



Continuing professional development (CPD) at a distance: Teachers' reflections on enhancing distance education (DE) provision

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ABSTRACT

In Ghana, continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives for teachers are fragmented, with limited participation opportunities for all subject teachers, resulting in a high reliance on distance education (DE) programs. This qualitative study investigates teachers' experiences with DE upgrading programs and their thoughts on improving. Data was gathered from 32 participants in the Ekumfi district of Ghana. The findings show that, despite the constraints, teachers in Ghana are taking an agentic stance in using DE for their professional development. However, while DE programs provide reliable paths to updating professional knowledge, they are insufficient as a CPD tool to assist teachers' learning for improvements in classroom practice. Teachers' DE experiences reveal a rigid program structure with content that is unreflective of current educational concerns and the utilization of didactic teaching and learning approaches. These are detrimental to active learning and unlikely to result in effective teacher improvement. To strengthen DE as an effective CPD tool in Ghana, the study recommends regularizing other CPD avenues, revising DE upgrading programs for teachers, and systematising mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating teachers' competencies before and after DE participation.

1. Introduction

Teachers, like every other profession, encounter enormous workplace challenges. The increasing technological innovations, higher education standards, student diversity, and the growth of knowledge economies have all expanded the role of teachers in today's schools. As a result, it has become critical for teachers to engage in continuous learning activities in order to execute their duties effectively in modern-day classrooms or risk becoming obsolete in their professional practice. From this position, the importance of providing continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers has been widely recognized because pre-service education and training alone are insufficient to foster teacher quality and teaching that meets the rapid changes in education today.

CPD broadly refers to variety of supported learning activities aimed at developing teachers' professional knowledge, abilities and disposition, in order to improve their practice and student learning outcomes (Egert et al., 2018). It is also characterized by the acquisition of new knowledge and skills beyond those acquired during initial teacher preparation (Armour et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2011). Effective CPD thus alters teachers' professional practices, beliefs, and knowledge to

facilitate improvement in student learning (Taddese & Rao, 2022). CPD also supports teachers' adaptation to emerging trends in their practice, prepare teachers for future work and expand the career options of teachers (Muijs & Reynolds, 2017; Richter et al., 2019).

Despite the apparent value of CPD to teachers' profession, its provision to teachers in some sub-Saharan African countries is woefully inadequate (Abakah et al., 2022; Geldenhuys & Oosthuizen, 2015). Particularly in Ghana, only 3.8 % of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is allocated to education, which is below the UNESCO's target of 6 %. Out of this budget, only 8 % is allocated to management and subventions, which includes capitation grants (UNICEF Ghana, 2022), which otherwise could be used to finance teacher CPD provisions at the school level. With such limited budgetary allocations, headteachers and school administrators confront significant challenges regarding CPD provisions, ensuring equal access to opportunities for all teachers, and funding for other CPD activities within their schools. As a result, in the absence of sustainable CPD programs, teachers have resorted to exploring their own professional development pathways to stay current in their knowledge and skills (Abakah, 2019).

To mitigate these challenges, distance education (DE) can support the large-scale provision of CPD opportunities for teachers and

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addressing the issue of insufficient funding and resources to support teacher CPD undertakings. Currently, DE is utilized globally in a variety of contexts to support teacher training and development. DE, also known as distance learning, is a type of structured learning in which students and teachers are separated by space and time, with "communication between the two mediated by print media or ICT; and learning is under the control of the learner rather than the teacher" (Mnyanyi & Mbwette, 2009, p. 2). DE incorporates a variety of media to facilitate the teaching and learning process. Many DE programs have a component of face-to-face interaction with students during weekends or in residential schools. Such flexibility in learning has increased teachers' enrolment in DE programs without having them leave the classrooms.

In Ghana, the scarcity of CPD opportunities has fueled teachers' desire for professional development through DE and sandwich learning models, where teachers who cannot enroll in full time programs are able to do so on short term during holidays. Evidence from two teacher universities, University of Cape Coast and University of Education, Winneba (UEW), reveals a massive enrollment of teachers in various educational programs at various levels. For example, between 2010 and 2017, the University of Education, Winneba, enrolled around 87 200 teachers in various DE programs (UEW 21st Congregation report, 2017). Interestingly, teachers' use of DE as a professional development tool has come with concerns. Questions have been raised about whether DE is responsive to changing demands in teacher education and professional development, if DE can help teachers build practical teaching skills, and whether DE can help teachers develop reflective practice (Robinson & Latchem, 2003). In Ghana, DE concerns relate to the significance of knowledge obtained to teachers' professional practice and the implications of teachers' participation on teaching and learning in schools. Mereku (2014), for example, concluded in his examination of distance education upgrading programs that DE programs appear to be 'credentialing' teachers rather than supporting growth in teachers' knowledge and skills to modify classroom practices. A comparative study by Attah-Mensah et al. (2016) revealed quality deficiencies in DE programs in terms of content, delivery, and organization to impact the desired teacher transformation for improved classroom performance. At the same time, it has been discovered that teachers' participation in various DE programs has negative repercussions for school administration, teaching, and learning, as well as the overall influence on student learning (Ananga et al., 2015; Tamanja, 2016).

These reservations cloud the potential benefits of DE's support for teacher education and continuous professional development. They allow for further investigation into how DE could be enhanced to support teachers' professional development more widely and effectively. To improve student learning, participation in DE as a professional development mechanism must expand and enhance teachers' repertoires of knowledge and practice. Thus, this study investigates teachers' experiences in DE programs and their reflections on how DE could be enhanced as an effective CPD tool. Such an investigation will help DE planners and educators understand how to improve DE programs and harness its utility as an effective instrument for teachers' professional development. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are teachers' experiences with distance education upgrading programs?
2. How might DE upgrading programs be improved to better support teachers' professional development?

