Exploring Educators' Expectations and Experiences of In-Service Education and Training [INSET] as Continuing Professional Development Opportunities

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Abstract

In-Service Education and Training (INSET) is widely used to support educators to cope with ongoing changes in education. This paper examines the results of two surveys of INSET recipients' expectations and their experiences of INSET before and after having attended a series of INSET workshops that were held with the intention of strengthening participants' capacity to teach environmental education. The educators who participated in the survey were from three rural districts in the Limpopo Province, a far northern province in South Africa which borders on Zimbabwe. The survey outcomes were appraised against the backdrop of what is identified in the literature as constituting meaningful INSET. The analysis was undertaken to determine the capacity of INSET programmes to realise the presumed goals of INSET. The outcomes of this survey point to a measure of continuity between theory and practice, but also to trends in participants' experiences of INSET that are not predominant in the literature.

Introduction

Since 1994 the South African government has embarked on an urgent programme of restructuring its education system according to principles of equity, human rights, democracy and sustainable development. Changes have included a unified, national education system and a re-orientation to outcomes-based education (OBE). Even so, the South African education system still faces major challenges. This is especially true in terms of the tension between implementing changes that need both time and considerable resources, and the immediacy of the issues that need to be addressed (National Research Foundation, 2004).

Teachers as agents of change play a pivotal role in the teaching-learning process. It has been said that no education system can rise too far beyond the level of the teachers in it (Georgio, 1998 cited in National Research Foundation, 2004). When the new national education curriculum, Curriculum 2005 (C2005), was introduced, practising teachers had no experience in OBE. There were also changes to the content and scope of education. For example, environmental education was introduced as a focus in the learning areas. At that stage, for most educators, environmental education was a foreign concept. It had not previously been taught in South African schools and only a few tertiary institutions had included courses in environmental education with even fewer including it in initial training for teachers.

The challenge to support practising educators to cope with the implementation of the new curriculum was enormous. The national Department of Education on its own was unable

to meet the INSET demand, and stake-holders with an interest in education stepped in to assist in the process. The University of South Africa (UNISA) also contributed towards these endeavours through a community-based INSET programme, the Science Outreach Project, initiated in 1997.

Background of the Project

The Science Outreach Project is registered with UNISA as an ongoing non-profit community project and is sponsored by major corporate bodies. The project aims to support educators teaching intermediate and senior level Natural Science, Technology Education, Mathematics and Environmental Education. The presenters are specialists in their particular fields and prepare their own programmes and support material based on the national curriculum statements. Twenty participants for each of the four subject fields are identified with the assistance of the targeted schools' principals. Most educators volunteer for selection. However, educators have to commit themselves to attend the complete series of workshops. Each workshop series comprises three to five workshops conducted over the weekends, starting on a Friday afternoon. The workshops are held approximately two months apart. At the close of the workshop, participants complete a workshop evaluation form for quality assurance purposes since a report needs to be submitted to the funding organisations after each workshop.

The Science Outreach Project started in 1997 when OBE and C2005 were being formally introduced throughout the country. The purpose of the first Science Outreach Project environmental education INSET workshops was to provide training in OBE and to introduce the concept of environmental education in the context of OBE and C2005. Workshops were presented in Limpopo Province, Mpumalanga Province, North West Province and KwaZulu-Natal Province as required by the donors since these provinces were perceived to be most in need of INSET opportunities. These 'first phase' INSET programmes comprised of only one workshop per district/region. After two such programmes, the presenters decided to include a follow-up workshop since it was believed that the single workshop provided too little contact time to make a meaningful contribution.

As educators became more familiar with OBE and C2005, because of progress being made in the delivery of provincial education department INSET, the Science Outreach Project presenters reviewed the format of the workshops. Due to increased funding, it became possible to run two workshop series simultaneously and to provide three workshops per series. These 'second phase' workshops started off with an introduction to environmental education and focussed on the development of cross-curricular learning programmes. At the close of the first workshop, participants were invited to decide what they would like to have included in the follow-up workshops. For the first time, Science Outreach Project participants were being asked to identify their own needs and to verbalise their personal expectations of the workshops. The participants remained positive about the INSET they were receiving, but seemed to consciously reflect on and monitor whether the workshops had actually realised the outcomes that they, as the participants, had identified at the start of the workshop session.

