Bureaucracy or Innovation? Perspectives on History Subject Panels and the Professional Development of Teachers in Zimbabwe

Godwin Mumhure
Email: mumhuregodwin@yahoo.com
Doctor of Philosophy, Morgenster Teachers College, Zimbabwe.

Loyiso C. Jita
Email: jitalc@ufs.ac.za
Professor, Doctor of Philosophy, Dean of Faculty of Education & SANRAL Chair in Mathematics, Natural Sciences & Technology Education, University of the Free State, South Africa.

Godsend T. Chimbi*
Email: ChimbiGT@ufs.ac.za; gchimbi1967@gmail.com
Doctor of Philosophy, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow under the SANRAL Chair in Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Technology Education, University of the Free State, South Africa.
*Corresponding author

Abstract
Teacher professional development has often been carried out by external experts as a once-off activity. This paper shifts from this traditional paradigm where teachers are recipients of external expert advice to one where they professionally develop themselves. The study explores how curriculum planners in Zimbabwe sought to improve teacher professional development by placing teacher learning in the hands of the teachers using subject clusters/panels. History teachers from eight high schools in one school district in Zimbabwe were case studied to gain deeper insights into how they understood the purpose and practice of history subject panels as an innovation for teacher professional development. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, non-participatory observations and document analysis. The key findings in the paper indicate that teachers conceptualisation of subject panels differed from that of school principals who championed their creation. While the latter see subject panels as an extension of their administrative arm, the former view them as learning platforms to improve instructional practice and induct new teachers into the profession. Creating a shared vision between teachers and school principals is suggested to reduce the conflicts that threaten the survival of subject clusters.

Key words: Teacher Professional Development, bureaucracy, innovation, subject panels, teacher leaders

Introduction

Throughout the world, the dawn of the 21st century ushered unprecedented policy reforms in education (Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Sato, 2019; Tsotetsi & Mahlomaholo,2013). But these reforms can only be realised if teachers possess the requisite competencies to implement the envisaged changes. One strategy to facilitate the enactment of intended reforms is continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers

(Lei & Medwell, 2020; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Ngcoza & Southwood, 2015). CPD is regarded as the "lynchpin of success" to reform implementation (Lemmer, Van Wyk, & Mazibuko, 2008, p. 22); and has often been initiated by "upper sources of authority" (Dehghan, 2020, p. 3) such as ministry of education officials, university experts and school principals. Unfortunately, this top-down trajectory has largely failed to bring desired changes in teachers' pedagogical practices (Steyn, 2011; Tsotetsi & Mahlomaholo, 2013). Consequently, current trends in school reform recommend bottom-up strategies which place CPD in the hands of teachers, instead of external experts who use top-down approaches (Gemeda, Fiorucci & Catarci, 2014; Gore & Rosser, 2020; Hardman et al., 2015). The creation of subject panels, which are teacher-driven, is one bottom-up strategy that has become popular in promoting grassroots curriculum reform.

Subject clusters are not new innovations for improving classroom practice in North America, Europe, Latin America and Asia (Lei & Medwell, 2020). But the concept is relatively new in many African countries that include Kenya, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa (Delport & Makaye, 2009; Ngcoza & Southwood, 2015). In Zimbabwe, for instance, school clusters and subject panels were only introduced in 1993 when the government (with financial support and technical expertise from the Netherlands) launched the Better Schools Programme Zimbabwe (BSPZ) (Chikoko, 2007). This was the beginning of school clusters and subject panels as platforms for the professional development of teachers. The school clusters and subject panels were heavily funded by the donor community, mainly from the Netherlands. However, donor funding for the clusters and panels dried up in 2010 and the projects were inherited by the National Association for Secondary School Heads (NASH) in Zimbabwe.

To create subject panels, teachers working in different schools who teach a particular subject come together to learn from each other how they can improve their practice and competencies (Ngcoza & Southwood, 2015). Available literature tends to use the terms "subject panels", "subject clusters", "teacher networks" and "professional learning communities" interchangeably; even though these terms may each have their own nuanced meanings (Kennedy, 2014; Lei & Medwell, 2020). Research has shown that teachers can improve how they teach and their students' performance when they learn from one another in subject clusters (Jita & Ndlalane, 2009; Tikkanen, Pyhalto, Pietarinen & Soini, 2019). Some of the benefits include stimulating collaboration; exchanging ideas, skills and expertise; collective decision-making and collegiality.

Despite these benefits, subject clusters are also undermined by overt and covert difficulties. Pomuti and Weber (2012) found that clusters in Namibia often encountered challenges in achieving their set goals of improving classroom practice and learner performance due to funding limitations. In South Africa, Jita and Mokhele (2012) established that teacher panels sometimes deviate from improving pedagogical practice because school principals convert them into administrative conduits. Furthermore, Maphosa, Mutekwe, Machingambi, Wadesango & Ndofirepi (2013) found that, in Zimbabwe, most school principals are not interested in funding subject cluster activities. As a result, teachers are sometimes forced to use their own finances to attend subject cluster meetings.

