Reflection and its Role in Fostering Teachers’ Professional Development during In-Service Training

Suraya Sulyman
Arshad Abd Samad, Universiti Putra Malaysia
Khairuddin Idris
Sharifah Mohd Noor

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/arshad_abdsamad/15/
Reflection and its Role in Fostering Teachers’ Professional Development during In-Service Training

Suraya Sulyman, Arshad Abd. Samad, Khairudin Idris, and Sharifah Mohd. Nor.

Abstract

This article reports on a study that explores and describes English as a Second Language or ESL teachers’ reflection on their learning experiences during a 12-week in-service training or INSET course on how the INSET promotes their professional development. Data were collected through interviews and teaching journals involving several ESL teachers during their training. Two major themes encompassing five sub themes emerged from this qualitative study, highlighting the interaction between reflection and training and the role reflection can have in developing the professional self of teachers. Several implications of the results towards training programmes are also discussed in this article.
Introduction

Globalisation combined with today’s technological revolution present new demands on education, especially on schools and teachers to produce competent human capital capable of meeting these changes and challenges. These demands dictate that teachers equip themselves with skills that will enable them to inculcate elements or qualities of cooperative learning, emphasising on initiative building and adaptability. Teachers need to be resilient to change or they “will not be able to cope constructively with those changes either in relation to themselves, their pupils or the wider society” (Collins, 1991: p. 13). The role of teachers now extends from classroom teaching to responsibilities outside the classroom as pupils need to learn and think for themselves, be resourceful and competent in their area of learning and able to adapt to flexible working environments. Since they will regularly come into contact with the community in the decision-making process regarding their children’s education, teachers are urged to acquire new skills ‘in listening, in explaining and justifying practice and negotiating’ (Collins, 1991). Consequently, teachers are becoming more of “guides on the side”, facilitating and encouraging students to take charge of their own learning (The Malaysian Smart School: The Conceptual Blueprint, 1997 p. 92) and are instrumentally essential in creating conditions that facilitate and encourage students to take responsibility of their own learning. The emphasis is for teachers to be reflective and collaborative in their teaching.

In response to these developments and the demands they bring, the Malaysian government has introduced numerous programmes into the national education system. One such programme is the Malaysian Smart School or BESTARI programme which was conceptualised and launched in 1999. The programme, which plans to produce smart individuals for the workforce, can be described as “a learning institution that has been reinvented in terms of teaching-learning practices and school management in order to prepare children for the information age” (The Malaysian Smart School: The Conceptual Blueprint: 1997, p. 20). The programme aims to develop self-directed, individually-paced, continuous and reflective learning through the provision of multimedia technology and worldwide networking (The Malaysian Smart School: The Conceptual Blueprint, 1997). Its stated goals are to produce autonomous and constructive learners.

The 12 week Smart School INSET course is intended to prepare teachers to teach in Smart Schools. In order to play their role effectively, they need to actively participate in teacher development activities so as to acquire new input and enhance their professional skills. For effective implementation of the smart school programme at all levels, school teachers need to be re-oriented with the changes and new emphases of the programme so that the idea can be fully applied in the classroom. The Teacher Education Department of the Malaysian Ministry of Education was given the responsibility to train teachers for this purpose. One hundred and ten lecturers were specially selected from several teacher training colleges to design the ‘smart school training program’ in all training colleges. On completion of the core trainers’ course and after a review and evaluation of the course, the 12 week in-service training for Smart School teachers was proposed and approved. The main focus of the training was to upgrade generic skills that cover the following aspects: creative and critical thinking, using technology in teaching, learning, evaluation and analysis. The training consisted of 8 weeks of interaction, 3 weeks of practicum
and a final week devoted to reflection. The 12 week duration was assumed sufficient in order to disseminate new information, for the teachers to raise any doubts and for the trainers to observe the degree of resistance or acceptance towards the innovation. This length of time was also considered sufficient for the participants to acquire special skills or techniques relevant for classroom teaching.

