Perception of IB Primary Years Programme Teachers on Professional Development

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ABSTRACT
As the present world challenges schools and the entire school community with many changes in the hope of improving the learning outcomes of students, schools and teachers, they are tasked with constantly upgrading the standards of education. Professional development has always been the focus of most of these improvements. In most schools and in the International Baccalaureate, teachers recognise that professional development does not end after the 1-hour or 3-days or 4-weeks sessions, it is continuous in nature and extends towards their everyday dealings. This study is a qualitative research that involves primary school teachers of an IB World School. The outcome of this research seems to capture the teachers' perspective on professional development and how it has influenced their teaching practice. A review of relevant literature on the topic of professional development will give an idea on what professional development is, its purpose, how it has met the needs of teachers and how it has caused significant changes in teaching techniques. Mixed research methods were adopted in this study, the perspectives of a small group of primary teachers were recorded and analysed; allowing for comparisons with the results of the previous researches conducted in the field.

Introduction

One of the priorities of every school is to raise the academic achievement of its students and one of the best paths to increased learning is to improve teaching (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000) and this involves teachers' classroom practices reflecting high standards. The biggest question now is how this can be attained. Over the past two decades, discussions and studies on teacher professional development (PD) have arisen, putting efforts into finding effective approaches in order to ensure that teachers are well prepared to implement appropriate teaching practices. Having read various literatures and studies about PD, it can be concluded that PD is perceived as a formal and informal development of professional knowledge and skills (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006) acquired and developed throughout a person's experience in the workplace. Desimone (2011) further said in her research that even informal hallway discussions with other teachers could cause an increase in a teacher's knowledge and skills. The Department of Education in New Jersey (2014) further quantifies what PD is and that it comprises of professional learning opportunities aligned with student learning, teacher development needs and school improvement goals.

Background

The focus school has been authorised to offer the IB Primary (PYP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP) for the past six years now. The PD practices of the school have been very extensive and they cater to all teachers- whether they are new/ experienced in the teaching profession or new/experienced in the IB. The school implements both formal and informal PD.

Formal PDs are more structured and almost usually involves the entire team or a group of teachers. Currently, these are some of the formal PDs conducted in the school: General Induction, Programme Specific Induction, In-Campus PD sessions and IB Workshops (either online, face-to-face, or in school). Informal PDs, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve all of the primary school teachers at once. Individual or a small group of teachers decide to do this on their own at their most convenient time. Some examples of this type of PD are the following: collaborative planning within their different teams (level and subject teams), professional learning community, visiting other teacher's classrooms, observing other teachers, visiting other IB schools and informal dialogues with each other. Recently, several blogs related to PYP, IB teacher forums and social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or WhatsApp to name a few) also became a famous platform for informal discussions among teachers not only in the focus school but also globally.

Problem Statement

Being a part of the Primary Years Programme (PYP) leadership team in the focus school, I have been actively involved in the planning and in the implementation of PD plans for the focus school's Primary team of teachers. However, it has been noticed that there has been no proper evaluation on whether it has been worthwhile to offer these PD sessions to teachers or has it been burdensome to the teaches and to the PD leaders. There has yet to be any attempt in place to understand how teachers perceive of PD and as a result, there has been no proper indication on where the PD plans are exactly based up on.

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Literature Review

Despite the fact that every institution may have their own purposes and reasons for offering PD courses to their teachers, the question on whether these courses meet teachers' needs still carries a big impact on the success of their efforts (Fishman & Duffy, 1992). Furthermore, they have deemed it extremely important for any institution to find out what teachers really need before designing any programme.

Regardless of whether one is a novice teacher or an in-service teacher, teachers share some common needs. As cited by Engstrom and Danielson (2006), some of the needs of teachers are the need to have time to work with their colleagues (which includes planning time and release time), the need for more focused workshops (e.g. learning on Inquiry Cycle) and the need to have a sort of a 'follow up discussion' weeks or months after the PD session. In addition to this, it has also been identified that teachers need opportunities to be a part of professional communities with open discussions about learning theories and about teacher materials and pedagogy. Giving teachers opportunities and space to "learn by doing" is also another need. (Wenzlaff & Wieseman, 2004).

