



Understanding professional development: Insights from Foundation Phase Teachers in Gauteng West, South Africa

Mathabiso Eunice Majahe¹  & Matshidiso Joyce Taole¹ 

¹ Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined Foundation Phase teachers' understanding of professional development (PD) activities in District Circuit 5, Cluster 2, Gauteng West, South Africa. Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm and Adult Learning Theory, the research employed an exploratory design using semi-structured interviews with purposively selected teachers and Departmental Heads. The elicited findings were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. The findings indicate that teachers view PD as essential for enhancing teaching competencies, updating pedagogical knowledge, and addressing diverse learner needs. However, participants reported that existing PD initiatives are often generic, misaligned with the realities of the Foundation Phase, and lack practical applicability. The key challenge was a gap between PD content and classroom demands. The study highlights the need for context-sensitive, teacher-driven, and practice-embedded PD models. The recommendations include sustained, phase-specific interventions, such as mentoring, professional learning communities, and reflective practices, to improve instructional relevance, teaching quality, and learner outcomes. This research emphasises the importance of aligning PD with teachers' classroom realities. The study contributes to existing knowledge by providing context-specific insights into how Foundation Phase teachers interpret and experience professional development, highlighting gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities, and offering evidence to inform the design of more responsive and practice-grounded PD models.

Keywords: Professional Development, Foundation Phase, Teacher Understanding, Adult Learning Theory, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

The quality of early education in South Africa (SA) is widely recognised as a critical determinant of long-term academic success and social development of learners.¹ Since the post-apartheid era, significant educational reforms have emphasised teacher development as a cornerstone of improving

¹ A. Ajani, "Enhancing Teachers' Knowledge for National Growth," *Journal of Education and Practice* 11, no. 22 (2020): 122–30; R Hasha and Wadesango Newman, "The Influence of Continuing Professional Teacher Development Programmes in Promoting Student Achievement in South African Schools," *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education* 24 (2021): 1–11.

CORRESPONDENCE – Matshidiso Joyce Taole Email: taolemj@unisa.ac.za

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learning outcomes.² In particular, professional development (PD) for teachers has been placed at the heart of national educational priorities, with the aim of improving instructional quality, supporting curriculum implementation, and equipping teachers to respond to diverse learner needs.³ The Education White Paper 6 (2001) underscores the importance of continuous teacher development to promote equity, improving educational standards, and prepare learners for the demands of a rapidly changing society.⁴ Continuous professional development (CPD) is broadly understood as an ongoing, systematic process through which teachers strengthen their professional knowledge, refine pedagogical practices, and acquire new competencies to meet evolving classroom demands.⁵ It encompasses both formal and informal learning opportunities, including workshops, mentoring, peer collaboration, reflective practice, and experiential learning embedded in day-to-day teaching.⁶ Unlike one-off training events, effective CPD is characterised by continuity, relevance, and practical applicability, enabling teachers to translate new knowledge into actionable strategies that improve instructional quality and learner outcomes.⁷ Within the South African context, CPD is positioned as a core mechanism to support curriculum implementation, improve teaching efficacy, and address persistent systemic challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, diverse learner needs, and resource inequalities.⁸ Thus, CPD serves as a critical driver of teacher growth and educational improvement, reinforcing the importance of sustained, contextually responsive professional learning.

Despite the policy emphasis, teachers' experiences and understanding of PD remain uneven and context-dependent. Foundation Phase teachers, who play a pivotal role in shaping learners' foundational skills, often face challenges such as limited access to relevant PD programs, insufficient leadership support, and difficulties in translating PD content into practical classroom strategies.⁹ Moreover, PD is increasingly recognised as encompassing not only formal workshops but also informal learning, peer collaboration, and mentorship, all of which contribute to meaningful professional growth.¹⁰ Therefore, exploring how teachers perceive and engage with these activities is essential for designing PD initiatives that are effective and contextually appropriate.

This study seeks to explore Foundation Phase teachers' understanding of professional development activities within District Circuit 5, Cluster 2 of Gauteng West. It aims to examine how teachers conceptualise PD, assess its relevance and practicality by exploring their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews, and identify the support structures that influence participation. The study addresses the central research question: *What is the Foundation Phase teachers' understanding of professional development activities in District Circuit 5, Cluster 2 of Gauteng West?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the significant scholarly and policy literature that informs the conceptualisation of teacher professional development in the context of the South African Foundation Phase context. It synthesises theoretical, empirical, and contextual perspectives to illuminate how professional development is defined, how it functions within early schooling, and the factors that influence its effectiveness.

² D. Agyapong, "Curriculum Changes and Their Impact on Educational Quality in South Africa.," *Educational Research* 65, no. 3 (2022): 302–15.

³ Hasha and Newman, "Continuing Professional Teacher Development," 4.

⁴ Department of Basic Education, "Annual Report 2020/21. South African Department of Basic Education.," 2020.

⁵ Ajani, "Enhancing Teachers' Knowledge," 125.

⁶ L. Darling-Hammond, M.E. Hyler, and M. Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2019); Easaw Alemayehu, "Does Continuous Professional Development (CPD) Improve Teachers Performance? Evidences from Public Schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia," *Research & Reviews: Journal of Educational Studies* 7, no. 9 (2021): 1–17.