Understanding in-service training among teachers

It is noted that the success or failure of a teacher development programme is difficult to measure because the developmental process is not easily visible unless one is looking at the product of the development (Petkova, 1995; O’Hanlon, 1993). One cannot determine the point at which the change had occurred or whether the product observed is a direct consequence of the said development. Attempts to measure the impact of teacher development are loaded with difficulty, especially if they are based on the learners’ learning. In-service programme planners shift this responsibility to the schools, which brings in a different set of problems. Hence, evaluations have invariably been reliant on participants’ self reports and reviews using evaluation forms constructed by the planners. Glover and Law (1996) add that while evaluation of training is a relatively longstanding practice, it remains problematic to capture an independent assessment of the impact of INSET on teachers’ practice within classrooms. As for the effectiveness of such training, a study by English (1995) indicates that INSET does not significantly influence classroom change. Due to this limited effect, English suggests that trainers should also be concerned with providing teachers with “advisory support beyond the duration of the course” (p. 302). Implementing new practices is an enormous task, and if unaided, may end with no implementation of the intended change. More importantly, the individual teacher must be able to develop and deal with change. The decision to either reject or accept change is dependent on the teachers’ beliefs and attitudes toward change and also on how strongly they are holding on to their personal practical knowledge (Golombek, 1998). All these elements are so closely knit that the absence of one can affect the entire process of development.

In countries where educational innovation is taking place, INSET courses seem to be the avenue for uniform dissemination of new information or knowledge and skills training. They appear to be the foundation in equipping teachers with new pedagogical and technical skills to face the challenge of educational change. As such, input is constantly improved and strategies for disseminating them are also developed. However, a support system is also needed to assist these teachers returning to their workplace upon completion of their training (Fullan, 1991).

A study conducted in Malaysia by Noor Azmi (1988) was among the first to examine INSET in conjunction with the implementation of a new curriculum. In-service training appeared to be the best approach for this purpose because firstly, the teachers had to become familiar with the curriculum within the limited time available for the implementation. Secondly, the course provided the avenue for teachers to interact with each other and react to the new curriculum. Through the use of interviews, observation (of the INSET) and questionnaires, Noor Azmi arrived at the conclusion that “the concern of in-service courses should not only be in transmitting
information but also in helping participants to acquire the understanding, skills, attitudes and values necessary to support and sustain the implementation of curriculum in schools. His conclusion seemed to support results of a study by Siti Hawa (1986) on the implementation of the New Primary Schools Curriculum (NPSC).

The main aim of INSET in Malaysian schools is to familiarise teachers with new methods and techniques in classroom instruction as well as their various roles as teachers (Ministry of Education, 1982). The purpose of the centrally organized INSET tends to focus on academic enrichment and skills acquisition by making known to teachers the intended innovations, the updated and upgraded methods and techniques of teaching, or to equip them with other relevant skills such as developing materials and planning interesting activities. The common strategy adopted for all in-service programmes for the implementation of innovations nation-wide has been the "cascade model" (Craft, 1996). "The cascade model is a series of consecutive training processes, each occurring as the result of the previous one, and designed to impart an agreed and consistent body of knowledge, skills and attitudes" (p. 17).

Siti Hawa (1986) found the cascade model ineffective due to "the dilution and distortion of the messages as it passes from one level to the next" (p. 101). She believes that one major weakness in all in-service training for teachers is the fact that they were once-off and not repeated. Such single intensive training according to Tomlinson (1988) can cause more harm than good. As Siti Hawa notes (1986) "the teachers were only exposed to the concept and some guidance to enable them to begin teaching but not to the skills and knowledge to cope with all aspects of the innovation" (p. 101). Despite its inadequacies, the model is used because of two reasons: the simultaneous nation-wide implementation and the short span of time between the decision to implement and the actual implementation (Siti Hawa, 1986). Furthermore, by employing this model, new information and knowledge can be disseminated to a large number of teachers in the limited time available prior to actual implementation.

Examining the influence of INSET

In this study, the researcher focuses on two types of teacher development activities namely the 12-week INSET for smart schools and teachers’ reflective teaching or practice, which are thought to influence teacher professional development. This study was undertaken because there are few studies documenting how language teachers in Malaysia learn to understand themselves and develop in relation to their profession particularly from the ‘teacher’s voice’. This examination of how in-service training affects teachers’ development, as seen from the teachers’ eyes, would be a new perspective in contrast to the current dominant approach that presents the perspectives of the planners. Being at the receiving end, the teachers can provide the relevant information pertaining to what they need to know and learn in order to become more efficient and effective as well as how effective the training has been. These teachers are in a better position to point out the practicality and workability of any new input because they are directly involved in the teaching.

