

Continuous Professional Development among Primary School Teachers – An Analysis Using Focused Group Discussion

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Abstract

Through efficient professional development, educators can enhance the knowledge and abilities required to satisfy the learning requirements of their students. Teacher professional development, to be successful, involves rigorous preparation, implementation, and evaluation to ensure that it meets the learning goals of educators. However, a review of current studies on continuous professional development programmes reveals that more intensive research in the field is required to enhance the quality of education. The purpose of this study is to identify and understand the attitude and opportunities towards CPD among primary school teachers of Kerala, India and to explore the challenges experienced by them with respect to CPD. The result of the study helps to get an insight into the status of continuous professional development (CPD) programmes among primary school teachers in Kerala. The study used a qualitative method. The investigator conducted three focused group discussions in the three districts of Kerala, India using a semi-structured schedule. Thematic analysis is used to analyse and interpret the qualitative data for this study. Five major themes and their sub-themes were discussed. The analysis highlights the relevance of bridging the gap between what teachers experience as part of their CPD and what they are expected to accomplish. It also points out of undertaking more major policy changes to ensure quality CPD among primary school teachers.

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I. Introduction

The world's educational system is going through a significant and unexpected shift. The right to education encompasses both the requirement to pursue education and the provision of high-quality education. Although students should be the focus of any academic environment, teachers frequently need support as well. Due to the very nature of their work and the evolving role played by teachers, it is critical that they are supposed to continue to develop professionally. It has become necessary to help teachers update their knowledge and skills and deal with change, on the one hand, and manage human resources better, on the other, through effective professional development (Anderson, 2001). Through efficient professional development, educators can enhance the knowledge and abilities required to satisfy the learning requirements of their students (Sachs, 2007; Guskey, 2003). Professional development, in order to be successful, involves rigorous preparation, implementation, and evaluation to ensure that it meets the learning goals of educators (Borg, 2015; Hustler, 2003). CPD or Continuing Professional Development is a long-term and complex process, which we understand as '...a planned, continuous and lifelong process whereby teachers try to develop their personal and professional qualities, and to improve their knowledge, skills, and practice, leading to their empowerment, the improvement of their agency and the development of their organisations and their pupils' (Padwad and Dixit, 2011:10). The NEP-2020 enshrines a provision in its policy for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes because teachers must be resourceful to engage students in advanced innovations. However, a review of current studies on continuous professional development programmes reveals that more intensive research in the field is required to enhance the quality of education. The purpose of the current study is to get an insight into the CPD opportunities received by the primary teachers of Kerala as well as their attitude towards CPD programmes. It also tries to explore the challenges experienced by these teachers on their journey of continuous professional development.

Objectives

- To identify and understand the attitude and opportunities towards CPD among primary school teachers of Kerala
- To explore the challenges experienced by the primary school teachers of Kerala with respect to CPD.

II. Materials and Methods

The study used a qualitative method. The investigator conducted three focused group discussions in the three districts of Kerala i.e; Wayanad, Palakkad, and Thrissur. 26 primary school teachers were selected as sample. Each focus group consisted of 8-10 participants. Equal weightage was given to lower primary and upper primary sections and male and female teachers while selecting the sample. The investigator had prepared a semi-structured schedule and employed it in the focus group discussion. The schedule consisted of 10 questions to assess the status of continuous professional development programmes among primary school teachers in Kerala. Thematic analysis is used to analyse and interpret the qualitative data for this study. The data were transcribed and analysed based on the thematic analysis procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). It included the steps such as familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing report. The study used deductive (top-down) thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The data were transcribed, and the texts were read numerous times to ensure a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2012), and initial codes were noted.

III. Result

The thematic analysis is used to get a comprehensive and systematic record of coding and the themes. Major themes and sub-themes after analyzing the data are given

Major Themes	Sub Themes
Support	i. Home
	i. Head of institution
	i. Colleagues
Self-initiatives	i. Collaboration
	i. Reading and researching
	i. Mentoring and coaching
	√. Reflective journal and portfolio
	√. Material development and Innovation
	i. Additional academic qualification
Opportunity	i. Online/blended
	i. Need
	i. Planning
	i. Praxis
	√. Choice

Quality	i.	Resource persons
	i.	Convergence
	i.	Monitoring
	v.	Mode of conducting
	v.	Content
	i.	Infrastructure
	i.	Follow-up
Barriers	i.	Personal
	i.	School
	i.	Gender

