation in Distance Education (DE) in Ghana

In Ghana, one of the dominant approaches of teacher development is continuing education using the distance mode. Distance education is any form of learning process where learners are separated from the teacher in terms of space and time, where "communication between the two is mediated by print media or ICT; and learning is under the control of the learner rather than the teacher" (Mnyanyi & Mbwette, 2009, p. 2). With its large-scale implementation in 1996, the University of Education, Winneba offers various distance education courses for teachers to upgrade their professional knowledge while remaining at post.

Such convenience associated with DE programmes has increased teachers' enrolment in DE over the years. Also, while study leave options are gradually becoming inaccessible to teachers due to its quota implementation, teachers are turning to the DE and sandwich programmes to upgrade themselves while remaining at post. Statistics from the largest DE providers for teachers attests to the phenomenal increase in teachers' enrolment in DE programmes at the University of Education, Winneba (see figure 1)

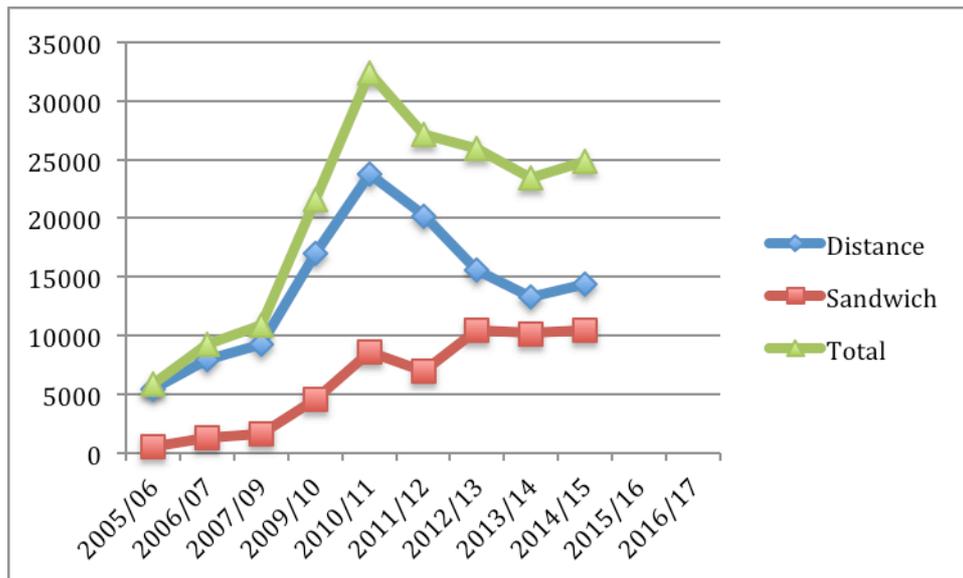


Figure 1: Enrolment trend in Distance Education and Sandwich Programmes at the University of Winneba (UEW)

Source: UEW 22nd Congregation report, 2017)

Methods

The study adopted a basic qualitative design involving 16 teachers and six educational stakeholders. Teachers were drawn from four (4) purposefully selected districts in the Central region as cases with their district educational directors. In-depth interviews were the only data collection tool. Themes were extracted from the data to form the basis of the analysis guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) criterion for thematic data analysis. The study had ethical approval granted by the University of Technology Sydney ethics committee and participants gave informed consent in order to be part of the study.

Results

This section presents the results from the interview data analysis. The findings have been categorised into four themes: teacher absenteeism, loss of instructional hours, effects on students learning and DE serving its fundamental purpose.

Teacher absenteeism

A major concern raised by all educational stakeholders was the increase in teacher absenteeism owing to participation in distance education programmes. All educational directors expressed worry over abandoning of classroom duties for engagement in further school activities such as leaving school to various campus sites for information, to write quizzes and to submit assignments. In Ghana teacher absenteeism has been an educational challenge affecting teaching and learning in classrooms. Absenteeism refers to a miss of work when a teacher allocates teaching time to activities that compete with scheduled work for other reasons such as personal utility (Martochio and Jimeno, 2003). An educational director expressed continuing education as a leading cause of teacher absenteeism in the following way:

It is very common that these teachers leave their classroom duties to engage in other personal studies. It is good that they obtain further upgrading but the distance programmes affect student. When a teacher needs to submit assignment to their various schools [where they pursue further studies] or find out information, they leave their teaching posts. Even though in some cases permission is sought from their head teachers, it amounts to absenteeism in the classroom (Becks, personal Interview)

Loss of instructional hours with students

Another effect of DE participation is the loss of instructional hours with students and time on task. Time on task refers to the contact hours teachers are expected to invest in teaching daily and for which they are paid (Tamanja, 2016). It was revealed that teachers' engagements in DE programmes affect the quality time teachers had to engage with their students in the classroom. Stakeholders observed through supervision and monitoring that, teachers used instructional hours to engage in personal learning while preparing for quizzes and examinations in their respective universities. Similarly leaving teaching duties for other learning commitments in the universities did not only increase absenteeism in the schools but also affected instructional hours and time on task within the schools.

