TOWARDS AN EFFECTIVE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract

Teachers' professional development (PD) is an essential tool in helping them meet the change requirements imposed by the continuing school improvement plans. In order to evaluate the quality and impact of the provided PD programmes, the ways teachers perceive and approach the provided PD programmes are important factors to investigate. Thus, this paper focuses on the factors that might influence the ways teachers perceive and approach the provided PD activities. In Particular, factors related to the school learning culture were the focus of this paper. The reason is that the features of school learning culture inevitably influence the ways teachers perceive and approach their professional learning in many different ways. The research that was reviewed in this paper suggested strategies for school leaders to build and sustain learning cultures that facilitate learning at all levels in schools. Additionally, the discussed literature proposed a potential effective strategy for planning and evaluating the impact of PD programmes that would increase the effectiveness of teacher PD programmes.

Keywords

Professional Development, Professional Learning, Teachers' Perceptions, School Culture, School Learning Culture.

1. Introduction

The potential role of teachers' professional development in influencing the quality of teaching and learning in schools is well established in the research. Reviewing the literature on teachers' professional learning, Opfer & Pedder (2011) assert that teachers' professional development (PD) has a significant role in achieving the goals of enhancing the quality of teaching, increasing student learning achievement and improving schools. Thus, investigating the factors that influence the ways teachers perceive and approach the provided PD activities looks necessary in this context. As the results of such an investigation could help in maximizing the teachers' commitment to implement these activities' content with the goal of improving their students' learning outcomes.

Previously the researcher conducted a study to explore school staff perceptions of the PD activities. Out of that study, the researcher realized that, in addition to the features of the learning activities, there are factors related to school culture, which Guskey (2000) suggested as the third of five levels of PD impact that is 'organization support and change', that might also influence the ways school staff perceive and participate in the PD activities.

Highlighting the significance of school culture, Kaplan & Owings (2013) contend that school culture affects all aspects of school life such as, the ways its staff think, communicate and behave. Additionally, they refer to the school culture's impact on its staff opportunities for professional growth.

In a similar vein, referring to the failure of many educational reforms to improve student learning significantly, Walker (2010) suggests examining schools' learning cultures as a necessary way to avoid the traditional lack of compatibility between the reform intentions and the entrenched teacher culture, which may affect achieving the reform aims seriously. Thus, exploring the influence of aspects related to school learning culture on the ways its staff perceive and approach the PD activities would help determine the features of learning cultures that facilitate or hinder teachers' professional learning. Recognizing the features of learning cultures that promote teachers' professional learning provide school leaders opportunities to build and develop a learning culture that contributes to improving the quality of learning, at all levels, within the school. Asserting the significance of this school leaders' proposed role, Nathalie & Swaleyah (2017, p.167) stated, "Educational leaders have to ensure that staff have the knowledge necessary for the job and help the organization reach its goals".

The concepts of school culture and school learning culture and their possible ways of influencing teachers' professional learning will be investigated in the literature review section.

Although the main focus of this paper is the factors that influence teachers' perceptions of PD programmes, the term professional learning will be used in this study, which refers to broader development opportunities for teachers (Middlewood & Abbott, 2015). The reason is that the prospective influence of school learning culture will be by no means limited to the formal PD programmes; rather it may influence teachers' learning needs and opportunities on a much wider scale. Consequently, the focus of this study will not be solely on the formal PD programmes as this might represent a serious limitation to the study, it will also consider various forms of teachers' PD.

1.1 Purpose of the Paper

As stated earlier, the aim of this paper is to recognise the ways the prevalent learning cultures in schools influence their teachers' perceptions of the provided PD programmes. This aims at exploring the potential influence of schools' learning cultures on teachers' professional learning and identifying the learning cultures' features that facilitate teachers' learning out of the available professional learning opportunities and help them enhance their classroom performance.

The suggested implications out of this paper would help school leaders increase the impact of the PD programmes on teachers' knowledge and practice, which may ultimately improve the students' learning outcomes. A rationalisation of this potential impact is what Muchtar, Yanuarsari & Lestari (2016, p.509) argued, "Teachers' role is as the spearhead in the implementation of the learning process and the achievement of quality learning outcomes".

The following questions are guiding this paper:

1) What factors influence school staff perceptions of the value of PD programmes?