⁷ Mary M Kennedy, "How We Learn about Teacher Learning," *Review of Research in Education* 43, no. 1 (2019): 138–62; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Teachers' Professional Development in Global Contexts: Insights and Innovations" (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019).

⁸ Hasha and Newman, "Continuing Professional Teacher Development," 4; R. Jansen and A. Blankley, "Teacher Learning and Systemic Reform in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 3 (2020): 1–15.

⁹ Ajani, "Enhancing Teachers' Knowledge," 125; Hasha and Newman, "Continuing Professional Teacher Development," 7.

¹⁰ Agyapong, "Curriculum Changes," 310.

The Importance of Continuous Professional Development

The field of education is dynamic and continually evolving, driven by innovative strategies, technologies, and teaching methods. Within this evolving landscape, teachers' continuous professional development is imperative for sustaining relevance and efficacy in their roles.¹¹ This imperative is particularly important for Foundation Phase teachers, who serve as the critical architects of young learners' cognitive, emotional, and social growth during the critical formative years of education. Research indicates that high-quality sustained professional development leads to improved teacher efficacy,¹² improved learner outcomes,¹³ and the successful implementation of educational reforms.¹⁴ For Foundation Phase specialists, whose pedagogical decisions profoundly influence literacy acquisition, numeracy development, and lifelong learning dispositions, ongoing professional growth is not only beneficial but ethically imperative to ensure equitable, developmentally appropriate education for all young children.¹⁵ The dynamic nature of early childhood education theory, coupled with South Africa's specific challenges of multilingual classrooms and resource disparities, makes continuous learning particularly vital for these teachers to adapt evidence-based practices to their unique contexts.¹⁶

Understanding Professional Development for Foundation Phase Teachers

Professional development is a cornerstone of effective teaching, equipping teachers with the competencies, skills, and knowledge necessary to refine their instructional practices and improve learner outcomes.¹⁷ A fundamental understanding of professional development is a crucial requirement for the Foundation Phase, as it directly influences the first educational experience of young learners.¹⁸ The formative years of schooling profoundly impact a child's long-term academic trajectory, making it imperative that teachers continuously develop and adapt their teaching strategies. Effective professional development ensures that teachers remain well-versed in evidence-based pedagogies, innovative classroom methodologies and the evolving educational landscape, ultimately enhancing their professional advancement and the learning experiences of learners.¹⁹

The UNESCO Teacher Professional Development Guidelines for SDG 4 (2020) define professional development as a rigorous and continuous systemic process aimed at improving teachers' ability to foster learner success. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development views professional development as the enhancement of knowledge, skills, and instructional effectiveness at both individual and institutional levels to achieve specific educational objectives.²⁰ These definitions emphasise the transformative essence of professional growth, especially when customised to the distinct requirements of Foundation Phase teachers. Foundation Phase teachers, who work with children aged 5 to 9, focus on building early literacy and numeracy skills, promoting cognitive and socio-emotional development, and fostering a lifelong love for learning.²¹ Their role extends beyond the classroom, as they collaborate with parents, caregivers and multidisciplinary educational professionals to create inclusive and supportive learning environments.²² Given the complexity and significance of their responsibilities, targeted professional development is essential to

¹¹ Liah Shonhe, "Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of Librarians: A Bibliometric Analysis of Research Productivity Viewed through WoS," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 2 (2020): 102106.

¹² Darling-Hammond et al., *Effective Teacher Professional Development*, 22.

¹³ OECD, *Teachers' Professional Development*, 41.

¹⁴ Kennedy, "How We Learn About Teacher Learning," 150.

¹⁵ Ryan Williams, "A Systematic Review of the Continuous Professional Development for Technology Enhanced Learning Literature," *Engineering International* 8, no. 2 (2020): 61–72.

¹⁶ Alemayehu, "Continuous Professional Development," 10.

¹⁷ Alemayehu, "Continuous Professional Development," 11.

¹⁸ A. Singh, R. M. Pillay, and T. Naidoo, "Professional Development and Teacher Effectiveness in Early Childhood Education," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (2021): 1–12.

¹⁹ R. Komalasari and M. Puspitasari, "Medical Teachers and Their Continuous Professional Development (CPD)," in *The Lifelong Learning Journey of Health Professionals: Continuing Education and Professional Development* (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2024), 54–76.

²⁰ OECD, *Teachers' Professional Development in Global Contexts* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019).

²¹ Welsh Government, *National Curriculum for Wales* (Cardiff: Welsh Government, 2015).

²² Singh et al., "Professional Development and Teacher Effectiveness," 6.

ensure that Foundation Phase teachers can effectively address the varied and evolving requirements of their learners.²³

Opportunities and Challenges for Teachers' Professional Development in South Africa

Emerging opportunities for improving teacher professional development through innovative approaches, such as online learning platforms, peer mentoring and contextually relevant training, are evidenced in South Africa. While there have been various initiatives to support teacher growth, the implementation of professional development programmes faces significant challenges, which encompass restricted access to resources, inadequate training opportunities and systemic inequalities that impede the complete potential of professional development efforts.