Research Objectives

Most studies on teacher professional development in Zimbabwe (Chikoko, 2007; Delport & Makaye, 2009; Maunganidze, 2017) have concentrated on clusters for primary and secondary schools and how they are used to improve school heads' administrative capacities and teachers' generic classroom competencies. Their focus has been on school clusters generally and not clusters for school subjects. To the researchers' best knowledge, very few studies (Chikoko & Aipinge, 2009; Maphosa et al., 2013; Mumhure, 2017) have documented the purposes and functions of subject clusters in Zimbabwean schools. The objectives of the current research, therefore, are to explore and unpack teachers and school principals' perspectives on the scope and practices of subject clusters in secondary schools. To achieve this, two research questions linchpin this paper:

1. What are teachers and school principals' perspectives on the purposes and practices of history subject panels?
2. What are the threats, if any, to the survival of history subject clusters?

Theoretical Framework

George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism guides this paper (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011; Klenke, 2016). The word 'symbolic interactionism' was popularised by Herbert Blumer, a student of Mead, while teaching at the Chicago School of Sociology in 1937 (Klenke, 2016). The theory assumes that meanings are products of the "process of interaction between people" (Mackinnon, 2005, p. 89). Symbolic interactionism assumes meanings are socially created by people as they use linguistic symbols to make sense of the world around them. Central to this framework is the supposition that meanings are constructed in social settings while socialising, mixing and working with others.

Symbolic interactionism was selected as an appropriate theoretical lens for the present study because it taps into meanings constructed by teachers on the purposes of subject panels and the roles they play in CPD. Through interaction, teacher participants framed (and reframed) meanings on the role of history subject panels in promoting teacher development and the militating factors undermining the attainment of this objective. In addition, participants generated ideas to improve the structures and practices of history subject clusters as teacher-led organs meant to benefit teachers.

Literature Review
Approaches to Teacher Professional Development

Traditionally, the professional development of teachers was perceived as a top-down, one-shot activity carried out often by hired, external experts to "develop" teachers on the improvement of their practice and student achievement (Ngcoza & Southwood, 2015; Dehghan, 2020). In-service training is the traditional and most popular systematic intervention for teacher professional development. It involves workshops initiated by curriculum supervisory authorities and facilitated by experts hired from outside the school system. However, several studies (Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2009; Fullan, 2012; Tikkanen et al., 2019) point to the ineffectivity of this traditional, top-down approach to teacher professional development. This is mainly because in-service training is usually carried out by external experts who may not be aware of the local contexts teachers operate in. Consequently, most of the advice and suggestions made at in-service workshops may not be related to the classroom realities unique to each school (Govender, 2018). Today, teacher professional development is seen as more than traditional in-servicing and sporadic staff development.

Since the turn of the 21st century, a paradigm shift has taken place in the conceptualisation of teacher improvement. Villegas-Reimers (2003, p. 12) views teacher-initiated professional development as "the new image of teacher learning." Dehghan (2020, p. 1) calls it "independent or transformative professionalism (bottom-up) versus managerial or prescribed professionalism (top-down)." The new perspective shifts from the traditional paradigm by placing teacher development in teachers' hands instead of the external experts. Lei and Medwell (2020, p. 2) view teacher improvement as "the career-long uptake of formal and informal learning opportunities that deepen and extend teachers' professional competence." It encompasses attending conferences and seminars facilitated by practicing teachers as well as informal experiences like reading professional publications, learning from colleagues and creating informal learning communities.

The new paradigm on the improvement of classroom practitioners is informed by constructivist philosophy and shuns the once-off-transmission model. According to Ngcoza and Southwood (2015, p. 3), "professional development is regarded, in this instance, as being transformative and continuous, as ongoing capacity and knowledge building, with a view to bringing about change in praxis." The argument is that teachers are active learners who generate new ideas on teaching and assessment. Teacher development is viewed from a long-term perspective which acknowledges that teachers are always learning (Tikkanen et al., 2019). Teachers need to be afforded continuous opportunities to learn instead of one-shot workshops. Teachers need time to absorb new experiences and knowledge and connect them to existing knowledge.

The contemporary perspective of teacher professional development suggests that, besides being continuous, teacher learning should be closely aligned to teachers' daily practice and schools need to be transformed into professional learning communities (Maunganidze, 2017; Ajani, 2019). This perspective emphasises the need to link continuous teacher improvement to the unique school contexts teachers work

in. Teachers are practitioners who join the profession with knowledge obtained from preservice training. Professional development must empower teachers with practical pedagogical practices that improve their existing knowledge and link theories learnt at college with classroom practice. Current thinking images continuous teacher improvement as a collective process "characterized by commitment, shared purpose, the sharing of information and emotional support, voluntary participation and an egalitarian ethos" (Ngcoza & Southwood, 2015, p. 3). This collaboration must go beyond the school context and encompass other influential members of the local communities in which schools are located.