2. Literature review

2.1. Why teacher CPD matters in Ghana

Teacher CPD is a crucial avenue for school improvement. It improves teacher quality and enhances the quality of student learning (De Vries et al., 2014; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). For these reasons, several countries have made investing in teachers' CPD a policy priority in order to ensure

quality education (Borg, 2015; King, 2014). However, in Ghana and many other sub-Saharan African nations, teacher CPD receives little policy attention as part of educational improvement efforts. Attempts to improve educational quality have primarily focused on the provision of "infrastructure such as classroom, equipment, teaching and learning materials, and the supply of an adequate number of teachers, but less on how teacher education can promote teacher competencies that meet the learning needs of students in real classrooms" (Pryor et al., 2012, p. 411). The consequence has been that several educational reforms have had little impact on teaching and learning and student performances, particularly in Ghana's basic schools (Akaboha & Kwofie, 2016; T-Tel, 2018).

According to Armah (2017), there is a gap between the professional ideals and skills required in 21st-century schools and those available within Ghana's teaching population. This impacts the quality of student learning, as students' performance in the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) has only improved steadily (Akaboha & Kwofie, 2016; Ansong et al., 2015). Other reports on educational quality conclude that student learning outcomes have decreased. According to the 2020 Ghana Education Fact Sheet, an assessment of the foundational learning for grade 2 and 3 levels reveals that only 7 % of children in Grade 3 have the expected reading skills for that grade, while 8% of children have the expected numeracy skills (UNICEF Ghana, 2020). The Global Education Monitoring report equally ascertains that about 80% of school children in Ghana still do not acquire basic skills in literacy and numeracy by the time they complete their primary education (UNESCO, 2022).

These troubling results highlight the urgent need to refocus attention on teacher CPD in order to increase teacher and student quality. CPD for teachers has been suggested to be one of the most critical variables or elements in increasing teacher quality and education (Borg, 2015; Desimone, 2011). According to Opfer and Pedder (2011), boosting student learning and performance requires teachers to engage in meaningful professional learning engagements throughout their careers. Effective CPD activities, according to studies, strengthen teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge to improve practice and empower teachers to make complicated decisions about their practice to support student learning (Banks & Smyth, 2011; Chetty et al., 2014; Shriki & Patkin, 2016).

While there are justifications for teacher CPD activities, it should be noted that participation in CPD does not always result in the desired effects of changes in classroom practice (Abakah, 2023; Shriki & Patkin, 2016). For example, participation in one-off workshops, in-service training (INSET), seminars, and continuing education is frequently criticized for not helping lead to teacher change in practices since it fails to create authentic learning opportunities for participating teachers. As a result, various principles have been proposed in the literature to guide effective teacher CPD practices.

Loucks-Horsley et al. (2010) for instance, suggest that an effective CPD is:

directly aligned with student learning needs; is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives; provides time and opportunities for teachers to collaborate and build strong working relationships; and is continually monitored and evaluated. (p.5)

Based on these ideas, it is important questioning how DE upgrading programs for teachers in Ghana are imbibing these guiding principles and resulting in the necessary teacher change in practice.

2.2. Teachers' participation in distance education (DE) programs in Ghana

DE has emerged as a complementary mode of delivery in higher education to address quality, access, equity, and cost-effectiveness issues

related to education provision and delivery (Perraton, 2012). In Ghana, DE programs were implemented in response to increased demand for postsecondary education and growing costs, and to relieve pressure on tertiary institutions' limited structures and facilities (Mends-Brew & Asabere, 2016).

DE implementation on a larger scale commenced with the government's initiatives and collaboration with international actors to assess the country's DE needs (Tamanja, 2016). Given this, the Ministry of Education (MOE) sponsored two major surveys by the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO to examine the country's DE needs in 1992 and 1994 (Kwapong, 2010). In 1996, institutions in Ghana launched numerous DE programs in response to its recommendations. Since then, DE has grown enormously, enabling and affording chances for a broader populace who had not previously had the opportunity to enroll in formal education. Currently, DE augments the traditional school system in Ghana. Its implementation addressed teacher shortages in Ghanaian schools and high attrition rates linked with teachers' study leave (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2002). DE programs safeguard teachers' jobs while they seek further education to upgrade themselves. Hence, today DE provides opportunities for most teachers to upgrade while remaining at their current jobs. Untrained teachers also utilize DE to upgrade to become professional teachers under the Untrained Teachers Diploma in Basic Education (UTDBE) program. According to Holmberg (2005), DE improves teachers' professional knowledge and ensures that teachers do not physically relocate to further their schooling. Such convenience has led to an overwhelming increase in teachers' participation in DE programs. Fig. 1 shows the enrolment figures in DE programs at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) (one of the largest providers of DE programs for teachers).

2.3. Challenges facing DE students

Increasingly, students enroll in DE programs for diverse reasons and for the convenience of combining work and study. However, students' participation in DE programs is not without challenges. For teachers, their challenges start with their inability to explicate their binary roles as teachers on the one hand and as students in DE programs on the other hand. For instance, Craft (1994), in a study on teacher development through distance learning, observed such a conflict as teachers lacked self-confidence in becoming students and perceived their changing role to be problematic. Other challenges identified in the study include a potential conflict between teachers' job roles and studying modules, difficulty motivating oneself at a distance, and difficulty studying at home. Therefore, programs must allay teachers' fears and utilize instructional approaches conducive to adult learning.

In a review of the implementation of teachers' professional development through open and distance learning by the Ministry of Education in Cameroun, Mufer (2013) identifies the following challenges

associated with the implementation of DE for teachers: lack of libraries and ICT tools, assignments not getting to students on time, lack of reforms in the curriculum to reflect new educational reforms and emerging themes in education, the use of print materials, the limited number of qualified teaching tutors, the financial burden on teachers, and inadequate sensitization.

