

Research Article

Teacher agency in professional development workshops: A South African perspective

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This article addresses challenges associated with developing and manifesting teacher agency in Professional Development workshops in the context of educational reform in South Africa. Drawing from a broader study investigating teachers' perspectives on curriculum reform, this article highlights the challenges posed by top-down Professional Development models that marginalise teacher voice and professional autonomy. The study used Bandura's socio-cognitive theory, incorporating the triadic causation model of agency. The study explores how systemic, contextual, and personal factors converge to influence teacher agency during professional development. This qualitative study, using a mix of classroom observations, document analysis, and interviews, purposively sampled nine teachers from five public schools in a district in Gauteng. The qualitative data analysis found that systemic influences of institutionally imposed development offered partial understandings of the reform because they excluded teachers' voices and empowerment in knowledge production. Consequently, it was found that traditional top-down approaches to professional learning constrain teacher agency, encouraging compliance rather than transformative growth. The article, therefore, recommends that teacher learning in professional development be reconceptualised as a collaborative process that empowers teachers as active agents in shaping educational change. The study's findings contribute to teacher knowledge, teacher training, and professional development in the context of educational reforms.

Keywords: Educational change, Professional development, Teacher agency, Teacher empowerment, Teacher knowledge, Teacher voice

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1. Introduction

Teacher competence is a focal point in global educational policy, yet it is often reduced to prescriptive lists of required skills (Toom et al., 2021). While teacher professional development [PD] is extensively researched, the critical role of teacher agency in cultivating competence, particularly in diverse contexts, is frequently overlooked. Teacher autonomy, reflective decision-making, and critical engagement are vital for navigating complex classroom realities (Campbell, 2012). However, PD often prioritises compliance over agency, stifling innovation and rendering teachers as passive implementers rather than active contributors to educational transformation.

Education systems require competent teachers to uphold quality, mediate reforms, and develop agency for transformative teaching (Toom et al., 2021). Beyond ensuring learners pass exams, teachers must cultivate critical thinking, multiliteracy skills, and communicative competence to prepare students for global citizenship. Globally, governments pursue high educational standards (Bodman et al., 2012), and South Africa is no exception, investing significantly in PD within reform contexts to shift teacher perceptions and

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enhance practices (Dyosini, 2024; Guskey, 2002). In South Africa, professional development workshops [PDWs] have been central in curriculum reform efforts, including the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement [CAPS] (Department of Basic Education, 2011). However, knowledge gained in PDWs often fails to translate into practice, particularly in diverse contexts (McCray, 2016). Bates and Morgan (2018) argue that this failure stems from a lack of alignment between the knowledge that PDWs provide and teachers' contextual realities, resulting in superficial adoption rather than meaningful change. Consequently, PD models reinforce divisions between stakeholders by prioritising policy compliance over meaningful professional growth (Gore et al., 2021) and teachers' contextual knowledge.

The success of educational goals depends on the quality of the curriculum and its applicability in the classroom (Mehmeti et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers need a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum and the skills to implement it effectively (Button, 2021; Liu et al., 2015; Xie et al., 2017). Quality PD is crucial for improving teaching (Choi & Mao, 2021) and learner outcomes (Gore et al., 2021), yet research often neglects teacher efficacy and agency in applying knowledge contextually. Exploring factors that enhance teacher agency is imperative for improving teaching quality and supporting meaningful learning (Yang & Chang, 2024).

Post-apartheid curriculum reforms in South Africa aimed to align with global reform efforts but faced recurring implementation failure (Sayed & Kanjee, 2013). Teachers still struggle with implementation (Maepa, 2017) and express dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of PDWs conducted by the Department of Basic Education (Govender, 2018). Traditional top-down PDWs' format persists, leading to limited teacher learning, erosion of professional confidence, and poor learner performance in international benchmarks (Schwab & Sala-i-Martin, 2011). As teaching complexities grow amidst technological, social, and cultural changes, teacher agency becomes indispensable for adapting, innovating, and prioritising learners' needs (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

This study explored how systemic, contextual, and personal factors influenced teacher agency within PDWs and highlights the need for participatory, context-responsive models that support shared ownership of educational reforms. Drawing from a PhD study titled: *The Influence of Teacher Voice on Educational Change*, the research re-analysed teacher perspectives regarding their preparation for implementing the CAPS reform. Teacher narratives highlight criticisms of PD efforts and provide insights into missing dimensions that lead to teachers' cognitive withdrawal and resistance to change. This article investigates these gaps to inform strategies that support teacher agency and drive meaningful educational transformation.

