

"Nobody is listening": the attitudes of teachers towards professional development by distance

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ABSTRACT

The research reported in this article focuses on the attitudes of primary school teachers upgrading their qualifications through distance education (DE) at Ramaano Mbulaheni Training Centre at Tshakhuma, in the Limpopo Province. A short literature study revealed that the attitudes of distance learners play a primary role in the successful implementation and sustainability of distance education. Taking as a point of departure the importance of teachers' attitudes for the successful implementation of teacher upgrading programmes through distance education, the purpose of the investigation was to explore the attitudes of primary school teachers towards professional development through DE which contributed to a high dropout and failure rate.

Questionnaires were sent to a large number of distance learners and interviews were conducted. The information received was analysed and the results are illustrated and discussed. Suggestions for the improvement of delivery strategies are made. This article attempts to help solve the problem that "nobody is listening".

INTRODUCTION

Like so many aspects of South African society, teacher education is undergoing change. Differentiated programmes (programmes generally designed to provide basic qualifications and knowledge in various fields of employment, support teaching and intensive social educational supervision) characterised the period since 1994. The aim and concept of these programmes is oriented towards the specific circumstances and educational needs of the particular target group. Transformation is taking place in all spheres and sectors of the government. There are many factors influencing distance learners' attitudes of tutorial package, student support and problems they are experiencing.

High dropout and failure rates in distance education institutions are the result of many factors. Research in the field of dropout and failure rates of distance learners should therefore eventually lead to changes and adaptations to tutorial packages and student support. People working in the field of distance education should always keep in mind that the factors which tend to impact negatively on distance learning influence students' attitudes towards tutorial packages and student support, and in return, these attitudes play a role in students' academic progress.

There are certain factors that foster student learning and influence students' perceptions of learning as well as their attitudes towards tutorial packages and assignments. It is therefore essential that lecturing staff are familiar with and understand the process of student learning and that they put this knowledge into practice. In order to enhance students' learning and at the same time enhance their perception of their learning, Guskin (1994:19) suggests the following:

- There are key elements of student learning that can only be accomplished effectively through human interaction between students and staff members. As far as distance education is concerned, this need for human interaction calls for special planning of the tutorial packages.
- There are key elements of student learning that can be accomplished effectively by using electronic technologies, especially new information technologies.

- There are key elements of student learning that can be accomplished effectively through peer interaction without the presence of staff members and by students learning independently inside and outside the institution.

DEFINITION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education is being used for a growing range of educational purposes in both industrialised and developing countries. Keegan (1992:83) defines distance education as a formalised teaching system specifically designed to be carried out remotely. The teaching techniques are separated in time and space from the learning acts. According to Bagwandeen and Louw (1993:36) distance education is a fairly new concept. It refers to the forms of study not led by teachers present in a classroom situation, but supported by tutors and an organisation at a distance from the student.

Distance education in this article covers the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation.

In the distance education course for teachers examined in this article, information is built into study guides, audio cassettes, video cassettes, and television programmes. These media entail a number of practical experiences which require learners to generate new information and integrate it with their own work experience. The distribution of information is followed by face-to-face contact sessions during school holidays where learners learn from one another by acquiring new insights into the challenges they are experiencing.

Because distance education is less expensive to support and is not constrained by geographic considerations, it offers opportunities in situations where traditional education has difficulty operating. Students with scheduling or distance problems can benefit, as can workers, because distance education can be more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered virtually anywhere. Studies indicate that distance learning can be as effective as the traditional format when the methods are appropriate to the teaching tasks, there is student-teacher interaction, and the teachers provide students with appropriate and timely feedback.

THE NEED FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

One of the most important reasons in opting for distance education in developing countries is to produce a corps of well-qualified educators. Such a force of qualified and dedicated educators has eluded this country for too long. South African educators have been "educationally disempowered and politically marginalised to a very large extent" (Jansen 1990:33).

