School Self Evaluation:
How Involved Are Educators in the Process?

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ABSTRACT Global studies show that educator development and whole-school improvement policies exist. Despite these measures, schools and educators remain oblivious of the intents, purposes and original goals of these policy measures. Whole School Evaluation (WSE) is the official evaluation system in South Africa; schools undergo both external and internal evaluation. This study explores the extent of educator involvement in internal evaluation, School Self-Evaluation (SSE) in some South African schools. Educator views on SSE in relation to their professional development are issues warranting deeper scrutiny. Data were gathered from 125 educators in sixteen randomly selected schools using a mixed mode approach. Data from interviews were analysed by developing categories and making comparisons and contrasts. The research findings suggest that educators are neither sufficiently trained nor are they aware of the significance of their role in the process. Results further show that school self-evaluation affects the educators' professional learning. The paper suggests that supportive school leadership and a collaborative educator culture are catalytic for whole school improvement.

INTRODUCTION

There is at present a quest for quality in education within all South African schools. The search for quality is an enduring one. Easy victory cannot be claimed, for quality requires sustained attention and suitable action. The efforts to improve must be continuous, and based on a critical reflection of what is happening in our institutions, in our classrooms, and between educators and learners. Since 1994, South Africa has embarked on restructuring, reform and re-organisation in the education departments. New policies were laid down and legislation passed, the South African Schools Act of 1996 and the National Education Policy Act of 1996 aimed at democratizing governance in schools and improving appalling conditions in previously disadvantaged schools to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities for education (Government Gazzette Vol. 433 2001). The National Department of Education's concern about lack

of proper evaluation strategies in South Africa resulted in the constitution of the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU), a means to provide the Minister of Education with an authoritative, analytical and accurate account on the state of schools in South Africa, in particular, on the status of teaching and learning (NEEDU 2013). This paper explores the educator's perceptions, views and experiences on the purposes of SSE, its impact on professional development, the school and the effect of its implementation on their learning and teaching.

What is School Self Evaluation?

According to Swaffield and MacBeath (2005), 'School Self-Evaluation is, by definition, something that schools do to themselves, by themselves and for themselves'. School Self-Evaluation (SSE) involves examining teaching and learning strategies, the performance and development culture and other aspects of school operations so they can be strengthened and supported to improve student outcomes. It also provides an opportunity for the whole school community, including learners, parents and all staff, to reflect on the learner outcomes in light of their goals, targets and key improvement strategies from the previous planning cycle (Smith 2012). This includes examining teaching and

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learning strategies, the performance and development culture and other aspects of school operations so they can be strengthened and supported to improve learner outcomes. The strongest features of self-evaluation is that it allows the school to reflect critically on external criteria, to set these against its own internally derived criteria and to consider the relative merits and appropriateness of both (Mac Beath 2006; Smith 2012).

Theoretical Framework

The literature reviewed is based on evaluation and Whole School Evaluation (WSE) because School Self Evaluation is part of WSE; however, the major focus was mainly on SSE.

Evaluation in Schools

As cited by De Grauwe (2001) 'Improving the quality of schools and the achievement of students remains a priority throughout the world, not at least in the developing countries. To monitor quality, national authorities rely strongly on the school supervision system'. In agreement with De Grauwe (2001), South Africa is a developing country and there is at present a quest for quality in education within all South African schools. The search for quality is an enduring one. Easy victory cannot be claimed, for quality requires sustained attention. The efforts to improve must be continuous, and based on a critical reflection of what is happening in our institutions, in our classrooms, and between educators and learners.

Evaluation according to Mathe (2000) is a 'structured process through which judgments are reached about the quality of provision offered to learners and the benefits those learners gain, be they academic attainment or personal and social development'. In addition to improving teaching and learning in the classroom, evaluation also improves a particular school's programmes to be able to understand more adequately the problems of diagnosis and programme formation (Quan-Baffour 2000). In many education systems, parents and the public at large use learner achievement to judge the quality of schools. If this is used as the only indicator of quality, it would be a very limited perspective on the complexity of the school and the schooling process.

