Planning Teachers' Professional Development

Taisia Muzafarova MA

Eotvos Lorand University, Hungary

taisiamuzafarova@gmail.com

Abstract: There is a growing trend to put the national and institutional priorities over the personal teachers' preferences when planning the professional development activities. The question arises: how to find the balance between individual and organizational learning needs and align those with policy priorities? The study aims to pilot the questionnaire, and the interview questions based on the questionnaire results, to refine the interview focus and select a relevant sample for the broader research on university teachers' professional development. The data collection tools were selected based on the contextual nature of the aspect of professional development. A small-scale survey based on TALIS questionnaire was modified to address the needs of the study. The questionnaire was used as a basis for developing and refining interview questions. It was also used to mediate the interview questions. The conclusions are organized under the three major categories: costs of teachers' professional development, leadership, and distribution of roles, collaboration, and networking.

Keywords: higher education, teachers' professional development, collaboration, networking, planning.

Introduction

Literature advises that sustainable professional development cannot be achieved solely through the provision of training; training itself only raises awareness but does not guarantee the application of the acquired knowledge and skills (Pedder, Opfer, 2010; Stoll, 2006). There is also evidence that in-service professional development proves to be the most cost-effective if it involves continuity and structured organization. Therefore, the goal of teachers' professional development is to create new practices based on data and evidence through the analysis of practical tools applicable to the specific context and its adaptation for the particular needs that lead to the elaboration of those practices into daily activities.

The teachers' professional development should incorporate the aspects under three major categories: training in professional knowledge, which incorporated subject area, pedagogy, and learning, training in skills and techniques, and ethics and attitudes that envision the development of sustainability (Frost, Akmal, Kingrey, 2010). Thus, the activities incorporated into teachers' professional development should fall into three categories and be sufficiently balanced to ensure the efficiency of emerging practices. The primary challenges to efficient teachers' professional development can be organized under, but not limited to, the following three categories: planning, evaluation, and dissemination. J. Pavulens highlights the necessity of career management competence development through the processes of personal reflection, reconstruction and social interaction, and implementation of certain activities to achieve effective performance management and successful career (Pavulens, 2015, 331).

There is a growing trend to put the national and institutional priorities over the personal teachers' preferences when planning the professional development activities. The question arises: how to find the balance between individual and organizational learning needs and align those with policy priorities?

Literature review suggests that senior leaders and managers are perceived as an authority in organizing professional development activities; at the same time, they rarely lead these events. The distribution of roles and responsibilities needs thoughtful accuracy to provide competent teachers' professional development.

Post-training evaluation is necessary to measure the participants' level of interest, perceived relevance of the training activities, usefulness for the desired goal (Beaty, 1998). Dissemination should include data collection, its thorough analysis, and reflection. Evaluation without properly planned outcomes and specific criteria add little to no effect on the teachers' professional development. Evaluative surveys/questionnaires are the most common types of data collection but are not sufficient enough as a stand-alone tool to achieve the re-thinking of old ideas and developing new priorities.

In the case study developed by C. Day (1999) the stated problem was that teachers' professional development lacked systematic collection and evaluation of data. Much attention was devoted to initial training of teachers at the given school, while senior teachers were engaged in unsystematic purely voluntary and unstructured continuous learning. Though the principal of the school agrees teachers themselves should be engaged in developing professionally, the role of institutional support should never be diminished. The professional development scheme engaged with the stated purpose and elaboration of the detailed list of criteria. The principal also highlighted his view of teachers as experts and recognized the senior teachers' resistance to "implementing passively other people's ideas" (Day, 1999, 114).

The solutions to the above-stated problems were achieved through several means. In addition to ongoing internal monitoring, regular and familiar to the school, the principal invested in external monitoring by "significant credible outsider" (Day, 1999, 115). The presence of the external monitoring as a non-participant observer at the scheme events added to the regular interview with those involved. The activities included in the overall scheme of professional development classified as action research.

The study aims to pilot the questionnaire, and the interview questions based on the questionnaire results, to refine the interview focus and select a relevant sample for the broader research on university teachers' professional development.

Methodology

The data collection tools were selected based on the contextual nature of the aspect of professional development. A small-scale survey based on TALIS questionnaire (OECD, 2013) was modified to address the needs of the study; the main changes were to address issues based on higher education context instead of the school. The questionnaire was not used as a separate data collection tool, being the basis for developing and refining interview questions instead. It was also used to mediate the interview questions.

The interview, as mentioned above, was based on the results of the small-scale survey. The questions were grouped according to the patterns developed during the literature review (organizational and opinion questions) and general background information about the participant. The interview was arranged through *Skype* and recorded with the help of *Callnote* software with the consent of the interviewee. The interview was manually transcribed.

All the questions related to the time span of 12 months up to the interview.

The following patterns were singled out to be the focal points of the data collection:

- organization of teachers' professional development activities, which focused on administrative and organizational issues (planning, participation, evaluation, dissemination);
- an opinion of teachers involved in professional development activities (their hopes and fear, expectations and perceived outcomes).

However, the nature of the collected data does not allow to analyse the aspects separately; the answered questions about organizational issues intertwine with the personal opinion, which adds to the validity of the study.

Results and Discussion

The interviewee is a teacher of English with six years of working experience five out of which are at the target higher education institution, a private university in Tbilisi, Georgia. Relevant background information retrieved with the help of the survey (distributed several days before the interview) is presented in the following list:

- the interviewee reported no participation in collaborative activities (including mentorship, observation, coaching) over an extended period;
- the interviewee did not take part in any of the professional development activities with the involvement of external partners;
- none of the professional development activities were spread out over several weeks or months.