This paper focuses on the effects of training on the self development of the teachers as it is assumed that self-development will most likely influence the professional development of the
individual. If the individual experiences positive self-development, it usually enhances the individual’s professional performance. Self-development involves awareness of oneself whether in the form of one’s potential ability, strengths and shortcomings, motivational state, and the desire to improve oneself. Moon (2000) argues that self development consists of self awareness and self improvement. While self awareness involves constructing meaning and interpreting experiences in terms of that meaning, self improvement builds on this awareness. In a case study on teacher development, Butler (1992) arrives at the conclusion that “of all judgments and beliefs that each teacher owns, none is more important than the ones they have about their selves” (p. 235). Teachers become what they think and believe about themselves. He believes that “it is the self that needs to be renewed and enhanced in in-service programs” (p. 235).

The primary tools used in the collection of data in this study were interviews and teaching journals. Semi-structured questions were posed during in-depth interviews and the stimulus recall interviews to encourage the respondents to talk at length, reconstructing and reflecting on their experiences. All interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed. At the same time, the respondents were asked to keep a teaching journal recording their teaching experience within and without classrooms, their thoughts and feelings too. Field observation and questionnaire were also used to supplement the data. The data were analysed by adopting a qualitative method of constant comparison in which transcripts were analysed independently identifying relevant passages and noting the themes in relation to the research questions. Member checks were conducted when the initial themes were generated. Upon verification, these were then compared and presented as emerging themes illustrated by the words of the respondents in verbatim.

The selection of respondents for the study was purposive. Only English language teachers who had attended an INSET on Smart schools, have at least five years of teaching experience and were willing to offer information as data were included as respondents. Of 17 teachers who attended an INSET course at a specific site, only 8 met the pre-set criteria for potential respondents. The final number of respondents, however, was to be determined by the point of saturation or redundancy reached (Merriam, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). So when the information generated by respondent number six echoed what earlier respondents had said, data collection was stopped at the fifth respondent (eliminating the sixth respondent).

Teacher reflections on INSET and teacher self development

Several themes highlighted by the respondents as they reflected on the in-service training for smart school emerged from the data. The main themes of being caring and insightful that emerged are related to the respondents’ reinforcement of their personal qualities in relation to human relationships. Caring encompasses two other subcategories: generosity and sensitivity. Insightfulness refers to the respondents’ ability to discern, accept new knowledge and receive enlightenment. These themes were derived from the respondents’ interview data and discussed in the following sections.
Caring

Caring is the ability to show affection for other people, being helpful and sympathetic. It has two sub-categories, which are generosity and sensitivity. Generosity refers to the respondents’ readiness to share their knowledge, skills and experiences with each other. Being sensitive demonstrates deep understanding and awareness of other people’s ideas and feelings. The two subcategories of generosity and sensitivity illustrate this larger category of caring.

**Generosity.** It was apparent that the 12-week INSET for smart school provided the opportunity for teachers from different states to meet and receive knowledge and skills from the organiser and trainers, as well as from each other. They learnt how to appreciate themselves and talk about common issues which are pertinent to their profession. One of the teachers said “being a teacher you can’t simply share your problems with friends who are not in the same field … so you can share only with teachers”. This implies that these respondents see the INSET as an opportunity to communicate their feelings and ideas because only a teacher can understand what another teacher is experiencing.

The INSET also provided the respondents an avenue to recall events that they had experienced and share information with others on how they solved the problems. The sharing of experiences, skills and knowledge was noticeable in the discussions and group activities. Cassie considered such activities as sharing time where course participants came to terms with issues they raised and were simultaneously reassured and convinced of their coping ability as confirmed by Cassie.

...a time to share our problems with the other friends. And our school’s problems different from another friend’s school’s problem. So this is the time, the share of problems as well as consoling each other lah.... my school is worse. After sharing, her school is even worse than my school. Console yourself, your school is not so bad....This kind of sharing, caring and sharing attitude, you share the problem ...