Trends in Teacher Professional Development in Africa
In most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the priority in the 1990s was on initial teacher education (Mulkeen, 2010; Maunganidze, 2017). This aligned with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the call for Education for All (EFA), which almost all SSA countries adopted. Emphasis was on providing primary education to all children, resulting in international donor agencies and governments investing heavily in primary education at the expense of secondary schools.

Equally neglected was the professional development of practicing teachers as governments focused on the initial training of teachers (Mulkeen, 2010). The increasing demand for secondary education by primary school graduates necessitated a shift in focus. There was a serious shortage of qualified teachers in the expanding secondary sector, creating new challenges for most SSA countries (Lauwerier and Akkari, 2015). Governments resorted to hiring unqualified teachers and expatriates. Some qualified primary school teachers were transferred to teach in secondary schools. In 11 countries in Southern and East Africa, only 33% of primary school teachers were qualified (Moons, 2007). In Chad only 27% of secondary school teachers were trained; in Madagascar only 36% had gone to college, and in Togo only 37% were qualified (Lauwerier & Akkari, 2015).

The shift of focus to CPD programmes by SSA governments was necessitated by teacher shortage in primary and secondary schools (Mulkeen, 2010). CPD took three forms – the training of untrained teachers already in service; in-servicing trained teachers to upgrade competency; and continuous teacher development for appropriately qualified teachers. In most African countries, large-scale CPD for qualified teachers is often offered by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in partnership with local governments. NGO activities in teacher improvement have been witnessed in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Guinea and Liberia, among others (Desta, Chalchisa & Lemma, 2013). Most CPD programmes are once-off seminars and workshops led by outside experts. Teachers are often not consulted when these programmes are planned, creating limited opportunities for meaningful interaction (Ajani, 2019). Consequently, most of these donors funded CPD projects do not address the challenges teachers face in their unique school and classroom contexts. These projects frequently wither once donor funding dries up.

Teacher Professional Development in Zimbabwe
There are common patterns in the professional development of teachers in most SSA countries and in Zimbabwe. The attainment of majority rule in 1980 saw the new Zimbabwe government introducing the policy of EFA (Sibanda & Young, 2019). Consequently, there was a severe shortage of qualified classroom practitioners as enrolments in primary and secondary schools ballooned. The massive expansion of education resulted in a quantity-quality dilemma (Gatawa, 1998; Sibanda & Young, 2019). This manifested in teacher shortages, meager learning resources, poor supervision of teachers, low pass rates and high attrition in response to poor working conditions.

The need for regular teacher in-servicing, to improve classroom practice, became imperative to the Zimbabwe government (Maunganidze, 2017; Zvobgo, 1998). In October 1990, the Commonwealth Conference held in Harare initiated a project targeting the professional improvement of heads of schools "as it was felt that the head carried the prime responsibility for creating an effective educational environment" (Ministry of Education, 1995, p. ii). This project started school clusters in all the provinces of Zimbabwe with the aim of nurturing quality education. While the initiative was commendable, it did not

improve the way teachers taught in both primary and secondary schools because it only targeted school principals.

The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (2000, p. i) "realised that the development of school heads' leadership and administrative skills would not automatically result in the provision of quality education. It was imperative that teachers be taken on board." The second phase of the BSPZ, which involved classroom practitioners, was launched in 1996 (Delport & Makaye, 2009). This marked the birth of subject panels/clusters as a paradigm shift to CPD in Zimbabwe.

The mandate and scope of subject panels have raised a lot of controversy since their conception in Zimbabwe. School heads see these panels as an extension of their administrative arm, while teachers regard them as a platform for exchanging best practices and improving the quality of instruction. Heads of schools often dominate cluster activities, marginalising teachers who are the intended beneficiaries (Chikoko, 2007). In addition, the scope and functions of subject clusters in Zimbabwe are not clearly defined, creating a potential friction zone for teacher leaders (who lead the clusters) and school principals (the direct supervisors of the subject cluster leaders). This elicits the question whether subject panels are organs for teacher professional development or administrative conduits for the bureaucratic organisation of schools? Or do they play a dual role? To date, no significant studies have explored teachers and administrators' views on the functions of subject panels in Zimbabwean secondary schools. This paper contributes new knowledge to the under-theorised discourse on innovative practices on professional development and specifically on history subject panels as platforms for teachers to learn from colleagues. The current study is important considering the paucity of literature on the purposes and practices of subject panels as examples of teacher-led structures of professional development in secondary schools.