Opportunities to Improve Teachers' Professional Development

Considerable opportunities have been shown to strengthen professional development for South African teachers through more collaborative, context-responsive, and sustainable approaches have been evidenced.²⁴ One key opportunity lies in school-based Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which encourage teachers to participate in peer mentoring, cooperative lesson design and information exchange initiatives.²⁵ Research has shown that PLCs are effective in improving teaching practice as they provide ongoing support, encourage practical application of new methods, and foster a culture of lifelong learning.²⁶ By decentralising professional development efforts and embedding them within school communities, teachers have access to continuous learning without the logistical and financial burdens associated with external training workshops.²⁷

The integration of digital learning platforms also presents a promising opportunity to expand access to professional development.²⁸ With the growing adoption of e-learning tools, teachers, particularly those in remote areas, can participate in flexible, self-paced training programmes that address their specific needs. Initiatives such as the Department's TeacherConnect and the Thutong Education Portal have begun offering virtual courses, interactive resources, and virtual mentorship programs that help close the divide in training disparities between rural and urban areas.²⁹ Leveraging mobile technology can further enhance the reach of professional development, as many teachers have access to smartphones, enabling them to participate in webinars, online discussions, and digital resource-sharing networks at their convenience.³⁰

Additionally, the alignment of professional development with career progression and incentives could motivate teachers to actively engage in professional growth.³¹ Establishing structured pathways where professional development participation contributes to salary increments, promotion, or leadership roles could encourage sustained engagement in training programmes.³² The South African Council for Educators (SACE) has established Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) points, requiring teachers to engage in ongoing learning to maintain their professional status. However, to enhance its impact, stakeholders must ensure that CPTD activities are relevant, accessible and tailored to teachers' unique challenges.³³

²³ Komalasari and Puspitasari, "Medical Teachers and Their Continuous Professional Development," 60.

²⁴ M. J. Moloi, "Research and Teaching Methods for Electrical Circuits in Science, Technology, and Engineering: A Bibliometric Analysis," *Proceedings of the International Academic Conference on Education* 1, no. 1 (2023): 29–44.

²⁵ R. Mestry and T. Ndhlovu, "The Role of School Principals in Promoting Professional Development in South African Schools," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 2 (2020): 1–12.

²⁶ B. Ngwenya, "Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) and the Performance of Banks in South Africa" (University of Pretoria, 2022).

²⁷ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) South Africa, "Early Grade Reading Programme" (New York: UNICEF, , 2024).

²⁸ Moloi, "Research and Teaching Methods for Electrical Circuits," 32.

²⁹ Department of Basic Education, *Annual Performance Plan 2021/22*.

³⁰ Mncedisi Christian Maphalala and Ntombikayise Nkosi, "Fostering Ubuntu in Teacher Education for South African Higher Education," *African Journal of Childhood Education* 13, no. 1 (2023): 1298.

³¹ Moloi, "Research and Teaching Methods for Electrical Circuits," 41.

³² Maphalala and Nkosi, "Fostering Ubuntu in Teacher Education," 14.

³³ Jansen and Blankley, "Teacher Learning and Systemic Reform," 9.

Challenges of Teachers' Professional Development

Despite its recognised importance, professional development (PD) for teachers in South Africa is constrained by a range of systemic and contextual challenges that significantly undermine its effectiveness.³⁴ Systemic challenges stem from structural inequalities within the education system, including inequitable access to PD opportunities across provinces and districts. Also, teachers in rural and under-resourced areas often struggle with inadequate infrastructure, limited training facilities, and poor internet connectivity, all of which impede participation in both face-to-face and online learning programmes.³⁵ Additionally, the centralised organisation of PD activities, often hosted in urban centres, creates logistical and financial burdens for teachers in remote regions, thereby perpetuating disparities in exposure to ongoing professional learning.^{36,37} These systemic constraints contribute to uneven upskilling across the teaching workforce, with some educators gaining regular access to innovative pedagogical practices while others remain excluded from emerging instructional advancements.³⁸

Alongside these system-level barriers, teachers also face contextual challenges that arise from the realities of their school environments.³⁹ A recurring issue is the misalignment between PD content and the practical demands of classrooms. *Spaull and Jansen* observe that many PD programmes adopt a standardised, theory-driven approach that does not adequately address the daily instructional pressures teachers confront.⁴⁰ For Foundation Phase teachers, these pressures include managing overcrowded classrooms, navigating linguistic diversity, and responding to learners' socio-emotional needs, yet PD offerings seldom provide targeted, phase-specific guidance on these challenges.⁴¹ Compounding this disconnect is the perception that PD is often treated as a compliance-oriented requirement rather than a meaningful opportunity for skill development, which weakens motivation and fosters superficial engagement.⁴² The prevalence of once-off workshops with minimal follow-up support further limits teachers' capacity to implement new strategies effectively and sustainably.⁴³

A further barrier to effective PD is the insufficient financial and administrative support available at the school level. Many schools, particularly those in disadvantaged communities, lack adequate funding to support sustained professional development programmes or to finance substitute teachers during training sessions.⁴⁴ Furthermore, teachers' heavy workloads often limit their ability to fully participate in PD activities, especially when they must be completed outside regular school hours. This contributes to increased stress and burnout, further reducing the likelihood of meaningful participation.⁴⁵ Without structured incentives, such as formal recognition, career progression pathways, or tangible improvements in teaching conditions, many educators perceive PD as offering limited immediate value to their professional growth.⁴⁶

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Adult Learning Theory (ALT), which provides a structured framework to understand how professional development (PD) influences teaching practices and outcomes. According to *Creswell*, a theoretical framework integrates key concepts and theories to inform and support research.⁴⁷ This study offers insights into how PD can meet the needs of Foundation Phase teachers operating in dynamic and challenging educational contexts.