The participant mentioned the seminars/workshops and regular participation in the conferences, which served as a starting point for the interview discussions. The following information presents a mix of data retrieved with the help of the interview and preliminary questionnaire:

- the interviewee was involved in the workshops that covered the subject matter and methodology and participated in education conferences for one and two days respectively over the last 12 months;
- the workshops usually included the aspects of subject knowledge and understanding and the application of ICT tools in teaching;
- the workshops were organized in an interactive way allowing the participants to collaborate with a group of colleagues from the same subject area in some of the activities;
- several of the events created an opportunity for active learning methods (opposed to passive listening); though the activities mentioned above did not make room for cross-field collaboration and research;
- all the teacher professional development activities the participant has attended were organized at the targeted higher education institution and were free of charge for the internal participants; the events were held during regular working hours.

All the questions related to the time span of 12 months up to the interview.

The interviewee highlighted the necessity to systematically upgrade her knowledge and understanding of the subject area, as well as pedagogical competencies in the field. She claimed ownership over her progress in the mentioned area, saying that her individualistic approach adds to the professional development events regularly scheduled at the target higher education institution. In fact, these two fields are the most regularly covered aspects within professional development activities.

The interviewee expressed a high level of need to be involved in the following areas for future professional development:

- knowledge of the curriculum (being acquainted with the overall structure would help to state clearer formative and summative goals for her instruction);
- student evaluation and assessment practices;
- teaching students with special needs;
- teaching a multicultural or multilingual setting;
- teaching cross-curricular skills (such as problem-solving, learning-to-learn);
- new technologies in the workplace;
- student career guidance and counselling.

In addition to the content (not limited to the subject) knowledge, the participant expressed her willingness to be more involved in the processes dealing with university management and administration, which would clarify the goals and vision of the university and help to establish a clear and stable connection between these and day-to-day teaching practices.

Conclusions

The following conclusions based on the data collection tool are organized into three major categories: costs of teachers' professional development, leadership, and distribution of roles, collaboration, and networking.

Costs of teachers' professional development

Lack of regularity of the professional development events is the leading and foremost obstacle on the road towards effectiveness and emergence of new practices. Though the interviewee agreed that the target institution provides enough time during the regular working hours to dedicate to professional development, there is a significant gap in the resources as well as support and opportunity to be involved in it regularly. Speaking about the barriers to the participation in the activities the interviewee singled out the lack of institutional support in the conflicting working schedule when often the events are scheduled with no regard to the classes. The interviewee also mentioned no incentives for participating in the activities; having it rest on exclusively internal motivation and willingness to upgrade the knowledge – “*I believe people do not see the necessity*”. Neither lack of qualification or experience nor family responsibilities are considered to be an obstacle for the interviewee's professional development; she believes the same applies to her colleagues as it all depends on the “*dedication to the profession*”.

Professional development outside the institution was addressed as “*too expensive, almost unaffordable*” concerning fees and time. The lack of the provision of relevant professional development from a trusted source (professional expertise) was one of the reasons to avoid it.

Collaboration and networking

The interviewee several times mentioned the lack of collaboration between the departments; she feels that the absence of “*external input*” considerably influences her practice. She believes that cross-field collaboration would involve “*more fun*” into the practice, which would be appreciated by the group of teachers as well as the students in the class. The methods used during the professional development activities at the institution were interactive and aimed to be collaborative; nevertheless, the participant admitted the participation in the training had a moderately positive impact on her practice.

The interviewee also noted the absence of teacher involvement in design and organization of teacher professional development; she mentioned she is willing to have an opportunity to influence the selection of topics and have the suggestions and ideas heard by the management teams.

The interviewee described the participation in the conferences as “*really fruitful*” as it was an opportunity to meet the external professionals as well as exchange knowledge and opinions across the pedagogical field. She recollected the practices from the previous years when she was invited to the training as an outsider – a teacher from school and mentioned these trainings were covering pedagogical aspects of language teaching; she agrees these meetings had a direct influence on her teaching at school.

Contents of the professional development activities

The vast majority of the professional development activities were dedicated to the training in the expert knowledge in the teaching domain, vastly ignoring the ethics and attitudes. The interviewee highlighted the areas of individualized approaches to student learning and student behavior as very important in day-to-day teaching activities. Besides, she has noted that she regularly updates her practices to match it with the values of the modern world, thus would love to see a platform where it could be discussed and trained on better implementation of these values into teaching practices.

The problems of the encouragement and involvement are the most widely discussed in the department of the participant. The goals of the professional development activities are not usually communicated publicly, thus limiting the possible number of attendants. While the results of the activities are widely spread through social media, the participants often miss important events due to easily approachable reasons - lack of communication and poorly organized schedules.

Bibliography

1. Beaty L. (1998). The Professional Development of Teachers in Higher Education: Structures, Methods and Responsibilities. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 35(2), 99-107.
2. Day C. (1999). *Developing Teachers: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning*. *Educational Change and Development Series*. Bristol: Taylor & Francis.
3. Frost H.J., Akmal T.T., Kingrey U.J. (2010). Planning teacher professional development: the struggles and successes of an inter-organizational collaboration. *Professional Development in Education*, 36(4), 581-595.
4. OECD. (2013). *TALIS - The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/talis/>
5. Pavulens J. (2015). Career Management: Towards Constructivist Model. In V. Dislere (Ed.), *The Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference Rural Environment. Education. Personality (REEP)*, 8. Jelgava: LLU, 329-337. Retrieved from: <http://llufb.llu.lv/conference/REEP/2015/Latvia-Univ-Agricult-REEP-2015proceedings.pdf>
6. Pedder D., Opfer D. (2010). Planning and organisation of teachers' Continuous Professional Development in schools in England. *The Curriculum Journal*, 21(4), 433-452.
7. Stoll L. B. (2006). Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221-258.