Methodology

Research Design
This qualitative study adopts a multi-case research design. A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for exploring and examining the way teachers co-construct and reconstruct meanings during history subject panel seminars. It allowed for prolonged engagement with participants in their natural settings (Creswell, 2020). A multi-case study allowed for prolonged engagement with participants and the collection of rich descriptive data on teachers' perspectives and experiences with history subject panels. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2017, p. 291) advise that, "having two cases (or more), for comparative purposes, is more than worth having double the amount of data on a single case study."

Ethical Clearance
Permission to collect data for this study was sought from the Ethics Committee of the University of the Free State in South Africa. It was granted under Ethical Clearance No. UFS-HSD2015/0291. Permission was also granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in Zimbabwe. The first researcher collected data from participating schools from July to November 2015.

Sampling
Eight secondary schools in the Masvingo district of Zimbabwe, with vibrant history subject panels, were purposively sampled to participate in the study. Teachers who participated actively in the history subject panels were specifically targeted for interviews. The intentions of the study and its possible benefits were explained to the targeted participants. Eventually, one teacher was purposively selected from each school because s/he was active in the history subject cluster and taught history at Advanced Level. This resulted in a total of eight cases. Participants voluntarily consented to be observed, interviewed and audio recorded. They were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity, hence the use of pseudonyms in the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study without explaining why they were doing so. They signed consent forms as part of the agreement for voluntary participation.

Data Collection and analysis

Interviews, a focus group discussion (FGD), observations and document analysis were used to collect qualitative data for this study. Two sets of interviews were held – one before and the other after the FGD. Five participants were selected for interviews before conducting the FGD. Two weeks after this first set of interviews were conducted, all eight participants were brought together for the FGD at one school in Masvingo town. The intention behind including some participants who had been interviewed prior to the FGD was to enable the interrogation of their views by their peers who had not participated in the pre-FGD interviews. This increased the credibility of the data gathered. The three participants who had not participated in the pre-FGD interviews were interviewed a week after the FGD. This was done as a follow-up on some of the issues that had not been adequately addressed in the FGD. The interviews and FGD provided rich data on how participants perceived the history subject panels and how school principals promoted and/or interfered with panel activities. Post-FGD interviews further elaborated the challenges participants faced in running the subject panel meetings and provided deeper insights into the threats that undermined the structures and functions of the panels.

In addition to the interviews and FGD, four observations of history subject panel meetings provided eye-witness accounts on facilitators of the history subject panel sessions, how participants interacted, and the issues they raised. Observations were critical in providing primary evidence on the activities of the subject panels and authenticating the trustworthiness of the data obtained in the interviews and FGD.

Furthermore, document analysis of the minutes of history subject panel meetings provided information on who facilitated the meetings, the agendas, attendance and issues discussed. The recordings of the interviews and FGD were transcribed. This data and that obtained from the observations and document analysis were then coded and analysed. Data were analysed using qualitative techniques, specifically interpretive content analysis, intra- and cross-case analyses, triangulation and thematic aggregation.

<div align="center">

Results

</div>

Data gathered in this study explored teachers and school principals' perspectives on the purposes and functions of history subject panels. It also examined the threats to the survival of history subject clusters as perceived from the teachers' perspective. Three themes emerged during the coding and cross-case analysis of data. These are: perspectives on history subject panels, role of history subject panels and threats to history subject panels. These themes are used as cornerstones in the presentation of the results of this study.

Theme 1: Perspectives on History Subject Panels

The first participant to be interviewed was Mberi from School 1. Mberi was a panel resource teacher leader, an A-level examiner and a frequent facilitator at the cluster sessions. Mberi held a Master of Education degree in history and had participated in the cluster for 10 years. He explained the meaning of the history cluster to him:

> *It means the coming together of teachers and students within the district. When teachers come together, they ask the questions that they have. The facilitators respond and present on the most important aspects that have to be considered when writing essays, because we find problems when students write A-level essays. They are demanding, so those facilitators with the knowledge will assist teachers and students on how they can improve essay writing and the pass rate.*

Mberi understood subject panels as a platform for teachers to come together and learn from colleagues how to teach the subject at A-level. He elaborated further:

> *In fact, they [subject panels] are very, very important to both teachers and pupils. At times, teachers fail to interpret the questions correctly, but when you are discussing with other teachers and students, you come to understand the challenges you are facing. And, in addition to that, you become very friendly to colleagues, whom you can ask after the*

> *meetings, or if you face some problems, you tend to have friends in these subject panels, whom you can consult later.*

Students' involvement appears to be one unique innovation in this panel. Mberi explained that it afforded teachers and students the opportunity to interrelate in an unrestricted space. The cluster also allowed for teacher interaction and the establishment of collegial relationships.