Research Rationale, Aims and Design

The observation that participants were reflecting on the workshop process and outcomes – in effect, reflecting on the merit and appropriateness of the professional development opportunities that the workshops were providing – prompted the researcher to critically reflect on the way in which the project was presenting INSET and whether the existing project processes were realising the participants' INSET needs. It was clear that a critical, in-depth inquiry into participants' expectations and experiences of the workshops was required. To ensure relevance, these expectations would need to be reflected against a theoretical framework of what constitutes veritable INSET. Support for this viewpoint and proposed action is provided by Schreuder (2005 citing Le Grange *et al.*, 2000) who suggest that research into professional development should be:

- *contextual* – that it relates to and respects closely the particular workplaces and workplace issues of participants
- *responsive* – that the issues explored in professional development processes are those of interest and concern to the participants themselves
- *participatory* – that participants are involved directly
- *critical* – that the process of professional development look beyond the surface layers of activity at the levels of policy, organisation and practice to identify and appraise the values, assumptions and interests that inform and justify the activity
- *praxiological* – that the processes of professional development proceed through and are mediated by praxis, the conscious and continuous interplay between theoretical and practical considerations.

To explore participants' expectations and experiences of INSET the following research strategy was employed:

- establish a theoretical framework based on the principles and purpose of INSET through a literature review;
- design a questionnaire to establish participants' perceptions regarding the purpose of INSET based on the theoretical framework;
- determine participants' expectations of INSET prior to the workshop series by means of the questionnaire;
- involve the participants in the workshop series; and
- determine participants' experiences of INSET after participation in the workshop series by means of a questionnaire and informal discussions and interviews.

The Scope, Principles and Purposes of INSET: A review of the literature

Schofield (1997) notes that during the past 20 years, the term INSET has gone by many names: in-service education, staff or teacher development, professional development and human resource development. In relation to the nature of the study and its context, a review of South African and international sources on INSET revealed a number of key issues with regard to the nature, purpose and contribution of INSET as ongoing professional development.

INSET is perceived to open up professional development and life-long learning opportunities and is thus generally located within a discourse of teaching professionalism (Crow *et al.*, 1998). Initially, staff development or professional development programmes were mostly one-day courses held in non-school venues and were characterised by educators, mostly teachers, who were relatively passive while an expert exposed them to new ideas or trained them in new practices (Sparks, 1994). However there is an increasing realisation that staff/teacher development encompasses a range of additional activities that occur through both formal and informal school processes. According to Crow *et al.* (1998) and Sparks (1994), INSET is primarily based on utilitarian concerns and, summarised, appears to cover specific categories:

- policy issues, e.g., revising existing or introducing new policy,
- contextual issues, e.g., responding to changes in school population/management/vision,
- professional knowledge/skills issues, e.g., improving quality of teaching, subject knowledge or presentation skills,
- career development issues, e.g., taking a visionary view of the position of the individual in the broader context, and
- performance issues, e.g., promoting individual or group performance.

Referring to the South African context of INSET, Ashley and Mehl (1987), the Department of National Education (1996) and Schofield (1997) identify the following core features of INSET. The programme should:

- be based on a needs and priorities analysis and be directed to a priority target group,
- contain a clear statement of objectives with a logical connection between goals, content, process and outcomes,
- be school-focussed, rather than focussed on the individual,
- allow participants active involvement in the design and implementation of the course, and
- have a broader focus, encompassing even the pre-service training of student teachers due to the failure to integrate staff development programmes into programmes of school improvement or community reconstruction.

In the South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE) report on Open Learning and Distance Education (within the context of the draft Policy Framework for Education and Training commissioned by the ANC in 1994) it is noted that teacher preparation and continued professional development are at the cutting edge of educational reconstruction (SAIDE, 1994). Various sources (CERI, 1982; Ashley & Mehl, 1987; SAIDE, 1994; St John, Ward & Laine, 1999; Mistri, 2001; Neville & Robinson, 2003; Balfour, 2004; Mokgalane, 2004) support this sentiment by purporting that the outcomes of INSET as professional development opportunities are to ensure that:

- teachers feel personally empowered and more efficacious,
- reflective practice is encouraged,
- specialised knowledge is deepened and capacity is developed,
- professional development is stimulated,
- school practice is improved,

- effectiveness of educators as facilitators of learning is improved,
- confidence is heightened, and
- the skills acquired extend beyond the classroom and assist the participants' interactions with others in the school and wider community.