It is a matter of urgency that teachers receive competency-based training to equip them for their new and ever-changing situation (Dlepu 1991:156-158). The previous dispensation also greatly affected the education that Blacks received and consequently Blacks considered colleges of education as an ideological arm for the state. With the hope of equal education in this country, distance education programmes to empower students should be further developed (Ravhudzulo 1997: 61). Black educators are aware of their professional shortcomings and wish to improve the skills and knowledge to remain relevant to the profession.

The implementation of Curriculum 2005 has left some educators in a state of uncertainty as to how they can participate meaningfully in the classroom situation because of the drastic changes in methodologies and learning content. According to Scott (1995:54), professional development is indispensable to upgrade the skills and knowledge of unqualified Black teachers, who account for 11,5% of the teaching population, as well as that of underqualified teachers (79,5%) and to improve the teaching of qualified teachers (9,0%) in the Limpopo Province (Figure 1). It should be noted that even those who are qualified need professional

development of some kind. These teachers may need skills instead of knowledge. All educators require continuous support throughout their careers in order to develop their professional skills and enhance the quality of their work.

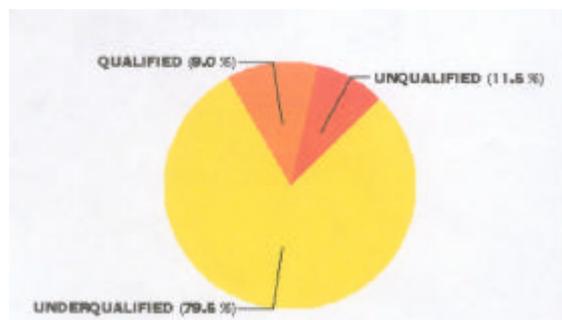


Figure 1. Black teacher qualifications: Limpopo Province – 1991 (Scott 1995:54)

Scott (1995:vii) rightfully maintains that there are too few qualified teachers in the Limpopo Province. Motsoaledi (1996) states that the Limpopo Province was declared a "disaster" province by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki in 1996. This "disaster" came about as a result of the lack of classrooms, the disrepair of some schools, overcrowded classrooms, the lack of text books and other learning materials, the collapse of a learning and teaching culture, a high dropout rate, and a high failure rate, particularly at matriculation level.

Within a context of rapid technological change and shifting market conditions, the American education system faces the challenge of providing increased educational opportunities without increased budgets. Many educational institutions are answering this challenge by developing distance education programmes. At its most basic level, distance education takes place when a teacher and student(s) are separated by physical distance, and technology (ie voice, video, data, and print), often in concert with face-to-face communication, is used to bridge the instructional gap. These types of programmes can provide adults with a second chance at a college education, reach those disadvantaged by limited time, distance or physical disability, and update the knowledge base of workers at their places of employment.

BACKGROUND OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY DISTANCE AT RAMAANO MBULAHENI TRAINING CENTRE (RMTC)

In 1994, the Primary Teachers Upgrading Programme through distance was introduced to upgrade and instil confidence in underqualified educators and assist teachers in relevant communication proficiency (RMTC 1995:18). The programme was launched by the former Minister of Education in the Northern Province on 4 July 1994. In his address the then Minister of Education, Dr. Aaron Motswaledi, mentioned the need for upgrading the qualifications of teachers and empowerment. He indicated that this teacher upgrading programme through distance was the first of its kind in the Limpopo Province.

Ramaano Mbulaheni Training Centre upgrades the qualifications of teachers in the teaching profession, providing them with knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and dispositions towards teaching and education through distance education as well as face-to-face contact sessions and seminars.

The Primary Teachers Upgrading Programme is offered to teachers who are in possession of a senior certificate, have a Primary Teachers Certificate Course (M+1) or Category A, and hold a post in a primary school. The upgrading programme was developed to improve the professional qualifications of practising educators whose qualification which only entitles them to a category rating of (M+1), but who have many years of experience. The duration of the programme is four years. Educators attend a face-to-face contact session for a week every school holiday. The lecturing staff draw up the timetable and organise face-to-face contact

sessions and regional meetings to hold group discussions. Externally moderated examinations are written at the end of the academic year.