While these challenges resonate with the current situation of DE in Ghana, Mereku (2014) also highlights challenges concerning teachers' use of DE for professional upgrading. In his study, teachers in the DE program only rated their experiences as average. The majority enumerated difficulties such as the inability to teach 'new content areas introduced into the syllabuses,' integrating ICT tools in their teaching, designing project tasks for school-based assessment, and improving students' low literacy and numeracy levels. Thus, the DE programs offered little opportunity for teachers to develop themselves in those areas (Mereku, 2014). Akoto (2015), in his examination of untrained teachers' experience in DE through the UTDBE program, identified the following challenges: overload of course content, programs' inability to utilize teachers' professional learning experiences, weak district, school and college collaboration, and tensions in expectations between the different communities of practice of the different contexts of training and practice. These challenges affected how the UTDBE program promoted teachers' professional and personal development.

Another concern associated with teachers' DE participation centers on the impacts of DE pursuits on classroom teaching and learning. It is argued that while teachers seek out opportunities and participate in various DE programs for their professional development, effective engagement with their students is affected in some ways (Tamanja, 2016). Attah-Mensah et al. (2016) revealed that DE participation leads to inadequate teacher preparation, teacher absenteeism, and a lack of adequate time with students in the classroom. Also, Ananga et al. (2015) found that teachers' DE participation affected teaching and student learning, classroom monitoring and engagement with students, and teacher preparations for classroom lessons. These effects remain significant concerns that need urgent addressing. Therefore, there is a need to negotiate the potential buy-ins and trade-offs so that DE can be utilized as an effective tool for teachers' professional development.

3. Method

3.1. Research design

We employed the basic or generic qualitative research design for this study (Merriam, 2002; Percy et al., 2015). In this design, research participants make meanings or construct their own reality through interaction with others as they interpret and make sense of their experiences (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The design allows participants to report their "subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world" (Percy et al., 2015, p.78). We chose this design to enable teachers with similar CPD experience (i. e., participation in DE programmes) to collectively through focus group discussions (FGDs) share their participation experiences and to reflect on practical ways for improvement in DE as effective CPD tool.

3.2. Context and participants

The Ekumfi district in the Central region of Ghana served as the context for this study. Teachers in all the 62 public Junior High Schools in the district constituted the population for the study. However, using purposive and convenience sampling strategies, we arrived at a sample of 28 teachers for the study. Purposive sampling made possible the selection of teachers based on the judgment of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought (Cohen et al., 2018) and from whom information could be obtained for the study (Patton, 1990). Merriam (2002) suggests the need to begin purposive sampling with clear-cut criteria essential for selecting participants. There were

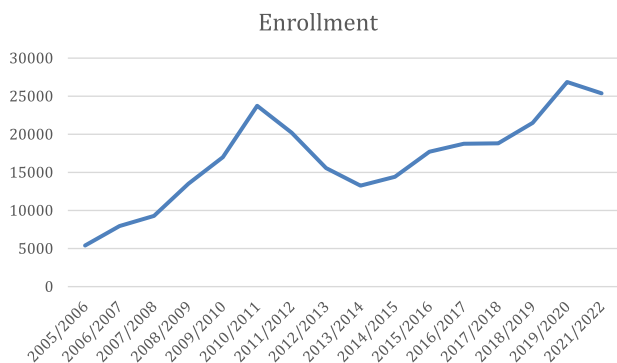


Fig. 1. DE enrolment trends in UEW from 2004/05 to 2021/2022 Academic years

(Source: Basic Statistics UEW congregation reports).

two main criteria for teacher inclusion in this study: (1) teachers with professional training qualifications and (2) those who have professionally upgraded their qualifications using the distance education medium. In all, 69 teachers qualified for inclusion in the study. All qualified teachers were contacted and invited to be part of the study. However, using convenient sampling, 28 teachers were finally included in the study. Convenience sampling entailed selecting persons who were accessible and willing to participate until the required number of participants was reached (Addae, 2022). We also included four key informants in the study for their roles in school administration and DE program delivery.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

We used multiple data collection tools of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews to gather data for the study. FGDs were conducted with teachers in four different sessions with composition as follows: FGD1 (8 participants), FGD2 (8 participants), FGD 3 (6 participants) and FGD 4 (6 participants). Focus groups were conducted between March and May 2021 at the district education office, Ekumfi. The questions were semi-structured, focusing on teachers' experiences with various aspects of DE upgrading programs. There were also questions soliciting opinions on enhancing DE upgrading programs to promote teachers' professional development effectively. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with four key informants, headteachers (2) and tutors in DE programs (2). Interview questions focused on the challenges of teachers' DE participation and ways of improving DE programs as effective CPD tool for teachers. Both FGDs and in-depth interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Averagely, all FGDs lasted for about 40–50 min.

Both FGDs and interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), reflexive thematic analysis entails a conscious and thoughtful engagement with the data by the researcher during the analytical process. This process was iterative, and all researchers engaged in reflexive introspection to understand, interpret and gain general insights into the data (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Six major steps guided the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2012). We began the analysis by transcribing the audio recorded data, followed by a continuous evaluation of the transcripts to enable us to familiarize with the data and to identify potential patterns for its interconnectedness (Miles et al., 2014). This was followed by the code generation process, which involved coding categories in the data and collating all occurrences of text in the data set where that code occurred (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The resulting codes were then categorized and aggregated into themes. These themes were reviewed, then labeled and defined to align with the study's research questions and relevant literature. Related data were grouped around the themes, and participants' verbatim accounts were included in the final report writing stage to help readers comprehend the results of the study.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Permission was sought from the district education office of the Ghana Education Service before the commencement of the study. Ethical considerations of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw (Morgan & Symon, 2004) were adhered to in the study.

