



Exploring teachers' perceptions of professional development:

The case of Kosova

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Abstract

Research into teacher professional development (PD) highlights the importance of scrutinizing features that make PD effective. While PD effectiveness is investigated in high-income countries, exploring the landscape of PD in low-income countries undergoing paradigm shifts in education is substantial as it may engender new perspectives or confirm existing stances on PD effectiveness. This qualitative study explored the perceptions of sixteen EFL teachers from Kosovo who attended a 100-hour professional development program. Interviews, reflection accounts, feedback forms and an external report were used to explore teacher views on, firstly, the effectiveness of the PD in developing professional knowledge and skills and, secondly, the relevancy of the PD to their capacity building. Data revealed that teachers found the PD relevant due to the new knowledge and skills they acquired which led to a change of classroom practice and beliefs. Teachers disclosed that the most relevant aspects of the PD program were the content, scaffolded learning, collaboration opportunities and high-quality trainers.

Keywords: professional development; the community of practice; PF effectiveness; scaffolded learning; teacher training

1. Introduction

Professional development (PD) is key to better education (Guskey, 2002). Despite a consensus about the perceived value of PD, determining the ways in which it is effective is inconclusive (Bayar, 2014). As Guskey (2003) notes, it may be difficult to draft "a single list of characteristics leading to broad-brush policies and guidelines for effective professional development" (p.750) due to the complexity of the aspects influencing the outcome of a professional development program. However, he suggests that identifying features that made certain programs effective may enable the replication of such successful components in other professional development programs. Therefore, it is important to keep exploring teachers' perceptions of experiences in PD sessions to inform future PD design. Since the implementation of taught concepts during PD is influenced by many contextual factors, it would be valuable to explore teachers' PD experiences in contexts that are undergoing paradigm shifts in

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education. In many countries around the world, educational contexts are undergoing change. However, most research in the literature on PD effectiveness comes from high-income countries such as the US (see Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007), and the UK (see McCaughtry, Martin, Kulinna, & Cothra, 2006). Although there is a growing number of research on the impact education interventions have on student performance in lower-income countries (see Conn, 2017), further research is needed to understand which pedagogical interventions improve the quality of teaching.

This is particularly evident for a great number of countries in post-conflict contexts, as it is the case with the Western Balkans, that in an effort to adhere to international standards are continuing the struggle to eliminate traditional teaching, rote learning and knowledge assessment. Unfortunately, a top-down approach to PD is the most common approach applied in this context (see Whyatt & Oncevska Ager, 2016; Mehmeti, Rraci & Bajrami, 2019). Hence, managing paradigm shifts has implications for PD as well.

Kosovo is a typical example of such a context. Through its education system has been undergoing continuous reforms in the past two decades, such as aligning its curriculum standards to international education standards and embracing a student-centered pedagogy, the full-frontal and a 'one-size-fits-all' model is still the norm (Mustafa, 2017). Also, a rigid top-down push to redefine teachers' role from knowledge providers to facilitators has challenged teachers' traditional values, downplaying the importance of empowerment and support in the process. As a result, little progress has been reported in terms of quality in education. This is also supported by the poor performance of fifteen years old Kosovar students in the international PISA tests (Avvisati, Echazarra, Givord & Schwabe, 2019; Schleicher, 2019).

Furthermore, there is an ongoing effort to reform the pre-university education system, which moved underground in the early 90's as resistance to Serbian government repression, followed by an armed conflict in 1999, and a rather unprecedented approach in its reinvention by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo - UNMIK (Sommers & Buckland, 2004; Clark, 2000).

However, in a recent attempt to ensure quality in education, teacher licensing is introduced. Unfortunately, this development has led teachers to attend professional development training for the sake of obtaining certificates as "evidence to meet relicensing criteria and not performance improvement" (Mehmeti et al., 2019, p. 53). To add to the complexity of the matter, the training providers, instead of conducting teacher needs assessment, comply with the priorities of the donors or perceptions of Ministry of Education and Science (MES) officials regarding the needs for teacher PD (Mehmeti et al., 2019). Consequently, teachers end up attending programs that often apply a top-down knowledge-transmission approach. By taking this approach, training providers fail to equip teachers with practical skills and knowledge that are directly applicable in their teaching contexts (Tilfarlioğlu & Öztürk, 2007). EFL teachers for example, are provided with predominantly generic PD training, often disconnected from the reality of their individual, subject-specific and school needs. More importantly, the training providers ignore to 'empower teachers with the knowledge, skill, attitude, and autonomy necessary to devise for themselves a systematic, coherent, and relevant alternative to the method that is informed by principled pragmatism' (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 45).