The issue of teaching and educator competence is core to educational reform and for this reason, INSET – which is one such vehicle to bring about reform – needs to address the needs and concerns of the teachers and the circumstances in which they work.

Research Methodology

The first field study was conducted with a group of 20 Science Outreach Project participants in the Lulekani and Namakgale districts of Limpopo Province. The rationale for the research and the research design was discussed with the participants in the first workshop. It was made clear that participation in the study was voluntary. All the participants agreed to take part and completed the first questionnaire in which they reflected on their perceptions and expectations of INSET.

During the course of the fifth and final workshop 12 months later participants were asked to reflect on their workshop experiences and to share these experiences among themselves. This process of reflection had been common practice in all the workshops, but during the final workshop the researcher took care to record comments that were relevant to the focus of the research. At the end of the final workshop, the second questionnaire was administered.

During the actual workshops, the researcher consciously took note of evidence of professional development occurrences as evidenced by participants. During the final workshop, informal discussions regarding the INSET workshops with and within the group were purposely initiated with the purpose of gathering further data on participants' INSET experiences and expectations.

A second study using the same approach was conducted a year later with a group of 16 Science Outreach Project participants in the Tivumbeni district in the same province.

Findings

Survey questionnaires

Survey Questionnaire 1: Perceptions and expectations of INSET. Taking the framework of the scope, principles and purpose of INSET revealed by the literature study as the point of departure, a questionnaire was designed to gather data regarding participants' perceptions and their expectations of INSET prior to being involved in the INSET programme. In the compilation of the questionnaire, the spectrum of elements as revealed by the review of the literature, were used as the questionnaire items which respondents were asked to rank in order of importance or relevance.

Table 1 reflects the incidences for rating each of the items. These scores were then used to rank the items as a collective register of the perceptions for each group.

Table 1. Expectations of INSET. (1) Tivumbeni; (2) Lulekani and Namakgale

What is the overall purpose of INSET?

INSET is aimed at …

	(1)	(2)
1. improving a group of teachers' job performance	4	4
2. the personal education of the teacher	6	3
3. increasing professional knowledge and skills	1	1
4. improving individual teachers' job performance	2	5
5. meeting the education system requirements	3	2
6. providing the opportunity for further qualifications	5	6

Why is INSET important?

INSET is important because …

1. it enables schools to respond to the needs of their learners within their local contexts	2	3
2. the skills, knowledge and attitudes of school staff play a fundamental role in the effectiveness of education	3	1
3. it facilitates responsiveness to educational change	1	2

What are the main concerns of INSET programmes?

INSET is concerned with …

1. non–teaching concerns such as personal development	5	4
2. professional expectations of the individual teacher like adequacy in knowledge and skills	2	1
3. the learning experience to which learners will be exposed	3	5
4. teachers' roles in helping learners meet the intended learning outcomes	1	2
5. building a body of competent teachers nationally	4	3

Who benefits most from INSET?

INSET benefits …

1. the practising teacher	2	1
2. the school	1	2
3. the service provider	5	3
4. those involved in providing the INSET	4	5
5. the education department	3	4

How can I benefit from INSET?

INSET ...

		(1)	(2)
1.	broadens my knowledge about a field of study	4	2
2.	enables me to improve my teaching skills	1	1
3.	keeps me up to date with new developments in education	2	3
4.	provides me with an opportunity to develop my professional skills	3	4
5.	fulfils a supportive role to me as an educator	5	5

What does INSET mean for me personally?

1.	I learn about my own strengths and weaknesses during INSET	4	1
2.	I am able to build relationships with other teachers during INSET	5	2
3.	INSET provides me with the opportunity to learn from my colleagues	2	4
4.	INSET builds my self-esteem	3	3
5.	I am able to share my experiences with others during INSET programmes	1	5

How should an INSET programme be structured?

INSET content should ...

1.	be relevant to the participants' circumstances	4	3
2.	provide a broad framework that participants adapt to suit their own circumstances	3	1
3.	systematically work through the 'curriculum' for specific learning areas	2	2
4.	be provided according to the principles of OBE	1	4

What is the value of INSET?