4. Findings

This section reports the study's findings under the following broad themes: teachers' experiences with DE upgrading programs, DE and teachers' professional development, and enhancing DE as an effective PD tool.

4.1. Demographic information of respondents

Table 1 summarizes the demographic details of all participants in the study. This comprises participants in focus group discussions and key informants in personal interviews. The study included 32 participants, with 14 females and 18 males. The majority (15) were between the ages of 31 and 40. Only six (6) respondents held a postgraduate degree, while the majority (24) obtained a bachelor's degree after their initial teacher education programs. The most experienced teacher had been teaching for at least 21 years (2). Finally, most teachers (12) upgraded their credentials within the first five years of their professional practice.

4.2. Teachers' experiences with DE upgrading programs

Teachers' discussions about their experiences with DE programs illuminated critical issues regarding the following sub-themes: (1) DE as a PD choice, (2) scope and DE program content, and (3) DE teaching and learning processes.

These themes are explicated below.

4.2.1. DE as a PD choice

Teachers underscored the criticality and relevance of continuing education to their professional development. As a PD tool, the belief was that participation would increase their knowledge of content and pedagogy for effective classroom teaching. Teachers' decision to opt for DE was borne out of access viability of DE programs, rendering an opportunity to further education while remaining at posts. It was also revealed that PD opportunities were themselves seldom, coupled with the bureaucratic nature and inequalities in accessing study leave options. Hence, DE programs were alternative conduits for teachers' professional development. Some teachers expressing their challenges in accessing CPD opportunities shared the following experiences:

I have been teaching for about a decade now, and I can tell the number of times other professional development programs are provided for us. We are always told there is no money. I had to look at another opportunity, so I enrolled in the DE program. (Participant 1, FGD 3)

I tried many times to access the study leave with pay but was unsuccessful. There is a quota system that only helps some subject teachers to get study leave, but then, as a teacher, I needed to update my knowledge. New things are emerging in practice, and you must rely on something other than what was taught during the training college. I did enroll in the DE program to be a better teacher to help my students. (Participant 1, FGD 1)

Table 1
Demographics characteristics of respondents.

Characteristics	Parameter	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18 – 30 yrs	11	34.4
	31 – 40 yrs	15	46.9
	41 – 50 yrs	4	12.5
Gender	51+	2	6.2
	Male	18	56.3
Highest qualification	Female	14	43.7
	Diploma	2	6.2
Teaching experience	Bachelor	24	75.0
	Postgraduate	6	18.8
	1–5 yrs	9	28.1
	6–10 yrs	11	34.4
Time of upgrade	11–15 yrs	7	21.9
	16–20 yrs	3	9.4
	21+	2	6.2
	1–5 yrs	12	37.5
	6–10 yrs	9	28.1
	11–15 yrs	7	21.9
	16+	4	12.5

Since I started teaching, I have never had the chance to attend a workshop, specifically in my teaching subject. I thought of ways to improve myself in terms of new knowledge to help these students, and the DE programs came in handy, so I enrolled. (Participant 7, FGD 3)

For others, it was the flexibility associated with DE programs that incensed their participation:

DE guarantees our upgrading, and there are no restrictions. So we [teachers] are just taking the chance to learn and become better teachers. (Participant 3, FGD 4)

The important thing is that DE allows us [teachers] to professionally upgrade ourselves while we are still teaching. With my participation, I have acquired the knowledge needed to better myself as a teacher. (Participant 2, FGD 1)

Teachers' decisions and participation in DE programs are arguably based on their agency to enhance practice, given the lack of diverse CPD opportunities. Teacher agency is an integral part of teacher professionalism (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013), and it refers to teachers' active attempts to make intentional choices that have a major impact on practice (Toom et al., 2015).

4.2.2. Scope and DE program content

Teachers' high expectations about DE programs' ability to equip them with relevant knowledge and pedagogical skills were unmet due to the limited scope of knowledge obtained in their upgrading programs. Teachers assumed that contemporary issues in education and the introduction of new curricular elements could have been integrated into DE programs to empower them in contemporary classrooms. Some anecdotes to buttress this claim:

New things are emerging in our profession today, but the program should have covered them in terms of the curriculum. Even in our basic school curriculum, GES has introduced different things, but they were not treated. (Participant 1, FGD 1)

There were many new things we needed to learn that the program did not offer. Take issues of digitalization, which is a buzzword now, ICT integration in classroom teaching, managing diversity like special needs students, and gender issues, but they were all not covered. (Participant 6, FGD 2)

Mereku (2014) made similar observations when he found that DE modules lacked the incorporation of emerging issues in teachers' professional practice because of their inflexibility to integrate changes in the curriculum and emergent issues in education. However, it is important to reiterate that by these comments, teachers did not overrule the fact that participation exposed them to significant areas in their professional practice with which they have improved their professions.

DE teaching and learning processes

It was also revealed that the teaching methodologies, approaches, and delivery structures were the same as those used in training colleges, which had received many criticisms as they negatively impacted teachers' active learning. Teachers raised four critical issues about DE teaching and learning processes: (1) lack of active involvement, (2) use of instructional methods appropriate for pupils, (3) over-emphasis on theory than practice and (4) overreliance on printed course modules.

