

Engagement of School Leadership in Teachers' Continuous Professional Development: A Case Study

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Abstract

Teachers in the recent fast transforming technological era are required to regularly upgrade their knowledge, skills and attitudes to meet the needs of the 21st century learners & learning. This study explores the engagement of the school leaders in continuous professional development (CPD) by using a case study method. An elite school was selected as a sample case considering its recognition of CPD models and its constructive implications on learning. Two school leaders consisting of school headmistress and CPD convenor were selected using a purposive sampling method. The data were collected using an in-depth interview strategy and having a semi structured interview guide that could allow subjective detailed questioning and responses. Also, researchers own observations of CPD programmes provided relevant data for the study. The data analysis revealed that school leaders pursue CPD in a very systemic and process-oriented manner. The process starts from exploring individual teachers' needs to providing them with avenues to upgrade their teaching with timely support and monitoring. This study synthesizes the findings and present essential characteristics of effective professional development. Strategies for policy makers, school leadership, school administrators and teachers to engage in continuous, relevant and contextualized professional development endeavours are discussed.

Keywords: continuous professional development, school leadership, student achievement, and teachers.

Introduction

Education is the foundation stone on which a country builds the future road map leading to prosperity and progress. This progress can be magnified by many folds if it is coupled with qualified, motivated and competent teaching force (Darling- Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Poekert, 2011). However, the dilemma, especially in a developing country like ours is that teaching profession does not enjoy the status of a ‘career’ for the preponderance (Halai, 2007). In Pakistani private schooling system, not much focus is paid on the professional certification as a requirement for recruitment of novice teacher entrants. Hence, not much significance is given to the pre-service training and qualifications. Consequently, entering into a teaching is often considered as a transitory phase. Therefore, the role of school leaders, specifically head teachers become imperative to plan CPD for such an intake. (Day, 2009; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Thoonen, Slegers, Oorta, & Peetsmaa, 2012).

The contemporary role of SL is multi-dimensional. It is expected of them to not only handle the academic and administrative matters of the school but also to deal with the ‘life world’ (Sergiovanni, 2000) of the school which constitutes relationship and associations. These associations are guided and governed by the learning environment of the school. Therefore, to enhance students’ learning, it is imperative that the teachers are well trained and equipped to facilitate students’ learning and assist them in preparing for the future. To create such a stimulating learning setting, the SL plays a critical role in engaging all its teachers in CPD programmes.

Researchers have established a direct proportional relationship between teacher learning and student achievement (DiPaola & Hoy 2014; King & Newmann 2000; Reimers, 2003; Vetter 2012). Thus, the status of teachers is placed on the highest pedestal for being the teacher of all professions. However, in our context the teaching profession is considered of minimal importance. Moreover, a mindset prevails in our society that one who cannot do anything else ends up teaching. Halai (2007) identifies the cause of this situation and rightly states that, “In Pakistan teacher status and teaching is considered low because of inadequate teacher training and preparation” (p. 100). Also women consider teaching as the best option as they do not need to invest in themselves to get a teaching job. Moreover, 6 hours working, summer breaks, fee waiver for children and social security appeals them

towards the teaching profession. There is a lack of locally researched published literature available on this front. In such a scenario, where teachers neither have adequate professional qualification nor the required skill for this career, in-service professional development (PD) is an essential foran impactful learning experiencee of the students. Consequently, it becomes the school leadership's responsibility to train, guide and facilitate the team of teachers through in-service professional development programmes.

In today's contemporary, technology driven society, where all content is available at the click of a button, the role of a teacher has become more complex in nature. Today's contemporary teacher not only needs to know 'what' and 'how' but also have to know 'when' and 'why' (Mcdonald, 2005). Since the learners are more demanding in the current era and have very sensitive self-esteem. Teachers today need to have more thorough understanding of the kinds of learners she is dealing with and their background to plan learning in a manner that it becomes interactive and motivating for the learners. Hence, professional development of teachers is termed as CPD as it is an all-time learning process, it starts with preliminary preparation that a teacher receives while entering the profession and it continues till retirement (Reimers, 2003). It is expected that the teacher is able to facilitate students in stretching their brain muscles and encourage them to become a lifelong learner. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers themselves are passionate about their own learning and engage in their CPD.

Continuous professional development refers to "a continual process that comprises of regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in the profession" (Reimers, 2003, p. 10). These CPD opportunities are at times provided by the school through in house training sessions, workshops, seminars and at times through teachers' initiative building on its formal and informal experiences.