In revealing their experiences, they offered some guidance to others should they face a similar situation in the course of their work. The respondents were also not embarrassed to talk about their failures. Adam stressed that the sharing and caring attitude is “part of our self-development”. They could extract lessons from each other’s experiences. He was certain that,

... from the experience of others we can actually equip ourselves with ...a.... possibilities of future problems. Maybe in our school ..., we will face that problem so we have the experience. We know what others have done, so maybe we can use what others have done, the action they’ve taken to solve the problem. I think the anecdotes, the stories, the experience that being shared during the course is part of our self-development.
Sarah supported Cassie’s and Adam’s views and believed that besides learning by sharing each other’s experiences, they were also seeking suggestions and approval from the ‘trainers’.

‘we wanted to share with our colleagues, probably to get their own opinion on the situation that we going through, how to solve the problem especially with students, like problematic students like that.

I think ... we are trying our trainers for help suggest technique of teaching that is suitable, for very weak students.’

It could be seen that if one did not talk about one’s situation, no one would realise that there were others who shared the same problems and would be able to detail how they confronted such problems. Jesse, who has been teaching for more than twenty years in six different schools, can be considered as a ‘store of experiential knowledge’ that could be tapped by the younger participants during the discussion sessions. His stance on teacher-student relationships that could be described as exemplary was described in the following:

In a way how, do you relate yourselves to the students? … a very a simple approach just maybe talk to them nicely or crack jokes with them. You can’t simply scold them so you must … certain situations, you know … and that in a way will make you, you know, happier to teach also ..... 

Besides disseminating new knowledge and skills, the INSET also provided the avenue for teachers to practise generosity, a quality required to establish and strengthen interpersonal relationships thus widening their network. The participants learnt to be more open to each other, which reduced their emotional stress, and in turn reinforced their commitment to their profession. Thus, the INSET has become an outlet to their pent-up emotions and a means to develop a better personality (Hayes, 1997).

**Sensitivity.** In the sharing of their problems and experiences, the teachers were sensitive to each other’s situations and reactions to the difficulties that emerged. Throughout the course, Cassie began to recognise the existence of the wide range of opinions and the different ways of teaching practised by her friends. She acknowledged that one needs to be tolerant and patient when dealing with other individuals because no one is perfect. What she says, demonstrates her understanding of the impact of one’s presence on another and this resulted in toning down her criticism.

Moral support, I give them when it comes to practical teaching, you just don’t run away, you give them moral support, and when you criticise you don’t. Every human being makes mistakes, you don’t criticise very sharply to them. It will really hurt them, try to talk.. why don’t you … like you know, you got another idea, why don’t you use the other idea instead of ‘this is wrong’ because to me I don’t have the right to criticise another
Being sensitive and able to empathise with others are positive qualities that teachers should possess in order to establish and maintain a harmonious working relationship. Recognising one’s capability would benefit everyone. Adam and Mariah, who were relatively more well-versed with the computer, could understand the difficulty and the stress experienced by novice users having to prepare work on the computer. Thus, they could understand why their computer skills were very much sought after. Mariah noted that

Some of the teachers are not very good with the ICT component so sometimes we have to help them… some teachers …, they’re not very well verse with the computers so we have to help. (Mariah)

I was helping the participants with the computer problems, doing certain things …. so sometimes I will help if they have problems a.. their document lost, I try to find. If they wanted me to show them how to use the powerpoint, the slide show what to include, how to make it lying all that, sometimes I show … (Adam)

As for Sarah, her help came in the form of ideas and advice in designing lesson plan.

I think some of the participants, … when they had problems they did ask how do I change this, lesson plan to make it better. They ask about lesson planning and I give them some … advise on how to modify their lesson plan

Jesse urged teachers not only to understand their colleagues but also their students by trying to understand their background and talk to them. He strongly objected to any action of sending students out of the classroom because it would make the students felt ‘unwanted’ especially if they regarded the school as their second home. Teachers have to be sensitive to their teaching surrounding especially their learners’ emotional needs since this will help teachers plan lessons and design activities that would be meaningful to the learners.