First, teachers expressed minimal involvement in teaching and learning during participation. Teachers explained that the program content and structure appeared 'too' structured, affecting tutors' abilities to introduce some flexibilities, especially during teaching. This affected their active learning. Teachers commented:

The program and the teaching were 'too' structured. Tutors came in prepared and focused strictly on their notes and modules. But I was expecting more interactions, examples, and opportunities to be

involved during lessons, but that was not the case for most of the courses. (Participant 1, FGD 1)

There was a lack of participation. Class interaction was minimal, and mostly, I found tutors lecturing and talking to themselves throughout the lesson. (Participant 7, FGD 1)

Tutors were rather worried about the time to complete the whole course, so what happened was that we were not actively involved when they were teaching. We could have been actively involved through discussions on some of the topics. (Participant 2, FGD 4)

For others, the teaching approaches and principles course instructors used resonated with their classroom teaching, reflecting their personae as pupils. While teachers found this challenging at first, they got accustomed to it with time. Some of the comments shared are indicated below:

I wasn't happy with some of the tutors because they saw us to be school children in the classroom. Psychologically, that wasn't helpful for learning. In one lesson, a tutor asked to repeat after him. We do this to children in the classroom. It was demoralizing. (Participant 1, FGD 4)

One thing I found challenging at first was how we were treated as pupils in the classroom. Learning would have been more fun if tutors had recognized us as teachers. (Participant 2, FGD 2)

Undeniably, the lack of recognition of teachers' prior experiences and their unique characteristics as adult learners affected learning. Another significant issue raised was the over-theorization of DE program content with a lack of real practical experiences with what goes on in actual classrooms. Teachers shared the following views:

There is a challenge in our educational system that teaching is more of theory than practical. It was the same for the program. Most of the things taught were for exams, but relating them to classroom experiences was difficult. (Participant 8, FGD3)

There was a little attempt to help us experiment with what was taught in the classroom. It may be that they [tutors] assumed we already knew about them. But knowing about them should have rather made it easier for tutors to get us involved in bringing our own experiences. (Participant 7, FGD 1)

A related concern was an issue of overreliance on DE modules as the sole resource for teaching and learning activities. Teachers explained that their learning primarily relied on their institutions' course modules. Meanwhile, as indicated earlier, the modules needed to incorporate emergent issues in education and curriculum to enable teachers to tackle their teaching easily. Some teachers, while expressing their experiences, shared:

The modules were the main resource for teaching and learning. It was basically the modules. This restricted what otherwise we could have learned if we were guided to access other useful learning materials. (Participant 3, FGD 3)

The program was restricted to content in the various modules, so tutors taught us from the modules, and we were also to learn from the modules and be assessed from the modules. So, the modules became our primary learning materials. (Participant 1, FGD 3)

The module content has remained the same, and you can tell that they have outlived their significance. Occasionally some tutors gave other materials, but we were examined on the modules. (Participant 8, FGD 2)

Teachers' experiences with various components of DE programs typify the difficulties involved with DE in general. Although DE allows many teachers to update their professional knowledge, problems hinder meaningful learning and, by extension, the actual development of

participating teachers. Nonetheless, teachers recognized the value of DE upgrading programs for their professional development and practice. This is advocated in the next section.

4.3. DE and teachers' professional development

Participation in CPD activities should promote teacher learning that can be applied in the classroom to improve student learning (Abakah, 2023). Despite teachers' dissatisfaction with their learning experiences, they were optimistic about DE, especially as an effective tool for their professional development. Teachers admonished that participation equipped them with new knowledge, skills, and attitude, which were significant to their classroom teaching. Through participation, teachers could modify their teaching pedagogies and gain better insights into their subject content knowledge. Some of the teachers who reported DE's importance to their professional development commented:

I have become a better teacher! We were exposed to new things concerning our teaching, especially how to teach some topics for students to understand better. For instance, I learned new ways of simplifying the teaching of integers. And I still use that in class. (Participant 4, FGD 1)

My participation improved my critical thinking, and in my social studies teaching, that has helped me a lot. Now I also allow my students to think for themselves when we are doing topics they are familiar with. It is interesting to see students think and debate on these issues. (Respondent 4, FGD 3)

I can attest I have significantly improved. I have learned new knowledge, competencies and skills equally relevant to my profession. (Respondent 1, FGD1)

One thing I learned and still use in my class is how to conduct assessments. We were introduced to some assessment practices, and I have adopted that. (Respondent 2, FGD 4)

Another significant finding was that participation proffered teachers the opportunity to form a network of a community of practice and was sustainable even after the program. Although informally enacted, these networks were potential sources of learning for teachers. Teachers learn from peers in reflexive dialogues on challenges and opportunities to improve practice.

4.3.1. Impacts of DE participation on teaching and learning within schools

Ironically, participation had negative consequences for teaching and learning activities in schools. This largely stemmed from the timing of DE learning activities. Both teachers and key informants explained that the often ad-hoc nature of their classes and assessments compelled teachers to leave their teaching posts with little attention paid to their daily tasks at work. Teachers themselves admitted to the following:

My participation affected my lecture notes preparations, especially when we had quizzes or exams to write. This was because I needed enough time to study. (Participant 6, FGD 3)

The fact is, we were forced to use teaching times for personal studies. For me, what I did was give exercises so I could focus on reading my modules. (Participant 1, FGD 4)

What happened with me was to just apportion my time in the classroom for my personal studies though it was not fair to the students. Frankly, during those times, I could only give them [student] work but did not have the time to do other things with them, like providing feedback or supervising. (Participant 6, FGD 4)

The negative consequences on teaching and learning when teachers participate in DE programs, alluded to by participating teachers, were buttressed by their head teachers. According to the heads, it bred teacher absenteeism, loss of instructional hours with students and lack of

teacher supervision in the classroom. One headteacher commented:

I have dealt with many cases where teachers leave their duty posts to go to their various learning centers. Some go with permission, and some don't. The effect is that pupils are left unattended, which equals abandoning their posts. (Headteacher 1, personal interview)

Another headteacher stated:

I have personally queried some teachers over this issue of going to school. We are not asking them to go, but it becomes a problem when that also affects pupils. You will always see teachers reading their notes when they should be teaching and pupils just playing. (Headteacher 2, personal interview)

The findings suggest that notwithstanding the importance of DE participation to teachers' professional development, the DE channel is fraught with challenges that may mar its usefulness as a CPD tool. The critical question thus is: How do we strengthen DE as an effective CPD tool and leverage teachers' participation to minimize its adverse effects on teaching and learning activities within schools? This is the focus of the following broad theme.