Since 1995 the number of primary school educators who have enrolled for the Diploma in Primary Education through distance education has decreased tremendously, and the graduates produced each year fall far short of the number needed to help the country's growth and development of well qualified educators. The class lists from 1994 to 1998 show the enrolment rate in 1994 to have been 512. The number decreased in 1995 to 85, in 1996 to 43, in 1997 to 18 whilst the enrolment in 1998 was a mere 14 students.

Table 1

Student numbers for professional development through distance

Year	Number of students enrolled	Percentage of students enrolled (%)
1994	512	76,19
1995	85	12,65
1996	43	6,40
1997	18	2,68
1998	14	2,08

The results of the above table are shocking (see Figure 2) below.

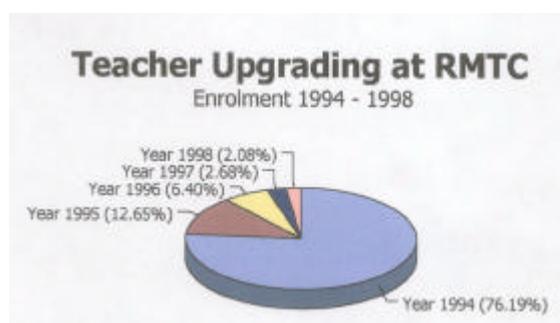


Figure: 2 Enrolment of distance education students from 1994-1998

A thorough study of the enrolment records indicated that most of the teachers dropped out of the course. This finding was alarming: why were teachers who were developing their professional qualifications through distance learning failing to complete the course? It was to answer this question that I felt compelled to conduct research into the attitudes of teachers towards professional development through distance education.

Between 1999 and 2001 there was no intake of first year students registered for this course and only a few third and fourth year students were still involved. In addition, many of the enrolled students were dropping out of the course. The Ramaano Mbulaheni Training Centre management committee made efforts to follow up on students who dropped out to encourage them to complete the course. With this encouragement, 60 students completed the Diploma in Primary Education in 2002.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

A review of the literature on teachers' attitudes towards professional development by distance shows that there are numerous variables which may influence these attitudes. Researchers warn of an inherent problem associated with ignoring classroom teachers' beliefs about any form of technology for distance education (Czerniak, Lumpe, Haney & Beck 1999). Tobin, Tippins & Gallard (1994) maintain that it is not only teachers' knowledge or skills are needed for implementing distance education, but also their perceptions and attitudes on the use of technologies for the purpose of education. The need to reform existing educational programmes and implement new ones requires the understanding of teachers' beliefs concerning distance education.

A first important reason why teachers' attitudes may be negative is that teachers often feel that they are obliged to implement a learner-centred approach (as promoted in outcomes-based education) for which they were not trained. Furthermore, teachers often do not have a clear understanding of the new approach they must implement and often lack adequate time to prepare for the implementation of these changes. Moreover, teachers' attitudes are also influenced by the planning and organisation of the distance education institution, the tutorial package, the availability and provision of sufficient support and resources, the burden of additional teacher responsibility and the time required for study.

Cartwright (1994:30) maintains that distance education should become more than a mere transmission of information. Distance educators need to consider various internal and external factors influencing students' success. Internal factors may include learners' poor reading and learning skills, while examples of external factors are the ineffective format of the text, visual and auditory presentations and lack of academic support. These factors even play a significant role for experienced adult learners, such as educators upgrading their skills through distance education courses.

Against this background, the purpose of this research was to explore the attitudes of a selection of primary school teachers towards professional development by distance. The concept "attitude" in this research holds the meaning of a complex social phenomenon which includes ideologies, thoughts, feelings and experiences that are developed in specific contexts (Vlachou 1997:53).

RESEARCH METHODS

The research was approached from an interpretive stance (Merriam 1998) as it aimed to gain insight into the meaning that the participants attached to professional development through distance education. Participants in the study included teachers, heads of department and principals from primary schools in Region 3 of Limpopo province. Purposeful sampling was used to select "information rich cases" (Patton 1990). A total sample of 200 teachers, heads of department and principals was selected and deemed sufficient for the investigation, working on the basis of five participants per school.