Furthermore, they use different practices in terms of monitoring and evaluating the programs: the raised concerns over the quality of training come as no surprise considering that the MEST has not developed criteria to measure quality in training programs. (Mehmeti et al., 2019). Also, beyond training, there seems to be a lack of resources and understanding from school management to support this paradigm shift. In other words, the current PD in pre-university education in Kosovo is not responsive to the needs of teachers and schools.

1.1. Literature Review

Effective teacher PD results in a change of practice in the classroom. However, it is important to explore what facilitates this change of practice. Research suggests that in addition to PD features that are related to content and delivery, creating opportunities for a community of practice could facilitate teacher change and therefore the effectiveness of PD.

1.1.1. What constitutes effective PD?

Despite numerous clarifications provided by researchers regarding key features of effective PD programs, determining the criteria of effectiveness in PD is continuously debated (Sokel, 2019). Traditional one-shot workshops, conferences, or seminars, that are disconnected from the context, for example, have been criticized by researchers to be ineffective in ensuring lasting changes in teaching practices (Easton, 2008; Day & Sachs, 2004; Fishman, Marx, Best & Tal, 2003). Robb (2000) criticized the traditional models of professional development which provide uniform theoretical content that does not meet the classroom realities and professional needs of teachers. Moreover, she noted that traditional models do not offer follow-up support for teachers in the implementation of new ideas and approaches, which impacts the effectiveness of teacher professional development programs.

Recently, however, researchers attempted to identify evidence-based features of PD programs that could determine their effectiveness (e.g. Richardson & Díaz Maggioli, 2018; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). In a review of 35 research articles, Darling-Hammond et al (2017) identified seven features of effective PD: an effective program is content-focused, i.e., teachers need to see an explicit connection between the content being learned and their own classroom needs (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006); it should incorporate active learning, utilize models of effective practices so teachers can 'learn by doing' (Bayar, 2014, p.324); and it should model scrutiny and adaptation of curriculum and/or instructions to the needs of individual classrooms.

Furthermore, Darling-Hammond et al (2017) observed that effective PD programs create opportunities for collaboration, coaching and expert support, feedback, and reflection. As they note, teachers who participate in a PD program need peer collaboration opportunities within the training, embedded in their jobs and/or outside of school. Of vital importance in facilitating teachers' learning is also the need to be guided by high-quality instructors (Bayar, 2014), who should model teaching, lead group discussions, provide constructive feedback, encourage peer collaboration, and demonstrate content knowledge (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017). This also means that instructors should create opportunities for reflection within the program, otherwise teachers will not be able to grasp the value and relevance of PD (Richardson & Díaz Maggioli, 2018).

Other researchers also list coherence as a way to evaluate an effective PD (Lindvall & Ryve, 2019; Desimone, 2009). Lindvall and Ryve's (2019) systematic review revealed three types of coherence: the first type of coherence refers to coherence with components such as national standards, curricula, and policies; the second type of coherence refers to achieving adjustment and coordination of activities within the program, and the third type of coherence refers to negotiating the content of the program with teachers participating in the PD.

1.1.2. Changes in classroom practices and teachers' beliefs

The goal of PD is to achieve a change of teacher practice and teacher beliefs which in turn lead to better learning results for students (Guskey 2002). Although research on how teacher change occurs is contradictory (Sahin & Yildirim, 2015), the consensus is that teacher change is highly complex. Even though change is not a linear process, Guskey (2002) suggests that for teacher change to happen, teachers must witness positive student response to the new activities, approaches, or methods

introduced. This response can range from higher student engagement during classes to improved student grades. Given the complexity of teacher change during PD, teachers' suggestions and needs ought to be considered (Bayar, 2014). This could shed light on how PD can be more effective so that change in teacher practices and beliefs is achieved and results in the increase of students' learning outcomes.

1.1.3. Community of Practice

For teacher change to occur, teachers must undergo change both as individuals and as part of a group of people (Fullan, 2007). Therefore, a community of practice can play an important role in the effectiveness of a professional development program (Kong, 2018; MacPhail, Patton, Parker, Tannehill, 2014; Trust & Horrocks, 2016; Vangrieken, Meredith, Packer & Kyndt, 2017).