1.2. Research Problem

Curriculum reforms reveal the existence of both literal and symbolic barriers that separate stakeholders in the pursuit of transformative change in the context of the South African CAPS reform. These walls manifest in the relationships between teachers, policymakers, and management, often obstructing the collaborative efforts necessary for meaningful educational change. This research critically examines how PD serves as both a mechanism for constructing boundaries and a potential bridge for dismantling them.

The introduction of top-down reforms such as CAPS has frequently undermined teacher agency by imposing rigid frameworks that constrain curriculum delivery, leaving little room for educators' voices or contextual adaptations (Badal, 2018; Bantwini, 2019; Jansen, 2002). While PD is supposedly designed to empower teachers, it often exacerbates existing challenges by adopting generic, one-size-fits-all models that fail to account for the diverse needs and lived experiences of teachers (Kennedy, 2014). These mechanisms are intended to support teachers instead of deepening divisions among stakeholders, reinforcing symbolic walls that impede collaboration, trust, and shared accountability. Therefore, this study highlights the construction, maintenance, and potential transcendence of these barriers within the context of teacher PD in the context of PDWs.

The persistent reliance on top-down reforms and PD in South Africa has marginalised teachers, relegating them to passive implementers of externally designed policies. As argued by Jansen (2002), such reforms exclude educators from decision-making processes, weakening their professional autonomy and capacity to adapt teaching practices to local realities. Despite its critical role in bridging the policy and practice divide, current PD models often prioritise compliance over meaningful professional growth, further entrenching divisions between stakeholders (Kennedy, 2014). These disparities are particularly pronounced in multilingual, resource-constrained contexts like South Africa, where rigid structures and standardised content fail to leverage the teachers' accumulated contextual knowledge or encourage reflective, collaborative learning environments. Consequently, disempowerment and frustration in PDWS limit

opportunities for teachers to contribute meaningfully to educational reforms (Bantwini, 2019) and transformational practices.

Using Bandura's Socio Cognitive theory, this research argues that the structural barriers inhibiting the success of reforms lead to diminished teacher agency. Teacher agency is a mediating factor for the success of reforms (Hidayat & Patras, 2024). This study, therefore, explores pathways for dismantling barriers by advocating for collaborative, context-responsive PD models that enhance teacher agency, promote shared ownership of reforms, and align policy design more closely with classroom practice. The study motivates that sustainable educational reform necessitates rethinking PD structures and approaches by shifting from hierarchical, transmission-based models to participatory, reflective approaches that position teachers as active partners rather than mere recipients of systemic mandates. This article argues that mending these metaphorical walls can allow the reform climates to cultivate an environment of trust, mutual respect, and shared responsibility, ensuring that policies and practices remain contextually relevant and pedagogically effective. Accordingly, the paper seeks to demystify calls within scholarship for empowered teachers capable of guiding learners into competitive global spaces. According to Biesta (2009, 2015) and Kennedy (2005), achieving this imperative requires PD goals focused on developing agentic teachers who equip learners to succeed in rapidly changing, complex futures. However, teachers who passively receive information and replicate traditional teaching methods cannot cultivate the critical skills and competencies in their learners necessary for success as global citizens.

As a developing nation, South Africa needs a profession-wide reconstruction of the teacher as a respected professional, moving beyond being mere instruments of state-regulated policies that erode teacher status and trust. This re-conceptualisation of teacher agency and efficacy shapes the view of educators as a trusted and respected professional group (Kennedy, 2014).

1.3. Literature Review

Professional learning is anchored in the mutuality of being and becoming a teacher whose agency of knowing and acting is essential for the transformation of their efficacy, educational practices, and education as an overarching concept (Olin et al. 2020). Although extensive research exists on teacher agency in reform contexts, most studies have predominantly examined teacher contributions to curriculum reform and their autonomy in policy implementation (Ahmad & Shah, 2022). Thus, there is a notable gap in understanding teacher agency in PD contexts, particularly regarding how agency influences teacher engagement, learning, and classroom practice. This review, therefore, includes the voices of both international and South African PD practices. In doing so, it underscores the importance of teacher agency as a catalyst for professional efficacy, contextual adaptability, and autonomous, reflective teaching practices vital for developing empowered learners capable of independent and critical thinking.

