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**ISSUE PAPER**  
***Professional Development and Quality:  
Perspectives of Namibian Teachers***



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## INTRODUCTION

Education policies adopted by many countries in the 1990s are based on constructivist paradigms that emphasize active learning and student-centered education. These policies have moved education away from paradigms based on memorization and repetition of facts to a vision of education based on meaningful and relevant learning, conceptual and analytical thinking, and the development of critical and higher-order thinking skills. The achievement of education quality, as defined by new policies and programs, depends on widespread understanding and effective implementation of complex new approaches to teaching and learning (UNESCO 2004, pp. 152-153; NIED 2003, p. 21-33; TGE 1994).

Many countries have found active-learning reforms difficult to implement successfully, particularly within the context of rapidly expanding enrolments in response to Education for All (EFA) goals and severe resource constraints (UNESCO 2004, pp. 152-153). Classes are overcrowded and teaching and learning resources are few. Teachers' pre-service and in-service opportunities to learn and improve are often limited. In addition, teachers sometimes receive mixed messages about the meaning and practice of the reforms, with different interpretations of active learning found in the curriculum, course syllabi, textbooks, teaching manuals, pre-service and in-service program content, and examinations (NIED 2003, p. 21). The resulting challenges have combined to threaten all aspects of quality of education (UNESCO 2004).

A study recently completed under the USAID-funded Educational Quality Improvement Program 1 (EQUIP1) Leader Award, investigates these issues through the eyes of teachers and other stakeholders in rural schools of northern Namibia.<sup>1</sup> The Academy for Educational Development (AED), in cooperation with the Namibian National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), conducted this study. In the study, teachers, principals, parents, and students described their perceptions of education quality within the context of Namibia's strong active-learning policies. Participants also reflected on the influence of pre-service and in-service teacher development programs on the quality of teaching and learning. With increasing attention paid to how school-level processes influence quality, an understanding of teacher and stakeholder perspectives of quality is an important step in identifying challenges and developing programs to support the growth of quality (LeCzel and Liman 2003; USAID/EQUIP2 2006; Verspoor 2006).

This issue paper draws on findings from the Namibia study, presenting and discussing the perceptions of teachers, principals, and parents on the influence of the professional development programs available at their schools. The paper examines a way of engaging with teachers and other stakeholders to examine their perspectives on how teaching and learning improve. The purpose is also to identify promising programs to support teacher quality that may be considered by policy makers and program designers in future planning.

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<sup>1</sup> A full research report and a shortened version of the research are available through USAID/EQUIP1 under the title of Namibia Pilot Study of Teacher Professional Development, *Quality in Education, Teaching, and Learning: Perceptions and Practice* by Mariana Van Graan and Elizabeth Leu.

## **THE LITERATURE ON TEACHER QUALITY AND TEACHER LEARNING<sup>2</sup>**

Among the many factors influencing education quality, teachers are widely recognized as a critical factor (UNESCO 2006; Villegas Reimers 2003). Researchers, policy makers, and program designers, implementers, and evaluators, therefore, are looking for ways of understanding teacher quality and teacher learning and focusing on effective and promising teacher improvement programs (ADEA 2004; ADEA 2005; Anderson 2002; Boyle et al. 2003; Craig et al. 1998; Leu 2005; Leu et al. 2005; Lewin and Stuart 2003; UNESCO 2004; UNESCO 2006; UNICEF 2000; USAID/EQUIP1 2004a; USAID/EQUIP2 2006; Verspoor 2006).

The literature on education quality indicates a strong link between teacher professional development and quality – especially in the areas of “teachers’ beliefs and practices, students’ learning and on the implementation of educational reforms” (UNESCO 2006, p. 71). This is particularly important for teachers working in the context of new constructivist and active-learning paradigms of teaching and learning. These approaches can only be implemented effectively when teachers understand the ideas behind the reforms and have the ability to apply ideas flexibly in the classroom (Santiago and McKenzie 2006, p. 6; USAID/EQUIP1 2004b; USAID/EQUIP1 2004c). If teachers are to practice active learning successfully in their classrooms, they need to develop flexibility for experimentation and innovation in the classroom, thus becoming “adaptive experts” who continuously add to their knowledge, skills, and professional commitment throughout their careers (Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005, p. 3).

