

Improving the Quality and Effectiveness of Distance Learning for Teachers and Changing Mindsets

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Abstract: A recent report from the Education Development Centre (EDC) examines different methods of distance learning and their impact on the professional growth of educators in low-resource settings. Additionally, it gathers best practices for the design and execution of distance learning initiatives.

For educators worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic may be permanently remembered as a pivotal moment that propelled professional development into the realm of remote learning. Although the initial transition was fraught with technical and pedagogical challenges, many educators gradually experienced a shift from frustration to satisfaction in various contexts. Numerous teachers found enjoyment in remote learning and adapted to teaching through technological means. Some even concluded that distance learning could rival traditional in-person instruction under specific conditions (Burns, in press; Watkins, 2021).

Education systems recognized the potential to offer a broader range of professional learning opportunities by utilizing distance technologies, thereby enhancing convenience for teachers. As a result, three years later, distance learning—whether utilized independently or in conjunction with face-to-face instruction—has emerged as a widely accepted alternative and complement to traditional learning methods. This significant change has greatly impacted the occurrence and structure of professional development for educators across various regions (Burns, in press).

The growing acceptance of distance education, the readiness of educators to participate in remote professional development, and the availability of various learning opportunities are indeed encouraging advancements. However, these factors have not addressed the enduring and legitimate concerns about the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of distance-based professional development for teachers.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of professional development into remote learning environments, bringing about challenges such as lack of evidence-based research on teacher learning and inadequate design and support for distance educators. The Public Melen School in Yaoundé, Cameroon, highlights the importance of

recognizing online and mobile learning as distinct modalities with their own advantages and challenges. The guide urges stakeholders to critically examine their perceptions of distance learning, promoting the enhancement of teacher's skills, instructional methods, and student outcomes, while also offering opportunities for practice and growth.

➤ *The Commitments—Both Realized and Unmet—Associated with Distance Education For Educators:-*

In its latest publication, Distance Education for Teacher Training: Modes, Models and Methods, which I authored, the Education Development Centre confronts these issues. This document assesses the significance and impact of distance learning for both pre-service and in-service educators, particularly in resource-limited settings. The guide examines various modalities of distance learning and their implications for teachers' professional growth, while also gathering best practices for the design and execution of distance education initiatives.

The EDC guide is based on the belief that distance education should—and must—remain a viable avenue for professional development for teachers globally, especially for those who do not have access to traditional in-person educational settings. It underscores the increasing reach, acceptance, and satisfaction with distance learning among university faculty, educators, and historically marginalized groups, including refugees and communities in the Arctic.

However, it also raises concerns regarding several persistent issues in distance education, such as the scarcity of evidence-based research on teacher learning across various distance education formats, particularly online and mobile learning. Furthermore, it highlights the poor design and lack of adequate preparation and support for most distance educators worldwide, which undermines the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of distance education. At the Public Melen School in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, students utilize tablets and computers as integral components of their educational experience.

➤ *Shifting Mindsets: Beyond Technological Solutions:-*

At the core of these challenges lie deep-seated human and institutional beliefs, biases, and misunderstandings that impede the effectiveness of distance education. A common concern is the inclination to view online and mobile learning solely as substitutes for conventional face-to-face instruction, rather than appreciating them as unique formats, each possessing its own set of benefits and obstacles.

To validate the investments made in distance education, the guide encourages those responsible for funding, managing, and designing distance-based professional development to reflect on their own beliefs regarding distance learning. To aid in this reflection, this blog proposes that we consider the following points.

➤ *Distance Education Serves as a Means for the Professional Development of Educators:-*

Professional development conducted remotely must adhere to the same rigorous standards as conventional face-to-face education. It should facilitate the advancement of teachers' skills, instructional techniques, and student achievement. Additionally, it is imperative that it emphasizes critical components of effective teaching, such as subject matter expertise, teaching strategies, pedagogical content knowledge, student learning and development, and

overall teaching effectiveness, while also providing ample opportunities for practice and improvement.

➤ *While Technology Plays a Crucial Role in Distance Education, it Should not be Regarded as the Most Critical Component:-*

The significance of technology in distance education is undeniable, and any program in this field must consider factors such as the available infrastructure, technology access, personnel competencies, and assessment methods. However, the emphasis should not solely be on technology within a distance education initiative. The platform used for distance education serves primarily as a software tool, rather than a comprehensive pedagogical approach or a framework for professional growth. Although technology can enhance and expand the possibilities for distance professional development, the activities centered around the curriculum within the platform are paramount, as they represent the essential elements that effectuate meaningful change.