2) What are the features of schools' learning cultures that help staff to make the most of PD programmes?

3) How to make the PD programmes' evaluation process an effective development tool?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This paper reviewed some relevant research that focused on staff perceptions of their professional learning considering the role of school learning culture in influencing these perceptions. The literature review examined the following aspects: firstly, the concepts of professional development and school culture, secondly, teachers' professional development: quality and impact, thirdly, school culture and teachers' professional learning and finally, school learning culture. This aimed at exploring the prospective influence of aspects related to school learning culture on the ways teachers perceive and approach the provided PD programmes. The goal is to recognise the aspects of school learning culture that promote teachers' professional learning with the ultimate goal of developing their classroom performance and improving their students' achievement. Consequently, helping the leaders of schools to build and develop such cultures in their schools.

2.2 The Concepts of Professional Development and School Culture

The Implementation of school improvement plans require school educators to develop their knowledge and skills to be able to meet the change requirements; accordingly, the provision of PD programmes is important to help achieving these goals. Stressing the significance of PD for educational reforms, Guskey (2000, p.3) asserts, "Every proposal for educational reform and every plan for school improvement emphasizes the need for high-quality professional development". This assertion highlights the necessity of effective PD programmes as an indispensable development tool for schools.

Another variable that has a prospective impact on the success of educational reforms is school culture; the literature underlines the significant role of culture in learning and change (Walker, 2010).

In a book that explored strategies for changing school culture with the goal of facilitating school improvement, Kaplan & Owings (2013) stress the significance of embedding the proposed rules and practices in school culture, referring to ignoring school culture as an important reason for reform failure. They suggest supporting the teachers to use strategies like self-reflection and feedback, which help them embrace the changes as being related directly to their personal experience. This argument about culture's role in change and development seems quite realistic as culture's values and beliefs may facilitate or hinder the learning process at any level. Thus, successful implementation of development plans requires

that school culture undergoes an intentional process of change by its staff as Kaplan & Owings (2013) suggested in order to making a real difference and persistent change.

Accordingly, when it comes to carrying out school improvement plans two elements should be taken into account. First, providing effective PD programmes that improve teachers' knowledge and practice and qualify them to meet the change requirements. Second, building a school culture, which is aligned with the intended improvement plans and facilitates the change process. The next three sections will explore the concepts of teachers' professional development, school culture and school learning culture.

2.3 Teachers' Professional Development: Quality and Impact

In a 2017 study, Mangaleswarasharma (2017, p.317) asserted, "Teachers are the key elements in the success of any educational system". Accordingly, qualifying them to be able to meet the development attainments represents a high priority. Stressing the importance of teachers' professional learning, Morewood, Ankrum, & Bean (2010, p.201) stated, "Teachers must be life- long learners", they justify this as teachers need to develop their knowledge, skills and practices in order to meet the demands of the continuing educational reforms.

In an empirical large study in England that examined the relationship between teachers' learning orientations and their learning change, Opfer, Pedder, & Lavicza (2011) contend that teachers learn through various ways including classroom interaction, involvement in school communities and participation in PD activities. Guskey (2000, p.16) defines professional development as "those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students". Guskey's definition suggests that PD programmes are the formal form of teachers' professional learning that are organised to develop teachers' knowledge and practice with the ultimate goal of improving students' learning.

In order to achieve these goals, effective PD activities should be provided to teachers. Morewood et al. (2010) consider PD activities as effective when they influence the quality of teachers' classroom performance. Classifying the potential impact of PD on participants, Guskey (2000) suggested five levels of PD's potential impact that are, participants' reactions, participants' learning, organization support and change, participants' use of new knowledge and skills and student learning outcomes. These levels of the PD's potential impact look quite rational in terms of their hierarchy in that 'organization support and change' precedes the implementation of the PD's content and improved students' learning outcomes.

Hence, evaluating the impact of PD on teachers' instruction and subsequently on students' learning is reasonably imperative in order to enhance its quality and increase its forthcoming influence. Equally, Morewood et al. (2010) refer to the significance of establishing teachers' perceptions of the influence of PD on their knowledge and practice, considering this as a precondition to investigating the relationship between teachers' knowledge and students' learning. Accordingly, teachers' perceptions of the value of PD are an important variable to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of a PD programme.