Scholars and education program specialists have long supported the view that successful school reform is best achieved by helping teachers and schools become inquiring collaborative organizations, engaging the entire school community in the reform (Craig *et al.* 1998; Darling-Hammond 1993; Lieberman and Miller 1990; Villegas-Reimers 2003). Teachers’ ability to develop, adopt, and improve throughout their careers may also depend on their participation in collaborative organizations, or “communities of practice” based on continuous inquiry into practice (Darling-Hammond 2006; Grossman et al. 2001; Hatch 2006). A study of teacher education reform projects in East Africa outlines factors that contribute to effective teacher professional development: 1) teacher-centered and school-based workshops; 2) in-class coaching by consultants, supervisors, or peers; 3) team planning and problem-solving by collegial work groups; 4) action research; 5) teacher inter-visitation; and 6) professional study groups (Anderson 2002). Many of the ideas of education quality and teacher learning drawn from the international literature are evident in the teacher development programs of Namibia reviewed below.

## **LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR NAMIBIAN TEACHERS**

The Namibian government introduced a process of social transformation after independence in 1990 in which education has played a key role. Reforms introduced in the 1990s are based on social constructivism; equity and democratic participation; critical and transformative pedagogy; learner-centered and democratic education; and conceptual learning and integration of knowledge. A pre-service teacher education program, the Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD), was designed as the anchor of the new education policies (Angula and Grant-Lewis

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<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive literature review on quality of education and teacher learning is available through USAID/EQUIP1, *Quality of Education and Teacher Learning: A Review of the Literature*, by Elizabeth Leu and Alison Price-Rom.

1997; Dahlstrom 1995, p. 281; NIED 2003; Pomuti in Van Graan et al. 2005, p. 65). The three-year BETD program was initially regarded as a model of excellence because of its clear principles and strong program of practical school-based studies (Craig et al. 1998). Despite these promising features, however, the BETD has been increasingly criticized and is presently being revised because of a system-wide decline in quality and concerns that the pre-service diploma, held by only half of Namibian lower primary teachers, provides neither the subject knowledge nor the teaching skills needed to promote good student learning (NIED 2003).

Pre-service and in-service programs in any system ideally form a comprehensive and continuous program of professional development that supports teachers' practice throughout their careers (Craig et al. 1998; Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005; Villegas-Reimers 2003). Continuous in-service programs are especially important in a country like Namibia where many teachers have not completed pre-service teacher education, teaching and learning are being drastically reformed, rapidly increasing enrolments have led to overcrowded classes; and resources are severely constrained. Despite the need, Namibia is only now starting to put in place the policies, programs, and budgets to support a comprehensive system of continuous in-service professional development. Most Namibian teachers presently participate in only episodic professional development – centralized cascade workshops and occasional supervision visits to schools. International donors have carried out programs in specialized areas such as mathematics and English, but the most promising comprehensive program which builds quality at the school level and supports continuous teacher learning has been the School Improvement Program (SIP) which is part of the USAID-funded Basic Education Support (BES) programs.

Since 1995, USAID has supported the Namibian government's policies to improve the quality of primary education in the disadvantaged northern regions through three BES programs. BESI (1995-2000) focused on curriculum development and teacher support, providing structured instructional materials on the use of active learning and continuous assessment. BESII (2000-2004) developed the comprehensive SIP that works in schools and school clusters on school planning and assessment; strengthening decentralized school management; providing ongoing teacher professional development; and promoting community involvement in the life of schools. BES3 (2004-2008) is extending the SIP to all 770 schools in the six northern regions. The SIP includes the School Self Assessment (SSA) component. The SSA includes teachers, parents, and principals in a yearly reflective cycle of identifying school goals, working together to create school improvement according to these goals, and assessing change, a process that has now become national policy for all schools. The SIP includes a school-based teacher professional development program nested within the whole-school improvement process (LeCzel and Liman, 2003; USAID/EQUIP1 2004a; USAID/EQUIP2 2006).