Through evaluation, skills of workers at schools are improved. Various techniques such as checklists, interviews, questionnaires, document analysis, testing and so on are for school evaluation (Quan-Baffour 2000). Evaluation provides an evidence base that will inform future planning. It is a means of exploring alternatives, re-educating and reforming judgments to make decisions about activities to be improved (Smith 2012).

The stakeholders in education, that is, all those involved in public education have to accept responsibility for actions, reporting on those actions and working to improve performance. Parents have a right to clear, comprehensive and timely information about their children's progress and the public has a right to know how well the system is achieving its goals. School evaluation can be external or internal (Earley 1998; Mac Beath 2006; Smith 2012). Stakeholders within the school conduct self-evaluation. Internal evaluation is often described as self-evaluation (Hofman et al. 2005; Earley 1998; Mac Beath 2006). The current situation is reviewed in self-evaluation. It is the at this stage where a closer look at areas that have to be evaluated has to be is taken, that is, stock of the school's present situation is taken (Issues in School Improvement 2003; Mac Beath 2006; Department of Education and Skills 2012). Subsequently, planning of the evaluation method and implementation was to be done. Stakeholders within a school then participated in the direction and goals of the improvement process. The school management team as well as the governing body of the school have to see to it that the improvement planning is integrated into the normal functioning of the school and that self-evaluation is conducted effectively and efficiently in the least disruptive and reliable way for all stakeholders concerned.

South African Perspective on School Evaluation

Before 1994 schools were evaluated by means of inspection. "Black schools",'…experienced a long history of unfair and illegitimate school inspection, a legacy that has made them suspicious of any claims to benefit of any form of school inspection or monitoring' (de Clercq 2007). The 'panels' comprising ad hoc inspectors, who were not specialists in any field of

study were made. The inspection was aiming at individual achievement and was done without control. The situation regarding evaluation in the post-apartheid era is still problematic given the negative experiences of the past.

Whole School Evaluation

Whole School Evaluation (WSE) process is transparent and interactive; it involves the holistic evaluation of performance of the school against set criteria with a view to improve the quality of education (ELRC 2004). For WSE to be effective, it should be well communicated, acceptable and understandable to all stakeholders within the school and should be flexible enough to take into account the different circumstances within South African schools.

The principle behind WSE is to enable educators, supervisors and District Support Services (DSS) to identify to what extent the schools is adding value to learner's prior knowledge, understanding and skills. It aims to recognize the contribution made by staff, learners and stakeholders in the smooth-running of the school. WSE must be characterized by openness and collaboration and quality WSE must be standardised and consistent. Both qualitative and quantitative data had to be evaluated to be able to make decisions as to how well a school is performing. It should also be noted that staff development and training is critical to school improvement.

School Self Evaluation (SSE)

For a school to become a learning community, it needs to enhance its own learning capacity such that the whole school seeks organizational improvement continuously. Before any improvements can be made, the first thing is to do introspection. In other words, all changes should be based on objective and reliable evidence of the school performance. Self evaluation thus becomes a necessary mechanism to manage changes in the school organization (Nevo 2002; Issues in School Improvement 2003; Mac Beath 2006 Department of Education and Skills 2012). It should be noted that school development and school improvement cannot be simply copied and imposed from outside. In undertaking self evaluation, stakeholders at a school will be able to understand the current situation, including

the strengths and area for development (weaknesses), opportunities and threats to their organization so as to be able to determine the goals and to develop the strategies for achieving the goals.

As Mac Beath (2006) explains 'self with its investment in preservation, its interest in protecting and projecting a favorable image, may seem at first sight a dubious source of evidence'. Hence, it is argued, we need a view from outside ourselves, a best friend who could help us see ourselves as others see us, an external perspective to protect us from self-delusion'. Introspection and knowing thyself is undoubtedly the basis of self evaluation, however, there are always self-delusions. Therefore a view from outside becomes necessary to protect schools from self-delusions. Schools are the same as individuals and may have, over time, settled into comfort zones or comfortable routines and could have perhaps forgotten their primary purpose needing to be jolted out of their complacency. The school's own data is its starting point when coming to self-evaluation. The better the self-evaluation the less intensive the evaluation will be.