Mapakise had an honours degree in history and a post-graduate certificate in education. He was from School 2 and had participated in panel activities for 11 years. He was sceptical of the benefits of subject clusters. He expressed his views thus:

> *Yaaah, it means a lot to me. It creates a lot of anxiety, and zeal and passion to benefit from that panel ... But you would find that those hopes and anticipation would end up not getting that kind of knowledge you expected or the imparting of those aspects we see as crucial. And, in the end, you find that those panels just become a rubber stamp for the whole thing [teacher professional development].*

From Mapakise's point of view, the history subject panels are supposed to be a source of important knowledge for A-level history teachers. However, he was disappointed that these expectations were not always met. At times the history panels did not improve teachers' pedagogical skills – failing to meet the primary objective for which they were created.

Chingeve had a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and divinity and had participated in the history cluster for 15 years. He was from School 3 and was an active participant without any special responsibility. He narrated that the cluster benefited him as an A-level history teacher. "It inspires me to let my students be exposed to these panel discussions. It makes them have confidence in me and they also have confidence in themselves", he said. He elaborated that, "These panel meetings actually prepare the students for the examinations as well as equip the teacher with the latest findings, be they pedagogical or historical."

For Chingeve, subject panels were supposed to provide space for teachers on how to teach A-level history and to prepare students for examinations. On 26 September 2015, the first researcher observed 226 A-level students from eight high schools in Masvingo district attending a subject panel session which was preparing them for their exit history examination. Students were assisted by the panel resource teachers (who were also A-level examiners) to interpret and respond to questions during examinations. They were also couched on time management.

Chambara, from School 4, had a degree in history and geography and had 15 years' experience in history subject panels. He viewed subject clusters as "the coming together of teachers to improve their teaching." He went on to explain that "the purpose is actually to discuss issues pertaining to the teaching and learning of history as a subject in schools." His explanation aligned with that given by Chingeve and Mapakise, who saw the subject cluster as an opportunity for A-level teachers to exchange notes on the teaching of the subject.

A former practitioner in primary schools, Zhou from School 5, seemed to appreciate the role the history subject panel played in assisting him to transform into a competent history teacher for A-level. He remarked: "Just the words, 'Masvingo district history subject panel', even if I was asleep, I just wake up because I know that's the panel which actually shaped me to become what I am today." He went on to say that: "It helped me because when I started teaching A-level, I didn't know how to actually teach the pupils, how to interpret the content itself, to interpret the syllabus. I got all that information from the panel." His elaboration was: "These have actually equipped me to be what I am today, a very effective A-level teacher who always produces good results." Zhou appreciated the subject panel for its impact on him and his career.

During the FGD, Zhou explained that "the history subject panels are where teachers come together and share their experiences through assisting each other on syllabus interpretation and answering examination questions." Participants saw the history subject panels as the ideal space for teacher collaboration and exchange of collective wisdom. They seemed to perceive the subject cluster as the environment for teacher capacity building and student preparation for A-level exit examinations.

Theme 2: Role of History Subject Panels
In most developing countries subject clusters are a recent innovation which places teacher improvement in the hands of the teachers (Ngcoza & Southwood, 2015). As such, the current study sought teachers' views on the differences (if any) between this new practice and the conventional teacher improvement models like staff-development workshops and conferences. Mberi pointed out that:

> *Yes, I attended one. On the issue of subject panels, there is cooperativeness. There is no one who is very, very dominant, unlike in staff-development workshops, [where] they will be telling us what to do. In the subject panels we are encouraged to ask questions, to interpret the questions as we feel like ...*

Mberi saw power dynamics as the major difference. Subject panels offer teachers the freedom and latitude to decide what they have to learn. In staff-development workshops everything is dictated to them. For Chambara, "the difference is that at subject panel meetings, we have the chance to ask questions, even in Shona [local language], whereas in staff-development workshops with outsiders, we will only be listening." Chambara saw history subject panels as offering unrestricted space for teacher engagement including the liberty to use one's first language which may not be English.

But the other teachers (Mapakise and Nyati) did not see much divergence between subject clusters and traditional staff-development. Mapakise argued that: "There would not be much difference, but I think something organised by outsiders would create that element of curiosity and probably an outsider can be listened to better. Teachers might have confidence in the one who would be organising from outside ...." Nyati added that: "There is no difference." Some participants did not see much difference in the continuous professional development led by fellow teachers vis-à-vis traditional staff development controlled by experts from outside the school system.

On the contrary, Nyota and Zvaita, like Mberi and Chambara, saw divergences between subject clusters and staff-development workshops. "History panels focus on historical interpretation and analysis, whereas other forms of staff development target varied issues which include school administration", explained Nyota. The collective response of the four participants was that: "History subject panels cater for the specific needs, hopes and aspirations of the history teachers and students, whereas other forms of professional development may be irrelevant to history teachers and students' needs." This collective view emphasises that cluster-led teacher improvement is relevant to the context in which it is initiated, but staff-development led by external experts is often not appropriate to unique school and classroom contexts in which teachers operate.