In an article outlining the findings of a study that explored the ways in which continuing professional development (CPD) is being evaluated in UK schools, Harris, Day, Goodall, Lindsay & Muijs (2006) mentioned two main objectives of CPD evaluation, summative evaluation, to measure the programme's influence on outcomes, and formative evaluation, to find out ways to improve the programme itself. However, in spite of the essential need for evaluating the impact of PD, research refers to the lack of robust PD evaluation at schools.

Reviewing the limitations of the processes of evaluating CPD, Guskey (2000) suggested three main limitations. Firstly, a focus on summarizing the activities included in the PD programmes rather than evaluating the effectiveness of these activities. Secondly, surveying whether the PD activities were satisfactory for participants, which neither evaluate their impact on teachers' practice nor on student learning. Thirdly, running directly after the PD activities without leaving enough time for reflection and influence to take place.

Reviewing the findings of a recent research that explored a CPD project carried out in UK schools, Earley & Porritt (2014) suggest planning the intended impact of the PD programme prior to its start. Earley and Porritt's proposed planning process is based on collecting data about teachers' practices and students' learning to be used as a 'baseline' to create a clear vision about the expected teachers' practice and students' learning, which represents the impact of teachers' involvement in the PD activities. The proposed PD planning process, see figure 1, has several potential benefits relating to designing and evaluating quality PD programmes. The initial planning process presents a practical strategy to evaluate the quality and impact of PD programmes for both the summative and formative types of evaluation that were identified by Harris et al. (2006).

The difference between the original baseline data and the resulting outcome might represent the impact of the PD programme within the school environment. Crucially, since

the PD programme is designed to reflect the teachers' learning needs it will not represent a 'One size fits all' scenario; but should represent a form of differentiation in teachers' learning. Furthermore, every cycle of the process will prioritize the training goals, which extends the impact of the training.
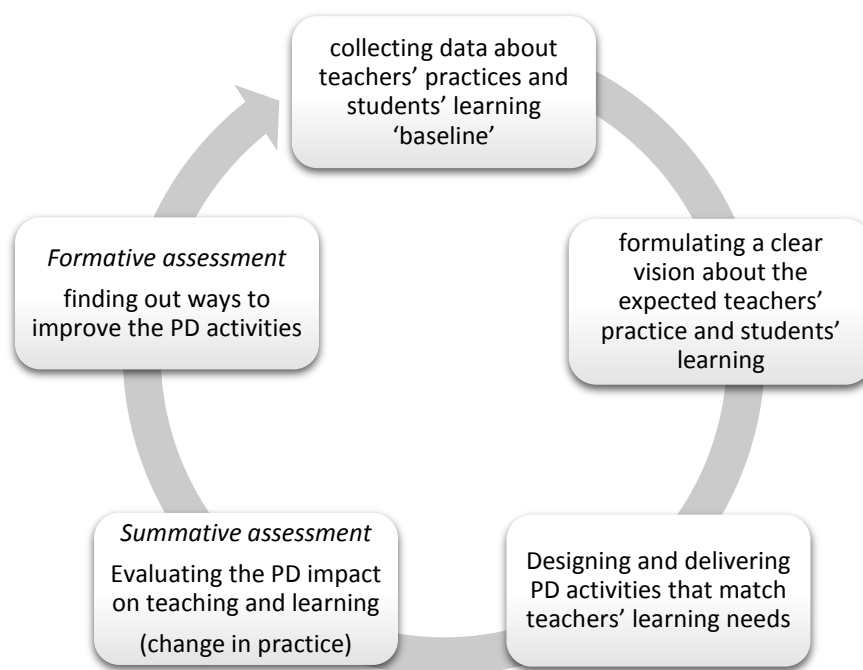
Figure 1: *Effective Teacher Professional Development Cycle*

Based on Earley & Porritt's (2014) suggested PD planning process

Having explored concepts related to teachers' PD and its evaluation, it is important now to turn on to the next section, which is exploring school culture and its influence on teachers' learning.

2.4 School Culture and Teachers' Professional Learning

Referring to culture as intangible and complex phenomenon, Walker (2010, p.180) stated, "(culture) influences human thought and behaviour at every turn". Consequently, School culture is an important variable to consider while investigating learning practices in schools. Kaplan & Owings (2013, p.2) define the school culture as "the shared orientations, values, norms, and practices that hold an educational unit together, give it a distinctive identity, and vigorously resist change from the outside". Evidently, school culture's variables are able to influence teachers' professional learning in different ways, including the ways they perceive and approach the provided PD programmes.