Teacher agency is widely recognised as a foundation of effective educational reform. Scholars such as Priestley et al. (2015) argue that successful reforms depend on collaborative models of professional development that balance expert knowledge with teachers' practical insights. However, PD in the context of educational reform reveals the existence of barriers that manifest in dysfunctional relationships between teachers, policymakers, and developers, often hindering the collaborative efforts necessary for meaningful educational improvement.

Professional agency, though widely discussed in educational theory, remains underrepresented in models of professional learning, particularly within the South African context. As Boylan et al. (2018) argue, teacher agency is often vaguely implied rather than explicitly integrated into frameworks for teacher development. Heikkilä (2022) conceptualises agency from an individualistic perspective, defining it as the educator's capacity to make decisions and act within their professional context. However, this view, grounded in instrumental rationality, overlooks the broader social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape professional action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Agency, from a sociocultural lens, is not merely a matter of individual autonomy but a dynamic interaction between personal capacities and environmental structures.

When teachers are recognised as agents of change and given opportunities to contribute to the design and implementation of PD initiatives, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with new content, experiment with innovative practices, and take ownership of their professional growth (Bergmark, 2023; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Conversely, when PD ignores these principles and imposes uniform content irrespective of context, it undermines teachers' sense of agency and reduces professional learning to a mechanical, compliance-based task.

The traditional top-down approach to knowledge dissemination in professional development workshops reinforces rigid cultural barriers, making interpretative agency seem unattainable. Failure to invite teachers into meaningful partnerships in co-creating the curriculum workshops limits teachers' ability to shape educational content (Codd, 2006). Salo et al. (2024) aptly point out that over the past three decades, the discourse on PD has predominantly adopted an individualistic, decontextualized, and outcome-driven perspective, often portraying teachers as deficient in professional competencies needed to promote learner learning outcomes (Aharonian, 2021; Mockler, 2022; Sancar et al., 2021). This deficit-oriented narrative positions teachers as passive recipients of knowledge, requiring external interventions to address perceived inadequacies. Such an approach not only undermines teachers' professional identities but also erodes their sense of agency, as top-down mandates reduce their autonomy to make contextually relevant pedagogical decisions. Studies found that professional learning was most effective when educators possessed the agency to make decisions grounded in their professional values, ethics, experiences, and competencies (Aharonian, 2021; Mockler, 2022; Sancar et al., 2021). Hence, social-political structures that support this agency are characterised by mutual trust and recognition, creating an environment where teachers feel empowered to engage in meaningful learning. Furthermore, professional learning is enhanced through practices that involve exploration, articulation, and the reinforcement of professional knowledge. These practices are best facilitated through dialogue, collaborative efforts, and collective inquiry, often structured within research circles, action research initiatives, and mentoring programmes (Olin et al., 2020).

As mentioned previously, one of the fundamental flaws of this transmission-style PD model is its failure to accommodate differentiation. Teachers, regardless of their expertise, experience, or contextual challenges, are subjected to one-size-fits-all training with no input in content, approach, or direction. In South Africa, workshops are mandated nationally or provincially, leaving teachers as mere recipients of policy knowledge rather than active participants in their professional growth. As Hargreaves and ElHawary (2019) argue, collaboration, self-discovery, and teacher-driven learning, which are the critical levers of effective PD, are absent from this model.

The South African Department of Basic Education [DBE] has introduced various initiatives to enhance teacher competencies across contexts. However, one significant factor contributing to the limited success of PD is the systematic exclusion of teachers from the design and development process. Ono and Ferreira (2010) found that South African PD programmes are often developed using an expert-driven, top-down approach, where teachers are positioned as passive recipients of pre-packaged knowledge rather than active contributors to the learning process. This exclusion disregards teachers' contextual knowledge and lived experiences, making it difficult to adapt and apply the content in their unique classroom environments, particularly in under-resourced schools. In the South African context, where diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic conditions shape classroom dynamics, the homogenous nature of CAPS content-aligned PD further exacerbates this disconnect. Teachers are trained to implement predefined curricula and strategies without consideration for the contextual challenges they face daily. This top-down imposition aligns with Strom et al.'s (2021) argument that PD is often a linear, dualistic process, ignoring the iterative, situated, and dynamic nature of teacher learning.