4.4. Teachers' reflections on improving DE as an effective CPD tool

Five major themes emanated from this finding: (1) a shift in the fundamental purpose of DE, (2) DE curriculum restructuring, (3) adult teaching methodologies, (4) timing and duration and (5) monitoring and evaluation systems. These themes are explained below:

4.4.1. A shift in the fundamental purpose of DE

DE serves to upgrade teachers' professional knowledge and ensures teachers do not physically relocate to further their school. However, in attempts to fulfilling this mandate, DE programs culminate in a situation Dore (1997) describes as 'diploma disease' where programs widely emphasize credentialing teachers at the expense of providing genuine education for teachers' professional development. The study observed that teachers' uptake of the various DE programs was primarily to secure certificates to advance their careers. For consideration as a CPD tool, teachers called for a shift and a move from just credentialing teachers to a focus on fostering ongoing learning among teachers. Teachers explained that because the focus has been on certificates, the program content, delivery and methods do not promote significant and active learning with which teachers could transform their practices. They thus suggested that DE programs, especially for teachers' upgrading, should be an ongoing attempt to develop teachers professionally. To do this, teachers suggested that DE programs must be tailored to the immediate needs of teachers in the classrooms and be made compulsory for teachers and not based on individual teachers' agency to learn to improve practice. Teachers made the following submissions:

Many teachers are upgrading, but it is for the certificates. Once we upgrade, it is easier to be promoted. Promotion is no longer how long you have taught but higher qualifications. That is why at first, some of us were going for certificates that we could not even use to teach... if we want to improve DE, DE itself must be transformed, it needs to move from just giving us the certificates but must focus on what teachers need to improve themselves in the classroom. (Participant 1, FGD 1)

As teachers, we have many needs. We come out to the field, and the realities and challenges are different. I think the DE programs, especially those that are designed for teachers, should be modified. If we want to ensure that our participation results in our development, then I think there should be an alternative where the program structure would not follow the regular schooling system, but we will have programs that are run all year round, and these programs are specifically designed to help us in our teaching profession and not the

current curriculum. Of course, certificates ought to be provided. (Participant 5, FGD 2)

One of the key informants also suggested:

DE programs have come to stay, and they can only be improved. Programs should focus on short courses relating specifically to the teaching profession because many teachers have enrolled in programs without any bearing on what they teach in the classrooms. But these short courses must be rolled out continuously. In that way, the content must be revised frequently to reflect any new changes in the education system. The GES can then integrate these programs and make them count to teachers' professional development points. (Headteacher 2, personal interview)

Related to a change in the purpose of DE, teachers also called for changes in how lessons are organized and delivered. With DE having transitioned from first generation to fifth generation, where technology permeates its organization, teachers suggested a move towards technology integration to reduce the burden of commuting to the various learning centers. The tutors supported this suggestion and added that such a move would reduce the economic burden on institutions regarding printing modules and the operational cost associated with organizing and monitoring tutorials. One tutor suggested:

In the 21st century, when technology is changing the face of DE, we still organize DE 'manually.' To reduce stress on teachers, upgrading courses should be strictly online so that teachers can access and learn at any time without competing times with classroom activities. (Tutor 1, personal interview)

For teachers using online delivery for DE will help reduce effects of their participation on classroom teaching. A teacher suggested:

Most courses are now delivered online especially after the Covid. If the DE programs should go fully online, I think most of our problems that we suggested earlier, like inadequate teaching preparation, leaving our students unattended to because we have quizzes, all will come to a minimum. (Participant 5, FGD)

While there is a need for a blended approach to DE delivery, factors such as ICT capabilities of both tutors and learners, online learning readiness of teachers, and Internet accessibility and affordances must be taken into account.

4.4.2. DE curriculum restructuring

As reported earlier, the content of DE upgrading programs was noted to need more emergent key issues that affect teacher professionalism. To improve DE as a CPD tool, teachers thus called for flexibility in the curriculum such that emergent issues in educational practice could be integrated. Teachers also called for the involvement of key teacher educators and practitioners, such as teacher associations, in developing curriculum content for DE programs for teacher upgrading. They also admonished that restructured curriculum must include institutionalized mentoring opportunities where mentors would monitor and support teachers' development even after completing their various programs. Teachers shared the following perspectives:

They need to have a re-look at the curriculum. What are the new things emerging? What are the new areas teachers are required to teach? GES keeps revising, for instance, the basic school curriculum, and all these changes must be factored in; if not, we will go to school for higher knowledge, but we will be unable even to understand the new curriculum we are to teach with. (Participant 4, FGD 4)

For DE programs to succeed, a needs assessment should be done, which must be part of planning the program, especially the content. Consultations must be done to identify the relevant areas to include in the curriculum. This must be done because then we will tell them what we want to learn and what our challenges are, and I think this

will help close the current gap with the DE programs being far too theoretical. (Participant 2, FGD 3)

A tutor in the DE program suggested:

As part of the attempt to redesign the curriculum, they should also look at mentoring. These teachers themselves have academics they look up to, so if mentoring is mainstreamed into the program, they can help track the progress of these teachers even after completing their programs and to support them. (Tutor 2, personal interview)

4.4.3. Timing and duration

Time and engagement are two common barriers to adult learners' participation in learning activities (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). For teachers in this study, the timing of DE program activities was essential in determining the efficacy of their participation and the effectiveness of the DE program. Teachers averred that to get the optimum learning outcome, DE should be structured in sync with the pre-tertiary school curriculum such that vacation periods are used for DE participation. Teachers explained that the conflicting lecture periods, assignments, and examinations affected their teaching activities within schools. Such arrangements would mitigate these adverse effects to ensure teachers' seeking of professional knowledge does not come at the expense of their students. Similar suggestions have been made by Ozer (2004) and Corcoran (1995) that CPD activities must be integrated into teachers' working schedules at school and be restructured to meet teachers' vacation periods.