During the past sixteen years of working as a school teacher and PD teacher, I had the opportunity of work for four different SLs, designated either as Principal, Vice Principal or Head Mistress. During this time, my observations have directed me to be certain that the SL's own practices, beliefs, views and insights have direct relationship with quality of teachers' CPD initiative, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Consequently, this impacts the students' learning and the culture

of the school. The more trained and well equipped the teacher community with the pedagogical skills, content knowledge, responsive to contemporary research in education, the better students' learning and preparedness to face the future with confidence.

Teachers in order to cater to the need of 21st century learners and learning need to have a strong foundation and understanding of CPD. In Pakistan, there is a trend in private schooling systems that fresh graduate teachers are recruited based on their proficiency over language and subject specialization. However, less focus is paid on the pre-service or teacher training certifications. Hence, it becomes very crucial for the school leaders, specifically for the head teachers to implement CPD sessions for such novice teachers and for the entire teaching staff. In order to study the key role played by the head teachers in CPD, Hence the purpose of my research was to undertake a comprehensive and detailed investigation to explore the nature of SLs engagement in facilitating teachers' CPD.

Research Question

What is the nature of engagement of school leader in teachers' continuous professional development?

Literature Review

School Leadership (SL)

SL is generally recognized as the most significant aspect in teacher and student learning (DiPaola & Hoy, 2014; Lee & Ko, 2014; Thoonen, Slegers, Oorta, & Peetsmaa, 2012). Sparks (2005), summarizes years of research on leadership in two words, "Leadership matters" (p.vi). It matters in creating conducive learning environment both for teachers' and students' learning. SL matters in supporting their team of teachers as they embark on their journey to learn and develop. They need to be well prepared in anticipating where and when assistance in terms of technical resources and moral support will be required by the teachers. Thus, SL own professional development values and beliefs, mirrors effective PD of teachers.

Considering literature, it is evident that SL holds significant importance in teachers' PD eventually resulting in enhanced student achievement. Hence it is important that the concept of SL is discussed. Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach

(1999) assert that there is no established characterisation of the perception of SL. Yukl (2002) also reconfirms Leithwood et al. views and state that the definition of SL is “arbitrary and very subjective” (p. 4). Nevertheless, a central element in most SL definition is the process of influence towards SL’s personal and professional vision (Day, 2009; Moos, Johannson, & Day, 2012). Beare, Caldwell and Millikan (1992), elaborate it further by reiterating the importance of vision, “outstanding leaders have a vision of their schools – a mental picture of a preferred future – which is shared with all in the school community” (p. 99). The concept of SL can therefore be summarized as a process of influence directed towards achieving certain goals based on a vision which is shared and owned by all stakeholders.

Continuous Professional Development of Teachers

In present time, all professionals need to continuously involve in their PD to keep abreast with the latest in the field and have a competitive edge over others. Likewise, PD of teachers has also become significant for those who are concerned about their own learning and development, and for those who are seeking improvement in students’ achievement (Patton, Parker & Tannehill 2015; Bredeson & Johansson, 2000). Moreover, with the passage of time, even societies have recognized the importance of teachers as one of the key variable that needs transformation in order to improve the education system but as one of the important change agent to facilitate and produce better future leaders (Elmore, 2004; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This changed part of teachers by being the subject and object of change has resulted in making their professional development a challenging area receiving much thought, awareness and consideration in the recent decades (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Patton et al., 2015).

Recent large-scale studies reflect a consensus with regards to the characteristics of effective teachers’ CPD. It is an ongoing and a rigorous procedure which provides active learning opportunities mainly focused towards teaching and learning of subject matter, connected with school reform and initiatives, where teachers are given time and opportunity to collaborate, reflect and solve problems (Desimone, 2011; Poekert, 2011). Moreover, in order to have increased commitment and ownership of PD, it is important that teachers’ PD should also focus on exercising leadership and participation in decision making about what and how learning will take place (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Principles for Designing Effective Professional Development Policy

The literature suggests a few important principles that SL and policy makers need to consider while designing teachers' CPD policy and programmes.

Rigorous, Continuing, and Connected Practice

Currently, the same as in earlier years, most teachers' CPD is in the form of episodic workshop or training session, normally planned for a day or half a day focusing on disconnected topics such as digital learning, assessments, emotional intelligence, computer-based instruction, etc. with the application to real life classroom left for the teachers to figure out. Conversely, such one-shot PD sessions detached from practice do not give an opportunity to teachers to get a firm grip of the content, internalize the concept, implementing it in the classroom and reflecting on the outcome of the implementation of the new strategy. Many researchers have concluded that rigorous PD which allows for substantial time for teachers to apply their knowledge in planning and implementation has a better possibility of influencing teaching and learning practices leading to improved student learning. (Day, 2009; DiPaola & Hoy, 2014; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Thoonen, Slegers, Oorta, & Peetsmaa, 2012).