Research Questions

This study is intended to better understand the perspectives of the team of PYP teachers in the school with the hope of being able to shed some light to the following questions:

1. What do teachers understand about professional development?
2. What do teachers understand about the purpose of professional development?
3. How has the professional development sessions in school met the needs of teachers as PYP practitioners?

Research Methodology

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used as its intention is to give light to what teachers in the focus school perceive about PD, its purpose and how it has influenced their teaching practice. The participants of this study are the primary teachers of the focus school. They come from different educational and ethnic backgrounds, different understanding and different experiences. They have also served the school in different levels and their length of service varies from zero to seven years. There are a total of 27 primary school teachers in the school. Eight of whom are teaching primary school and middle school at the same time.

The instruments used for this research are questionnaire and interview. As the questionnaire was developed, it was decided to use the Likert scale, a summated rating scale, developed by Rensis Likert and is one of the most widely used techniques to measure attitude or perceptions. It assesses attitudes or positions of individuals towards a topic by presenting a set of statements about the topic and asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement towards the statements; whether they strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree. Some adaptations have also been done based on the Teacher Professional Development Evaluation Guide (Bruce, 2010).

Interviews are widely used tools across all disciplines. In educational research, this is a key tool of data collection. It is useful because researchers can get a large amount of data quickly and enables them to ask follow up questions and clarifications immediately. Interviews also permit participants to describe detailed personal information and allow the interviewer to have better control over the types of information received (Baxter & Jack, 2008). However, interviews provide only filtered information as viewed by the interviewer (Creswell, 2012). Another disadvantage of interview according to Creswell is the fact that the interviewee may provide perspectives that he or she wants the interviewer to hear.

Discussion and Findings

Thematic analysis as suggested by the step-by-step guide provided by Braun and Clarke (2010) was used to analyse the data gathered.

Career Development

One of the overarching themes that emerged based on the data gathered in terms of teachers' understanding of PD and its purpose was career development. This involves the development of skills, courses and trainings, development of profession and acquisition of knowledge.

Table 1 below shows that a majority (96%) of the participants views PD as an opportunity to acquire knowledge and to advance in the career (96%) that they have chosen despite the fact that these sessions happen almost weekly in the school and always at the end of a long day. It has also been noted that a few of the participants (35%) also agree that it is an obligation that they need and are forced to participate into which is quite alarming.

[I1T1T1], [I1T2T1], [I1T5T1] and [I1T6T1] mentioned that they consider PD as an opportunity to attain particular skills required for them to carry out their responsibilities as a teacher. Similarly, [I2T8T1] and [I2T8T1] are quoted to view PD as "sharpening of our thinking skills, our knowledge, the input so that we can put it into our classroom," and "a tool wherein teachers can be developed, be taught and be honed in our teaching and learning skills and also in our knowledge and pedagogy."

These data are consistent with Dall'Alba and Sandberg's (2006) definition of PD, which consists of both the formal and informal development of knowledge and skills acquired through practical experience that happens in the workplace. These data also are in accordance with Hill's (2009) statement in his journal saying that PD has led to improvements in teachers' knowledge and instructions.

[I2T11T1] acknowledged the importance of learning from his/her coordinator and from other teachers in the school. This is substantiated by Borko (2004) as he supported a focus on strong professional community among teachers and that having a strong PD community is important to instructional improvement. Chalmers and Keown (2006) have also talked about professional communities, specially called 'communities of practice'. They further define what these communities are. Three of the basic characteristics of these communities are having a shared domain of interest, being a community whereby members engage in activities and discussions where they help each other and share information and lastly, the members of these communities of practice are practitioners. Jackson and Bruegmann (2009), has also mentioned about similar characteristics in their study. They talked about joint production and shared resources among teachers, they also talk about the presence of good teachers may motivate colleagues to do better, and they talked about peer learning among teachers. The role of fellow colleagues is also suggested to be crucial in the learning of the entire body of teachers in a school (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007). Souto-Manning (2010) has also mentioned a similar concept for which she called "teacher culture circles". It is her belief that all teachers bring a wealth of practices, experiences, and knowledge with them.