Related to this is duration; DE programs must be of sustained duration to achieve the desired results. Hochberg and Desimone (2010) define duration in CPD activities as the number of contact hours of CPD and the length of time over which engagement in the activity spans. Teachers suggested that DE contact hours for tutorials and engagement on campuses needed to be improved to promote effective learning. They suggested at least eight sessions per course and online learning opportunities to foster regular interactions with their tutors. Teachers believed that regular interaction and engagements with tutors and coursemates made them feel part of the learning community and not as passive learners.

4.4.4. Adult teaching methodologies

Underlying this theme was the need to adopt active teaching methods conducive to adult learning situations. Teachers concerns about teaching approaches and methodologies indeed is a generalist problem characterizing Ghana's education system that encourages didactic approaches as the main educational method (Ampadu, 2012). Teachers in the study however criticized this approach to teaching and called for different methods that resonate with the teaching of adults. This was needful in building teachers' self-confidence in learning. Teachers suggested the following measures:

Finding myself in the classroom was initially a challenge for me. But I think if tutors see us as adults and teach us as such, that would be very helpful. They [tutors] need to adopt different teaching approaches that make us comfortable in class and not as if we are just some school children. (Participant 1, FDG 4)

Another teacher shared a personal experience:

I recall in one of our lessons; a tutor asked us to repeat some sentences after him. Some of us were outraged, but we could not do anything. So, tutors must be developed to teach classes differently when we are adults. (Participant 7, FGD, 2)

There were also calls for tutors to utilize more facilitative instructions than didactic methods that seek to pass on information to learners passively. Teachers suggested using questioning and other collaborative teaching techniques to facilitate knowledge co-construction. Teachers also admonished tutors to acknowledge their

existing prior knowledge in the classroom.

4.4.5. Monitoring and evaluative systems

The outcome of every CPD participation is teacher change practices that support student learning. It is thus expected that teachers will be able to implement new knowledge in classroom situations after engagement in DE programs. To materialize this outcome, teachers suggested an effective monitoring and evaluation system to track teachers' learning during and after participation in DE programs. Teachers suggested the institutionalization of mentoring as an effective approach in this regard, where mentors will continue to support teachers' development even after completing their courses. It was also suggested that DE organizers should periodically evaluate teachers' learning through examination assessment and observing classroom performances on how knowledge obtained is contextualized in the classroom. Some key informants shared the following insights:

To ascertain a program's success, there must be some form of evaluation. But that is not done currently. Institutions must periodically evaluate how teachers' participation leads them to become better teachers in the classroom. This will help to change aspects of the program that are not working. (Tutor 1, personal interview)

Monitoring and evaluation are very important to ensure a program is making an impact, and using mentors can be helpful here. These mentors could be assigned to a particular group or year group of teachers enrolled in DE programs. Once they are done, mentors' work will even continue. They will then assist and support their mentees in their professional practice. (Tutor 2, personal interview)

A teacher equally made this submission:

There must be proper evaluation of what we come to learn but not using the exams or the quizzes but where officials will come to schools, talk to us and share our experiences of how we are using our knowledge in teaching. If we tell them our challenges in the classroom, they can go back and improve. (Participant 4, FGD 3)

The findings thus far suggest that notwithstanding the importance of continuing education to teachers' professional practice, the DE channel as a professional development tool is fraught with challenges that affect effective learning, which otherwise could promote teacher change for improved student learning. While teachers admit DE programs as an essential source of learning for their professional development, in their perspectives, programs could be improved by instituting the following measures: a re-look at DE's purpose, curriculum restructuring to reflect emerging themes in education, employing adult teaching methodologies in program delivery, a consideration on the timing and duration of the program and effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluations.

5. Discussion

The study aimed to investigate teachers' participation experiences with DE upgrading programs as a professional development tool and to elicit teachers' opinions on improvement.

Somantri and Iskandar (2021) argue that "CPD is not simply a form of teacher training, but a more holistic type of lifelong learning" (p.336). Therefore, while the initial education and training of teachers may be structured, it is required that teachers generally should have greater discretion and control over their professional development. Our findings demonstrate teachers' poise in exercising discretion towards their own professional development. This was typified in teachers' agentic attitudes in search for alternate professional development pathways. Teacher agency is defined as active attempts to make intentional choices and decisions that make a significant difference in practice (Toom et al., 2015). Teachers are placed in agentic positions when given the autonomy or control to make independent decisions about their professional practice as they adapt to constraints and challenges to improve

what they do.

For teachers in the study, lack of access to varied CPD options, the seldom provision of CPD activities and the bureaucratic nature in access to study leave with pay options presented contextual challenges that in a way affected their professional development. However, to improve practice and to support student learning, teachers made a personal and independent decision to participate in various DE programs. Teachers' participation and, for that matter, agency were tied to their beliefs about CPD and their professional responsibility to improve student learning. Agency was also demonstrated in teachers' enactment of informal networks of a community of practice as a potential source for their learning during their DE participation. These networks were sustained even after the completion of the program with teachers' further interaction to support their learning and development.

This finding affirms Osei's (2006) earlier argument that, despite various contextual constraints, Ghanaian teachers are committed to their professional teaching role. The findings further dispel the negative image of teachers and the teaching profession in Ghana as people who resist learning efforts to support student learning (iNews, 2023). Even though teachers in the study were regarded to be proactive about their learning, Ghanaian teachers still require the necessary tools to aid their learning and development. Aside from learning through DE conduits, teachers can self-direct their own learning through engagements in other online professional development courses that can enable them to learn in bit and sizes at their own convenience. Presently, there are contemporary educational technologies such as online learning that can be embedded in the DE model to help teachers in their continuing professional development.