Thus, to improve student learning it is essential that policy makers should refrain from episodic PD sessions and workshops which are disconnected from practice and focus more on content which could facilitate teachers' application of knowledge in planning and instruction, which in turn would influence teaching practices leading to enhanced student learning.

Teaching and Learning of Specific Content

Researchers are of the view that PD focused on dealing with everyday content delivery challenges are more effective than the ones that focus on out of context content and educational philosophies (Garet, Portet, Desimone, Birman, 2001; Weiss & Pasley, 2006). It is also observed that teachers value those PD programmes which are more hands-on, build their knowledge of academic content and model for them daily classroom practices, which they in turn can try in their own settings (Saxe, Gearhart & Nasir, 2001). More often than not, teachers are offered PD in areas which are based on educational theories which fail to make

a connection to their everyday teaching practices. Teachers are expected to make appropriate connections of these theories and build up on it. What teachers need is solution, relevance and enhanced learning of their student. Thus it is imperative that PD policy focuses on teaching and learning of relevant content.

According to the evaluation report result of a two separate year-long programme study conducted by Supovitz, Mayer, & Kahle (2000), concluded that science teachers who received more than 80 hours of PD for promoting inquiry based approach applied the taught strategies more significantly than those who were trained for a shorter duration of time. Also, the more rigorous and continuous teachers' PD, the better students' achievement was observed during the following year.

Professional Development Should be Contextualized

The dilemma of developing countries is that there is a dearth of contextual research in the educational PD programmes. Consequently, most of our PD programmes are based on research conducted in western context. Researchers believe PD policy should focus on contextually relevant programmes considering the needs of the curriculum that is offered, assessment practices and guidelines resources available to the school and in line with students' needs (Desimone, 2011; Supovitz, Mayer & Kahle, 2000). PD programmes have little impact if there is disconnect between the programme that is offered and its relevance to the daily classroom situation.

Another contextually relevant PD strategy for policy maker is to have group of subject specific teachers analyse students' course work and performance data, to find students' common mistakes and confusions and collectively come to a mutual thought of what is required to help students master concept or skill and which teaching strategy will do justice to which group of students (Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; Little, 2002). This approach would lead to a contextualised solution to enhance student learning.

Strahan (2003), conducted a study in three elementary schools and observed that in schools where teachers regularly consulted multiple source of student data to inform and plan their teaching strategy and instruction had high levels of student performance.

Professional Development Should Promote Teacher Collaboration

For the past many decades, our school culture is based on an ‘egg crate’ model. School culture and norms favour secrecy and loneliness, whereby teachers devote maximum of their time in their classroom. They are infrequently given time and space to plan lessons collectively, share their best practices. Conversely, research shows that when policy makers create time for teacher collaboration within departments and/or across grade levels, the benefit of it will promote sharing of ideas, issues and achievement in resolving difficulties of practice (Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Successful California Schools, 2007).

One of the possible ways to break out of professional isolation is by promoting a culture of collaboration; a non-threatening environment whereby teachers are free to observe their peer’s classroom teaching and offer productive feedback. Dunne, Nave and Lewis,(2000) conducted research in 12 school which were implementing a peer observation system called Critical Friends Groups. Teachers have to make use of a set of rules that would guide their observations. It was observed that teachers’ focus changed from completing the content to working towards students understanding of the concepts resulting in more student-centered approach adopted by teachers. Thus teachers got more opportunity to develop their teaching practices as compared to the non-programme participant teachers

Thus, PD of teachers can be done effectively and economically through promotion of a collaborative learning culture whereby teachers are encouraged and facilitated to go in to each other’s classrooms, observe classroom practices and give constructive feedback to find answers to address the problems of practice, improve teachers’ knowledge, classroom instructions leading to improved student learning.

Methodology

Within the qualitative research paradigm, I choose to adopt observational case study methodology for a holistic and in-depth analysis of a bounded phenomenon, Teachers’ CPD in the real context of a private school based in Karachi. Case study research methodology is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context in which multiple sources of evidence are

used” (Yin, 1994, p. 23). To collect the required data, semi structured interviews were conducted with the research participants, and some key CPD activities of the school like the CPD weekly sessions, workshops were observed and recorded as field notes. These different forms of data were triangulated (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) that provided a reliable basis for data analysis and interpretation.