Support - For teachers to succeed in their profession, there is a critical need for adequate support (McIlveen et.al., 2019). In this context, support from family, school officials, and colleagues are critical. The majority of the participants stated that participating in professional development activities around the holidays made their families very unhappy. As a result, even if teachers were motivated and ready to participate in programmes during the holidays, their minds would be preoccupied with their households, preventing them from fully engaging in the activities or sessions. They proposed conducting such events on weekdays. At the same time when asked about the support from the heads of schools, most of the participants claimed that their head teachers wouldn't entertain them to attend professional development programmes on weekdays since their absence would make students suffer and the colleagues would be overburdened. One participant commented, “--- it's somewhat irritating that I needed to convince my HM that I am not going to a personal affair!”

While asking about the support from colleagues, most of the teachers stated that their colleagues, though very friendly by nature, were not particularly supportive of professional development activities. It is likely that they would be in trouble due to the teacher's physical absence from school. Furthermore, they failed to grasp the importance of staying updated and the need of the hour to acquire and embrace new concepts.

Self – initiatives - The necessity of informal and self-directed learning has increasingly been recognised. Self-directed professional development is described as a process in which the learner has primary responsibility for planning, implementing, and analysing the learning process, with the help of an education agent or resource (Guskey, 2000). Peer observation is a useful method for fostering professional development, according to all participants. It may be a beneficial activity for the teachers and the observers if handled appropriately. It has the power to build observational and reflective skills, promote cooperation, and ultimately improve teaching abilities. Along with peer observation, working with teachers from different institutions and creating professional learning communities have become highly important. The majority of the respondents claimed to participate in many academic groups with identical interests. These organisations were more active as a result of the pandemic's emergence and the online classes that followed. They may teach their topics both offline and online, plan field excursions, host expert panels, provide study materials for online classes, and much more. One participant exclaimed,

“I was involved in some study material development and collaboratively with teachers in other districts and it was novel experience for me. When I worked together, I felt a sense of commitment and confidence.”

Many participants believed that teachers' reading habits directly affect the performance and learning of their students. Due to time restrictions, some participants claimed they did not read frequently, indicating that they were unable to incorporate reading into their already hectic schedules.

“I'm running out of time. A break from what I do all day is required. I don't always have time to plan my classes, so I skip off all the opportunity to read books”.

All participants felt that action research is a great source of professional development since it is a teacher-initiated classroom investigation. They admitted, however, that they could not utilise successfully since they had not been adequately trained. Mentorship from experienced teachers, according to two novice teachers in the group, allowed them to experiment with new concepts, strategies, and ideas while also reflecting on their current pedagogy. Participants with extensive teaching experience said it was beneficial because it allowed them to

broaden their knowledge, experience, and talents in mentoring and coaching, as well as develop their feedback skills, methodologies, and communication strategies and approaches. However, it should be noted that the system does not initiate mentoring programmes, despite the fact that it has been demonstrated globally that mentoring plays an important role throughout a novice teacher's induction phase. One of the novice teachers shared,

“We didn't have a formal mentor, but several of our older teachers really offered apparent guidance.” one participant stated. “They were there for us anytime we needed them.”

When asked if they kept reflective diaries, the vast majority of participants said no.

“I typically do them in my mind rather than truly writing anything down, which may be beneficial for review in the future”.

The idea, however, grabbed their interest, and they revealed that some of their friends had been keeping track of the training sessions they had attended and the changes they had incorporated.

When asked about their involvement in material creation prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, 80% of respondents said they had never been active. During the pandemic situation and the subsequent online classes were compelled these teachers to use a range of software packages to develop digital learning materials, such as worksheets, audio and video animations, digital quizzes, and more. Even after the schools reopened, these resources remained extremely valuable, and many teachers expanded their expertise and involvement in such material production in the aftermath of the pandemic. One participant became excited

“.....it actually instilled confidence to prepare something for our learners”.

The majority of the participants agreed that it is essential to try out new teaching methods. They also complain about the lack of institutional support at the same time. Even if they complete more courses, according to some participants, only a selected few are considered seriously for promotions. The department does not appropriately acknowledge earning an M.Phil. or Ph.D. Additionally, they receive no financial gain. They said that in order to take further academic courses, they required more paid leave.