Theme 3: Threats to History Subject Panels
During the FGD, participants expressed their concern over school heads' lack of interest in subject panels. They felt that school heads did not take the subject panels seriously because the panels did not directly promote their interests as school administrators. Zvaita complained that: "There is need for school heads to take these panels more seriously by providing a strong budget for the workshops and seminars. I think making them mandatory can force these heads to be more serious about the panels and improving pass rates." On a similar note, Mapakise had this to say in the post-FGD interview: "What I think is that there should be a constitution that should also be put in place to make subject panels compulsory so that all teachers would attend, and, more than that, they should oblige institutions and school administrators to support the teachers who attend and lead these panels."

In the FGD, participants complained that some heads of schools refuse to offer transport and subsistence allowances to participants attending subject panel meetings and seminars. School principals argued that these panels are not part of schools' administrative structures. Teachers ultimately fund themselves to be present at the panel meetings and discussions. Participants reiterated that "subject panels need to be funded" and "school heads need to gear up a bit and take the panels more seriously"

Discussion

This study sought to examine teachers and school principals' perspectives on the scope and functions of history subject panels in secondary schools. The study elicited some unique findings that add new dimensions to the current discourse on continuous professional development for teachers. The findings suggest that school principals may have been largely unsuccessful in attempting to turn this particular history subject panel into an extension of their bureaucratic arm. Participating teacher leaders appeared to be winning the battle of taking charge of the history subject cluster and making it a decisive organ for a grassroots approach to the professional development of teachers. Despite the school principals' limited support for the panel, the Masvingo district history panel was, for example, able to hold seminars every month during the data collection period for this study (July to November 2015). It also inducted new history teachers into the profession and was able to create functional learning communities for history students doing A-level in the eight schools constituting this cluster. The current study begins to show that subject clusters can be an effective bottom-up grassroots innovation that promotes both teacher development and student learning, while moving away from the top-down extension of bureaucratic control from the principal's office.

Some findings from the current study are in tandem with existent literature. For example, the struggle for the control of the subject clusters is a recorded phenomenon in national and regional literature. The current study confirmed the tug-of-war between school principals and teacher leaders who spearhead the activities of subject panels. Chikoko (2007) reported on fundamental problems of ownership and control of the school clusters from their inception in Zimbabwe. When school clusters were initiated in 1996, under the BSPZ, they were placed under the control of teacher leaders who were just ordinary classroom practitioners. Chikoko and Aipinge (2009, p. 40) found that: "In Zimbabwe, principals had a low opinion of teacher-led cluster activities, because of both the existing hierarchical structure of the school as an organisation and the concomitant culture in which the principal's status was higher than that of the teachers." In the principals' eyes, subject clusters formed two competing power points in the schools. Heads of schools felt that subject panel teacher leaders were usurping power from them and were creating a parallel power structure which threatened their authority.

The school heads had expected the clusters to be an extension of their administrative arm, while the teacher leaders (in charge of controlling the cluster activities) viewed clusters as non-administrative platforms with the main purpose of improving teacher and classroom practice. The contradiction was that the subject cluster leader, as a full-time teacher in a school, "was at the mercy of the head of that school in terms of getting time off to pursue cluster activities" (Chikoko, 2007, p. 52). This, inevitably, generated tension between the school heads and the cluster leaders, with the latter seeking autonomy from the former. As alluded to by the teacher leaders who were interviewed for the current study, school heads appeared disinterested in the subject panels and some appeared to intentionally undermine cluster activities. When the cluster resource teachers asked for financial and material support for instance, most school heads were not willing to offer this support because they felt that the resource teachers were challenging their authority.

The struggle for the control of subject panels is not unique to Zimbabwe. Similar conflicts of interest on the practice of school and subject clusters have been reported in Nigeria (Badau & Yahya, 2017), Namibia (Nakambonde-Daniel, 2018; Shikalepo, 2018) and South Africa (Govender, 2018, Ajani, 2019). Jita & Mokhele (2012) reported the clash of interests between school heads and subject panel leaders in Mpumalanga province in South Africa. Apparently irked by the hijacking of subject panels into administrative conduits by school heads, some cluster leaders in this province broke away from the existing panels and created alternative clusters that focused solely on teacher professional development. This phenomenon of alternative clusters that result from such tensions and struggles for control of the soul of subject clusters, as discussed briefly in Jita and Mokhele (2012), is yet to be researched and explored sufficiently.