In the National Policy on Whole-School Evaluation (2001) a combination of internal self-evaluation and external evaluation according to the same set of prescribed criteria is advocated and this is now the type of evaluation being done in South African schools. Self-evaluation and external evaluation are the means to quality assurance in schools. External evaluations become effective and meaningful only when schools have well developed internal self-evaluation processes in place. According to Mac Beath (2006), the concept of self-evaluation is actually replete with paradox, as he explains, 'self', with its investment in preservation, its interest in protecting and projecting a favourable image, may seem at first sight a dubious source of evidence. Hence, it is argued, we need a view from outside ourselves, a best friend who will help us see ourselves as others see us, an external perspective to protect us from self-delusion. Both external and internal evaluations are important, but that neither can exist by itself (Nevo 2002; Department of Education and Skills 2012).

Van Petegem (1998) asserts: 'Whereas self-evaluation is a means to an end, it soon becomes an end in itself for those concerned, precisely because it is what the inspectors are asking for. In such a high-stake context, the more pressure

is exercised from above regarding setting up action for SSE, the greater the risk for undesired effects like fake and paper dragons'. However it is observed that over-emphasis on the accountability purpose often increases the tendency that the schools create self-defensive mechanism, which subsequently hinders school self-learning and improvement. Other activities involved at this phase include scrutiny of documents, completion of questionnaires by stakeholders and interviews with educators whenever necessary.

From the literature, it is evident that evaluation has a critical part to play in assisting with all aspects of quality in schools. School inspectors or WSE supervisors therefore have to identify good practice in schools and encourage educators to develop further the desirable practice; this in turn will foster and promote collaborative work within schools as a unit as well as development. It should also be noted that schools can empower themselves to do school-based self-evaluation in order to benefit maximally from WSE.

Research Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the educator's perceptions, views and experiences on the purposes of SSE, its impact on professional development, the school and the effect of its implementation on their teaching and learning.

Research Objectives

The study intended to:
- Find out whether educators are informed about SSE and do they know their role in the process as well as the extent of their involvement in the development and implementation of the School Improvement Plan (SIP)
- Identify problems, if any, that SSE cause for educators initiative specifically relating to teaching and learning as well as their professional development

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design

Semi-structured interviews, triangulated with quantitative approach were used to collect data. A study using more than one method is fuller or more comprehensive than the one using only one method (Babbie 2012; De Vos et al. 2007; Cohen et al. 2011). Comprehensible questions were formulated by the researcher for semi-structured interviews. They were constructed such that they may be tallied, coded and analysed as accurately as possible to glean information that is pertinent to the study.

Participants and Setting/ Population and Sampling

Population in terms of this study was made up of 125 educators from sixteen primary schools evaluated by WSE teams during the period 2003 to 2008 in Motheo Education Districts of the Free State Province. A random selection from a list of all Motheo Education Districts primary schools evaluated during 2003-2008 was done since all schools evaluated appear on the list. The sample comprised sixteen primary schools (public and farm) evaluated by the provincial WSE teams.

Data Collection

Data were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews made up of eight focus groups; three comprising five educators and five comprising six educators. Out of 101 questionnaires distributed to educators (eight principals included) in eight primary schools in Motheo Education District, 80 (79.2%) were returned. Semi-structured interviews between the researcher and the respondents were conducted in order to elicit information from the educators in order to elaborate on the quantitative data (Babbie 2012; Goddard and Melville 2006; Cohen et al. 2011). The interaction gave detailed views and opinions about the implementation of SSE at their schools. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere, with spacious and casual settings. This helped the researcher to get full range of rich information while developing a rapport with the respondents. Interviewing was employed to let the researcher understand more what the interviewees are thinking about SSE in order to probe more deeply into the problems investigated.