Wenger defines the community of practice as a community with "1) mutual engagement 2) a joint enterprise 3) a shared repertoire" (1998, p.73). However, in an interview series, Wenger notes that just because one is part of the group does not make that individual part of a community of practice (Farnsworth, Kleanthous & Wenger-Trayner, 2016). To clarify, he elaborates that while "[a] team is defined by a joint task, something they [members] have to accomplish together", in a community of practice "[members] may engage in the same practice while working on different tasks in different teams" and regardless of that create a "learning partnership" (Farnsworth et al, 2016, p.143).

More specific to teacher professional development, a teacher community of practice is presented as "...a group of teachers who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and share and build knowledge with a group identity, shared domain, goals, and interactional repertoire" (Brouwer, Brekelmans, Nieuwenhuis, & Simons, 2012, p.320). Communities of practice are known to evolve naturally (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) and are consistent with bottom-up initiatives of teacher professional development (Vangrieken et al., 2017). In considering its effectiveness in supporting teacher learning, some PD providers use it as a deliberate learning strategy: they encourage teachers with different experiences and levels of understanding to share and learn from peers (see Armour & Makopoulou, 2012).

1.2. Research questions

This small-scale research aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of PD in developing their professional knowledge and skill?*
- 2. What are the most relevant aspects of PD in developing professional knowledge and skills from teachers' perspectives?*

2. Method

2.1. Overview of the training

Sixteen pre-university English teachers in Kosovo attended a 100-hour PD training delivered by Kosovo English Teachers' Network (KETNET) and financed by the US Embassy in Kosovo. KETNET is a non-for-profit association that aims at improving the practice of English teaching and learning by creating various PD opportunities, sharing information, and connecting teachers at local, regional and international levels. In its continuous efforts to meet teachers' needs and transform learning for students, KETNET created a training program that aimed at helping teachers grasp and apply competency and interdisciplinary-based teaching, as foreseen by the New Kosovo Curriculum.

To do so, and to encourage collaboration with other subject teachers, the training focused on Project Based Learning (PBL) as an approach. The training was offered to KETNET members free of charge and bore no credits toward the teacher relicensing program.

The training took place in ten face-to-face sessions over a span of three months. The content and instructional design of the training were planned based on the feedback from previous KETNET training, classroom observations, experience, and a review of existing literature on PD. In considering anecdotal evidence related to the dubious quality of past training of English teachers in Kosovo, and bearing in mind the multifaceted effectiveness of scaffolding (Kleickmann, Trobst, Jonen, Vehmeyer, & Moller, 2016) great consideration was given to scaffolding of content and implementation of PBL. This PD program used the same principles that according to Good and Brophy (2008) teachers use to help their learners, i.e., present information through modeling, demonstration, or explanations, interact with students on content and engage students in activities that allow them to apply the taught concepts. In addition, providing ongoing support and guidance was a central part of the training. More importantly, the program was not too rigid, having in mind that 'many needs are usually discovered while working' (Berkvens, Kalyanpur, Kuiper & den Akker, 2012, p.250). Instead, teachers' input during and after the sessions and reflections of both teacher trainers and the project coordinator at the end of each session, enabled the program to be adjusted to the needs of the teachers.

Throughout the PD implementation process, teachers constructed knowledge on PBL, competency-based and student-centered teaching, cooperation and collaboration by completing hands-on activities, sharing experiences through face-to-face and online discussions, and reflection assignments. Moreover, instructional practices were modeled by a team of four experienced KETNET trainers: three of them were university lecturers, and one was an experienced quality assurance coordinator from a prestigious English language school. They collaborated very closely and complemented each other in their dual roles as trainer-mentors. In addition, the program coordinator supported both the trainers and participants throughout the process. From the onset, each trainer was assigned four teachers to mentor, while progress was ensured through continuous guidance and feedback. As part of the training, each teacher cooperated with at least one subject teacher from one's school to implement PBL in the classroom. In the end, they shared students' products with the school and parents. Lastly, all teachers shared their PBL experience with peers at an annual KETNET Teachers' Lounge event and some of them at the KETNET's annual conference as well.