While undergoing the course, Mariah, on the other hand, began to understand herself better as a person. She discovered that she could communicate with almost everyone, a quality to keep and recognised the need to eliminate her revengeful side.

So I think I got to know myself better, my negotiation skill [too] I think I see my interaction, there’s something about myself I get to know. OK means I think I can get well with others. I learn I’m a stubborn person and I take revenge on other people
Generally, the INSET helped to improve the respondents’ interpersonal qualities such as caring or being generous and sensitive to the feelings and needs of others. Most of the respondents were proactive and bold in seeking advice and were ever ready to offer their assistance. As a result of the relationships and interactions, a special bond was formed amongst the respondents. They were willing to share their experiences and problems about the realities of their schools as well as their failure. Another teacher claimed that the INSET brought to the surface a part of herself previously unknown to her.

Teachers are unique people working in a complex situation and having to simultaneously deal with youths and adults of various ages, diversity of minds, requirements and needs. The only people they can share such feelings with are their own kind. Therefore, it was a solace to get together and communicate during the training, knowing that they could derive strength and inspiration from each other. Most of the time, teachers learn from trial and error in seeking the best way to solve a problem, especially in communicating with unruly students and unfriendly colleagues. As one of them stated, “experience [being] shared during the course is part of our self-development”.

**Insightfulness**

Insightfulness is the second major theme that emerged from the data. Insightfulness refers to the respondents’ ability to discern, accept new knowledge and receive enlightenment. These characteristics are described and discussed in the following sections.

**Discerning.** The INSET provided the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their current practices. When they were exposed to new input, the teachers were expected to discriminate it by consistently comparing it with their existing knowledge before integrating the relevant ones. Assimilation is the process whereby new information is incorporated into existing beliefs; accommodation takes place when new information cannot be assimilated and that existing beliefs must be replaced or reorganised. Accommodation requires a more radical alteration. Given the context, many respondents asserted that they were familiar with some of the information and techniques given, and have been practising them in their classroom. Hence, the possibility that the new input were likely to be assimilated in the teachers’ current practice was relatively high. The comparison was likely to make the respondents more aware of their state of affair, personally and professionally.

What made some of the techniques obscure in the present situation, according to Cassie, was that, teachers were not required to explicitly state them in the lesson plan and there were times when these techniques were not applied. However, in accordance to the smart school lesson plan, these techniques were to be spelt out clearly. The feature that made the lesson plan ‘new’ was the terminologies used to refer to those techniques. Cassie cited an example,
… especially the multiple intelligences … all those that are actually not new but the words are new … because during the teaching process you have already touch all that thing but you just don’t know that. This is … you have self-paced, student-based all that [the kinetic] the kinaesthetic, the linguistics, [the art and science], the generic skills, we never specify that in our lesson plans but for the smart school we have to. So the words are actually new.

Sarah confirmed this,

it was really like a refresher course to me, because, I’ve done that before …, I mean like we’ve been doing some of the techniques that they were telling us.

The ability to discern new input seemed to give the respondents the opportunity to re-evaluate their own teaching, that is, the extent to which they had used contemporary techniques and/or were informed of the latest technique and the current research on teaching and learning. The INSET appeared to help the respondents uncover flaws in their practice by indirectly analysing the theories underlying their practice in making wise pedagogical choices. In the process of comparing her practice and the new input, Sarah was conscious of her own shortcomings. She detected some important elements were missing in her practice.

… as a teacher I noticed I haven’t done much in my teaching. I, realise that there are a lot of skills that is lacking in my classroom. As usual, like critical and creative thinking skills, I could have done better with the activities but instead of .. I don’t really generate their thinking, mostly drilling…

Sarah became aware of her own prejudice in employing techniques to specific groups despite the fact that all techniques are relevant to all types of students.

…for the weaker classes I tend to employ drilling …. I buried myself in that sort of methodology, …, drilling them but when I went for the smart school course that day, I found that … some parts of what they taught to us was actually implemented before, and I could carry out even with weaker students. It was not meant for good classes only.