Exploring the factors affecting teachers' participation in professional learning activities, Kwakman (2003) stressed the culture's influence on teachers' learning suggesting an important role for teachers' collaboration to enhance their professional learning through exchanging feedback. Similarly, Kaplan & Owings (2013) argue that, teachers' abilities to implement new learning activities, aiming at developing their students' learning, increase when they work collaboratively with their colleagues.

Reviewing the literature on teachers' professional learning, Opfer & Pedder (2011) claim that research did not consider how teachers' professional learning is embedded in their professional lives and working conditions. They propose three systems involved in teachers' professional learning. Firstly, the individual teacher system: this relates to teachers' prior knowledge and experience and their orientations about learning. Opfer et al. (2011) define teachers' orientations as "an integrated set of attitudes, beliefs and practices as well as the alignment of oneself and one's ideas to circumstances and ideas". Secondly, school-level system: this includes the teaching and learning context in the school, teachers' collective orientations about learning, the common norms of practice and the level of sharing the school's learning goals. Central to the teaching and learning context is the type of students a teacher work with, thus, investigating their influence on her/his professional learning looks significant. Thirdly, learning activities: these are the tasks and practices of PD in which teachers participate.

Opfer & Pedder (2011) point out the drawback that research focuses mostly on investigating the learning activities system ignoring the other two important systems, individual teacher and school-level, and more importantly the correlations between the three systems, and how they influence teachers' professional learning.

Similarly, investigating professional learning in schools, Middlewood & Abbott (2015) refer to both individual and institutional factors that influence teacher professional learning. Accordingly, this paper considers variables related to these three systems in investigating the factors influencing teachers' perceptions of the provided PD programmes.

As school culture and its impact on teachers' professional learning and the ways they perceive and approach this learning have been established, the next section will explore the concept of school learning culture.

2.5 School Learning Culture

An important variable that is worth considering while investigating teachers' professional learning is school learning culture. Pointing out the dual nature of culture as both a product of human social practices and a force that influences those practices, Biesta (2011, p.202) defines learning culture as, "the social practices through which people learn". Biesta referred to the difficulty of investigating learning cultures due to their lack of clear boundaries. Illustrating the nature of learning cultures, Walker (2010, p.180) stated, "A learning culture is in effect the synergistic effects generated through the establishment and embedment of a set of interrelated conditions that promote and encourage learning as a way of professional life". Accordingly, learning culture can be perceived as the established learning conditions at school, which inevitably influence the ways people perceive and approach learning at all levels.

Establishing learning prerequisites in schools, Walker & Quong (2008) as cited in, Walker (2010) propose a group of learning conditions considering them as framing schools' learning cultures; these conditions include:

Firstly, teachers' will to learn, ability to work collectively and share their experiences, commitment to observe each other's performance and share honest feedback. These strategies are essential for both promoting reflection on one's own as well as colleagues' practices and experimenting with different teaching strategies, which in turn improve teachers' performance and students' learning. Middlewood & Abbott (2015) consider staff commitment to learning as an essential component of school learning culture.

Secondly, teachers need to be open to new ideas and willing to alter their practices through active experimentation. Thus, rather than relying only on traditional activities that worked previously, teachers should risk-take by trying new activities, by adopting a self-critical approach, defying the idea of 'best practice'. Writing about models of good classroom practices, Middlewood & Abbott (2015) stress the significance of a school culture that fosters risk-taking in order to support teachers to try new teaching approaches. Correspondingly, Kaplan & Owings (2013) consider innovation, experimentation and risk-taking as characteristics of a positive school culture.

Thirdly, using data as an essential development tool. This is through building on the available data and using it to identify the learning needs of both students and teachers. Referring to school data as 'the knowledge base', Kaplan & Owings (2013) highlight its role

in informing the subsequent teaching and improving students' learning opportunities in the light of their needs and interests.

Fourthly, teachers need to engage in activities that challenge their orientations about learning, which makes them curious to learn and try to modify their practice. Opfer & Pedder (2011) stress the strong influence of teachers' orientations to learning on how and what they learn; they specifically denote the impact of practical PD activities in influencing teachers' orientations about learning as these have been acquired through their practice.