Data Analysis

Analysis as cited by De Vos et al. (2007) refers to 'the categorizing, ordering manipulating

and summarizing of data to obtain answers to research questions'. Patton (1990) and Babbie (2012) contend that the culminating activities of qualitative inquiry are analysis, interpretation and presentation, meaning that the researcher should not only end with collected data but the said data has to be analysed. The researcher collected data using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews made up of eight focus groups; three comprising five educators and five comprising six educators. The said data was organised, checked for accuracy, categorised and then analysed in accordance with the research objectives (purpose of the study).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings, based on data collected from the semi structured interviews, triangulated with the data generated from questionnaires are presented. The research data suggests that the majority of educators generally held a negative attitude towards the SSE conducted in their schools. According to educators, SSE did or does not bring about any improvements in their teaching practice, as such; they do not expect any great impact of SSE on their teaching and learning as well as professional growth either.

Lack of Involvement of Educators in the SSE Process

From the research findings, educators generally agree that decision-making power was dominated by a few personnel in the school, in particular, the School Management Team (SMT), made up of the principal, deputy principal and heads of departments, as such, this impedes on the supportive climate and the establishment of a learning community within school which could have allowed dialogues and discussions for the educator's learning (Devos and Verhoeven 2003).

When asked about SSE and their involvement in the process, some of the participants interviewed responded as follows, quoted verbatim:

- *'I personally do not know exactly what SSE is all about. I was never involved with SSE'.*
- *'I must say I was involved in the process because I was given forms to assist the principal to complete. Some questions on the form were not easy to understand not to mention to answer'.*

- *'The principal informed us at a meeting before the supervisors came to our school that there was a form that has to be completed. He indicated that he was also not very clear about how to complete it and will require our assistance in that regard. I was not directly involved in the process other than ensuring that my files are in order'.*
- *'Our principal informed us about the visit by WSE team and also distributed a sample of the SSE form for our perusal. I can't say that I was involved in the process. Rather, I would say that I had an idea of what was required in the SSE process from the document circulated by the principal'.*
- *'SSE was not actually done before the visit. I only became aware of this process at the end of evaluation because we were required to make inputs to information that was needed by the WSE teams after evaluation. It is only then that I knew that such a process exists'.*
- *'Oh yes, I know what SSE is. It is a small evaluation that has to be done by ourselves before the WSE supervisors come to evaluate our school. Our principal gave us forms to fill before the supervisors came to our schools'.*
- *'The WSE supervisors talked about this process but did not train us to do the process. I really do not know how and what to do regarding the process'.*
- *'School self evaluation, in my opinion, serves a purpose to generate data from questionnaires and reveal problems. The next stage is to interpret the data and deal with the problems revealed'.*
- *'A lot of the questions from the SSE questionnaires are about learners, school buildings, finance, parents, educators, the principal and even the school workers. All of these had to provide feedback to the principal to be able to complete the SSE form. With that information, I can understand more about my learners, their needs and how the school has to be run'*

It is evident that majority of the educators interviewed were not informed and involved in SSE as it was the case with educators from other sampled schools who completed questionnaires, and that evaluated schools have problems with SSE since the implementers them-

selves seem not to be clear about their role in the process themselves.

Information by educators (who completed questionnaires) from sampled evaluated schools, who took part in this study with regard to whether they had clarity on the School Evaluation process and were involved in the process is reflected, that is, 63 (78. 8%) indicated that the WSE process was not clear to them and only 17 (21. 3%) indicated that the process was clear to them.

To be able to ensure effective and efficient implementation of the WSE process, supervisors need to device means of assisting schools on how to conduct SSE. It is through the process of SSE that the strengths and weaknesses of the school could be identified, providing direction for school improvement and development.