Limitations of the study
The absence of the school principals' voices in the narratives is the major weakness of the current study. The principals' perspectives on history subject clusters were presented as seen and interpreted by the teacher participants in the interviews and the FGD. The resultant shortcoming is that the principals were not afforded the chance to reply and speak for themselves. In addition, the minutes of the subject panel meetings, in which teachers complained about the principals' withholding of financial support and general lack of interest in cluster activities, also excluded the principals' voices. Indeed, what participants said concerning the power struggle for the control of the clusters reverberated with what was established in previous studies. Nonetheless, the trustworthiness of this multi-case study could have been enhanced had the principals been afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves.

Conclusions

This paper deliberated on whether subject panels are an extension of school administrative bureaucracy or an innovation for teacher professional development. The paper has shown that teachers and school principals have competing and conflicting perspectives on the purposes and functions of subject clusters. Despite efforts by teacher leaders in the current study to decentralise subject clusters from established bureaucratic control in schools, school heads exhibited centralisation tendencies and the desire to bring the history subject panels into their bureaucratic fold. Although teacher leaders in the present study appeared to be winning the struggle for the control of the subject panel, by fanning off bureaucratic interference, the continued existence of the subject panels appears seriously threatened by the school heads' withholding of financial support. Until school heads are persuaded to see the potential value of subject panels, the future of these panels seems to be hanging by a thread.

Recommendations

It appears prudent to revisit the philosophy behind subject panels, the structures that govern them and the duties they perform. This can be done by widening the scope of subject clusters to include school principals and all the teachers. It is necessary to dispel the myth (so prevalent among school principals) that subject panels are an extension of administrative bureaucracy and nurture their focus on improved subject instruction. Future research on subject clusters can include both school principals and teachers so that the two competing (and often conflicting) perspectives are given equal space and opportunity to be heard, creating a more balanced representation of opinions. Future studies can also search for a compromise between the interests of school heads and teacher leaders. Such compromise will allow the two protagonists to work together for the common benefit of teacher improvement and ultimately learners, who are the chief beneficiaries of school-based teacher development.

Acknowledgments

References

Ajani, O.A. (2019). Effective teachers' cluster system as an approach to enhanced classroom practices in South African high schools. *Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa,* 8(1), 173–194. Doi: 10.31920/2050-4284/2019/8n1a8
Aldiabat, K., & Navenec, C.L. (2011). Philosophical roots of classical grounded theory: Its foundations in symbolic interactionism. *The qualitative report*, 16(4), 1063–1080.

Badau, K.M., & Yahya, S.A. (2017). Assessing the success of school cluster zoning system in senior secondary schools of Adamawa State, Nigeria. *The Journal of Middle East and North Africa Sciences,* 3(4), 1–7.

Chikoko, V., 2007. The school cluster system as an innovation: Perspectives of Zimbabwean teachers and school heads. *Africa Review,* 4(1), 42-57.

Chikoko, V., & Aipinge, L. (2009). The school cluster system as an educational reform: Evidence from Namibia and Zimbabwe. *Southern African Review of Education*, 15(1), 25–43.

Cohen, L., Manion. L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research Methods in Education.* 8th ed. London: Routledge.

Creswell, J.W. (2020). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches.* 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage.

Dehghan, F. (2020). Teachers' perspectives of professionalism: A top-down or bottom-up decision-making process? *Professional Development in Education*, 46(1), 1–10. Doi: 10.1080/19415257.2020.1725597

Delport, A., & Makaye, J. (2009). Clustering schools to improve teacher professional development: Lessons learnt from a Zimbabwean case study. *Africa Education Review,* 6(1), 96–105.

Desta, D., Chalchisa, D., & Lemma, L. (2013). School-based continuous teacher professional development in Addis Ababa: An investigation of practices, opportunities and challenges. *Journal of International Cooperation in Education,*15(3), 77–94.

Fullan, M. (2012). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. London: Routledge.

Gatawa, B.S.M. (1998). *Quality-quantity dilemma in education: The Zimbabwean experience.* Harare: College Press.

Gemeda, F.T., Fiorucci, M., & Catarci, M. (2014). Teachers' professional development in schools: Rhetoric versus reality. *Professional development in education*, 40(1), 71–88. Doi: 10.1080/19415257.2012.759988

Govender, S. (2018). South African teachers' perspectives on support received in implementing curriculum changes. *South African Journal of Education,* 38(2), S1–S12.

Hardman, F., Hardman, J., Dachi, H., Eliott, L., Ihebuzor, N., Ntekim, M. & Tibuhinda, A. (2015). Implementing school-based teacher development in Tanzania. *Professional Development in Education*, 41(4), 602–623. Doi: 10.1080/19415257.2015.1026453

Gore, J., & Rosser, B. (2020). Beyond content-focused professional development: Powerful professional learning through genuine learning communities across grades and subjects. *Professional Development in Education*, 46(1), 1–16. Doi: 10.1080/19415257.2020.1725904

Jita, L.C., & Ndlalane, T.C. (2009). Clusters in South Africa: Opportunities and constraints for teacher development and change*. Perspectives in Education,* 27(1), 58–68.