Having reviewed the learning conditions at school, the next priority is an exploration of the approaches that help build and develop learning cultures.

Proposing ways for school leaders to build and develop learning cultures, Walker (2010) lists a group of strategies that cut across the abovementioned learning conditions:

Firstly, *modelling*: school leaders need to align their actions to their beliefs and the shared goals of the school aiming at showing these beliefs clearly to everyone in the school. Following and articulating common beliefs can help the school staff stay focused on, and their actions aligned to, the school's shared goals. Kaplan & Owings (2013) stress the essential role of school leaders in expressing the school's shared goals, considering it as an aspect of a positive school culture.

Secondly, *monitoring:* the collection of data of all types such as achievements, feelings and attitudes, and using them effectively to inform the process of decision-making. School leaders should focus on providing continuous feedback and ensuring that students are provided a quality education. Earley & Porritt (2014) emphasize the school leaders' role of following up teachers' performance and ensuring that their involvement in professional learning activities improves the learning of their pupils.

Thirdly, dialogue: staff need to exchange their knowledge and experiences and to share students' data. They should consider a feedback exchange as an essential learning and practice development tool. The feedback may come out of staff meetings, peer observations or discussions about student data. Proposing strategies for creating a supportive learning culture in school and building a community that stimulates further learning, Kaplan & Owings (2013) suggest holding regular, peer and administrator observations, with peer coaching and co-planning on department level in order to make any intended change a regular practice.

Fourthly, *similarity at scale*: this strategy aims at sustaining and spreading successful practices on a whole school level rather than staying limited in certain parts of the school. A fundamental school leaders' role is to help staff collaborate with the goal of reaching a common understanding about success criteria and the forms of PD that fit the staff learning needs. This strategy looks at the core part of building and developing school learning culture.

To sum up, there is a number of interrelated variables that influence the ways a school staff perceive and approach the provided PD programmes. These variables relate to the individual educator, school level, and the learning activities. Moreover, school culture and school learning culture highly determine the staff perceptions of, and approaches to, learning. School leaders have a key role in building and developing learning culture that promotes learning as a way of school life with the goal of improving teachers' practice and their students' learning.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this paper was to shed light on some of the factors that influence the ways teachers perceive and approach their professional learning. The ultimate goal was to increase the impact of the provided PD programmes on teachers' practice and students' learning. In addition to the type of the provided PD activities, there are factors related to both the individual teacher and the whole school level that inevitably influence the ways teachers perceive and approach the PD programmes. The research that was reviewed in this paper suggest strategies that would help school leaders build and sustain a school learning culture that facilitates teachers' professional learning individually and collectively.

Moreover, a potential effective strategy for the planning and evaluation of PD programmes is through monitoring the change in teachers' performance and students' learning throughout the teachers' participation in the PD activities, which represents the impact of the PD programme. This strategy helps to attain both summative and formative evaluation of the PD programme, which in turn might help in increasing its effectiveness.

This paper aimed at informing the existing literature on the unavoidable role of school learning culture in influencing teachers' professional learning and investigating strategies that help maximise the quality and impact of the provided PD activities in schools.

In the light of the reviewed research, the following recommendations may help increase the quality and impact of the provided PD programmes at schools:

- The PD planning process should begin with collecting data about teachers' practices and students' learning. These data should be used as a 'baseline' to create a clear vision about the expected teachers' practice and students' learning, which represent the impact of the PD activities. Accordingly, the PD programme reflects the teachers' learning needs and should represent a form of differentiation in teachers' learning.

- Teachers' will to learn, ability to work collectively, commitment to observe each other's performance and share honest feedback are all essential prerequisites for their performance development.

- PD programmes should include practical activities that challenge the teachers' orientations about learning, which in turn foster their will to learn.

- School leaders need to follow and articulate the school shared goals, monitor classroom performance and provide regular feedback and ensure that teachers exchange their experiences.

- A school leaders' fundamental role is to help sustaining and spreading successful practices on a whole school level. They can achieve this goal through helping the staff reaching a common understanding about success criteria and the forms of PD that fit with the teachers' professional learning needs as well as the school shared goals.

- Further research is needed to investigate the impact of different school learning cultures on teachers' professional learning and the ways they approach PD activities.

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