Questionnaires were sent to a large number of distance learners and interviews were conducted. According to Tuckman (1978:196-197), questionnaires and interviews are used by researchers to convert into data the information directly given by a person. By providing access to what is "inside a person's head," these approaches make it possible to measure what a person knows (knowledge or information), what a person likes and dislikes (values and preferences), and what a person thinks (attitudes and beliefs). The interviewee gives the needed information verbally in a face-to-face relationship rather than writing the response. The interview method of collecting data is flexible and can be easily adapted to a variety of situations.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

It was intended that the results of the study intended to provide important information to the Department of Education, Ramaano Mbulaheni Training Centre as well as other researchers in the areas of professional development through distance. A total of 150 participants from the

random sampled group involved in the Teacher Upgrading Programme were requested to complete the questionnaires; 50 participants were interviewed and all interviews were recorded. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and were conducted by the author.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Against the background of critical issues in DE, lecturers are expected to move from a content-driven to a learner-centred approach to teaching where the voice of the learner will be heard through activity-based learning. Observations made by the educators about their role as teacher developer, mentor and facilitator in the new OBE system are described. As pointed out above, the delivery of teacher development through DE should be improved. The researcher therefore analysed all available data pertaining on the respondents' attitudes toward professional development by distance with a view to the improvement of distance education services. The responses of the participants, together with information from the literature review, reveal some important findings. The problems encountered by teachers taking upgrading programmes at Ramaano Mbulaheni Training Centre were categorised and the findings are listed as follows:

Administrative staff

A large percentage (71,5%) of the respondents felt that no direction is provided by the administrative staff. They believed that the administrative staff do not have sufficient knowledge about distance education to administer the programme. This causes confusion between the students and the college.

Procedures of registering

The majority of participants (63,3%) felt another problem to be that the college uses radio to inform students about the closing date for registration. Students who live in remote areas where radio signals cannot be received therefore have no access to such information. After paying study fees, there is no receipt to show that they have paid. They went on to say that sometimes they are given a piece of paper with a college stamp on as a proof of payment, sometimes nothing at all.

Collecting study guides

The majority of the respondents (66,7%) revealed that they receive their study guides as much as two to three months after registering for the academic year. The participants indicated that when they enquire they are told that the study guides are still in the printing room. Another concern is that some courses do not have complete study guides.

Submission of assignments

All the respondents (100%) mentioned that no due dates exist for the submission of assignments, and that there is no specific place where they should hand in assignments. This causes tremendous confusion and many assignments are lost as a result.

Communication with the college

The majority of the respondents (69,4%) also felt that the administrative staff is not organised, and claimed that the communication between the students and the college is very poor. In order to get the assignments or tutorial letters back, students must walk or drive to the college to collect the documents.

Contact sessions

In accordance with the responses given there is an indication that the majority of the respondents encounter major problems in attending lectures and these have been noted as follows:

- Because of a lack of communication with the college, the respondents often find that no arrangement has been made to book venues for the contact sessions. There is always confusion even concerning examination venues because of this lack of communication.
- The respondents complained that lectures start very early which is difficult as most of them come from very far. They suggested that it would be far better if the lectures were to commence at 9h00 and end off at 14h00. Another concern was that respondents encounter transport difficulties when the lectures do not end at the stipulated time.
- Respondents felt that too many lectures are scheduled for the day, and that they feel exhausted at the end of it all.
- Respondents felt that the length of each lecture is acceptable but they expressed a need to meet the lecturers more often for feedback and follow ups.
- The respondents stated that during their first year of study, the study guides were very big and poorly organised. However, this situation seems to have improved over the years with the third year study guides being of an acceptable size and number.

Lecturing staff

The majority of respondents (59,6%) complained that there are too many lecturers lecturing one module, and that a module includes many different sections each comprising 100 marks. They suggest that, to avoid confusion, the number of lecturers should be limited to two or three per course.