Opportunities - Examining the opportunities the system provide for primary teachers to advance their profession is significant. In fact, if we want schools to provide more effective learning opportunities for students, we must also provide effective learning opportunities for teachers (Feiman-Nemser ,2001; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Opportunities include the chances to express their requirements, involvement in planning, chances to apply what they have learned from professional development sessions, choice with regard to time, content, schedule etc. The majority of respondents stated that they were unable to adequately express their genuine professional requirements. One participant expressed,

“If our needs had been adequately elicited, we could have avoided repeated sessions or similar programmes.”

Teachers expressed a desire to get involved in the planning and development of professional development sessions in order to better understand what types of learning would meet their perceived needs. One participant stated

“It is pathetic that we were never invited during planning stage.”

Another element of PD sessions that teachers appreciated was the opportunity to immediately integrate techniques or practices into classroom instruction. They complain that the workshops frequently don't offer opportunities for direct classroom application, which leads to dissatisfaction. Teachers claimed that if they had greater control over the timing, duration, location, learning objectives, degree of participation in the training, and people with whom they would collaborate, they would participate in professional development programmes more successfully.

Quality - The quality of professional development activities must be evaluated from the standpoint of stakeholders. The performance of the resource persons who lead the PD sessions is critical to the program's success. Many participants felt that the RPs' performance was unsatisfactory. Many participants opined that the RPs' performance is unsatisfactory. Some respondents remarked that certain resource people are not sufficiently resourceful because they conduct sessions without enough planning.

“They don't demonstrate how to do it. They merely show the powerpoint presentation or play some videos.”

Participants reported that the department held many professional development workshops simultaneously. Many agencies, including SCERT, SSK, DIETs, KITE, and others, conduct programmes concurrently but in conflict with one another. They were overloaded by multiple programmes that did not complement one another, and they received no follow-up or feedback on any of the programmes' implementation. The majority of participants believe that monitoring by their HMs and other educational officials is critical to their success. Meanwhile, they did not feel at ease if these authorities monitored them in a judgmental fashion.

As far as the strategy of training programmes, most of the participants were reported to be satisfied on an average level. They were happy that the training sessions had been evolved into a workshop model. The majority of the participants agreed that residential workshops were necessary.

“Many of life's worries are eased when one is not at home or working at their regular place of employment.”

Respondents agreed that the sessions should be interesting and participatory. The participants also mentioned the need for more technology-integrated workshops.

“Several Google applications were utilised in the recent sessions we attended, which was really exciting. It infuses the sessions with creativity and gives us knowledge as well.”

Participants unanimously agreed that the venue's excellent refreshment facilities will undoubtedly contribute to the program's success.

“If lunch is provided, we will be more comfortable and on time.”

Participants demand professional assistance that extends beyond the day of the PD sessions. Some professional development programmes were both motivating and successful in this regard.

Barriers – An investigation into the barriers of professional development will help us address the issues in an effective manner. Some participants expressed their inability to engage in professional development events owing to family and health concerns.

“They make us feel worse, more anxious, and weary, which causes our performance to decline. As a result, we have a hard time focusing on our responsibilities.”

Most of participating teachers agree that teacher performance appraisals are inadequate and unsatisfactory, because teachers who work hard or work less are paid the same. As a result, considering that there is no reward for effort, some individuals are hesitant to work hard. Teachers frequently complain about having to complete a lot of file work in addition of their everyday academic workload. They must keep a large number of files pertaining to noon-meals, scholarships, and other clerical duties. Considering the gender disparity in engaging continuous professional development programmes, majority of the teachers expressed their concern. One female participant expressed her worry in these words.

“My usual schoolwork is unaffected by my gender. But if I want to do anything like travel for a long time or remain away from home, I have to answer a lot of questions. I'm certain it's because I'm a woman. Our male colleagues are more free than we are. They will go anywhere and do whatever they want. I have to skip numerous professional development activities simply because I am a woman.”

IV. Discussion

The examination of participant responses is in consistent with the studies conducted. Teachers need to be encouraged to actively and voluntarily study, grow, and improve their profession, and school leaders play a critical part in this. To address the needs of teachers, students, the school, and the community, development opportunities must be created with the help of leaders (Somantri & Iskandar, 2021). It is important for everyone in society to understand that teachers play important responsibilities beyond regular classroom activities. The analysis makes it quite evident that teachers struggle to keep a balance between their obligations at home and at work.