She seemed to realise the extent she had been swayed away from applying the techniques she was exposed to and trained for during her initial training. The techniques used and highlighted in the INSET reawakened her to those almost forgotten skills. Indirectly, the training has put her back on track.

… then when I came to school I tend to go with the trend, English for communication that time. Before I just, I don’t really left out that part I
mean like group work, all that we did focus a lot when we were doing our degree. Getting students doing work in groups but when we come to school we found that, some difficulty. Their language constraint so we tend to adapt. When we adapt … we tend to gradually forget about the group work and then we tend to focus on improving students’ grammar, proficiency …

The respondents’ confessions seemed to illustrate how knowledge and skills acquired in the initial training gradually dissipated in their daily practice. The realities the teachers faced had no bounds. In an attempt to satisfy certain quarters, some of the skills learnt during pre-service training were replaced with others more ‘practical’ and ‘convenient’, and at times, considered most effective. However, teachers need constant reminder of the latest changes in the education field and the 12-week INSET appeared to accommodate that.

Jesse, on the other hand, found new strategies he could apply to remove the boredom in the usual routine. He was able to form new ideas from the input to improve his teaching and students’ learning.

I can make it more interesting by applying those strategies that I’ve learnt like for example collaborative strategies, I can divide them into group work use the dictionary, that is [something new] something new to the students, something interesting.

I find for 1 hour lesson sometimes it can be boring if I just use talk and chalk. So by incorporating strategies like these, you know, collaborative, cooperative for example even in teaching literature.

On comparison with other previous INSET courses, this particular course has given Sarah clearer insights regarding the real concept of smart school. She pointed out the difference with other courses she had attended.

I like this Bestari course because when we go for in-service training usually we go back without any reflection, there is no follow-up. Like this one they give us time for us to experiment on the concept that we’ve learnt and then after that we can reflect. So I think this is quite a good technique in order to get teachers to develop their teaching professionally.

Acceptance of new knowledge. All the respondents agreed that they have gained the intended skills and knowledge. This is indicated in one of the objectives of the INSET that is ‘to orientate teachers towards new developments in teaching concepts, methods, techniques and curricular programmes’. Thus, acceptance of new knowledge seemed to suggest that the respondents were observant, open-minded, flexible and ready to apply the knowledge. Cassie
claimed she learnt a lot about computer use and programmes, which were relevant for teaching and managed to develop skills using excel and snap graphics.

I learn a lot about computers, go into detail not on the surface like Excel, we didn’t know that Excel is really about, we go into detail. And then … introduces a lot of utility, snap graphics ….

Jesse claimed that

Not only we know more about computers but [how to] incorporate the various teaching skills’ and … strategies. In a way it’s good also because we can use these in the classroom situation. I mean incorporate or use the ICT component so I had to use the OHP.

The new concepts were clarified in the techniques the trainers employed directly in delivering their input. The application of those techniques gave the respondents real experience, and whatever uncertainties and difficulties of implementing them in their own classroom could be envisaged. Most of them stressed that they were able to emulate those techniques because they appeared feasible and promoted essential elements of cooperation and collaborative. These are the aims of smart school learning (see pp.152 -3). Adam admitted that he had gained additional information having experienced the learning process pertaining to outside contexts, he claimed he had been practising with his students without much success. During the training, the trainer used this technique whereby the participants worked in small groups to study a shrub of their choice. The tasks were to draw out what they saw and wrote the function(s) of the visible parts of the plant. The cooperative and collaborative elements were incorporated into the task. Adam discovered and believed that if applied well, the students would be able to retain the information longer when they learn by doing.

Yes, I really like the outside context where … I’ve tried before this but I did not know how to incorporate actually, I just bring them to the school surrounding and show them this is flower, what is the colour. I do not know how to really elaborate from that a … a strategy to another task. That was a new thing to me. So the students actually see it, touch it, experience it, so they … remember it, understand it and they can bring to the class and I give task sheet to enhance their understanding …

Mariah also preferred the hands-on learning approach such as the collaborative and cooperative learning, outside context and portfolio because these techniques gave them the opportunity to experience theory and practice. They have to try first before carrying it out on the students.

