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An investigation of teachers' professional development practices in a rural Fijian secondary school

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Abstract

This research investigates teachers' professional development (PD) practices in a rural Fijian secondary school. Using a qualitative research design, data was gathered by means of document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers of the case study school. The findings revealed that the teachers in the school were mostly engaged in traditional PD which involved a teacher-centred PD, top-down approach and PD being short-term and unconnected, which basically failed to meet teachers' professional needs. In contrast job-embedded collegial learning, even though not widely practiced, was found to be more beneficial. By providing information on teachers' PD, this study could be of interest to schools and the Ministry of Education.

Keywords

Professional development (PD); Ministry of Education; rural; Fijian; practices; traditional; job-embedded.

The study context: Fiji

The Wesleyan missionaries introduced formal education in Fiji in the 1830's (Tuimavana, 2010). The main purpose was to convert the indigenous (I-Taukei) population to Christianity. Earliest records of local teacher education show that the Methodist district institutions were responsible for the preparation of pastors-teachers (Coxon, 2000). The primary purpose of these institutions was to produce local pastors who would promote Christianity in Fijian village communities, and in 1856 a central Methodist teacher training institution was set up on the main island of Viti Levu (Coxon, 2000).

In 1929, the government set up a facility to train Indo-Fijian teachers at Natabua on the Western side of Viti Levu (Sharma, 2012). Later in 1947, the Methodist institution and the Natabua institution were replaced with one large government college known as the Nasinu Teachers' College (NTC) on the outskirts of the capital, Suva (Fiji Islands Education Commission report, 2000). In 1958, the Catholic community had also set up Corpus Christi Teachers' College, a 3-year primary teacher education institution in Suva. Later, in 1977, the government established another primary teacher training



institution, Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC). In 1983 the NTC was closed as it was felt that staffing supply for primary schools was adequate. The same facilities were later used from 1992 to 2009, to facilitate the training of teachers for junior secondary schools from forms one to four level (grade 7 to 10), which operated under the name of Fiji College of Advanced Education (FCAE). The FCAE offered diploma qualifications only. More recently, in 2010, the LTC and FCAE amalgamated with the new Fiji National University (FNU), which has assumed responsibility for providing pre-service primary and secondary teacher training.

The secondary school teachers in Fiji with qualifications of bachelor's degree and above were mostly graduates of the University of the South Pacific (USP), Laucala Campus, Suva, Fiji (Fiji Islands Education Commission report, 2000). The USP was the only university in the Oceania region to be internationally recognised outside of Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, and Guam with its bachelor's and other award programmes (USP, 2009). USP is owned by the governments of 12 Pacific Island countries: the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The colonial link and the establishment of the USP in 1968 allowed the education system to parallel the teacher qualification system across the Commonwealth (USP, 2009).

In the Fiji Islands Education Commission report (2000) it was pointed out that there were inadequacies in teacher preparation and called for better teacher preparation. The Commission further stated that it was very evident that in many schools, inadequately prepared teachers were providing a low quality of education in Fiji. The quality of teachers teaching in schools had not significantly changed until 2000; therefore the Fiji Islands Education Commission report (2000) concluded that there was a need for the government to assign very high priority to the importance of teacher education. Hence the education system in Fiji, in the last decade, has been undergoing various reforms (Lingam, 2012). Teachers are necessarily at the centre of reforms, which are to achieve high standards in the classroom; thus, teacher PD programmes need to be a major focus (Fullan, 2007). For these reasons, the Ministry of Education in Fiji has made it mandatory for each teacher to undergo at least 20 hours of PD each year (Ministry of Education, 2014). In light of this, an investigation into the teachers' perceptions of PD is warranted. Furthermore, to the author's knowledge, there is little research done in a Fijian context that directly investigates teachers' PD practices in schools. By investigating the current state of PD in the school and enquiring about teachers' perceptions on this, one can gain an understanding of the problems and recognise solutions to these problems. Thus, the purpose of the study was to answer the principle research question: What are teachers' perceptions on the current PD practices of the school? Researchers often have used professional development (PD) and professional learning (PL) in the teaching profession interchangeably (Mayer & Lloyd, 2011), hence the researcher has done the same for this study.