➤ *The Primary Objective of Distance Education is to Enhance Student Learning Outcomes:-*

Teacher education, encompassing both initial training and ongoing professional development, is crucial as it represents the most direct and effective means of fostering school improvement (Fletcher-Wood & Zuccollo, 2020). Consequently, the aim of any type of teacher education, whether conducted in-person or through distance learning, should prioritize the enhancement of teaching quality to elevate students' knowledge and skills. If there is a lack of awareness regarding this objective and the provision of high-quality professional learning opportunities grounded in best practices that support this aim, distance learning programs may ultimately fail to benefit teachers and their students.

➤ *Distance Programs Should Consider the Length, Duration, and Complexity of the Change Process:-*

Professional development for teachers, irrespective of whether it is conducted online, in-person, or through a blended approach, necessitates alterations in teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, aptitudes, values, and behaviours. These transformations can be intricate and are frequently met with resistance from both individuals and institutions. Striking a balance between the urgency for swift change and the inherent human reluctance to adapt requires that educators are afforded sufficient time, comprehension, and continuous support throughout the change process. Additionally, it is essential for donors and implementers to moderate their expectations and aspirations. Failing to acknowledge this need for support can render efforts to implement change counterproductive, stressful, and ultimately ineffective.

➤ *Quality is of Utmost Importance in Every Aspect of Distance Learning:-*

The publication Distance Education for Teacher Training: Modes, Models and Methods underscores that maintaining high standards should be the foremost priority throughout all elements of the distance education framework. This includes having qualified and well-

prepared educators, thoughtfully designed curricula, and adherence to established standards. It is essential to define, implement, and assess quality across all forms of distance education. The significance of this emphasis on quality is amplified by the increasing globalization of higher education and the professional development of educators, the emergence of diverse distance education formats—particularly hybrid and online learning—largely propelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the imperative to improve professional development within initiatives funded by donors.

➤ *The Emphasis on Quality is Particularly Vital Within Donor-Funded Education Programs, Which Carry Distinct Educational and Fiduciary Obligations:-*

In many cases, these programs aim to improve a country's educational workforce and strengthen teacher education programs that confer degrees. Therefore, it is essential that the distance education initiatives they support adhere to rigorous national or international standards, guaranteeing that quality is upheld and evaluated through appropriate systems and frameworks.

➤ *The Potential of Distance Professional Development for Educators:-*

Overcoming the challenges linked to distance teacher development significantly depends on advancements in both technology and methodology. This endeavour requires a transformation in our understanding of the characteristics, constraints, and possibilities inherent in distance education.

It is crucial to prioritize quality, comprehend the intricacies of change, and acknowledge that technology by itself is insufficient to facilitate effective distance education. By adopting these principles, stakeholders involved in funding, managing, supporting, and designing professional development for teachers can advance these initiatives, ensuring they deliver meaningful and high-quality learning experiences, whether conducted in person or remotely.

II. CONCLUSION

The Education Development Centre (EDC) has published a report on the impact of distance learning on the professional growth of educators in low-resource settings. The report highlights the growing acceptance of distance learning and its potential to complement traditional methods. However, the report also raises concerns about the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of distance-based professional development for teachers. The EDC believes that distance education should remain a viable avenue for professional development, especially for those without access to traditional in-person settings. However, it also highlights the scarcity of evidence-based research on teacher learning across various distance education formats and the poor design and lack of adequate preparation and support for most distance educators worldwide. The report also suggests that deep-seated human and institutional beliefs, biases, and misunderstandings hinder the effectiveness of distance education. The report encourages those responsible for funding, managing, and designing distance-based

professional development to reflect on their own beliefs regarding distance learning.

Distance education is a crucial field that requires careful consideration of factors such as infrastructure, technology access, personnel competencies, and assessment methods. However, technology alone is not the most critical component. The primary objective of distance education is to enhance student learning outcomes, with teacher education being the most effective means of fostering school improvement. High-quality professional learning opportunities should be provided to enhance teaching quality. The change process for teachers requires alterations in knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, aptitudes, values, and behaviours. Striking a balance between the urgency for swift change and the inherent human reluctance to adapt requires sufficient time, comprehension, and continuous support. Quality is of utmost importance in all aspects of distance learning, including having qualified educators, thoughtfully designed curricula, and adherence to established standards. The potential of distance professional development for educators depends on advancements in technology and methodology. Prioritizing quality, understanding the intricacies of change, and acknowledging that technology alone is insufficient to facilitate meaningful change are essential for successful distance education initiatives.

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