Scholars in global contexts argue that failure to engage teachers as co-constructors of knowledge reflects a broader systemic neglect of teacher agency. Teacher agency, as understood by Biesta and Tedder (2007), refers to the capacity of teachers to make informed decisions, exercise professional judgment, and adapt teaching practices to suit their learners' needs. When PD programmes ignore these principles and impose uniform content irrespective of context, they undermine teachers' sense of agency and reduce professional learning to a technical task lacking professional judgment (Campbell, 2012) and creativity. This rigid structure inhibits the development of adaptive expertise for navigating the complexities of diverse educational settings.

Villegas-Reimers (2003) argues that successful educational reforms depend on collaborative models of PD that balance expert knowledge with teachers' practical insights. When teachers are recognised as agents of change and given opportunities to contribute to the design and delivery of professional development initiatives, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with new content, experiment with innovative practices, and take ownership of their professional growth. This collaborative approach aligns with the tenets of teacher agency, as it acknowledges teachers as professionals with valuable contextual expertise, rather than mere implementers of externally devised reforms (Campbell, 2006).

Mockler (2013, p. 36) aptly argues that professional learning refers to the "ongoing processes through which teachers develop, refine, and adapt their practice". While short-term, surface-level professional development sessions as 'one-shot' or 'spray-on' initiatives (Mockler, 2005) or 'drive-by' workshops (Senge

et al., 2000), may introduce new ideas and spark initial interest, they do not constitute meaningful professional learning. Genuine professional learning requires sustained, reflective engagement that translates theory into practice. Mockler (2013), therefore, argues that genuine educational quality is deeply rooted in the acknowledgment of teaching as a complex, context-dependent, and inherently human process. Unlike mechanical systems, education cannot be reduced to standardised practices that can be applied uniformly across diverse settings. Thus, unique social, cultural, and contextual factors that shape learning experiences demand adaptive, flexible approaches to teaching and professional development.

South African scholars like Myende (2014) also critique the one-size-fits-all design of one-shot initiatives, noting that programmes developed without consideration of local contexts often fail to produce meaningful change. Moreover, the lack of follow-up and post-workshop support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) leaves teachers unsure. Teachers are expected to implement new methodologies without opportunities to revisit, discuss, or evaluate their attempts. There is no space for reflection on what worked, what failed, and why, leaving teachers isolated in their learning process (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). In the South African educational landscape, where socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural diversity profoundly impact learning, the lack of context-specific professional development creates a disconnect between policy expectations and classroom realities (Blignaut, 2007). The resulting frustration and disempowerment among teachers contribute to professional stagnation and diminished motivation to implement new pedagogical strategies.

The South African education system faces unique challenges that complicate PD efforts. Township schools (context of this study) are historically underfunded and characterised by resource shortages, low literacy levels, and socioeconomic challenges, requiring tailored PD solutions. Post-apartheid efforts to improve conditions have fallen short, leaving equity as an elusive goal. Standardised PD fails to account for these disparities, exacerbating existing inequalities. For instance, urban schools may benefit from libraries, internet access, and smaller class sizes, while township and rural schools often face overcrowding, limited materials, and inadequate infrastructure. Generic PD workshops do not equip teachers with strategies to compensate for these differences, leading to disillusionment and ineffective implementation.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Participants

The study adopted a bounded case study approach, focusing on a specific context while acknowledging broader educational dynamics. The study was situated in Township schools, historically underfunded and characterised by resource shortages, low literacy levels, and socioeconomic challenges. Purposive sampling allows a selection of “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research question and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). The participants were home language [HL] English teachers with at least five years of CAPS curriculum teaching experience, differentiated by race and gender. However, the sample predominantly consisted of Black teachers, reflecting the demographics of Township schools.

2.2. Data Collection

Data collection instruments were carefully aligned with the research questions and theoretical paradigm (Forman & Damschroder, 2008). Two semi-structured interviews, lasting one to two hours, captured teachers’ unreserved reflections on their experiences as “empty boxes” during PDWs. Follow-up interviews allowed for clarification, refinement of responses, and member checking (Creswell, 2013). Classroom observations and analyses of teachers’ preparation documents provided additional triangulation of data sources (Tracy, 2010).

2.3. Data Analysis

The analysis began with identifying narratives used by teachers to describe their roles and perceptions of PD (Patton, 1990). This data was coded and grouped into categories based on their meanings, forming themes that revealed teachers’ perceptions and social realities. Hermeneutic interpretive analysis ensured thematic alignment with notions of conformability and compliance (Charteris-Black, 2004). Reflexivity and iterative processes enhanced the credibility and dependability of the findings (Merriam, 1998).