Table 1.Teachers' Understanding of Professional Development.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neitheragree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
The acquisition of knowledge	13	12	1	0	0	26
A personal development	13	13	0	0	0	26
A career advancement	12	13	1	0	0	26
An obligation that I am forced to participate	2	7	7	7	3	26

Table 2.Perceptions of the Extent to which the Professional Development Sessions Teachers' Attended met their Developmental Needs.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neitheragree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
All of the sessions I attended addressed my professional needs completely.	6	13	5	0	0	24
All of the sessions did not help me much because I was already familiar with those topics.	0	1	3	12	8	24

It is of great significance that teachers and teacher educators learn from each other. She further implies that teacher culture circles are reflective in nature.

[I2T10T1] and [I2T12T1] further said that being a new IB teacher, they feel that they are not equipped with the necessary tools to become effective in their role as PYP teachers. Having PD sessions in school has given them knowledge on what IB really is and has given them confidence in their classroom. [I2T9T1], despite having taught for many years now, he/she still feels that there is still a need for him/her to participate in PD sessions to keep up with the times in this 21st century.

Learning new skills and new ways to teach for [I1T2T1] is part of the journey of being a teacher. In addition, [I1T3T1] views PD as a "lifelong process that targets on our growth as a practitioner in the profession we have chosen". Both [I1T4T1] and [I1T7T1] view PD as a career enhancement opportunity, a way for them to be better in what they do. This is similar to how IB views professional development; as a tool to help educators reach a deeper understanding of what it means to be an effective teacher and in doing so, IB believes that it will take them ahead of every other educator (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013).

Becoming effective teachers is one of the main concerns of teachers in the focus school. They worry that they may not be conducting their lessons according to the standards and practices of the IB.

Personal Development

Another overarching theme that emerged based on the data that I have collected was on personal development. [I2T9T1], [I1T7T1] and [I2T9T1] believe that the main purpose of PD is for teachers to develop and grow as a person and in his / her profession.

This needs to be seen in the context of Desimone (2009) statement, who says that PD refers to experiences of teachers which also contributes to their personal, social and emotional growth as teachers and not just on the increase of knowledge and skills. Personal development involves a change in the personal characteristics of the teachers such as "passion, perseverance, willingness to take risks, pragmatism, patience, flexibility, respect, creativity, authenticity, love of learning, high energy and sense of humour." (Goble & Horm, 2010)

Lifelong learning

The third overarching theme that emerged was on PD as a lifelong learning. Quoting directly from [I1T3T1], "Professional Development is a lifelong process that targets our growth as a practitioner in the profession we have chosen." [I2T9T1] and [I2T13T1] both reiterated that PD doesn't end with the seminar or training itself but it is continued to visiting the classroom and one-on-one sessions with teachers also. So, even when inside the class, PD is still ongoing. It doesn't end within the PD week, it ends when they stop teaching.

Being lifelong learners is a big thing for IB and it is also gaining popularity this century. In an attempt to give an example of one way of demonstrating life-long learning, Coffey and Billings (2009) have explored the role of reading as one way of supporting on going professional growth of his teachers. They urged all teachers and all learners to carefully read and learn from articles, journals and researches available. This reminds me of the statement that [I2T9T1] said during the interview, "I think it is good to know what the standards of good professional practice are because I know from other schools that teachers are encouraged to write their own publications regarding educational principles and practices of theirs."