Developed by Knowles, Adult Learning Theory revolutionised education for adult learners by recognising their self-directedness, prior experiences, and readiness to learn in response to real-life

³⁴ Moloi, "Research and Teaching Methods for Electrical Circuits," 42.

³⁵ Department of Basic Education, *Annual Performance Plan 2021/22*, 17.

³⁶ Ngwenya, *Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG)*, 61.

³⁷ Moloi, "Research and Teaching Methods for Electrical Circuits," 42.

³⁸ UNICEF, *Early Grade Reading Programme*, 9.

³⁹ Mestry and Ndhlovu, "Role of School Principals," 7.

⁴⁰ Nic Spaull and Jonathan D. Jansen, *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

⁴¹ Ngwenya, *Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG)*, 61.

⁴² Mestry and Ndhlovu, "Role of School Principals," 7.

⁴³ Jansen and Blankley, "Teacher Learning and Systemic Reform," 9.

⁴⁴ Maphalala and Nkosi. "Fostering Ubuntu in Teacher Education for South African Higher Education." 10–25.

⁴⁵ Moloi, "Research and Teaching Methods for Electrical Circuits," 42.

⁴⁶ UNICEF, *Early Grade Reading Programme*, 9.

⁴⁷ John W Creswell, *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research* (SAGE publications, 2021).

needs.⁴⁸ Unlike traditional models that treated adults as passive recipients of knowledge, Knowles emphasised active, participatory learning where content must be relevant, practical, and immediately applicable.⁴⁹ Adults are motivated to learn when confronting challenges or gaps in their personal or professional lives, making autonomy, experiential learning, and practical application central principles.⁵⁰

For Foundation Phase teachers, these principles highlight the importance of PD that is flexible, contextually relevant, and adaptable to varying experience levels and teaching styles.⁵¹ The COVID-19 pandemic underscored this need, as teachers navigated online and hybrid instruction with limited in-person support, demonstrating the value of self-directed, technology-enhanced PD.⁵² Within this study, ALT frames professional development as a process that must be practical, actionable, and tailored to the immediate classroom needs of Foundation Phase teachers. By emphasising autonomy, relevance, and adaptability, the theory supports PD strategies that enhance teacher competence, enable responsive classroom practices, and foster continuous professional growth in a rapidly changing educational landscape.⁵³

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to explore Foundation Phase teachers' experiences with professional development activities in District Circuit 5, Cluster 2, Gauteng West, South Africa. A qualitative approach was selected for its ability to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences of teachers and provide in-depth insights into how professional development influences instructional practices.⁵⁴

An exploratory research design guided the study, as the topic remains underexamined in the local context. This design allowed a comprehensive investigation of the lived experiences and the identification of emergent themes, without the constraints of pre-existing theoretical frameworks.⁵⁵ Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method, providing participants with the opportunity to articulate their perspectives while allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights and clarify responses as needed.⁵⁷

Population, Data Collection, and Analysis

The study population comprised Foundation Phase teachers (Grades 1–3) and Departmental Heads (DHs) from three purposively selected public schools in District Circuit 5, Cluster 2. Inclusion criteria ensured that participants could provide informed, contextually rich insights: teachers were required to have at least ten years of classroom experience and active involvement in professional development activities, while DHs were required to have at least 5 years of leadership experience and involvement in coordinating professional development initiatives.⁵⁸

⁴⁸ William J Rothwell, *Adult Learning Basics* (Association for Talent Development, 2020); Szufang Chuang, "The Applications of Constructivist Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory on Adult Continuous Development," *Performance Improvement* 60, no. 3 (March 14, 2021): 6–14, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pfi.21963>.

⁴⁹ Tara Fenwick and Mark Tennant, "Understanding Adult Learners," in *Dimensions of Adult Learning* (Routledge, 2020), 55–73.

⁵⁰ Angela M Passarelli and David A Kolb, "Using Experiential Learning Theory to Promote Student Learning and Development in Programs of Education Abroad," in *Student Learning Abroad* (Routledge, 2023), 137–61.

⁵¹ Rothwell, *Adult Learning Basics*.

⁵² Chuang, "Constructivist and Social Learning Theory," 8; Fenwick and Tennant, "Understanding Adult Learners," 61.

⁵³ B. S. Bell and R. L. Bell, *Learning in Organizations: An Evidence-Based Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Passarelli and Kolb, "Using Experiential Learning Theory to Promote Student Learning and Development in Programs of Education Abroad."

⁵⁴ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2018); J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches (4th Ed.)* (Sage, 2018).

⁵⁵ Banabotlhe G. Baakeleng et al., "Indigenous Practitioners' Views on Causes of Female Infertility," *Health SA Gesondheid* 28 (February 8, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v28i0.2152>. Creswell, J. W., *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (New York: SAGE Publications, 2018).

⁵⁶ Earl R Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Cengage Au, 2020).

⁵⁷ G. Guest, E. Namey, and M. Saldaña, *Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2017); John W Creswell and J David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage publications, 2017).

⁵⁸ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 89.

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interview schedule included two sections: demographic information and open-ended questions aligned with the study objectives. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Data were analysed using thematic analysis with an inductive approach, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting.⁵⁹ This approach facilitated the emergence of patterns and themes grounded in participants' narratives.

Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies: credibility through member checking and prolonged engagement; transferability through rich contextual description; dependability through systematic documentation; and confirmability through audit trails and reflexivity.⁶⁰ Ethical standards were rigorously observed, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms, ensuring data storage, and safeguarding participants' well-being, in line with the UNISA Research Ethics Review Committee guidelines.⁶¹

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The study explored how Foundation Phase teachers in District Circuit 5, Cluster 2 of Gauteng West, conceptualise professional development activities. The findings revealed that teachers generally view professional development as a continuous, essential process aimed at improving their teaching skills, staying up-to-date with curriculum changes, and responding effectively to diverse learner needs. For most participants, professional development was not limited to formal workshops but also included informal learning, peer collaboration, and mentorship. Three sub-themes emerged: the relevance and practicality of professional development activities, which highlighted teachers' belief that development activities should be directly applicable to their classroom realities; awareness and perception of professional development activities, which reflected their recognition of professional development as a tool for growth and adaptability; and support and encouragement from leadership, which influenced how teachers valued and participated in professional development activities.

Professional Development as a Key Tool for Enhancing Teaching Competencies

When participants were asked about their understanding of professional development activities in District Circuit 5 Cluster 2, they expressed varying perspectives, but a common thread emerged: their recognition of professional development as a tool for professional growth. However, many participants also pointed out that professional development activities in their district often lack relevance to the specific needs of Foundation Phase teachers. The following are the responses that highlight how participants define professional development activities in this context.

Teacher 1 demonstrated an understanding of professional development as training aimed at improving teaching skills, but noted that the sessions often do not align with the real challenges in the classroom. She explained:

"Professional development is training to help us improve, especially in the foundation phase. But most of the time, it's too broad and doesn't focus on what we do daily in the classroom. It should be more focused on the practical aspects of teaching young children." (Teacher 1)

Teacher 2 viewed professional development activities as a tool to improve teaching practices, but emphasised that the content often feels too generalised. She highlighted the need for professional development activities to be more tailored to the Foundation Phase. She stated:

⁵⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide," 2021; Creswell, *Research Design*, 45.

⁶⁰ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985); Lorelli S Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847; S.B. Merriam and E.J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: CA: Jossey-Bass, 2020).

⁶¹ University of South Africa (UNISA), *Research Ethics Policy and Guidelines* (Pretoria: UNISA, 2024); Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 89.

“Professional development, in my view, is meant to make us better teachers by giving us tools to enhance our teaching skills. But, in my experience, the workshops are too generalised. They don’t consider the specific needs of foundation phase teachers. We need something more focused on early childhood education.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 3 understood professional development activities as an opportunity to gain new strategies for effective teaching. However, she emphasised that the professional development activities offered did not always align with the needs of Foundation Phase teachers. She shared:

“To me, professional development means learning new methods and strategies to be a better teacher. But sometimes, the professional development sessions are not specific to what we do in our classrooms, especially in the early grades. They should focus more on how to teach young learners, like phonics or behaviour management.” (Teacher 3)

Teacher 4 defined professional development activities as an ongoing process of learning and improving teaching techniques. However, she expressed frustration with how professional development sessions often focus on topics that are not immediately useful in their daily teaching. She shared:

“Professional development is about continually learning and finding new ways to teach. But what frustrates me is that the professional development programmes often focus on things that don’t apply to what we do in the classroom, like new tech tools that aren’t relevant for our young learners. We need something practical that’s directly useful in teaching literacy and numeracy.” (Teacher 4)

Teacher 5 defined professional development as the support of teachers to improve their teaching methods, but noted that the content often felt disconnected from the practical demands of teaching young children. She said:

“I understand professional development as training that helps us get better at what we do, especially in the Foundation Phase. But often, the professional development is too theoretical. It doesn’t focus on what we need, like teaching literacy or managing behaviour in the classroom.” (Teacher 5)

Teacher 7 saw professional development as essential to becoming a better teacher, but noted that much of the training was overly theoretical rather than focused on practical teaching strategies. She clarified:

“Professional development should help us improve as teachers. But in my experience, most professional development is about theory. What we need is something practical that we can apply right away in the classroom, especially in teaching literacy and managing classroom behaviour.” (Teacher 7)

DH 1 defined professional development activities as a way to build teacher capacity and improve teaching quality. However, she noted that the training often did not address the specific needs of teachers in the district. She said:

“Professional development is meant to help teachers grow and build capacity. But too often, it feels like a box-ticking exercise. The workshops don’t address the challenges that Foundation Phase teachers face, like literacy and numeracy.” (DH1)

DH 2 offered a broader perspective on professional development activities. DH 2 defined it as a continuous process of self-improvement, which includes formal academic advancement, such as moving from a degree to an honour’s qualification, and informal learning through workshops and peer-to-peer engagements. She explained:

“Professional development for me is learning or developing oneself by registering or studying further at an accredited institution in the teaching profession. For example, moving from a degree to honours or pursuing other learning practices contributes to personal growth. Additionally, development occurs through peer-to-peer interactions and workshops offered by various companies in the profession”. (DH2)

DH 3 also viewed professional development activities as a way to improve teaching quality, but she emphasised that it should be more relevant and directly applicable to the challenges teachers face in the classroom. She stated:

“Professional development should be about improving teaching quality. But too often, the professional development activities feel more like a formality. They don’t address what we need in the Foundation Phase. Professional development needs to be more focused on real classroom challenges, like how to improve literacy and numeracy skills in young learners.” (DH3)

The participants shared a common understanding that professional development is essential for improving teaching practice. However, there is strong consensus that professional development activities in District Circuit 5 Cluster 2 often do not address the specific needs of Foundation Phase teachers.