2.2. Participants

Sixteen teachers, from various regions and sectors, teaching different CEFR levels participated in the training. The majority of participants taught in public schools. The participants' length of teaching experience ranged from 1-21 years and more (see Table 1) and they all participated in the research through reflection and workshop feedback forms (see Instruments).

Table 1. The demographic background of the participants

		Unit
Gender	Female	14
	Males	2
Teaching experience	1-10 years	12
	11-20 years	3

	21 and more	1
Sector	Public	12
	Private	3
	Both	1
Location	Urban	12
	Rural	4
Level of students	TEYL	3
	A1-A2	5
	B1-B2	8

However, for a more thorough insight into teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of the PD training, purposive sampling was used to select participants for semi-structured interviews. A purposive sample created the opportunity for a strategic approach for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of the teachers who attended this PD program (Bryman, 2012). Two criteria were established for the selection of participants: the location where teachers worked and the sector in which they worked (public, private, or both). Based on these criteria, teachers were contacted and following their consent to participate in the interviews, the final list of interviewees consisted of six teachers. At the time of the project implementation, three of the teachers were working in the private sector, two of them were employed in the public sector and one was engaged in both the public and private sector. While all of the teachers who responded by expressing their interest to participate in the interview worked in an urban location, four of the teachers worked in a larger urban region whereas two others worked in smaller towns in two other regions of Kosovo.

2.3. Instruments

Using a qualitative approach, data were collected and triangulated using interviews, reflection accounts, feedback forms, and an external project evaluation report (see Table 2 for details).

Table 2. Means of data collection

Type	Reference in the text
Teacher interviews (face-to-face or via email)	T1-T6
Reflection (mid-way and at the end)	R1- R2
Workshop feedback forms	W1-W10
External Evaluator's Report	EE

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six of the teachers. Semi-structured interviews created the opportunity for "specific issues to be addressed" (Bryman, 2012, p.472). They also enabled the interviewees and the interviewer to be more engaged in the communication process if certain aspects needed to be addressed in greater detail than anticipated by the planned interview questions

(Brinkmann, 2013). Predetermined open-ended interview questions focused on exploring the challenges and benefits that teachers encountered during the PD program. However, additional questions were also asked by the researcher during the interview to explore teachers' experiences more in-depth when considered necessary.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

Upon completion of the training, using probability sampling, six participants, from both the private and public education sectors, took part in face-to-face or email interviews. Participation was voluntary, information about the aim of the study was shared, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. The first researcher, in her role as the project coordinator and the mastermind of the program, attended all training sessions and online discussions as an observer. She collected data from participants via feedback and reflection forms. The second researcher in her role as a trainer-mentor ensured data collection through semi-structured interviews. The data were collectively organized into a shared Google Drive which was individually analyzed by both researchers. Researchers recorded their thoughts and discussed the data set prior to beginning the joint process of inductive coding by hand (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and re-coding using MAXQDA computer software. Through constant comparison, data were analyzed around themes.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings from this research are divided into two categories: effectiveness of PD in developing teachers' professional knowledge and skills and teachers' perceptions on the key aspect of the training that contributed to their professional development.

3.1. The Benefits of PD

Similar to Sokel (2019, p.4), teachers in the present study reported that attending PD was beneficial because they acquired new knowledge and skills, which resulted in a change of their classroom practices and helped them revisit their beliefs.

3.1.1. New knowledge and skills

Primary and secondary data indicate that teachers acquired new knowledge and skills during the training. The emphasis on learning new information and its immediate, and lasting impact in teaching is evident in the comments below:

We are learning and doing things that we have not done until now. In this way, our students are benefiting from the training as well. (R1)

From each session, I learned something new that can improve my teaching. (R2)

One of the teachers stated that she learned activities that 'I apply in my classes' and 'I also understood better the Kosova Core Curriculum for pre-university education'(T6), emphasizing again the relevance that training can have in meeting the needs of the teachers (Bayar, 2014) and in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills (Sokel, 2019; Berkvens et al., 2012). That these concepts were new to teachers is shown in a comment by T1: 'There were things I learned for the first time such as learning about rubrics and writing objectives.'

Acquisition of new knowledge and skills is also demonstrated in the external evaluator's report: One could observe the participants' capacity developed through this project. They demonstrated a high level of knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility in the content covered.