It opens another avenue for teachers to learn, publications, journals or even simply blogs of other practitioners could be rich in information and rich in good practices from which anyone can learn from. Through teachers' own reading, they tend to make connections with what they are currently doing in their classroom (Coffey & Billings, 2009).

Referring to Table 2 below, a majority (79%) of the PYP teachers agree that the sessions they have attended have somehow addressed their needs. We can recall that most of these teachers view PD as an opportunity to learn new skills; it is imperative then, to assume that the greatest need of the team of teachers is this. Teachers feel that there is a need to have PD sessions in school. [I2T9T2], [I2T10T2] and [I2T12T2] were very vocal about this need during interview.

Looking at the data gathered, it was noted that there are two main needs of the teachers in the focus school and these have been identified due to a realization that this group of teachers is either totally new to the school and/ or new to IB PYP. Having said this, it was noted that teachers needed to be familiar with what IB is and its pedagogy first before they will be able to reflect fully on what they know and on what they need to know more about. Day and Gu (2007) have explained in detail how teachers' development needs greatly affects teachers' sense of identity, commitment and effectiveness. They also pointed out that there is a great need to provide differentiated support to teachers to meet both their professional and personal learning needs at different points of time in their career. Day and Gu (2007) have also concluded that the support from head teachers and other colleagues play an important role in the fulfilment of the different needs of all teachers. Having a positive learning climate allows for professional learning opportunities to happen and eventually sustains commitment and effectiveness of all teachers.

Conclusion

As implied in my introduction chapter above, professional development is an integral part of the school's vision and mission statement. Providing the teachers with continuous professional growth and a wide range of learning opportunities for all of the teachers and staff have always been one of the priorities of the focus school. Ever since embracing the IB philosophy, the school has also grown to adopt the IB's perspective of professional development. By providing IB PD workshops in various forms, IB creates transformative experiences for IB teachers, so they can do the same for students. IB PD sessions are beyond offering new skills. They encourage IB teachers to develop new insights into pedagogy and their own practices, creating life-long learners and internationally minded teachers. In view of this purpose, every teacher has been encouraged to constantly reflect on his or her own learning and on his or her practice. Reflection, according to Burton (1986), is the soul of learning and action. Reflection has been a great culture of the school. Ever since becoming an IB PYP school, we are constantly reviewing our own practice in alignment with the IB standards and practices and are constantly updating our action plan. Conducting this study now is crucial as in two years' time; the focus school will be facing the evaluation process and will be asked to conduct a self-study, reviewing all of its practices. Professional development is just one small part of the whole process.

Looking back at the research questions for this study the main objective was to better understand the perspectives of the team of PYP teachers on what they understand about PD and its purpose and the extent to which PD sessions met their needs. It was found that generally, teachers in the focus school views PD as an important part of their journey as a teacher, particularly as an IB PYP teacher. They recognise the fact that PD offers them opportunities for professional and personal development. In terms of professional development, teachers see PD as an avenue for them to learn new skills, new strategies and new ideas that they may find useful in their own classroom. It also serves as an avenue for them to learn from one another and sharing best practices with one another. In terms of personal development, teachers see PD as an opportunity to make them readier and be more confident to conduct their lesson. Teachers in the focus school also recognise that PD is a process and does not end after the 1-hour or 1-week session. They recognise that it is and it must be continuous in nature. Teachers' beliefs on PD as a life-long learning has been validated. Further to this, a note on spending more one-to-one time with the teachers is important and requests of more observations have also been slightly touched on.

As a result of this study, it is recommended that the school look deeper into each professional development session. The next step is surely to evaluate the effectiveness of the whole PD programme of the school so that each session will be meaningful and relevant to what teachers need and to what they would want to learn. One of realisations that came out of this study was the fact that only one out of two of the needs of teachers is being covered in all of our PD sessions in school. As mentioned in the previous chapter above, teachers in the focus school have two main needs: the need to be familiar with IB and its pedagogy and the need to have differentiated support. I have realized that the second need has not yet been provided or not being considered yet.

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