Value of professional development /positive view of professional development

Participants recognised professional development activities as a significant component of their career growth. Across the board, teachers expressed the belief that professional development activities are essential for improving their teaching effectiveness, enhancing classroom practice and fostering personal professional growth. Despite varied experiences and perspectives, the overall consensus highlighted the crucial role that professional development activities play in helping teachers stay informed, up-to-date and motivated.

Teacher 2 shared a view of professional development activities as an essential tool for her development. She saw professional development activities as a means of honing her teaching skills, especially as she continues to learn in her teaching journey. She noted:

“Professional development is important, especially for someone like me who is still learning. It’s a chance to enhance what I do in the classroom, and I can always find something useful to improve my practice.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 5 spoke about professional development activities as an opportunity to grow, seeing them as a way to expand her knowledge and skills. She expressed the belief that professional development activities are an ongoing process that supports teachers in refining their practice:

“I understand that professional development is supposed to help us grow, and I can see the value in the sessions that provide new strategies or methods. It’s not always perfect, but it’s crucial for keeping us on track with our teaching.” (Teacher 5)

Teacher 8 recognised professional development activities as an essential element for keeping up with new trends and pedagogical strategies, particularly in her role as a Foundation Phase teacher. She explained:

“Professional development is vital, especially in the early years of schooling. It’s important to stay informed on new approaches to teaching that can benefit our younger learners. It helps us refine our methods and adapt to the needs of our students.” (Teacher 8)

Teacher 8 acknowledged that professional development activities provide valuable opportunities for both personal and professional advancement. She noted that such initiatives allow teachers to critically reflect on their teaching approaches and make the necessary adjustments to better support their learners. She stated:

“After many years of teaching, professional development activities have still helped me grow. Even if the topics aren’t always a perfect fit, I do learn something new that I can incorporate into my classroom. Professional development activities are about evolving, and that’s what we need to be better teachers.” (Teacher 8)

Teacher 6 echoed the view that professional development activities are important for professional growth, particularly when they introduce innovative strategies and teaching techniques. She explained

that professional development activities encourage teachers to think critically and engage with new ideas that can make a significant difference in the classroom:

“Professional development keeps us engaged in our profession. It’s an opportunity to explore fresh ideas and techniques that could improve our teaching. It allows us to evolve and be responsive to the challenges we face every day.” (Teacher 6)

Teacher 7 shared a more enthusiastic outlook on professional development activities, noting that, even when the content was not immediately applicable, the discussions and ideas that emerged during sessions helped them view teaching from a new perspective:

“I look at professional development as an important part of my professional journey. Even if the session doesn’t always solve my immediate problems, it provides ideas that I can think about and experiment with. It gives me new perspectives on how to handle situations in the classroom.” (Teacher 7)

DH1 emphasised the importance of professional development activities for career longevity, viewing it as a fundamental part of teacher development. She noted that professional development activities, if well-structured, contribute significantly to both personal improvement and institutional growth:

“Professional development is essential for the growth of both individual teachers and the school as a whole. It’s not just about learning new techniques; it’s about growing as professionals and improving the quality of education for our learners. professional development keeps teachers motivated and engaged in their work.” (DH1)

DH2 viewed professional development activities as a tool for enhancing teaching quality through both concrete and non-concrete methods. DH2 explained,

“Professional development activities are activities aimed at assisting teachers to implement what they have learnt thoroughly to learners by using concrete and non-concrete approaches when the content is grasped by learners. Professional activities are learning through play using six bricks that we integrate within all the learning areas and assist learners to acquire the set skills according to their age and grade level. These are the activities that reinforce what teachers implement in their classes and also provide additional knowledge on teaching and learning”. (DH2)

These responses suggest that teachers appreciate the value of professional development activities in fostering continuous professional growth. For them, professional development activities are seen not only as an opportunity to refine their practice but also as a means to stay connected with the latest developments in teaching and learning. The positive view of professional development activities is built around its potential to improve teaching skills, stay up-to-date on educational trends, and foster a sense of personal and professional development.

Professional Development does not target the needs of teachers

Although participants generally appreciated the role of professional development activities in improving their teaching and supporting their professional growth, some felt these initiatives did not adequately address their specific needs. Despite the recognition, there was a strong, recurring sentiment that current professional development initiatives often fail to address the real, specific challenges teachers face in their day-to-day classroom contexts, particularly within the Foundation Phase. Thus, teachers acknowledged professional development activities as an essential aspect of professional identity and career progression, yet lamented their limited practical application and relevance, describing them as misaligned, repetitive and overly generic.