3.1.2. *Impact on classroom practice*

While observations in the classroom were not included as part of the training program, the impact of the training on classroom practices was evident in responsive self-reporting by the teachers about their students' reactions towards the new teaching approach. All of the six interviewees reported high levels of student engagement and motivation when practicing concepts taught in the training. One teacher stated:

...professionally it helped me make the lesson more attractive for my students and I noticed that once I implemented it in my classroom, they were pretty much motivated and encouraged to be part of the lesson. And, I felt very good about this because it was like I made a change and I can use this even further. (T2)

Further implementation impacts on student engagement through the incorporation of PBL is shown in teacher comments that „everyone took part and was included in the project“ (T6), and „everyone was working on his or her- her element and doing things that they enjoyed, actually doing without noticing that they were learning something.“ (T3). This comes as no surprise having in mind that students were active participants in the construction of knowledge. In comparison to the standard practice of acquiring factual information, this approach created an opportunity for students to experience „meaningful learning“ (Good & Brophy, 2008). Furthermore, this approach awakened an enthusiasm in learning in disinterested students, as suggested by another teacher:

... I had students who are usually reserved or unwilling to participate in class activities come up to me to ask for my opinion on their project. (T4)

Student outcomes of the PBL impressed teachers, as well: 'I have some amazing videos that I never thought my students could do such things, i.e., 'developed critical thinking' (T6) and 'through PBL I saw how creative my students are' (T1), implying, as suggested by Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (2015) that 'rote-oriented learning' in the past, did not create opportunities for these students to develop competence in an area of inquiry. It also demonstrates how teachers' expectations for student achievement can change based on student's participation in academic activities (Good & Brophy, 2008). It is, thus, useful to note that content and pedagogical knowledge acquired during the training resulted in a measurable, positive change of classroom practices, which is consistent with other studies (Sokel, 2019; Sahin & Yildirim, 2015).

3.1.3. *Impact on beliefs*

Five participants reported initially doubting the training's effectiveness:

I was quite skeptical about whether I would be able to implement PBL in my classes successfully. The training helped me understand that it was possible, and very doable which in the end resulted to be true. (T4)

Teachers' reservations over the effectiveness of PBL in their teaching context is expressed in the mid-training reflections, too. Concerns such as „I wonder how cooperative my students will be“ show teachers feared that PBL was not an adequate teaching practice for their students. As one teacher reported: „I'm not very comfortable with it. I need to find out more and learn more about it in general“. This implies that teachers need to be persuaded that the new approach is valuable, otherwise they will most likely reject it (Timperley, 2008). Also, in a context where the teacher's predominant role is that of a knowledge transmitter, the reservation over responsibility-sharing with learners is understandable.

Moreover, four of the teachers reported that PBL seemed an implementation challenge for their classrooms, especially if it meant discarding teaching practices they had already developed. Teachers

are not open to changes if they have doubts since „to change means to change the possibility that students might learn less well than they do under current practices” (Guskey, 2002, p. 387).

However, at the end of the training program, as the data show, several teachers perceived that training affected them positively. One teacher noted 'I feel more open-minded'; another stated that 'I feel more accomplished as a teacher and 'more experienced than before.' During an interview, one teacher reflected that the training 'increased my engagement and motivation... and built my confidence to apply success skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity in my classroom.' (T6). These views seem to resonate with Timperley (2008), who argues that once teachers realize that their teaching practices are bringing positive changes in learners, they start viewing themselves as more effective teachers.

In general, teachers’ prior beliefs about students’ resistance towards the new teaching practices were challenged as they gained additional knowledge about what constitutes effective teaching practices, as expressed below:

In the beginning, I thought that my students will hardly accept a challenge like this but on the contrary, they are asking for more and I will try to lead them to new challenges. (R2)

Another teacher revealed that even though initially she was doubtful, she came to realize that students are more open to challenges than one would expect. According to her, '[I]f we do our job... then the students are going to accept every challenge' (T5). Another teacher expressed the belief that PBL 'emphasized learning out of the classroom and...the importance of student teamwork which, before this training, I had not prioritized in my classes.' (T4)

While reflecting upon her teaching practices another teacher realized and admitted that she could do more to make her students responsible learners. As she stated: „besides the traditional way that we’re used to...PBL showed me how to work on a project... in a way leading them [students] but also making them responsible for their work that they have to finish or complete at the end.” (T3)

From these observations, one can conclude that teachers revisited their beliefs and attitudes only after they saw positive outcomes with students in the implementation of new teaching practices (Guskey, 2002; Timperley, 2008). This concurs with a review of studies showing 'programs that ask teachers to try out new practices and see the effects on their students tend to be more successful than those that focus on changing attitudes first in the hope that this will lead to changes in practice.’ (Richardson & Díaz Maggioli, 2018, p.8)

3.2. *Attributes to effective PD*

Teachers in this study reported that 1) program coherence and 2) a community of practice, where learning through collaboration, guidance, and support occurred, were the features that made this PD effective.