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutions, including the Department of Basic Education and the University’s ethics committee. Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were prioritised, with

pseudonyms used for participants and the research site. Data security measures ensured that participant identities remained protected (Creswell, 2013).

Validity and rigour were maintained through transferability, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. Researcher reflexivity was applied throughout crucial decisions of the research process as a means for critically inspecting “the entire research process” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 224), and validity was ensured through ‘faithful reconstruction of the participant’s multiple perceptions’ (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 415). Triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity further “strengthened the study’s quality” (Tracy, 2010, p. 845).

The research strategies selected for this study were appropriate for a comprehensive examination of teacher agency within PD in South Africa. The use of qualitative methodology grounded in social constructivism and phenomenology highlights the importance of contextualising professional development to meet diverse needs and encourage genuine teacher engagement in reform initiatives to mend the walls of stakeholder dissonance.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the current PD model constrains teacher agency, positioning educators as passive recipients rather than active contributors to their professional learning. Facilitators of PDWs exhibited minimal shifts in their approach to professional development, focusing primarily on ensuring strict adherence to curriculum requirements rather than promoting professional autonomy or reflective practice. This phenomenon manifested a culture of compliance rather than critical engagement, directly contradicting Kennedy’s (2014) assertion that transformative learning is contingent upon teacher autonomy, agency, and authority over their professional development.

The study’s analysis aligns with the study’s theoretical framework, identifying three interconnected themes that influence teacher agency in PD, described below:

Systemic Factors (Imposed Development). The top-down, policy-driven nature of PD reinforces external control over teacher learning, limiting opportunities for self-directed professional growth.

Contextual Factors (Culture and Resources). The effectiveness of PD is further shaped by resource constraints, school cultures, and institutional expectations, which often fail to accommodate the diverse realities of teachers’ working environments.

Personal Factors (Teacher Self-Efficacy and Motivation). Teachers’ perceived ability to enact change, their sense of professional worth, and their motivation to implement new strategies are necessary for shaping how they engage with PD content and whether they integrate it into their practice.

3.1. Systemic Factors: Top-Down Approach and Bureaucratic Control

A key finding underscores the limitations of traditional, top-down PD, which functions as a mechanism for policy transmission rather than a collaborative space for knowledge creation. Teachers reported feeling marginalised due to the rigid structure of these sessions, which excluded opportunities for meaningful discussion, co-construction of knowledge, and goal setting. Despite possessing valuable contextual expertise, many teachers expressed reluctance to voice concerns about the feasibility or effectiveness of proposed reforms due to fears of institutional repercussions. Thus, teachers’ narratives reported the exclusionary and hierarchical nature of PD. One participant reported,

Decisions are made at the top, and we have to implement... we don’t have a voice... we are implementing something that we did not take part in (T 3).

Another participant echoed this sentiment, emphasising how the lack of teacher input encouraged passivity rather than professional autonomy:

I am not an empowered teacher, and I never question anything or contribute to anything. I listen like a good girl and go back and do as I am told...” (T 6).

This marginalisation of teacher voice aligns with Giddens’ (1991) argument that when individuals are systematically excluded from decision-making, they internalise a sense of powerlessness, leading to passive compliance. Similarly, Kirk and MacDonald (2001) found that teacher voice is constrained by hierarchical control structures, while Jessop and Penny (1998) highlight how physical and relational barriers to power centres contribute to teachers’ inability to be heard. The pervasive sense of voicelessness does not simply result in policy resistance as it demonstrates a broader resignation to the status quo, where teachers stop attempting to influence change and instead perform the bare minimum required to avoid repercussions (Badal, 2018).

Moreover, the rigid nature of PDWs removed opportunities for teachers to engage critically, adapt curriculum, and make instructional decisions, reducing their confidence in professional judgment (Campbell, 2006). As one teacher remarked,

I am not told why it has changed, why must I accept what is new? Someone must come and tell me why this policy has failed. Why I must adopt it even if it does not work here? (T 2).

The teacher's frustration reflects a deeper systemic issue when teachers are not given justifications to understand the rationale behind reforms; hence, they struggle to implement the reform effectively, even if it "does not work". This finding resonates with existing literature that critiques bureaucratic control over educational reform, which does not provide a comprehensive understanding of curriculum rationale (Mehmeti et al., 2024). Scholars such as Fullan (2007) and Priestly et al. (2015) argue that when professional development is imposed rather than co-constructed, it alienates teachers from the very reforms they are expected to implement.