Teacher 2 highlighted her desire for professional development activities that go beyond theory and directly support her classroom practice:

“Professional development is important, especially for someone like me who is still learning. But sometimes the workshops feel repetitive, and I don’t always feel like they help with what I need to improve in the classroom. I need something practical that I can use every day.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 5 voiced similar concerns, stating that while she values the concept of professional development activities, many sessions lack direct relevance:

"I understand that professional development is supposed to help us grow, but sometimes it feels like a waste of time. The topics aren't always aligned with the specific challenges I face in my classroom, so I don't always benefit from the sessions. I think they need to be more specific to the real issues we face as teachers." (Teacher 5)

Teacher 8 questioned the effectiveness of generic professional development models, particularly in her Foundation Phase setting:

"I've been to so many professional development sessions, and while I know they're supposed to help, I'm not always convinced that they do. Many times, it feels like a one-size-fits-all approach that doesn't really take into account the unique needs of the foundation phase. We need professional development that understands the developmental stages of our students" (Teacher 8)

Teacher 8 offered a critical reflection, noting that professional development activities tend to lose their value when they do not evolve with the teacher's professional context:

"After so many years of teaching, I sometimes question the relevance of these sessions. They often don't address what I'm struggling with in my classroom. I need practical advice that works with the kids I teach, but a lot of the training is too general. It's like they're trying to cover everything, but in doing so, they miss the point." (Teacher 8)

Teacher 6 echoed this sentiment, emphasising that professional development activities must be grounded in the real and urgent issues teachers face:

"Professional development is something that can improve your teaching, but too often it doesn't focus on what we need. For example, we're struggling with things like classroom management and improving literacy. professional development needs to focus on the real challenges we face in the classroom every day." (Teacher 6)

Teacher 7 reinforced this by highlighting the gap between information and applicability:

"I know that professional development is supposed to help us grow, but sometimes I feel like it's just a waste of time. I go to these workshops, and while the information is nice, it's not always useful for what I'm doing in the classroom. I need something I can take back and use immediately, like better strategies for teaching reading or handling difficult behaviour." (Teacher 7)

DH1 emphasised that professional development activities must be differentiated and responsive, particularly when it comes to phase-specific demands:

"Professional development is crucial for teachers to stay up-to-date and improve their skills, but it needs to be tailored to the needs of the teachers. In the Foundation Phase, we need more training that focuses on early childhood development and literacy, and not just broad, general topics that may not apply to all teachers." (DH1)

DH 2 shared a key concern about the disconnect between national or provincial directives and reality on the ground, particularly in township schools.

"Workshops sometimes feel irrelevant because they do not consider the unique challenges we face in our township context compared to Model C schools. We deal with larger class sizes, more marking, and a lack of resources, which makes our teaching environment challenging." (DH2)

The verbatim quotes revealed a tension between the recognised theoretical value of professional development and the practical misalignment of its delivery. Participants expressed a clear desire for professional development activities that are customised, phase-specific and problem-oriented, with actionable strategies that can be quickly integrated into their teaching practice.

DISCUSSION

Teachers in District Circuit 5, Cluster 2, see professional development not as a mere compliance requirement but as an essential, practice-based tool to boost teaching skills, adapt curricula, and support career growth. This practical view directly addresses the main research question, showing that teachers prioritise professional development based on its immediate relevance to their classrooms rather than on theoretical concepts alone. Their focus on literacy, numeracy, and learner diversity aligns with the view that professional development is key to effective teaching and quality early education.⁶² However, the study also highlights a key tension: Although teachers value professional growth, they often criticise current programs as too broad and disconnected from the realities of teaching young learners. This supports Kennedy's claim that much research on professional learning overlooks how teachers interpret new knowledge within their specific instructional settings.⁶³ As a result, teachers' understanding is largely experience-based; they find professional development meaningful only when it directly helps with the pedagogical and behavioural challenges they face daily, revealing a gap between policy goals and what is needed in the classroom.

A key aspect of this concept is the clear gap between centrally designed professional development programs and the socio-economic realities of township and under-resourced schools. Participants consistently noted that generic, "one-size-fits-all" workshops ignore specific phase challenges such as managing large classes, linguistic diversity, and limited teaching resources. This supports existing research showing how structural inequalities lead to unequal access to relevant professional learning.^{64,65,66} As Spaul and Jansen state, South African professional development often focuses more on policy dissemination than on solving pedagogical issues, a point confirmed by teachers' reports of repetitive, compliance-focused training.⁶⁷ When professional development is disconnected from real-world contexts, it unintentionally reinforces teachers' marginalisation by failing to provide the targeted support needed for implementing evidence-based strategies. Hasha and Newman also observe that continuing professional development programs in South Africa often face implementation challenges due to a mismatch with local contexts.⁶⁸ Therefore, teachers' dissatisfaction reflects a desire for decentralised, problem-solving interventions that recognise the complex environments in which Foundation Phase teachers work.

Moreover, Knowles' Adult Learning Theory offers a strong framework for understanding why current professional development methods often misalign with teachers' expectations.⁶⁹ The theory suggests that adults learn best when they are problem-centred, experience-driven, and motivated by practical application, aligning with teachers' need for targeted, actionable training. When workshops focus too much on abstract theory instead of practical strategies, they neglect core principles of andragogy, leading to shallow engagement and limited impact in classrooms. Also, meaningful adult learning must respect prior experience and promote self-direction, which helps explain teachers' preference for ongoing, embedded models such as mentoring, peer collaboration, and professional learning communities.^{70,71} Passarelli and Kolb show that experiential, constructivist learning environments boost motivation and reflective practice among teachers.⁷² The data confirm that when professional development aligns with these principles, teachers show greater agency, adaptability, and willingness to try new teaching methods. This integration of theory clarifies that effective professional

⁶² Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development*; UNESCO, *Teacher Professional Development Guidelines: Empowering Teachers to Achieve SDG 4*. (Paris: UNESCO, 2020).