Lack of Appropriate Follow Up

Lack of appropriate follow up after SSE was cited as another major perceived constraint. Most of the educators indicated that there isn't sufficient report back and follow-up discussions with the educators and other stakeholders after SSE and those more follow-up discussions were necessary. Educators generally found that time allocated for SSE in most of the schools was inadequate. It was evident that the interviewed educators were rather disappointed with the way the school treated the data generated from the SSE questionnaires. They pointed out that some principals and SMT's had not guided them to work on the revealed problems together. Moreover, they also complained that they were not widely involved in the follow-up discussions. Lack of follow-up discussions further limited the chance of educators to share their views on solving problems revealed from the SSE data. Educators were also emphatic on the importance of being given sufficient time wherein they could share their views on their findings and experiences of SSE for the benefit of their schools so that whatever problems revealed from the SSE data could be dealt with in a whole-school approach. Most educators indicated that they have challenges regarding the SSE process because they are confused as some had indicated that they were not involved in the SSE and that there is no point in doing SSE if there are no follow-up discussions and actions. They also indicated that, without follow-up, the evaluation process becomes a sheer waste of time.

Below is the response from quantitative survey with regard to follow up after SSE.

It has been observed that 41 (51, 3%) respondents indicated that there was no follow up of SSE activities within their schools when 39 (48, 8%) of the respondents indicated that there was such a follow up at their school after SSE.

The following are some comments from the educator's interview regarding follow up of SSE activities at their schools quoted verbatim:

- *"Yes, I was just confused"*.
- *"Yes, no reasons or explanation given for implementing this SSE."*
- *"I experienced challenges because I was confused not knowing what exactly was expected from everyone. Most of us were not involved at that time. Management was basically doing SSE"*.
- *"I have complete lack of understanding of this process; it is a complete waste of time to engage in this evaluation process"*.
- *"I was not involved in SSE"*.
- *"In my opinion, SSE is a burden more than a benefit, I would say. I have to spend a lot of time on doing the complicated questionnaires………It appears to me that SSE findings mainly benefit the school management team, rather than the educators, to make school plans and policies. Even if problems are revealed from the questionnaires, I will not be involved. It is just the business of the SMT. I don't know clearly how the revealed problems are followed"*.

In the light of the above responses, it is evident that the educator's sense of ownership on SSE is weak. On the contrary, they develop negative feelings towards SSE, particularly when they could not see the benefits of SSE in their own teaching and their own professional development. Lack of ownership of the evaluative process thus makes educators less eager to share their views. It can be concluded that neither proper managerial guidance nor supportive administrative intervention had been provided to create opportunities for them to learn together from the School Self Evaluation. The process is done just for the sake of doing it and because the WSE teams will expect schools they evaluate to have gone through the process.

The researcher is of the opinion that all stakeholders should be made aware of their roles and responsibilities with regard to SSE and WSE accordingly so as to enable them to function

appropriately in the process. This will in turn eliminate uncertainties as to what role to play in the process by the relevant role players as it was the case with most educators used in this sample.

Lack of Collaborative Culture

Because educators seem to be sidelined when it comes to SSE, and only School Management Teams are actually involved in the self-evaluative process, this lack of collaborative culture set barriers to educator sharing activities and thereby inhibit the educator's institutional learning from the school hence teachers' professional development. Therefore, it can be concluded that school leadership and management, educator's work culture, together with school administration, intertwine and seemingly exert influence on the learning environment of a school. Professional learning from SSE appears to be much affected by the learning environment nurtured by the school. It is evident that inadequate school leadership, lack of collaborative culture and the educator's negative attitudes towards SSE were all perceived to be the barriers to professional development during the implementation of WSE and SSE. Various studies have shown that school improvement works best when there is more support than pressure on schools (Harris and Lambert 2003; Department of Education and Skills 2012). Educators within any school context, will work collaboratively and engage in positive dialogue when they are encouraged and supported.