## **NAMIBIA STUDY OF TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The Namibia study was based on in-depth interviews with a core group of 40 BETD teachers, two in each of 20 rural schools in two regions of northern Namibia. Other stakeholders, principals in each of the schools and focus groups of parents and students in each school, were also interviewed. Half of the schools had participated in the SIP and half had participated only in the more episodic in-service provided by the regions. The teachers in the study, therefore, had similar pre-service experiences and different in-service experiences. The study examined: 1) teachers'

and the other stakeholders' perceptions of quality;<sup>3</sup> 2) teachers' classroom practice; and 3) teachers' and other stakeholders' perceptions of the influence of professional development programs on quality in their schools. This paper reviews the findings in the third area, the influence of professional development, comparing the responses from SIP and non-SIP schools.

## **TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON IN-SERVICE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

1. *Available in-service professional development opportunities:* All 20 SIP teachers said that they had participated in professional development activities organized by SIP and enumerated an extensive list of workshop topics. The 20 non-SIP teachers attend fewer in-service cluster or circuit workshops; workshop subjects are more limited and random.
2. *Influence of in-service professional development on practice:* The SIP teachers described many ways in which their participation in SIP had influenced their practice, about half referring to how well they understood and used learner-centered education (LCE). Some SIP teachers referred to self-evaluation or reflection as a way to improve practice. Others described better understanding and use of specific teaching strategies. SIP teachers also referred to the positive effects parents' involvement on their teaching; working in a school team; working together on the projects funded by small grants under SIP; and initiatives based on the needs of individual schools and groups of teachers. All non-SIP teachers describe the influence of the workshops on teaching, although in more general terms. Some non-SIP teachers said that they had experienced little additional learning after completing the BETD.
3. *Support needed to improve the quality of teaching:* SIP teachers overwhelmingly identified SIP activities as being the most helpful form of support for becoming a better teacher. SIP teachers also mentioned the value of supervision visits, peer collaboration, and community involvement in the school. Non-SIP teachers also identified professional development as the most needed form of support, emphasizing the importance of regular and school-based workshops. Several non-SIP teachers asked for more supervision visits. Several mentioned the need for better relationships with the community and the need for additional resources.

## **PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES ON IN-SERVICE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

1. *Programs with the greatest influence on improving the quality of education:* All 10 SIP principals identified SIP as having had the greatest influence on improving quality in the region. Principals cited the clustering system for teachers and principals, the resources available through small grants, and the good relationships established between parents and teachers. Five of the 10 non-SIP principals also named SIP as having had the greatest impact, although they do not participate in the program. Others could not think of a program that had an influence. One non-SIP principal thought that projects were ineffective because they were not given enough time to take root and no time was given for reflection.
2. *Professional development influence on teaching and learning:* SIP principals were overwhelmingly positive about SIP, giving similar responses focusing on new forms of collective decision-making; school planning and assessment; community involvement in the school; parental involvement in the classroom; improved teaching using LCE; increased use

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<sup>3</sup> This is reported in another Issue Paper: USAID/EQUIP1 2006, "Perceptions of Namibian Teachers and Other Stakeholders of Quality of Education," by Elizabeth Leu, Karima Barrow, and Mariana Van Graan.

of teaching aids; more “joyful” learning with songs and plays; sharing of ideas among learners; involvement of parents in their children’s learning; and more cooperation among teachers. The non-SIP principals’ responses were predictably more limited as they had participated in fewer programs; some described lack of parental interest in school involvement.