⁶³ Kennedy, "How We Learn About Teacher Learning." 138–162.

⁶⁴ Department of Basic Education. *Annual Performance Plan 2021/22*.

⁶⁵ Mestry and Ndhlovu. "The Role of School Principals in Promoting Professional Development in South African Schools."

⁶⁶ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) South Africa. *Early Grade Reading Programme*.

⁶⁷ Spaul and Jansen. *South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality*.

⁶⁸ Hasha and Newman. "The Influence of Continuing Professional Teacher Development Programmes in Promoting Student Achievement in South African Schools."

⁶⁹ Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge Books, 1980).

⁷⁰ Rothwell, *Adult Learning Basics*.

⁷¹ Fenwick and Tennant. "Understanding Adult Learners."

⁷² Passarelli and Kolb. "Using Experiential Learning Theory to Promote Student Learning and Development in Programs of Education Abroad."

development for Foundation Phase teachers should shift from top-down knowledge transfer to collaborative, context-aware inquiry that actively utilizes educators' professional expertise.

These results are significant for shaping educational policies, curriculum design, and district planning. They also deepen the scholarly insight into professional teacher learning in resource-limited settings. By showing how Foundation Phase teachers view professional development through a practical, context-based lens, this study challenges the idea that standardised training is always effective. It highlights the importance of teacher agency, relevance to their phase, and ongoing instructional support.⁷³ The findings offer a clear guide for curriculum developers and school leaders to make professional development a continuous, participatory process rooted in school structures, helping to close the gap between policy and practice. Therefore, the study shows that Foundation Phase teachers see professional development as a vital, practice-based tool to improve instruction and professional growth when it aligns with their context and is immediately useful.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these insights, it is recommended that professional development initiatives be reimagined as continuous, practice-embedded, and teacher-centred processes. This includes designing phase-specific workshops, mentoring programmes, professional learning communities, peer collaboration opportunities, and reflective practice mechanisms that directly address real classroom challenges. Education authorities and school leadership should prioritise aligning professional development with teachers' daily instructional needs, ensuring it is relevant to literacy, numeracy, and learner engagement strategies. Furthermore, professional development should promote teacher agency, adaptive expertise, and critical engagement with evolving curriculum demands, allowing teachers to integrate evidence-based strategies into their practice. Therefore, by emphasising practical applicability, contextual responsiveness, and ongoing support, professional development can meaningfully contribute to improving teaching quality, learner outcomes, and the professional growth of Foundation Phase educators.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Foundation Phase teachers in District Circuit 5, Cluster 2, conceptualise professional development activities as essential for enhancing teaching competencies, improving classroom practice, and fostering personal and professional growth. Teachers consistently highlighted that professional development is most meaningful when it is directly applicable to their classroom realities, particularly in supporting literacy and numeracy instruction. Although participants recognised the theoretical and career-enhancing value of professional development, there was a recurring concern about the lack of contextualisation, practical relevance, and phase-specific focus in current initiatives. Findings indicate that generic, one-size-fits-all workshops fail to address the complex, contextually bound challenges faced by Foundation Phase teachers, including large class sizes, resource constraints, and diverse learner needs. This aligns with the existing literature that emphasises the importance of sustained, teacher-driven, and context-sensitive professional development models to improve teaching quality and learner outcomes. This research emphasises the importance of aligning PD with teachers' classroom realities.

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⁷³ A. AbdulRab, "Professional Development Activities for Teachers in Developing Nations: A Case Study," *Journal of Education Policy* 25, no. 3 (2023): 356–69; UNESCO. *Teacher Professional Development Guidelines: Empowering Teachers to Achieve SDG 4*.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Mathabiso is a postgraduate researcher specialising in teacher development, early childhood education, and instructional improvement within South African schooling contexts. Her research interests include professional development models, curriculum implementation, literacy and numeracy acquisition in the Foundation Phase, and the role of school leadership in supporting continuous teacher learning. She contributed to research projects focusing on classroom practice, teacher training, and educational policy implementation, and are committed to advancing equity and quality in basic education. Mathabiso is affiliated with the University of South Africa (UNISA) and engages in scholarly communities concerned with qualitative research methods, teacher professional growth, and foundational learning. Her work reflects a sustained interest in improving the professional competencies of Foundation Phase teachers through contextually grounded and evidence-based development strategies.

Professor Matshidiso Joyce Taole is a Full Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA). She has extensive experience in teaching and learning in higher education, with many years of service as an academic involved in programme design, alignment, development, and evaluation. Her scholarly work is underpinned by a commitment to strengthening practical, context-responsive teaching and learning as a means of advancing sustainable educational transformation. Her academic vision and mission focus on fostering students' self-efficacy and nurturing them to become lifelong, critical, and innovative thinkers. She is actively involved in the supervision of postgraduate students within the College of Education. Professor Taole publishes and presents widely on issues of inclusivity, rural education, curriculum, teaching and learning, and professional development. She has presented research at both national and international conferences and holds an NRF C rating.