3.2. Contextual Factors: Classroom Realities

The effectiveness of PD is further shaped by resource constraints, school cultures, and institutional expectations, which often fail to accommodate the diverse realities of teachers' working environments (Bates & Morgan, 2018). Teachers face deteriorating discipline, lack of accountability, and systemic constraints that undermine effective teaching and learning. A critical issue emerging from the data is the erosion of teacher authority in the classroom, leading to a culture of ill-discipline, disengagement, and apathy. Teachers reported that their lack of agency in instructional decision-making negatively impacted learner performance, particularly in underperforming schools. One participant reported,

The learners have no discipline. They do not respect and fear teachers and sometimes they are not serious because they never bring books to school and do their homework. How do I keep up with the pace? I just do what I can... (T 7).

The failure of educational policies to support teacher authority creates a climate of learned helplessness, where teachers withdraw from proactive instructional decision-making and focus solely on surviving the school day. Teachers reported that adaptive expertise (Priestly et al., 2015), a crucial characteristic of teacher agency, was undervalued or unwarranted in the current reform. This lack of agency not only stifles innovation but also negatively impacts learner performance, particularly in underperforming schools. Teachers felt powerless to adapt prescribed methods to suit their unique classroom contexts, which led to frustration and disengagement. This finding, therefore, revealed a disconnect between policy directives and classroom realities evident in teachers' navigation of rigid curricula, overcrowded classrooms, and limited resources.

Consequently, many teachers expressed feelings of marginalisation and suppression of teacher intuition when confronted with top-down mandates that failed to account for contextual differences. One teacher highlighted the futility of adhering strictly to prescribed methods by stating:

We are failing here to teach as they want, and the learners are also failing... Our school is always in trouble for poor Matric pass rates... We cannot change anything because in the workshops, the facilitator says we must teach a certain way. (T8).

This finding revealed that teachers perceived themselves as unable to influence outcomes due to overly prescriptive policies that leave little room for adaptation. Additionally, teachers noted the impracticality of implementing standardised approaches in vastly different educational environments. Accordingly, another teacher explained the challenges of teaching large classes with learners who struggle with English proficiency:

We cannot teach like the rich schools in the suburbs. The schools, resources, and learners are different. But we must do what they say in the workshops. Our struggles are different. I have over forty to fifty learners in one class, and they are not interested because they are poor in English. But I must teach the same way. Impossible! (T9).

This finding highlights the tension between policy expectations and the realities of under-resourced schools, where rigid adherence to prescribed methods exacerbates existing inequities. Furthermore, the rigidity of lesson plans is identified as a significant barrier to effective teaching. Teachers reported that overly detailed lesson plans, which specified timeframes for every activity, failed to accommodate the dynamic nature of real classrooms. One teacher explained:

The lesson plans are specified to the point that they provide a time frame for every activity for the entire lesson. It does not work for me; you cannot specify that the introduction must be five minutes! It takes about fifteen minutes to get the learners to settle down and take out their books. The lesson plans do not work in this

environment. The CAPS workshops insist that we must not deviate, no matter what... then the Facilitator monitors us to make sure we do not deviate (T1).

This revelation highlights how stringent monitoring stifles teacher creativity and limits their ability to respond flexibly to learners' needs. When teachers are required to adhere strictly to prescribed lesson plans, rigid curricula, and external monitoring, they often lack the autonomy to adapt instructional methods to suit the unique contexts of their classrooms. Consequently, teachers find it challenging to incorporate culturally relevant materials, integrate learner-centred strategies, or address the diverse academic and psychosocial needs of their students.

Policies designed to protect learners' rights often disregard practical implications for teachers, leading to a lack of accountability and brazen learner misconduct. This contextual factor is exacerbated by the focus on results, especially Matric (Grade 12) exit-level performance. This finding confirms the argument of Mockler (2022), who reported that globally, teacher professional development has been colonised by regimes of performativity and accountability.