Approaches to teacher professional development

Traditional models of teacher PD had been described by researchers as teacher-centred (Girvan, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016). They had argued that traditional PD includes the transformation of information by an expert to bring immediate change. But Bausmith and Barry (2011) and Guskey (2002) had claimed that it does not happen in reality. Apple (2009) argued that top-down teacher PD in schools often aligns with hierarchical structures that de-skill teachers from their intellectual work by treating them as passive recipients of mandates. In addition, Kennedy (2016) argued that traditional PD initiatives are rarely designed based on how teachers learn, but are instead built on the premise that highly effective teaching results from mastering a set of technical skills. Therefore traditional efforts at PD have also failed to respect the agency and needs of classroom teachers (Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter, 2016).

Archibald, Coggshall, Croft, and Goe (2011) argued that teachers' sense of being isolated when PD programmes are planned is the major barrier to teachers' professional growth. This is because the common practice is that the PD is planned by the Ministry of Education or school heads (Archibald et

al., 2011). Therefore Rivero (2006) affirmed that mostly PD initiatives are practising a 'one size fits all' approach, which is traditionally short-term and unconnected. Gates and Gates (2014), and Ravhuhali, Kutame, and Mutshaeni (2015) indicated that much of the PD initiatives are simply not working to benefit teachers. Teachers often view such PD offerings as irrelevant, ineffective and unconnected to their everyday work of helping students learn (Ravhuhali et al., 2015). Similar sentiments were shared by Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009), who argued that many teachers consider that the PD often available to them is not useful since it does not meet all of their professional needs. Traditional PD has been characterised by narrow aims that are disconnected from broad, complex and disparate needs of teachers (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). It often includes short workshops or seminars that feature outside experts and that occur away from teachers' work stations (Trust et al., 2016).

Although such PD can introduce teachers to important knowledge and skills, it can also often lack depth and tends to focus mostly on content knowledge (Kennedy, 2016). In contrast, quality PD experiences are believed by many scholars to be central to the improvement of teaching and student learning and which are long-term, ongoing, social, constructivist and job-embedded (Desimone, 2009; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Timperly & Alton-Lee, 2008). According to Smith and Gillespie (2007) the traditional model can be more effective if it is designed to be of long duration, content to be relevant to work, include analysis and reflection, and encourages collegial learning. Longer-term PD gives more time for teachers to learn about their own practice, especially if it includes follow-up (Stein, Smith, & Silver, 1999). Smith and Gillespie (2007) found a direct and positive correlation between the number of hours teachers spend participating in PD activity and the amount and type of change related to the topic of the PD they demonstrated in the following year. In addition, they argued that there needs to be a strong connection between what is learned in the PD and the teachers' own work context. PD needs to help teachers plan for application and to identify and strategise barriers to application that they will face in work (Ottoson, 1997).

Teachers themselves report that PD focused on content knowledge contributes to changes in instructional practice (Garet et al., 2001). Furthermore, PD should include a strong emphasis on analysis and reflection (Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Guskey (1997) and Sparks (1994) promote PD that focuses on learning rather than on teaching, on problem-solving and reflectiveness rather than on acquiring new techniques, and on embedding change within the programme rather than on individual change. They had argued that student achievement improves, compared to the students of teachers who do not attend this intensive PD. PD is more effective when teachers are given time to work together in their school, grade or department (Garet, et al., 2001). Smith and Gillespie (2007) also found that PD contributes to high performance when it focuses not on individual teachers but on groups of teachers within schools, especially where school culture supports the 'professional lives' of the teachers. PD in schools constitutes another collaborative approach to teacher PD that is becoming popular in many teacher-education programmes. Hence, PD should be job-embedded.

In job-embedded PD, teachers' learning is grounded in their day-to-day teaching practice with the intent of improving student learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hirsh, 2009). Hunzicker (2010) argued that for relevant and authentic PD, it needs to be job-embedded. Teachers consider PD to be relevant when it is connected to learning experience and their daily responsibilities (Flores, 2005; Tate, 2009). PD within the school promotes active learning and builds consistency more than traditional learning sites (Quick, Holtzman, & Chaney, 2009), hence it is regarded as more effective.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) had identified 12 job-embedded formats: action research, examining student work, lesson study, assessment development teams, case discussions, study groups, critical friends' group, implementing individual learning plans, mentoring, portfolios, professional learning communities (PLC) and coaching. Format of PD does not matter as long as it is grounded in theoretical knowledge which is relevant, self-directed and significant to the teacher (Croft, Cogshall, Dolan, Powers, & Killion, 2010).