3. *Sustainability of professional development programs:* All SIP principals said that the program was sustainable because they were, in the words of one principal “equipped with knowledge and skills which will enable us to continue and sustain the changes, even when the program has come to an end.” The non-SIP principals were generally less optimistic about the sustainability of the programs available to them; a few raised the issue of funds, an issue which the SIP principals did not mention.

### **PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON IN-SERVICE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

1. *Knowledge of professional development programs:* Nine of the 10 groups of SIP parents mentioned SIP by name; the other group described SIP without naming it. SIP parents were very knowledgeable about the effect of the program on school management, teaching, and their children’s learning. They described the positive effect of their participation in designing the yearly school development plan and described the value of developing vision and mission statements for the school. They said that SIP had empowered parents to participate fully in their children’s education. The non-SIP parents had little to say about professional development programs at their schools; two groups mentioned SIP because they had heard of it in other schools.
2. *Involvement in decision-making and learning:* All 10 groups of SIP parents said that they were involved in school decision-making, giving many examples of what they do (e.g., giving advice on school problems, discussing disciplinary problems, developing vision and mission statements, discussing how to follow student progress, making collective decisions), and why it is important (e.g., taking responsibility and feeling ownership). One group of non-SIP parents said they were not involved in making decisions at the school, three groups described involvement as “being called to meetings,” and the other six groups described limited involvement.

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results concerning teachers’ perspectives on the influence of professional development were strongly in favor of an ongoing, school-based form of professional development in which all teachers participate. This is seen to be more effective than episodic or centralized cascade models. All of the teachers expressed the need for more professional development, emphasizing the benefits of working in a collaborative whole-school manner with their peers and community members. This is in keeping with Namibia’s policies as well as with the international literature on effective professional development programs.

Although the demand for professional development along the lines of SIP is clear, the claim of stakeholders that professional development has led to successful practice in line with active-learning and learner-centered policies is less clear. The larger study reports that teachers and other stakeholders hold narrow and limited ideas about the policies that guide their practice, quality of education, and learner-centered education, although SIP teachers discuss quality with

somewhat more texture and depth than non-SIP teachers. The classroom practice observed in the study, however, indicated that SIP teachers' practice was only very slightly more successful on the items rated than the practice of non-SIP teachers. All teachers had low ratings, particularly in the more substantive areas of active learning such as the use of critical thinking, higher-order thinking skills, and cooperative and conceptual learning. Although the sample in the study is small and not representative, as is the case in most qualitative studies, the results suggest major challenges in both understanding and implementing active-learning policies. This may indicate the fact that complex and possibly contradictory policies, representing new visions of quality within new paradigms of teaching, and learning, are not easily understood and translated into effective practice, particularly in the context of rapid system expansion and resource constraint.

The findings indicate the need for strengthening pre-service teacher education, adjusting it to the challenges of understanding and implementing a complicated and unfamiliar educational paradigm within the reality of crowded classrooms with limited teaching and learning resources. The findings also call for the urgent establishment of a comprehensive and continuing in-service professional development program based on promoting better understanding of policies rooted in the reality of teachers' practice and local conditions. According to teachers and other stakeholders in this study, school-level change is significantly supported by the whole-school process of planning, reflection, and assessment represented by the SIP. The SIP contains a variety of ideas, mechanisms, and processes that appear to be promising for promoting systemic change and quality improvement.

The study suggests many challenges to policy makers and program planners. From the findings presented in this issue paper, the following areas emerge that may help improve system-wide quality: 1) planning will be strengthened if it focuses on the school level and includes local voices as a starting point for understanding how policies are perceived and practiced by teachers and other stakeholders; 2) in-service teacher professional development that reaches all teachers on a continuous basis at the school level is critical to ensure that teachers understand complex new approaches and develop appropriate new practices within the reality of increasingly difficult (i.e., overcrowded and under-resourced) classroom situations; and 3) programs that stakeholders view as highly successful, such as SIP, suggest that teacher professional development, in combination with a whole-school program that involves all stakeholders working on a process of planning, reflection, and assessment, is a promising approach to improving quality at the school level.

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