Purposive sampling was employed in the selection of two research participants out of the five school leaders. One being the section headmistress and the other the CPD convenor.

A systematic procedure was adopted to analyse the data. In this regard, the interview transcripts, observations and field notes were read and re-read to develop the coding categories and assign codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) using manual qualitative coding mechanism. The verbatims were assigned to the coding categories. This systematic analysis resulted in categories and themes related to different strategies and practices used by the SL for teachers’ CPD.

The research participants were provided a detailed information sheet clearly stating the purpose, significance and proceedings of the study. Through consent form, the SLs were given the rights to withdraw from the research any time they wished to do so. Pseudonyms were used for the names of the research participants and their school.

Findings

As a researcher, I selected Kolachi Public School with the prime question to explore the nature of engagement of SL in teachers’ continuous professional development. It is one of the affluent, elite, private, co-educational, English medium school based in Karachi. It is known for its high standard of academics and co-curricular activities with contemporary teaching and learning facilities. Most of the teachers teaching in this school are well qualified, subject specialist with either a Masters degree in specific subject or teacher education. The school follows the British curriculum and students sit for O level examination.

The school leaders Mrs. Haider Ali and the CPD convenor Mrs. Yousuf voluntarily agreed to participate in this exploratory journey as participants of my study. Having two interviews with each participant along with my observations

and document analysis, I managed to establish a pool of data about the nature of engagement of my research participants on TCPD. The data revealed that the school leaders have their own perspectives and standards for TCPD, which are reflected in school policies and practices. The SLs not only establishes policies and practices for TCPD but also model it through their own behavior. Furthermore, they have established a mechanism of support to the teachers in their journey to study and enhance their professional skills.

Perspective of School Leadership on TCPD

At the onset, it is imperative that we understand the SL's perspective of TCPD. Mrs. Haider Ali shared:

“We can't leave CPD for the end of term or for 3 workshops in a term. We call it continuing professional development and meeting thrice in a term for 3 hours isn't going to achieve that sort of a continuing professional development.”

According to her TCPD as the name suggest should be an on-going, regular feature. Elaborating on the ways in which teachers can continuously develop themselves, she said:

“Every day is to be considered as a learning experience I understand that reflecting after every lesson might become very tedious for the teachers but even if you don't write something down, if you have reflected on the lesson and made a mental note of not to repeat an error that you have made, I think that is also professional development. Whether you're reading something up, whether you are trying out new technique, whether you are looking at a colleague, talking to a colleague about your experience about colleague's experience or about colleague's way of conducting a particular lesson or colleague's plan - all that constitutes professional development in many different ways.”

The SL believes that TCPD workshops should be of quality, be within the school day and three hourly workshops be within the school calendar. Talking about the importance of teachers' time, Mrs. Yousuf shared:

“Teachers’ continuous professional development workshop needs to be within the school day, it needs to be within the calendar, if it is a big Workshop. Quality of the workshops must be maintained; all teachers must feel that they have walked with something that they weren’t aware of.”

Similar views were shared by Mrs. Haider Ali:

“Unless these training sessions are worthwhile they’ll never going to be taken happily and only if you take something with delight, will you learn so they have got to be those that are beneficial and those that make an impact on the learner.”

Thus, as the name TCPD suggest PD of teachers has to be an on-going regular feature where apart from the SL’s initiative the teacher also has to made a conscious effort to learn from the environment; either by reading a relevant research article, a book, observing a peer, trying new techniques, sharing ideas and planners. Alongside, the SL also must ensure that the PD sessions are of quality, relevance and are part of the school academic calendar.

Role of School Leader

To facilitate TCPD, the convenor or the head of the CPD must be a good motivator who assists teachers in their own learning and development. She is the one who sets the standard and navigates the team to achieve the set targets. While describing the role of CPD, Mrs. Yousuf stated:

“I see teachers’ continuous professional development as a very important task, I see as a person who motivates and set the standard for the workforce and really has to play an integral part in the progression of teachers and students.”

Adding on to the responsibilities of a CPD convenor, she said:

“In my opinion the CPD convenor should have a hands-on classroom experience that’s how he/she connects with the student body and with her peers.”

Both Mrs. Haiderali and Mrs. Yousuf are active and regular subject teachers of English and Mathematics respectively for the school believes that classroom teaching assists the SLs to feel the pulse of the teachers' and students' need.