… she (a trainer) did hands on, she gave us the experience.

on the theory and the she introduces what that theory is. Learning strategy is collaborative … from the very beginning we did the activity first. When we did the activity first, we remember better, like the round robin, …. I
think we should be given opportunities to experience those kinds of learning before imposing to our students …

Sarah contended that she had applied various teaching techniques emphasised in the INSET though not regularly.

I think learning strategies, directive, meditative have been applying that one but not the last part contextual learning … outside context actually some of us do the topic … on the canteen and library, we take the students to the canteen and to the library. For example, I mean things like flowers, I don’t actually bring them out, I get some flowers and showed it to them because they don’t know what is bougainvillea, hibiscus … And that also not fully outside context, they meant is really going on field trip and come back doing their work.

Generally, the respondents seemed to accept new knowledge and skills provided in the course either through direct practice or emulating the trainers’ techniques. They seemed to welcome experiential learning or learning by doing and recognised the additional knowledge received were essential for better classroom practice.

**Enlightened.** Enlightening the teachers with in-depth knowledge is one of the implicit objectives of the INSET. Enlightenment means that the respondents obtained either a delayed or an instant realisation from the input that appears to complement their current knowledge and / or teaching techniques. Teachers who participated in the training were assured of additional knowledge irrespective of whether it would entail self or professional improvement or both. It was certain that the course, which was designed and executed in such a way, benefited the teachers. For instance, Cassie knew very little about the Smart School prior to attending the course. However, upon completion, her understanding of the concept of Smart Schools appeared to have increased and that can improve her teaching.

I came across Smart School but I didn’t know what Smart School is about. All I know is computer. Smart school link with computer, that’s all. When we go through the training we realise it’s not computer at all, part of it. It’s the way how they conduct teaching. Instead of talk and talk, we are the facilitator, that’s all.

Mariah was enlightened by the fact that it was no easy task to implement cooperative and collaborative learning, a technique not commonly practised by learners. It required a lot of patience but was not impossible to apply in the classroom.

… the collaborative, the cooperative I’ve tried a few times. It worked, but of course it needs patience because you introducing something new to the students, it takes time, so you have to be really patient, but it can be done and then I can see that … some students have leadership
qualities and you can train them through what we learn in the course, cooperative.

Jesse felt enlightened when he realised that some of the techniques he was exposed to can be combined to teach a component in literature. Since he had been appointed to teach in a secondary school and was asked to teach literature, the training had given him some insight on how to approach the teaching of literature that would suit his learners’ level. He narrated with enthusiasm and marvelled at the enlightening experience.

... incorporating strategies like these ... collaborative, cooperative, for example, even teaching literature. Like just now I was teaching one component, a poem ... It is sort of comparison between a city and a country life ... So first I discussed poem with the students. After that I asked them to picture what they can see in a country life. Give them a sheet [of paper] and ask them to draw. You know, what they can picture a country life. So they draw a village, a kampong ... and then name 5 or maybe 8 things that you can see in a country life. Compare it with the city. It's not just talking about the poem. I can sidetrack it ... the most important is the theme so from there you can gain something and make comparison.

The respondents gained insight when they were able to evaluate objectively and recognise that the input disseminated in the course, to a certain degree, could affect them. Their comments suggest that they had made connections between experiences and knowledge acquired in the training and past experiences. Most of the respondents had previously attended other short courses but they agreed that the INSET for smart school was the longest they had participated in and worth the while. They had gained new and additional knowledge and skills, and at the same time expanded their professional circle. The constant group reflections in the form of discussions and group activities have improved themselves personally and professionally.

According to Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), the primary purpose of professional development is to help teachers articulate their voice as a way of constructing and reconstructing the purpose and priorities in their work, both individually and collectively. The INSET for Smart Schools provided the opportunity for the respondents to actively discern past knowledge and experiences with the new input. As a result, the INSET was able to either reinforce or change existing beliefs and skills, and add new knowledge. The constant re-evaluation of their practices led to the discoveries of elements missing in their teaching and the use of viable teaching strategies once thought impossible.