The research findings also suggest that SMT's seems to play an important role in the build-up of a learning environment for educators at their schools to learn from SSE. It can be concluded that proper time scheduling, arrangement of more follow-up discussions and adequate managerial guidance are all supportive administrative interventions that are seen to foster the educator's professional development from SSE. If this is not considered, as MacBeath (2006) puts it; such SSE will lose vitality and engagement and becomes an annual event to be dutifully administered.

As shown in the research findings, educators, even though uncertain about their role in SSE, believed that SSE was solely for school development and improvement. It is thus recommended that during the implementation of SSE in the schools, the school Management Teams

should explain clearly its meaning and its importance to the educators. In other words, the school should make an effort to help the educators develop a common understanding of SSE. It should be noted that lack of knowledge may prohibit participants to function successfully. Stakeholders in SSE should work towards a common goal. According to Arcaro (1995), 'the vision provides people with the direction to follow. Once the direction is known, the next step is to remove obstacles and barriers that prevent people from achieving excellence in their performance.' SSE should therefore promote democratic beliefs through consultation practices and negotiations.

When educators realise that their views bring about new policies or changes in school practices, they would strongly feel that their contributions have been valued. On the contrary, if the school does not give any response to their views, they would feel frustrated. Feedback also needs to be provided, even if their suggestions are not feasible.

SSE has to enrich the lives of educators (Department of Education and Skills 2012). There should be more follow up meetings in which with all educators contribute and join in the discussions after SSE. This could be done either in their departmental meetings or staff meetings. Caution should be taken that such self-evaluation meetings are not just a routine but are of a more immediate, specific and technical nature and are also purposeful. This would enable the educators to share and learn on their own initiative rather than be grid locked in administratively controlled procedural discussions and thus build up a learning environment for them.

The research findings also reveal that collaboration was lacking in most schools, and this the lack of sharing could possibly inhibit educator's collaborative learning from SSE and their professional growth could be much impeded in such a learning environment. Much as a collaborative culture is most supportive and facilitating to the educator's learning, it is not easy to develop. A school environment full of trust, support and professional respect appears to be very important to the educator's learning from SSE. The school administration, school leadership and management, and the educator's work culture all play a significant role to build up the learning environment of a school. It is recommended that every school should establish a 'learning com-

munity' within, as a result of the implementation of SSE. The work of Davis and Rudd (2000) and Mac Beath (2006) suggest that self-evaluating schools can develop their own agenda thus enabling staff to focus on areas for improvement of relevancy to their own context. As a way for schools to regain their professional status and become centers of learning, Smith (1997) suggests: 'I believe that (school self-evaluation) is a good thing. It returns a degree of control to us as professional educators…(and) enable(s) schools to set their own agenda for improvement, an agenda that dismisses schools as a standardized factory for information cramming but moves them towards being centers of learning…'. This could assist to helps improve on ownership of the process. The principal together with the SMT, also involving educators through their departments, need to plan strategically by integrating the SSE findings into their School Improvement Plans; that is, share with educators from setting out the aims to dissemination of the outcomes. The SMT does also have to create supportive interventions that will enable educators to learn together from SSE. Through this, educators could set a life-long learner model for their learners. Learners could possibly learn how to be a self-reflective and life-long learner through institutionalizing SSE into the daily practices of their educators. This could have an impact in classrooms through transforming the schools into learning communities

Ethical Issues

The following ethical issues were addressed as illustrated by Creswell (2009):
- Informed consent
  Consent was obtained from the participants of the study and permission to conduct research was sought from the director of Motheo Education District as well as the school principals concerned.
- Anonymity
  The right of participants to be anonymous was protected, both in the structuring of the questionnaire as well as in the analysis of the results.

CONCLUSION

The actual intent of SSE is for school improvement and accountability. It does not nec-

essarily aim at educator development; however, educators learn from discussions, reflections and follow up to the SSE findings. It should also be noted that professional development, teaching and learning of educators from SSE appears to be influenced by the learning environment created by the school and how the school implements SSE. That is, educator's learning will not take place if the school environment does not support learning or the self-evaluative processes are improperly implemented in the school.

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