Providing teachers with openings to participate in collaboration and reciprocal learning that is initiated from the ground up, as opposed to being instigated from the top down, encourages and enables teachers to embrace learning opportunities, engage with colleagues to share ideas, brainstorm and collaboratively learn (Borko, 2004). Therefore PD in schools needs to be highly embedded in work (Doornbos, Bolhuis, & Simons, 2004; Pyhalto, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2015), thus it is continuous and connected. According to Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijaard, and Verloop (2007), in-service teachers most frequently learn from colleagues through experimenting with ideas and reflection.

Self-initiated informal activities contribute to 90% of the learning in the workplace (Lohman, 2006; Lohman & Woolf, 2001). School-based teacher learning with colleagues is becoming the leading form of professional learning (PL), rather than teachers attending one-off PL activities (Owen, 2005; Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009). Research shows that PL involving colleagues actively exploring new ideas, linking previous knowledge with new understandings, reflecting on the classroom practices, and mutually sharing and discussing educational practice is the best model (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009; Owen, 2014). This process is embedded in school work, where self-initiated teacher learning teams are evolving (Owen, 2005; Stoll, Bolam, McMahan, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Webster-Wright, 2009). This is argued by Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) and Owen (2005), who believed school to be the best place for teacher PL. Hence, school principals have to play critical roles in creating a collaborative environment (Murphy, Smylie, Mayrowetz, & Louis, 2009). Vanblaere and Devos (2016) argued that school leadership in teacher collaboration plays a major role as school leaders have a strong impact on the teachers and the learning environment. This is asserted by Timperley (2011) who identified that school leadership is a contextual factor that is important in managing sustained engagement with PL initiatives.

Research methodology

This study was deliberately designed to collect qualitative data, for qualitative analysis. Focusing on the phenomenological aspect of qualitative research allowed the study to incorporate teachers' perceptions, both emotional and intellectual, about PD practices. For the purpose of this study, open-ended semi-structured interviews and document analysis were considered appropriate. These interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length, which covered the teachers' perceptions on what makes PD effective and/or ineffective, current PD practices (what, when and how), PD needs of teachers and challenges faced. The researcher asked additional questions for clarity and accuracy of the responses. With permission from the participants, the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder to maintain accurate findings. The transcribed data were subjected to qualitative analysis through the process of coding, which allowed categories and themes to be derived from the actual data. According to McMillan (2004) triangulation is necessary in qualitative research as it enhances the credibility of the data. Thus, as well as interviews, documents associated with school PD were also examined.

Population and sample

The case study school had a total roll of 490 students with 29 teachers. The teachers consisted of 55 percent male and 45 percent female. Among the 29 teachers, 15 had a diploma, 13 a degree and one had postgraduate qualifications. Thirteen had 1–3 years of teaching experience, four had 4–7 years, 10 had 8–15 years and two had more than 15 years. The study sample consisted of 15 teachers, which represented 52 percent of the total population of teachers in the school. Of the teachers selected for the study, 53 percent were male and 47 percent were female. From those 15 teachers, 40 percent were apprentice teachers and 60 percent were experienced teachers.

Findings

The main data collection tool was the interview. Fifteen teachers were interviewed from the case study school, which consisted of male, female, novice and experienced. The interviews are analysed in Table 1 under the identified themes. Some typical responses of the participants are also included under the identified themes.

Table 1. Identified Themes with Quotes

Themes	Examples of quotes from teachers
Teachers' perception of effective PD	<p>Effective PD is one which enhances my knowledge and skills. But my personal experience is that I learn more from my colleagues than in PD sessions. (T 3)</p> <p>Effective PD gives me new knowledge. As a new teacher I have to depend on my senior colleagues a lot if PD doesn't give me knowledge I personally require. (T 7)</p> <p>Effective PD improves my practice and I'm able to help my students learn better. (T 10)</p>
Current PD practice	<p>We have PD every Wednesday taken by senior teachers. (T 2)</p> <p>PDs are mostly conducted by the senior teachers or experts from outside. (T 8)</p> <p>We as senior teachers are asked by the administrators to prepare on a topic and present to rest of the staff. (T 11)</p>
PD Planning	<p>Like for our school, we have PD every Wednesday and it is planned by the principal. (T 1)</p> <p>PDs are planned by the administrators. We, teachers don't have any say. (T 5)</p> <p>The time of PD is planned but the topic of PD is unplanned. (T 6)</p>
PD needs of teachers	<p>We need PD based on students' needs. (T 4)</p> <p>PD should be conducted based on our needs. Example, on instructional practice. (T 14)</p> <p>We need PDs on things we need improvement in. (T 15)</p>
Challengers	<p>We don't have enough resources. We need more support from the administrators. (T 2)</p> <p>Top-down approach is used. Administrators plan and we follow. (T 11)</p> <p>Not enough time for PD during school hours. (T 12)</p>