Jita, L.C., & Mokhele, M.L. (2012). Institutionalising teacher clusters in South Africa: Dilemmas and contradictions. *Perspectives in Education,* 30(2), 1–11.

Kennedy, A. (2014). Understanding continuing professional development: The need for theory to impact on policy and practice. *Professional Development in Education,* 40(5), 688–697.

Klenke, K. (2016). *Qualitative research in the study of leadership*. 2nd ed. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Lauwerier, T. & Akkari, A. (2015). *The teachers and quality of basic education in Sub-saharan Africa.* Washington: UNESCO.

Lei, M., & Medwell, J. (2020). How do English language teachers understand the idea of professional development in the recent curriculum reforms in China? *Asia-Pacific Journal of Education.* 40(3), 401-417. Doi: 10.1080/02188791.2020.1717440

Lemmer, E.M., Van Wyk, J.N. & Mazibuko, S.P. (2008). The role of the principal in whole school evaluation. *Journal of Educational Studies*, 7(1, 18-30.

Maunganidze, O. (2017). Driving quality instruction through teacher continuous improvement programmes in Zimbabwean primary schools. *Mosenodi Journal,* 20(2), 66–76.

Mackinnon, G. (2005). Symbolic interactionism: A lens for judging the social constructivist potential of learner-centred chemistry software. *International Journal of Technology and Learning,* 1(2), 89–102.

Maphosa, C., Mutekwe, E., Machingambi, S., Wadesango, N., & Ndofirepi, A. (2013). School clusters in Zimbabwe: What issues do clusters tackle? *International Journal of Science,* 5(3), 293–300.

Moons, B. (2007). *Research analysis: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers: A global overview of current policies and practices*. Geneva: UNESCO.

Ministry of Education. (1995). *The better schools programme in Zimbabwe: Training and support for teachers, heads and education officers*. Harare: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture. (2000). *The better schools programme (Zimbabwe): A manual on clusters.* Harare: Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture.

Mumhure, G., 2017. Zimbabwean teachers' perspectives on the history subject panels as an innovation for professional development. Unpublished thesis (PhD). University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. scholar.ufs.ac.za:8080/handle/11660/6526

Musanti, S.I., & Pence, L.P. (2010). Collaboration and teacher development: Unpacking resistance, constructing knowledge, and navigating identities. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 37(1), 73–89.

Mulkeen, A. (2010). *Teachers in Anglophone Africa: Issues in teacher supply, training and management.* Washington: The World Bank.

Nakambonde-Daniel, J. (2018). The role of school cluster system as a support service for teachers: A case of Oluno Circuit in the Oshana Region of Namibia. Unpublished dissertation (M.Ed.). University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia.

Ngcoza, K., & Southwood, S. (2015). Professional development networks: From transmission to construction. *Perspectives in Education,* 33(1), 1–11.

Pomuti, H., & Weber, E. (2012). *Decentralization and school management in Namibia*: *The ideologies of education bureaucrats in implementing government policies*. Windhoek, ISRN.

Priestley, M., & Philippou, S. (2018). Curriculum making as social practice: Complex webs of enactment. *The Curriculum Journal,* 29(2), 151–158. Doi: 10/1080/09585176.2018.145/o96

Sato, H. (2019). National curriculum reforms in Japan from 1998 to 2018: A critical discourse analysis on the possibility of sustainable development. *Journal of South - East Asian Education,* 2019(1), 1–9. http://hdl.handle.net/2241/00157847

Shikalepo, E.E. (2018). School cluster system for quality education in rural Namibian schools. *African Educational Research Journal,* 6(2), 48–57. Doi: 10.30918/AERJ.62.18.008

Sibanda, L., & Young, J. (2019). Towards a postcolonial curriculum in Zimbabwe: A critical review of the literature. *Africa Education Review,* 17(2). 50-72. Doi:10.1080/18146627.2018.1507622

Steyn, G.M. (2011). Determining guidelines for professional development: A qualitative study. *Journal of Educational Studies,* 10(1), 2-30.

Tikkanen, L., Pyhalto, K., Pietarinen, J., & Soini, T. (2019). Lessons learnt from large-scale curriculum reform: The strategies to enhance development work and reduce reform-related stress. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1–25.   https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-019-09363-1

Tsotetsi, C.T., & Mahlomaholo, S.M.G. (2013). Teacher professional development programmes: what is missing? *Journal of Educational Studies*, 12(1), 89-102.

Wei, R.C., Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, P. (2010). *Professional development in the United States: Trends and challenges*. Dallas TX: National Staff Development Council.

Villegas-Reimers, E. (2003). *Teacher professional development: An international review of the literature.* Paris: UNESCO.

Zvobgo, R. J. (1998). *The post-colonial state and educational reform: Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana.* Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.