Teachers' participation experiences revealed that DE programs have little impact on teachers' professional development. According to CPD literature, teachers' participation in CPD must lead to teacher change practices that support student learning in the classroom. That is, a teacher who has completed or participated in any CPD program is empowered to make complex practice decisions, develop their ability to identify and solve problems and improve their content and pedagogical knowledge to improve students' learning (Roesken-Winter et al., 2015; Shriki & Patkin, 2016). However, in the context of this study, these skill sets were untenable after participation in DE programs. This was due to factors such as rigid curriculum structures, over-theorization of program content and the program's inability to cover key themes in educational practice today. These challenges affected teachers' active learning, which could have fostered their genuine development. A study by the IEDE (2012, Mereku, 2014) on DE upgrading programs for teachers in Ghana showed that the programs are not achieving their objective of enhancing teachers' quality of teaching and learning within schools. The findings also support other studies that have found teachers' experiences with DE programs as unsatisfactory in quality to bring about desirable changes in their professional practice (Attah-Mensah et al., 2016; Mereku, 2014). For instance, Attah-Mensah et al. (2016), in exploring quality dimensions of teacher DE programs, found teachers' rating of the following quality dimensions to be unsatisfactory: quality of program design and organization, quality of content, quality of instructional design, and delivery.

It is important to note that these challenges are reflective of the transmissive models or approaches to teacher development (such as continuing education, workshops, in-service training) where the focus is on updating teachers' knowledge by external experts (Kennedy, 2005, 2014). However, these approaches just like DE have been criticized for their effectiveness in developing critical teachers who are able to transform their classroom practice.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that although DE programs are meeting their intended purpose of enabling teachers to upgrade with different teaching qualifications, teachers' participation can negatively impact effective teaching and learning in schools. Participation leads to teacher absenteeism, loss of instructional time with pupils, and lack of adequate classroom supervision of student learning activities. This

affirms the World Bank's report by Darvas and Balwanz (2014) that participation in-service training, workshops, and continuing education are potential causes of teacher absenteeism. While there have not been many studies on absenteeism caused by continuing education and professional development activities in Ghana, the findings support Ananga et al.'s (2015) study, which concluded that teachers' participation in DE programs affect negatively effective teaching and learning in schools. These consequences remain a critical issue that policymakers and all stakeholders in education must address since the loss of instructional hours has significant consequences on students' academic performance, social and career growth, and development (Tamanja, 2016).

Notwithstanding these challenges, the importance of distance education as a CPD pathway was highlighted in the study. Participants underscored its relevance to teachers' professional practice and as one of the surest ways to update professional knowledge and skills, especially when other development opportunities were virtually non-existent. DE offered benefits such as accessibility and an avenue for teachers to engage in lifelong learning to improve practice. This supports a study by Alvarez et al. (2020) that open and distance education can provide a new learning pathway for teachers to continue engaging in improving their field of practice.

However, to make DE an effective professional development tool, teachers suggested the need to alter DE's purpose by restructuring its curriculum to focus on current trends in teaching practice. Teachers also called for modification in DE organization and delivery by moving from print media to the use of digital technologies to deal with conflicting timing in their teaching roles. These calls are not farfetched as technologies pervade DE provision and delivery today, especially after Covid-19 pandemic. From an initial period where weekly lessons in DE programmes were delivered to students via print materials, radio, television (Burns, 2011), DE has moved to the fifth generation where technological advancement enables the transformation of DE printed materials into e-books and the transformation of traditional classroom into e-learning (Heeks, 2020) to enhance student learning experiences. From teachers' anecdotes, our findings show a contrast to the current models of delivery in DE. The situation resonates with other sub-Saharan African countries where the print and text-based learning remain major media for teacher development, particularly for upgrading teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge (Burns, 2023). It is thus important that DE upgrading programmes for teachers in Ghana integrate technology and distance learning methodologies in its delivery to minimize the enlisted repercussions participation has on teaching and learning in schools.

6. Conclusion

Distance education programmes have significant prospects for expanding access to teacher CPD options, and thereby addressing the issue of lack of funding to support CPD activities at the school level. Our study revealed that its widely utilization among teachers in Ghana spurns from its flexibility, accessibility, and its utility in supporting teachers' personal and professional development. In spite of these, the findings equally suggest that DE as a professional development tool for teachers was fraught with challenges that marred its intended purpose of bringing about teacher change practices to support student learning outcomes. Teachers in the study identified challenges such as rigid curriculum structure and content that affected the ability to incorporate current trends and issues in practice, overreliance on printed modules, and the adoption of didactic teaching and teaching approaches. These challenges limited teachers' active learning through collaboration and reflection. To improve DE provision as a CPD tool, teachers suggested four key areas: a shift in the fundamental purpose of DE, DE curriculum restructuring to reflect teachers' classroom needs, revision in time and duration for DE upgrading programmes, utilization of adult teaching and delivery methods and monitoring and evaluative systems on teachers' participation.

There is a great untapped potential for DE to be an effective professional learning tool for teachers (Burns, 2023). In addition to teachers' reflections, the study recommends the following:

- Robust design and delivery of DE upgrading programmes that leverages on technology. Leveraging on technology in DE can promote teacher self-direction and autonomy in teachers' learning while also allowing teachers to take up these courses in bite-size and complete coursework at their own pace and leisure. This will also allow teachers to prioritize their work job, family, and other societal duties.
- Training of DE tutors in constructivist approaches to teaching and learning and in adult teaching. Tutors must be able to integrate authentic and real-world tasks in their teaching, provide opportunities for teachers to learn from observing others, and implement self-assessment rather than formal assessment practices in the classroom. These activities promote active learning, and teachers as adult learners are bound to learn if they are actively engaged in learning activities.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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