Reinstatement of expelled learners diminishes teacher morale and makes classroom management nearly impossible, particularly in schools with large class sizes and minimal resources. The contradiction between policy expectations and classroom realities exacerbates the impracticality of idealised instructional strategies promoted in PDWs without addressing contextual barriers. While data-driven policies may provide an illusion of progress, they do little to address the day-to-day pedagogical struggles of teachers. The emphasis on meeting targets often forces educators to focus on syllabus completion rather than the actual development of learners' communicative competence, a goal that requires adaptable and innovative teaching strategies rather than rigid compliance with curriculum guidelines. The participants' narratives illustrated how contextual neglect produced cognitive dissonance, reducing their confidence in their professional judgments. This deficit-based approach positions teachers as knowledge consumers rather than knowledge producers, directly contradicting recent global shifts toward bottom-up, teacher-initiated PD (Macias, 2017). The focus on compliance over adaptive expertise results in mechanical, uninspired teaching, where teachers follow policy mandates rather than actively engage with their learners' learning needs. This disjuncture requires the bridge suggested by Bergmark (2023), which is that the bottom-up model encourages the co-construction of knowledge, allowing teachers to take ownership of their professional development and make contextualised, evidence-based pedagogical decisions.

3.3. Personal Factors: Teacher Self-Efficacy and Motivation

Professional development workshops in South Africa are often disempowering spaces where teachers feel vulnerable, hesitant, and lacking in confidence to speak up (Macias, 2017). This reluctance stems from fear of judgment from colleagues and facilitators, particularly when they lack familiarity with the theoretical foundations of educational reforms. Instead of being platforms for intellectual engagement and pedagogical reflection, these workshops become passive, top-down knowledge transmission sessions, where facilitators themselves fail to adequately address fundamental learning theories that underpin policy changes. This results in a fundamental disconnect between the principles of the reform and the realities of classroom practice.

Teachers' perceived ability to enact change, their sense of professional worth, and their motivation to implement new strategies play a crucial role in shaping how they engage with PD content. Social cognitive theory identifies two modes of learning: enactive learning (active engagement and knowledge construction) and vicarious learning (observing and imitating behaviours without direct participation) (Bandura, 2001). PDWs overwhelmingly promote vicarious learning, compelling teachers to comply with scripted reform agendas rather than engage in reflective, self-directed professional learning. This is reflected in teachers' voices below:

T 3: We do as we are told in the workshops, or we need to explain why we are not on par with the others. It does not matter if it does not work. I am not a teacher but a sergeant, drill, drill, drill for better pass rate, not deep learning, or else we need to account for poor failure rates.

T 4: What happened to my creativity? ... teaching used to be fun, and the results were better. Now we do as we are instructed in the workshops.

This finding aligns with Khoza (2016), who reported that teachers have come to rely more on expert guidance than their professional judgment. Thus, teaching in the direction of the flow of bureaucracy instead of teacher intuition becomes the norm. Most teachers in the study reported that they strive to meet the benchmarks of performativity at the expense of deep learning. Teachers' narratives continued in the

direction of following directives and compliance, revealing that they did not demonstrate teacher agency in their practices.

Some teachers expressed a desire to push boundaries despite systemic constraints, illustrating a contrast in how personal factors mediate teacher agency. For instance, one teacher stated,

I could do more to improve my teaching by creating better strategies to deal with the challenges but where is the time? I teach and go home... (T 9).

This self-awareness of the potential for improvement was a common but underutilised theme among teachers, as they were so preoccupied with compliance that they had little energy or motivation left for professional growth or adaptive teaching.

Thus, teachers' narratives demonstrated that they were not responsible for implementation failure because implementation problems stemmed from a lack of teacher input and homogenised notions of teachers, their learners, and their teaching contexts. Scholars who have attested to this finding include (Luttenberg, van Veen & Imants, 2015).

Teachers expressed profound frustration with idealised curriculum policies that neglected contextual diversity and threatened teacher agency. This issue is consistently highlighted in South African education research (Blignaut, 2007; Govender, 2018; Jansen, 2002; Rogan & Grayson, 2003). Policymakers' efforts were disparaged by teachers, with a participant succinctly capturing the sentiment as: "... a lump of bovine excrement." This criticism reflects the disjuncture between policymakers and teachers, emphasizing the need for contextual consideration in reform development:

Policymakers do not take into consideration teacher voice and send out a lump of bovine excrement that is not feasible. They have these pipe dreams, which are lovely ideas, but they don't take into consideration teachers' opinions and knowledge. (T 5).