INSET is ...

1.	beneficial	1	2
2.	only effective if it is supported by the school management	2	1
3.	limited	3	3

Both groups of participants rated the main purpose of INSET to be knowledge and skills development. Meeting education system needs was also relatively highly rated. What was generally not viewed as being an important purpose of INSET was the opportunity INSET provided for furthering qualifications.

The Lulekani and Namakgale group was consistent in their opinion that knowledge and skills development as provided for through INSET are fundamental tools in ensuring the effectiveness of education. The Tivumbeni group identified the importance of INSET as its ability to foster educational change or reform. INSET was also expected to assist educators in contributing towards enabling their learners to meet the learning outcomes. Both groups rated these two issues as being important and the link between the two is evident. Personal development concerns, however, were rated low.

It was anticipated that the school and the educator would benefit most from INSET. Any personal benefit would be in the improvement of teaching skills. In agreement with previous ratings, Lulekani and Namakgale participants regarded knowledge development as a personal benefit. Tivumbeni identified keeping one up-to-date with new developments in education being a prime personal benefit.

The expectations showed great variation. Lulekani and Namakgale participants saw INSET programmes as providing a broad framework within which participants have the flexibility to adapt the programme and its outcomes to their own context. Rated the most important structuring principle by Tivumbeni participants was that INSET programmes should mirror the principles of OBE. Both groups expected INSET programmes to deal with the 'curriculum'. The groups agreed that it was less important that the programme should focus on only one education band at a time. Both groups expected INSET to be beneficial in the long run although Lulekani and Namakgale indicated that INSET had to be supported by the school management.

Survey Questionnaire 2: Experiences of INSET. This questionnaire was administered during the final workshop. The data was dealt with similarly to the first questionnaire and the incidences of selection of each rating were totalled and ranked and are recorded in Table 2.

Table 2. Experiences of INSET. (1) Tivumbeni; (2) Lulekani and Namakgale

After the INSET programme I feel more …	(1)	(2)
1. confident	1	3
2. efficient	3	2
3. knowledgeable	2	1
4. empowered	4	4
5. professional	5	5

My greatest gain from the inset programme has been in relation to …		
1. skills development	2	2
2. knowledge gained	1	1
3. meeting colleagues from other schools	3	6
4. establishing a support network	6	4
5. reflecting on my own teaching practice	5	3
6. sharing ideas	4	5

What I enjoyed most was ...

		(1)	(2)
1.	learning from others	3	4
2.	gaining new knowledge	2	3
3.	the active participation	1	1
4.	being able to voice my opinion	6	6
5.	planning programmes	5	5
6.	learning new teaching methods	4	2

INSET should be conducted by means of ...

1.	lectures	3	2
2.	workshops	1	1
3.	group discussions	4	3
4.	a variety of methods	2	4
5.	video and films	6	5
6.	class or school visits	5	6

INSET should be provided through ...

1.	visiting other schools	5	6
2.	exchanging jobs for a short period, e.g., one week	6	5
3.	spending time in a colleague's class observing and discussing observations	3	2

Participants indicated that they felt more knowledgeable after the INSET experience and that they regarded themselves to be more efficient educators. The Lulekani/Namakgale group continued to advance the 'knowledge' theme that had dominated in the first questionnaire. The Tivumbeni group rated their experience as having gained confidence firstly and knowledge secondly. Both groups ranked empowerment and a feeling of being professional on the bottom end of the scale.

Both groups were unanimous in identifying their greatest gain as being the increase in knowledge and the development of skills. What participants enjoyed most was the active participation. Both groups agreed that INSET should be provided through workshops while their less preferred modes were by means of films and class or school visits. The two groups perceived local universities or teacher centres to be in the best position to provide meaningful INSET. Least desired methods of delivery were visits to other schools or programmes run by staff from neighbouring schools.

Fortunately neither of the groups indicated that they would prefer to continue teaching as before once they got back to their schools! The Lulekani and Namakgale group mentioned that they wanted to inspire their learners while the Tivumbeni group wanted to share their experiences with colleagues.

Group interactions: experiences and expectations of INSET

During the final workshop, the researcher encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences of the INSET programme. Recalling distinctive humourous incidents and meaningful learning experiences was sufficient to encourage reflection and reminiscence. The conversation was animated and the atmosphere relaxed and it was not difficult to elicit dialogue.