The INSET also enlightened the teachers on the relevance of various known techniques that are still practical. For example, the group work highlighted the principles of working cooperatively such as the importance of assigning roles and the responsibilities attached to each role. These elements implicitly insist on members’ commitment in ensuring a successful interaction. At the same time, they learn to shoulder the responsibility of each other’s learning. As a result of the
explicit training, the respondents were more inclined to apply the new techniques and skills obtained in the course. These findings concur with the result of a study conducted on INSET by Glover and Law (1996) who contend that participants found that INSET helped them to think through ‘new ideas’, identify ‘new practices’, open ‘new doors’ and ‘new horizons’, gain greater inspiration and expand network with adults of similar profession.

Conclusion.

Change is a difficult and slow process (Fullan, 1991). Having to accept something new in one’s life, even under normal circumstances, usually causes an imbalance to the equilibrium. Teachers have to make adjustments in many ways in order to arrive at a new equilibrium. The reflections conducted in the INSET course are said to have allowed the teachers to debate amongst themselves and/or with their colleagues about the usefulness of the input in their practice. When they are satisfied and convinced of the benefits and usefulness of the input, they will gradually assimilate or accommodate reflection into their current training course. Talking about the input is one way to help teachers to deal with change within them before they return to their working environment. The whole process concurs with the process of individual change underlying the ‘force field analysis’ that emphasises the interplay between facilitating and restraining forces in order to reach equilibrium (Lewin, 1951 cited in Everard and Morris, 1996).

The respondents reported that the INSET for Smart School reminded them of the skills and knowledge they already possessed and reinforced these skills and knowledge. The INSET provided them the opportunity to re-evaluate the effectiveness of their practices. The experiential, collaborative and cooperative learning strategies used by the trainers had encouraged the respondents to utilise student-centred learning techniques more frequently than they used to. In general, the informants claimed that the INSET had given them the opportunity to become more open-minded, willing to share their knowledge and experiences with others, able to accept new knowledge, caring and insightful. They appeared to have refined their personality.

The respondents also claimed that they improved in their interpersonal skills and personality because of the interactions amongst themselves and with the trainers. They were inclined to be more open to comments and that raised their awareness of their personal and professional selves. Consequently, it was found that the respondents preferred to attend formal teacher development activities such as in-service training, workshops and conferences to seek new input, learn new skills and acquire materials relevant for classroom teaching than other forms of teacher development activities. As participants, they could communicate, share and learn from each other’s experience to enhance their understanding and knowledge. Generally, the teachers’ self development leads them to secure a better academic level and professional position. ** Cassie proceeded to secure a degree from a local university after teaching a few years in a couple of primary schools. In the process, a few claimed that they had developed higher self-confidence and are able to voice out their opinion with more certainty and guide other teachers in applying new techniques. Their enhanced understanding and sensitivity appeared to make them more generous with their knowledge and skills.
In most in-house staff development activities, the respondents had for the most part increased their content and pedagogical knowledge without the opportunity to re-examine the situational assumptions or moral and ethical contexts of their work. This means that there was a lack of reflection in context. Although the document on the curriculum implementation of the INSET for smart school stipulated and allotted specific time for formal reflection training, the practice of reflection was minimal. It was neither done consistently at the end of every subject nor at the end of the day. Although guided questions were prepared and the teachers were required to write their opinion pertaining to their learning experience of the specific subject in the course and on the teaching-learning difficulties they encountered and suggestions to address the difficulties in the practicum, the teachers were left to do their reflection on their own. Clear guidance from the trainers should be enforced to give real training to teachers for them to reflect more constructively and productively.

Essentially, reflections, whether carried out in the INSET for smart schools or in the form of reflective teaching in school, provide the respondents with avenues to re-evaluate themselves as a professional and a person. In addition to acquiring new skills and knowledge, the respondents were given the opportunities to link experiences gained in the training with their past experiences and get in touch with their ‘self’. They also seemed appreciative of the learning experience and acknowledged that these experiences had somehow inspired and helped them to improve. They seemed to become more caring and insightful individuals as the result of the interactions amongst themselves. They appeared to be more generous and sensitive to the feelings of others. They gradually become insightful as their discerning ability increased, and as they readily accept new knowledge and become enlightened. Hence, the interaction between experiences and self led to self-development, which in turn influenced the professional development of the teacher.
REFERENCES