3.2.1. *Coherence*

The majority of the participants perceived coherence as a contributing factor in deciding the PD’s effectiveness. More specifically, the training was reported to have been well-planned, the delivered content was scaffolded, and hands-on learning occurred. One of the teachers saw the experience as a puzzle where „step by step we learned something new and this added on to the previous things that we learned...”, so by the end „everyone had a clear picture of what they were doing and they should do with PBL further when they worked with their students.” (T3)

A further insight on scaffolding the learning process was offered by another teacher who 'really liked all the steps included in the training', specifically the part that required the teachers to work on

their PBL and then share that experience with colleagues at Teachers Lounge. In her words, this was a 'very well thought through' (T4) referring to the progressive layering of the knowledge. In extending the point further, a teacher noted that each session 'was planned professionally and in a thoughtful way' (T6), thus highlighting not only the importance of coherence within the PD course itself (Lindvall & Ryve, 2019) but also with classroom practices (Bayar, 2014).

Teachers were participating actively in their process of learning, suggesting that they were not passively listening to traditional, lecture-type training (Sokel, 2019; Bayar, 2014). This view is echoed by T2 who found the training practical, as hands-on learning demonstrated „how to engage our students in PBL“. In referring to the structure, she noted that “the training was well planned... you learn skills that you need” (T2); the learning was not separated from individual teachers needs and concerns (Bayar, 2014; Richardson & Díaz Maggioli, 2018).

In addition, many teachers appreciated that there was a balance between practice and theory. As one of them commented: 'It was not only theory, ...but there were practical things included' (T2). Six teachers commented, in the initial stages of the training, that 'everything was perfect, theory combined with practice'; 'What I liked most was that first, you explained PBL and then you made us practice what we learned' (W2), suggesting that the connection between theory and practice was done in a manner that was meaningful to teachers and considerate to their context (Timperley, 2008). Also, in line with the results of the work of Sokel (2019) and Posnanski (2002), this finding highlights the importance of theory-practice connection as a contributing factor to the effectiveness of PD.

The external evaluator also felt the training was geared towards the needs of the participants and displayed elements of coherence, stating 'the content... was relevant, up-to-date and rather beneficial for the participants. There was a natural order of sequencing and delivery of the modules. The content of each module was well thought. The ratio between the theory that is input, and hands-on experience of participants was also well thought and appropriate'.

3.2.2. Community of Practice

Community of practice emerges from the intertwining of opportunities with peers and supportive professionals. As reported frequently in primary and secondary data of this research, the regular opportunities for teacher collaboration and the sharing of ideas gave participants a sense of belonging to a community where one is valued and supported (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). This community was referred to in interviews as 'a family where you matter', 'a small family...who can help me with any difficulties with my students, and a place where 'meeting colleagues and exchanging experiences was another good thing that makes you think and feel evaluated.' Namely, through collaboration, teachers had opportunities to learn from each other: „you learned from others, and others learned from you“. (T5)

The role of the emerged community of practice is exemplified in the following comment:

...I was lucky to be part of an excellent group of people. The continuous support that I received not only from the mentors but also from colleagues participating in the training is incomparable. I just can say that things like this don't happen every day. (R2)

The benefits of the community of practice were observed in the External Evaluator's report: 'when they [teachers] would encounter a difficulty, they said that they supported each other in finding the best solution for the problem'. This perspective complies with research that views peer collaboration and support as a key factor in determining the effectiveness of PD. Namely, it encourages the co-construction of knowledge (Richardson & Díaz Maggioli, 2018). Through the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and mutual support, teachers advance approaches together and solve problems (Sokel, 2019; Akinyemi, Rembe, Shumba and Adewumi, 2019). Thirteen teachers expressed gratitude for a

culture of collaborative learning, guidance, and feedback where sharing knowledge was a central component. Not surprisingly, two of the teachers stated that they are going to miss the weekly group reflection meetings.