The following themes emerged from the discussions.

Networking and interaction between participants. Many of the Lulekani and Namakgale participants knew each other prior to the workshop. There is a very active local environmental forum of which some of the participants are members. The group interacted well and comments such as '… we have similar problems and it is good to share experiences' … 'I like to find that I am not alone. It doesn't solve my problems, but it helps' indicates that participants used the workshop to build networks and to share experiences.

Some of the Tivumbeni participants also knew each other socially and enjoyed working together on workshop activities, but one of the Tivumbeni participants commented that she did not want to work in a particular group because she knew them all and jokingly said 'there is nothing to learn from them!'. However there was one participant who commented that 'sharing ideas helps more than [actual] working together. I like to work alone' and another remarked that 'working with someone who is advanced makes you feel inferior'. This could indicate that although some feel comfortable working in groups and interacting, the experience was not necessarily equally appreciated.

Empowerment. This issue, although not necessarily specifically mentioned by participants, was observed by the researcher. Participants were more forthcoming in suggestions in relation to how to approach particular workshop and school context activities. Participants were generally more prepared to defend their opinions than they had been initially. Although this could be ascribed to becoming more familiar with each other and feeling less self-conscious, the researcher believed that at the root of this newfound confidence was the effect of empowerment that the workshop experience had provided. One participant from Lulekani district mentioned that she felt she was respected by her colleagues because she had attended the workshop and could help them with matters related to OBE and cross-curricular teaching. A Tivumbeni participant mentioned that she hoped she would be receiving a certificate because she would use this to 'show my friends' with the purpose of impressing them with her accomplishment!

Several participants from the Lulekani and Namakgale districts had started their own food-gardening project at the schools where they teach. The researcher visited a number of these projects prior to the last workshop. It was clear that their colleagues admired them for the contribution they had made and that school staff and the learners had a strong sense of ownership of the project. The principals were also appreciative of the efforts and the attention that was being elicited and proudly praised those who had initiated the project.

Skills development. Participants acknowledged that the workshops had given them a 'clear perspective' on environmental education and the principles of OBE. Very few of the participants mentioned that they remained sceptical of whether they would be able to develop a cross-curricular learning programme on their own or whether they could implement OBE. Despite the positive comment, it was obvious to the researcher that there were individuals who had still

not participated optimally despite efforts made to include them in activities and the spirit of the workshop. Despite this, it did not seem as if these participants were disturbed by this.

Conclusions

It is hardly possible to provide universal definitions of effective INSET beyond baseline generalities. The role of INSET to facilitate educational change through building professional capacity, however, is readily acknowledged.

A general criticism lodged against attempts to implement innovations in education has been that the wish to change came from the outside and rarely took into account the concerns of the teachers and the circumstances in which they work. Educational transformation does not only require professional development in relation to the rational, cognitive processes but also professional development in relation to its emotional dimension. An issue inherent to educational change is the need to deal with the natural emotional reactions of people to the threat of, for example, losing certainty, predictability or stability. There is an emerging recognition that not only should the milestones of change be considered, but also the means that bring about the change. The research outcomes have pointed to the advantages of and need for reducing the isolation of educators by establishing an environment of professional trust and by providing opportunities for collaboration and networking. Day (1999) states categorically that educators cannot be developed passively – they develop actively: they should be involved in decisions concerning the direction and process of their professional development.

Education remains the primary agent of transformation while INSET – dubbed by UNESCO as the 'Queen of Education' (Ministry of Education and Science, 2001) – is a constant and indispensable part of continuous education. It is believed that by monitoring participants' expectations and experiences of INSET, presentation processes can be adapted and implemented to suit the specific context within which these programmes run. Using the research undertaken as a starting point, a rubric of issues for consideration in INSET initiatives can be deliberated and negotiated between providers and participants. The research outcomes serve as a framework to establish an INSET monitoring and evaluation guide.

What might the future of environmental education INSET be? The current decade – 2005 to 2014 – has been identified as the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The objectives of the DESD include increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development and the development of strategies to strengthen capacity in ESD (UNESCO, 2005). It is to be expected that stakeholders in environmental education will create opportunities to honor this vision and it is readily assumed that professional development through INSET will be but one of the options.

Notes on the Contributor

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