Discussion

School-based teacher learning with colleagues is becoming the leading form of professional learning, rather than teachers attending one-off professional learning activities (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009). It is an effective approach to enable teachers to engage in collaborative learning to improve practice in work (Lieberman & Mace, 2008; McLaughlan & Talbert, 2001). However, analysis of data (Table 1) shows that there was very little practice of collegial learning in regard to teachers' PL. It was evident that PD in the school was mostly conducted based on a traditional PD model. The findings showed that there was a lack of active participation of teachers in the PD programmes. It was noted that the majority of the time teachers attended traditional PD programmes as audience only. Hence, there was very little collaborative PL practiced.

In addition, the findings showed that the PDs were mostly conducted by experts, school administrators or the senior teachers where a top-down approach was used in the planning since the findings revealed that the teachers were being isolated from the planning of the PD. It was also revealed that the PD was mostly short term and unconnected since topics changed whenever there was a new PD session. This was not helping teachers, as Archibald et al., (2011) had argued that teachers' sense of being isolated when PD programmes are planned was the major barrier to teachers' professional growth. In a traditional PD model, a 'one size fits all' approach does not meet the teacher needs (Rivero, 2006). This was also revealed in the findings as the teachers mentioned that they were able to learn more from their colleagues than in the PD sessions.

Furthermore, it was evident from the findings that teachers needed PD which was connected to teaching and learning. Teachers often viewed PD, which did not help improve instructional practice, as irrelevant, ineffective and unconnected to their everyday work of helping students learn. This was consistent with Gates and Gates (2014), and Ravhuhali et al., (2015) who indicated that much of the PD initiatives of schools are simply not working to benefit teachers. In addition, it was found that teachers needed PD based on students' needs. This supported Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), who had argued that many teachers consider that the PD often available to them is not useful since it does not meet all of their professional needs.

Looking at the factors that affect PD effectiveness produced the observation that the majority of the participants mentioned the importance of the timing of the sessions. To undergo PD in school during official hours becomes very difficult for the teachers because it affects teaching time. Therefore PD conducted during school hours was said to be ineffective because of time limitations. This supports Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung's (2007) conclusion that teachers need to participate in longer PD sessions to sustain more complex change to their practice.

It was interesting to note that job-embedded collegial practice was present in the school to some extent. The teachers commented that they were able to learn from their colleagues more than the PD sessions. This supported the argument that PL involving colleagues actively exploring new ideas, linking previous knowledge with new understandings, reflecting on the classroom practices, and mutually sharing and discussing educational practice was considered to be the best model (DuFour et al., 2010; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009; Owen, 2014). Hence, school-based teacher learning with colleagues was becoming the leading form of PL, rather than teachers attending one-off PL activities (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Owen, 2005).

Even though school-based teacher learning with colleagues was known to be more effective, the findings had revealed that teachers are challenged with the lack of resources and leadership support. The teachers' feedback about lack of resources in the case study school is explicit; their paucity is bound to limit active learning and restrict the development of students and teachers to their full potential (Lingam & Lingam, 2013). The teachers had mentioned that they need more support from the administrators for continuous PL. This supports Vanblaere and Devos (2016) and Timperley (2011), who argued that school leadership in teacher collaboration plays a major role, as school leaders have a strong impact on the teachers and the learning environment. To enhance collaboration amongst colleagues and address the identified challenges, it is vital for administrators to play a more active role.

Conclusion

This study has established that traditional PD models are simply not working to benefit teachers. Even though job-embedded PL is more helpful for teachers, it is sad to say that very little is being practiced. For building twenty-first century skills, teachers need to be facilitators of learning and self-learners by building strong relationships with students and working colleagues (Owen, 2015). Hence, teachers require strong leadership support to facilitate collegial learning. There had been strong international calls for teachers to undertake collaborative PL where they need to take responsibility for their

learning to contribute high quality student learning through collegial collaboration (DuFour, 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Stoll et al., 2006). Hence, it is recommended that schools move away from the traditional PD model and engage in teacher initiated collaborative PL to maximise benefit.

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