The structural rigidity observed in South African PDWs parallels the unquestioned tradition of wall-building in poems. Just as the neighbour insists on maintaining the boundary with the phrase "Good fences make good neighbours" education policymakers maintain rigid knowledge boundaries through standardised PD. Teachers question the necessity of these walls as they inhibit adaptive, contextualised learning. This study found that one-size-fits-all PD eroded teachers' sense of ownership, as their self-efficacy beliefs deteriorated in the face of curricular mandates divorced from contextual realities. Consequently, teacher agency manifested in acts of apathy and compliance.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study are embedded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, specifically the Triadic Causation Model (1986, 1997, 2001), which provided an apt theoretical framework for understanding the complex interplay of personal, environmental, and behavioural factors that shape teacher agency in PD. Hence, the findings demonstrate that systemic, contextual, and personal factors influence teacher agency in different but intersecting ways. Systemic factors create an environment of compliance, disempowerment, and rigid instructional expectations. The reinforcement of policy directives by PD facilitators limited teachers' ability to exercise professional judgment and modify instruction. These factors tether teachers' characteristics to their cognitive and emotional perspectives, shaping individual teacher responses. There is no space for reflection on what worked and what failed and why, leaving teachers isolated in their learning process.

Contextual influences, including social, cultural, and systemic structures, significantly shaped the space available for teacher agency in the context of PD. The rigid, top-down structure of professional development PD in South Africa has created an impenetrable wall between policymakers, workshop trainers, and the teachers that these interventions strive to empower. While educational reforms and developmental agendas aim to enhance teaching quality, their execution often marginalises teachers, treating them as objects rather than active participants in their professional growth. This disconnect undermines the very purpose of PD, reinforcing a divide between policy intentions and classroom realities and stifling meaningful transformation in teaching practices.

Personal influences such as teacher cognition, self-worth, and motivation are shaped by social, institutional, instructional, and physical environments. These conditions influence teachers' behavioural factors, resulting in teacher apathy and a lack of accountability for the success of reforms. Bandura (1997) emphasises that self-efficacy beliefs are contextually situated and socially constructed, underscoring the importance of aligning PD programmes with the unique realities of teachers' contexts. However, when PD fails to provide meaningful opportunities for teachers to exercise autonomy and professional judgment and

reflect on their practice, their actions become constrained by external pressures rather than driven by intrinsic motivation.

To address the gaps identified in this study, sustained professional development models must be considered. If professional development is truly about learning, then it must provide opportunities for teachers to deepen their pedagogical knowledge and develop contextually relevant strategies for their specific teaching environments. PD approaches should prioritise teacher voice, agency, and expertise, developing professional autonomy and reflective practice while bridging the gap between policy formulation and classroom realities. Reimagining Professional Development programmes in South Africa requires a fundamental shift from prescriptive, top-down models to participatory, context-sensitive frameworks. Therefore, this study highlights the need for PD that empowers teachers as agents of change, enabling their capacity to find space to manoeuvre and make informed decisions within their contexts of practice. As Villegas-Reimers (2003) asserts, achieving this balance is essential to the success of any educational reform as it ensures that policies remain grounded in the lived realities of educators and learners. Through such efforts, the metaphorical 'walls' that inhibit adaptive, contextualised learning can be dismantled, paving the way for more effective PD practices.

5. Recommendations

This study argues that teacher agency must be at the centre of professional development PD initiatives, as it is only through teacher-driven learning that meaningful educational change can occur. Instead of treating teachers as passive implementers of externally imposed policies, PDWs should serve as spaces where educators critically engage with reforms, reflect on their practices, and adapt new methodologies to fit their unique contexts. By focusing on teacher agency within PDWs, this paper highlights the need for professional learning that is co-constructed, context-sensitive, and reflective of teachers' lived realities. Ultimately, empowering teachers with agency is not just about improving individual professional competency but about reshaping the broader educational system to recognise teachers as key decision-makers in curriculum implementation and instructional practice. Without agency, teachers remain trapped in a cycle of policy compliance, unable to fully exercise their expertise, innovate in their classrooms, or respond effectively to their learners' needs.

6. Limitations

A potential limitation of this study is its focus on a specific context within South African educational reform, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions or educational systems. Additionally, the reliance on teacher narratives, while valuable for capturing lived experiences, may introduce subjective biases influenced by individual perceptions and emotions. The study also primarily examines the perspectives of teachers and overlooks the views of policymakers and workshop facilitators, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within professional development workshops. Further research that includes all the voices at the wall of policy reform and development is recommended.

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