Apart from being a motivator and setting the standards, the SL must be regular with her rounds; patrolling and observing the teachers and students' in action. Mrs. Haider Ali shared one of the key responsibility of a SL:

“A school head must do a walk through very regularly and subtly listen to the noise in the classes whether it is pleasant to really assess the needs.”

Based on the above responses of SL, it can be summarized that in order for the SLs to effectively engage in the TCPD programmes, s/he needs to be a motivator, set realistic standards, assist in attaining high teaching and learning standards, have hands-on classroom observation and regularly patrol the school campus to feel and assess the needs of TCPD.

The findings suggest that the SL is dynamically involved in the process of TCPD. Starting with the rigorous process of need analysis, the SL makes informed decision on the most important TCPD needs through classroom observation, teachers' end of the year reflections and latest research. This is followed by the planning stage where the SL with its team prioritises TCPD programmes and designs a tentative yearly TCPD calendar. The SL believes that teachers PD is a continuous process and hence the SL implements CPD initiatives through forty minutes weekly sessions and six weekly three hour PD sessions and through other external PD opportunities. Monitoring and evaluation is also given due importance and the SL ensures timely evaluation and monitoring of the CPD initiatives.

The SLs believe for a teachers' CPD program to be effective, it is imperative that it is based on a thorough need analysis both at individual and at school level. Despite having an umbrella theme for TCPD which is as per the school's vision and mission, the SL makes conscious effort to ensure that the need of the novice and seasoned teachers is met by the PD initiatives. At an individual level, needs of a novice teacher as compared to a seasoned teacher may be very different. The SLs therefore consider classroom observation as an important tool to identify the needs of both novice and seasoned teachers. Thus, the SL makes informed decision on the

most important TCPD needs through classroom observation, teachers' end of the year reflections and latest research.

The need analysis process is followed by the planning stage where the SL with its team prioritises TCPD programmes and designs a tentative yearly TCPD calendar. The SL believes that teachers' PD is a continuous process which is so rightly being advocated by Feiman-Nemser, (2012) and Reimers (2003) and hence the SL implements CPD initiatives through in-house forty minutes weekly sessions and six weekly three hour PD sessions. They also avail external PD opportunities relevant to their needs. Thus the SLs ensure regular and extended CPD opportunities are provided to teachers so that it gets translated into the teaching practices. This same concept was confirmed by Supovitz, Mayer, & Kahle (2000) by the evaluation report result of a two separate year-long programme study. They concluded that science teachers who received more than 80 hours of PD for promoting inquiry based approach applied the taught strategies more significantly than those who were trained for a shorter duration of time. Also, the more rigorous and continuous teachers' PD, the better students' achievement was observed during the following year.

However, in Pakistani context, we find that PD initiatives are one-shot workshop/ seminars or summer focused PD initiatives.

Monitoring and evaluation is also given due importance and the SL ensures timely evaluation and monitoring of the CPD initiatives. The important aspect of having these feedback mechanisms is to ensure that the SL incorporates different approach to eliminate the impediments that they may have had in the previous workshops. Levine (2006) also supports the views of SLs about regular monitoring and highlights proper monitoring and evaluating system as one of the reasons for Pakistan being unsuccessful in implementing quality teacher education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on my learnings from reviewing relevant literature and study of my research context, it is recommended that teachers' CPD must be continuous, contextualized and rigorous process of quality and focusing on teachers' needs and interest. Moreover, it should be well planned and regular PD sessions of short durations should be within school hours and the detail workshops/seminars should

be part of the school calendar which is shared at the beginning of the academic year.

The second and the most crucial factor is the collaborative learning school culture which is created by the school leadership. SL sets the tone of the school and plays an instrumental role in developing and sustaining a given school culture. In order to ensure that teachers' engage in a continuous process of learning, the environment of the school should be such where teachers feel free to walk into each other's classroom and observe peers, give feedback to each other in a non-threatening environment to the teachers, seek feedback and suggestions, etc. The SIs have to be role models as mentors, and living and breathing the life-long learning and developing model for all teachers.

Teachers are the ones who hold the responsibility to mentor and facilitate the students; future leaders of the country. Thus it is imperative that the teachers are well trained and well informed about the contemporary teaching and learning techniques and research. Planning and executing teachers' CPD is a daunting task for it must be an enriching learning experience for all teachers. Moreover, convincing teachers to keep learning and developing themselves professionally; adapt and apply new techniques of teaching and learning is an overwhelming task. Hence, good practices of facilitating teachers' CPD, in a developing context as ours should be researched and published.

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