In concurrence with other studies, (Bayar, 2014; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005), the importance of high-quality instructors was reported to have been an important factor in the process of learning and in determining the effectiveness of the training. As suggested by Timperley (2008), trainers who promote their practices without any meaningful involvement of teachers in PD are less effective. Fortunately, frequent references were made about the role trainer-mentors played in creating conditions for the establishment and growth of the community of practice, such as 'at the beginning I thought it would be a bit hard ... but with the help and communication we had with mentor professors everything was easy and fun to do.' (T1)

One of the teachers expressed gratitude to share the same community with mentors. In her words: „I am really satisfied and proud to be part of this team. I appreciate your work and your kind behaviors as well.' (R1) Another insight was offered by T5 who stated: '[T]hey [trainer-mentors] was amazing. I adore them.' The external evaluator expressed that 'mentors were rather knowledgeable, helpful, open, ready to assist, and supportive all the time, always provided detailed feedback, even extra--feedback at times if it was deemed necessary.' This resonates with Guskey (2002), who emphasizes the importance of regular feedback when implementing new practices in the classroom. In other words, the ongoing feedback, from input to implementation, enables teachers to assess what works and what does not in their teaching context (Richardson & Díaz Maggioli, 2018). Mentors were also shown gratitude for 'facilitating things' or 'for the patience' and they were encouraged to 'keep being as intelligent as you are', and 'keep on being as clear as you are.' (W8)

A comfortable learning environment where guidance, feedback, and support were central was established by trainer-mentors and further developed by teachers. As one teacher sums up:

I was in the presence of professionals in the field who made me feel confident in learning about PBL. Secondly, I got the chance to go through this experience with many other teachers who helped me along the way by sharing their challenges with me. I also felt comfortable talking to my mentor about any issue I encountered. In general, the training provided a comfortable learning environment together with peer feedback opportunities. (T4)

As argued by Timperley (2008), for professional learning to occur teachers need to take risks: but 'before teachers take on that risk, they need to trust that their honest efforts will be supported, not belittled (p.16). In other words, great attention should be given to establishing 'trust and a safe learning environment' (Berkvens et al., 2012, p.249). Frequent interaction and collaboration among peers contributed towards establishing positive relationships, which, in turn, built trust, which allowed the vulnerability to disclose one's problems in the classroom and both give and receive help (Akinyemi et al., 2019). Hence, in concurrence with King and Newman (2001), this community of practice fostered learning because there were peer collaboration opportunities and teachers had to access the expertise of instructor-mentors. In regards to the latter, and line with other findings, it can be concluded that teachers who 'receive coaching are more likely to enact desired teaching practices and apply them more appropriately than those receiving more traditional PD.' (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017, p.13)

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

A PD program, as the findings from this small-scale study suggest, can be effective and can immediately affect change in teaching practices, which, in the long run, is the goal of offering PD. PD can also change teachers' beliefs and attitudes about their teaching practices. Four prominent features that helped change participants' classroom practices were:

- 1) **Relevant Content:** A training program tailored to meet teachers' needs should balance theory and practice, using hands-on approaches to learning. Moreover, for teachers to make connections between content and classroom practices, a PD needs to be compatible with curriculum goals. In other words, teachers should have the opportunity to practice adaptable activities, allowing for creative implementation in their teaching context. For content to be relevant, training developers need to either be in contact with teachers (e.g. informal conversations, classroom observations, survey) or they need to involve teachers in the design of the training.
- 2) **Scaffolded Learning:** A training program that delivers the content gradually and uses active learning techniques is able to accommodate the various needs of teachers and help them progressively reach the goals. Trainers should gradually present new content and continuously provide support, setting their pace to the teachers' comfort and comprehension level.
- 3) **Collaboration Opportunities:** Teachers need opportunities to share and acquire professional knowledge and skills through interaction and collaboration with their peers. They need to feel that they are part of a community where they feel comfortable sharing and help each other. The sense of belonging to a community can shift focus from the individual to the group, hence everyone could benefit from it.
- 4) **High-Quality Instructors:** For training to be perceived as effective, it is vital that trainers/instructors have the knowledge and experience to both teach and model the information. They need to build rapport with participants, developing the aforementioned sense of community where sharing, feedback, and mutual support are at the heart of the training. Trainers must demonstrate listening and discussion skills, ensuring teachers' concerns are heard and solutions are explored jointly.

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