Ironically, all teachers who had used the DE modes of study did not concur to the concerns raised by educational stakeholder on absenteeism and loss of instructional hours with students. Teachers who were Junior high school teachers¹ argued that whenever they had to leave for their university engagements (be it examinations, submission of assignment or registration), they did so after finishing their tasks in schools. Teachers explained with their experiences:

I have successfully completed my degree programme through the DE and there was never a time I left my students unattended for schools. Lectures are on weekends and I also didn't use my instructional hours teaching to read by lecture notes, that is not just possible (Teacher 2, personal interview).

Another teacher also commented:

I think stakeholders just exaggerate teacher absenteeism that we [teachers] leave the classrooms to pursue our own personal learning. I didn't do that and I don't think any good teacher will do that. What we usually do is to engage with our lecture materials during our free time (teacher 3, personal interview)

It is important to emphasise that, this contrary positions have fuelled tensions between participating teachers and school administration that view this practice as affecting the learning of students. While, in the study teachers' responses were apparent justification for their engagement, it is important to reckon that indeed teachers' engagement in DE programmes contribute to teacher absenteeism in the classroom as

¹ At the Junior High school level, teachers teach specific subject and thus have specific time allocation in the school timetable for their lesson.

well as loss of quality time with students as has been established in other studies (Tamanja, 2016).

DE serving its purpose

This theme emerged as teachers' justification on their use of DE programmes to develop professional selves especially in situations where CPD opportunities for teachers are not forthcoming. Therefore to the teachers DE programmes enable majority of teachers to further their education while remaining at their teaching post. Teachers also explained that, as opportunities to obtain study leave with pay to leave classrooms to pursue further studies is limited, the distance education and sandwich programmes remained alternative PD tool to upgrade their professional knowledge. Teachers explained in the following ways:

Whether you like it or not, the DE programmes have come to stay with us. I am able to further my knowledge so are my colleague teachers. We wouldn't have been able to do that because it is difficult to even get study leave with pay (Kwesi, teacher).

Another teacher also explained:

We are able to further our education thanks to DE and the sandwich programmes. It allows us to be in school and study at the same time. Today many teachers are in school because of DE programmes (Ato, teacher).

Discussion and conclusion

The study's results show that teacher participation in DE programmes affect teaching and learning. On one hand, though educational stakeholders identified concerns and effect of teachers' participation, teachers on the other hand felt the DE programmes are serving its purpose by equipping them with professional resources (knowledge, skills and attitudes) with hitherto were unattainable due to the difficulties in access study leave options. Furthermore, in the absence of varied CPD opportunities to develop teachers, engaging in continuing education using the DE demonstrates human agency on the part of these teachers as they sought out own avenue to develop in their profession. However, teachers cannot develop at the expense of their students. Researches have indeed demonstrated effects of participation in DE programmes on the teaching and learning. Mereku (2013) reports in a study among teacher participants in DE programmes at the University of Education, Winneba that although teachers generally felt the DE is achieving its purpose in terms of widening access to teachers in the continuing education pursuits, DE programmes are inadequate to increase teacher capacity effectively in the classrooms. Other reports have also identified teachers' continuing education through the DE and sandwich modes as significant cause of teacher absenteeism, which is found to affect students learning (World Bank report, 2010; Tamanja, 2016).

In conclusion, to harness the contribution of DE towards teachers' professional development, measure must be taken to address these concerns as this study has highlighted. Challenges associated with DE practices need urgent redress in order for teachers to enjoy full participation without adverse effects on their students. School

management can streamline pragmatic steps at the school level to ensure that teachers do not use official hours for personal learning concerning their further studies. Also, there is the need for consideration of richer repertoire of CPD practices that include teachers' informal activities as they occur within the context of their practice. This will reduce the overreliance of continuing education to other avenues for teachers to develop professionally.

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