When teachers take ownership of the content and process of professional development, it becomes more meaningful to them (King & Newmann, 2000). The findings reinforce the notion that the greatest place to begin professional development is with the teachers themselves, because professional development cannot be relevant and successful unless the teachers are committed to growing professionally. The discussion discloses that many teachers often resist participating in observation of a colleague's class or similar events since observation is attached to the assessment. At the same time, many teachers enjoyed working together with other teachers, especially in some other schools. Strong collegial connections among teachers contribute to the development of a learning community (Duncombe & Armour, 2004; Tannehill, 2016) and, as a result, successful PD, which teachers are more inclined to take part in (Smith, 2015).

The findings on professional reading reinforce the findings of Carroll and Simmons (2009) and Rudland and Kemp (2004). Participants' remarks suggest that teachers did not spend a significant amount of time for reading books or journals related to their profession during school and instead found time to read when they were not bound by school-based duties. The comments about action research indicate a few possible reasons. It is likely that the teachers do not have sufficient knowledge about action research and how it should be done. Reading groups or learning communities that focus on investigating a certain topic of interest for teachers in a given school provide collegial support and shared meaning-making (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Hauge, 2019). Teachers' perspectives on mentoring are consistent with practices across the world (Huling, & Resta, 2001). Mentoring is an important strategy in Finnish schools for encouraging the professional development of new teachers. The teachers wanted mentoring to be a constant practice since they considered it was so important during the induction period (Jokinen & Välijärvi, 2017; Spanorriga, Tsiotakis & Jimoyiannis, 2018).

This study validates the conclusions of prior research in the field of material development (Koparan, 2015; Collopy, 2003). The analysis and findings revealed that experienced teachers engaged in a variety of self-initiated learning activities, including knowledge exchange, experimenting, and continuing their education. The

availability of resources, family support, and school support all influenced their participation in these activities. With the exception of some differences between novice and experienced teachers in terms of observation of classroom events by heads and administrators, following research literature in their own field, and peer observation, the majority of them almost all agreed on the importance of these activities. Participants stated that more acknowledgment for their self-driven professional development endeavours is needed. Numerous research undertaken have adequately proved this (Lohman & Woolf, 2001; Tour, 2017; Foran, Mannion & Rutherford, 2017). Depending on their level of proficiency, teachers should be rewarded and paid. These incentives and rewards may come in the form of salary increment and promotion. Furthermore, honors, diplomas, and possibly praise remarks may be given to high-performing instructors in order to recognise them (Nawab, 2020). If professional development is required for them and there are opportunities for incentives, career advancement, growth, and success, teachers will be more encouraged to partake (McMillan, McConnell, & O'Sullivan, 2016).

The findings stress the necessity of addressing discrepancies and bridging the gap between teachers' demands and service providers' intentions. The conclusions Adams (2014) and Haug and Mork (2021) made in his research are consistent with the results. As felt by majority of the participants, the courses have been created and implemented by a group that are not in touch with the 'field reality'. This top-down method is criticised for the potential of becoming increasingly conceptual and disconnected from classroom practice, which may hinder professional development and, in many cases, render teachers unproductive (Timperley, 2011). The bottom-up decisions should be in fact the basis of professional development (Dehghan, 2022). According to the findings, teachers require additional subject-specific training. It has been found that PD is more effective when subject-specific training is included (Blank & Alas, 2009). This is frequently contrasted with PD that consists simply of training in generic pedagogical practices that are unrelated to the topic which will be delivered. Indeed, these two are typically seen as complimentary, and PD is therefore most effective when both subject-specific sessions and broader educational techniques are delivered together (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2018).

Even if teachers disagree with the practice of rigorous monitoring of their activities, various studies have demonstrated the importance of monitoring to ensure quality (Reeves, 2005). Several studies (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Richardson, 2003; Goderya-Shaikh, 2010) conducted across the world highlighted the necessity for follow-up for teacher professional development programmes, which is evident in the focused group discussions. Conflicts with work schedules, a lack of incentives, and conflicts with family responsibilities were the most often stated impediments for teacher engagement in professional development. The majority of practitioners see excessive workload as a greater obstacle to their professional development.

V. Conclusion

The analysis of the result highlights the importance of focusing on more studies related continuous professional development programmes to enhance the quality of primary education. Future studies should address a number of relevant issues raised by the study's findings. Teachers' actual CPD experiences differ from what CPD "should" be according to the international studies. The result points out that, the majority of teachers' professional development experiences are still brief, one-day workshops, which is still not very effective. The comments and discussion, will undoubtedly be an eye-opener for the policy makers and administrators.

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