Those who did not attend the contact sessions (25,4%) indicated a major problem as being communication with the college. Notices regarding the course are communicated via a regional radio station, Radio Thohoyandou, which broadcasts in the Tshivenda language. However, many respondents live in the Malamulele and Sekgosese areas and do not understand Tshivenda.

Most of the respondents (74,6%) indicated that they have attended contact sessions and receive guidance at these sessions. They are given the chance to ask questions, and receive clarification and information concerning their studies. They are also given summaries of the whole course.

The majority of the respondents (73,2%) indicated that some of the lecturers are not prepared to assist teachers when they come to contact them. The respondents reported that some lecturers would refuse to answer any questions if students had not made an appointment, and they felt that this was an excuse to avoid having to answer questions. The respondents suspected that some lecturers feel threatened at being consulted or questioned.

Suggestions for improvement

The following responses emerged when the respondents were asked to give suggestions and recommendations for the improvement of the planning and organisation of an effective teacher upgrading programme:

- For upgrading programmes to be successful, lecturers, advisers, consultants, specialists and rectors must have a high degree of practical experience and should be drawn from the ranks of the profession itself.
- Teacher centres should be establishment in each area so that teachers can minimise travelling costs.

- In addition to existing universities and colleges of education, adult centres and selected schools should also be used for the upgrading of Black teachers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

The result of this study clearly indicate that the participants in upgrading programmes want to be involved in determining the programme's content, structure and process, and wish to make a contribution to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of upgrading courses and programmes.

The implications of the new OBE teaching approach, as indicated earlier, have relevance for the upgrading of primary teachers. A nurturing environment is a prerequisite for fostering creative thinking skills among teachers.

The teacher upgrading curriculum must be regularly reviewed with the purpose of re-orientating, adapting, reshaping and enriching it so that it meets the changes that are occurring in society. The style and ethos of teacher education needs to be examined critically by persons within the college as well as from the outside.

The design of the teacher upgrading programme at Ramaano Mbulaheni Training Centre needs to be reviewed. It should reflect major goals, relevant content, methodology and evaluation procedures. The principles for selection of these aspects in the syllabus will depend on the policy goals of the teacher upgrading curriculum, the characteristics and needs of the educator as well as the roles expected of educators.

Teacher upgrading programmes should include the development of creative thinking since the traditional role of the teacher is being constantly challenged. Educators need to be adaptable, flexible, creative and capable of independent thinking. They are required to make decisions and solve problems. Educators need to encourage learners to be independent and innovative in their learning. This requires a teacher who is committed to being flexible and who can adopt an open approach to teaching. The educator ought to respect the learner's autonomy and be capable of bringing about a wider perception of the world.

Educators need to make use of effective strategies to encourage thinking. Some of these strategies include lectures, discussions, panel discussion, seminars, workshops, case studies, projects, experiments, brainstorming, role-playing and finally the reviewing and evaluating of films and dramatic performances.

Meeting the instructional needs of students is the cornerstone of every effective distance education programme, and the test by which all efforts in the field are judged. Regardless of the educational context, the primary role of the student is to learn. This is a daunting task under the best of circumstances, requiring motivation, planning, and an ability to analyze and apply the instructional content being taught. When instruction is delivered at a distance, additional challenges result because students are often separated from others who share their backgrounds and interests, have few (if any) opportunities to interact with teachers outside of class, and must rely on technology to bridge the gap separating class participants.

CONCLUSION

This study was initiated and sustained by the author's deep interest in the attitudes of teachers towards professional development through distance and the challenges faced by distance students. Structured as they are at present, distance teaching institutions will find it difficult to move towards quality course development and support.

In addition, academic staff are not equipped to deal with the challenges of distance education. Their job descriptions are similar to those of contact institutions, namely, writing courses, teaching and conducting research. They are full time subject specialists. Distance education institutions require staff specialised in fields such as learning development and print, audio,

and video production. Administrators in distance education should be integrally involved in the learning process; and should be trained to approach students with understanding and sensitivity. The systems and structures put in place by the administration should at all times consider the needs of students. Lastly, documents given to students should serve as a useful and manageable guide in the learning process.

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