A New Vision of Professional Development for Tertiary Teachers in Pakistan

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Introduction

Professional development for tertiary teachers in Pakistan is problematic. In most cases, it does not exist; and if it does, it is very brief, sporadic and traditional, and is conveyed off-site through top-down teacher training strategies.

The Pakistani tertiary education sector is predominantly public in nature and consists of two main wings: the university/degree-awarding institutes and the affiliated degree colleges. Pakistani degree colleges, despite being the main tertiary education providers, do not have any professional development to support their teachers (Ministry of Education, Pakistan 2008). Nearly the same holds true for the universities, except the initiative that was taken by the National Academy of Higher Education in 2004 to offer short-term, off-campus staff development programmes (NAHE 2009). This project is close to its ending and to date only few university teachers (about 9.8%) could benefit from it. Discussions with some of the teachers in Pakistan revealed that this initiative remained drastically under-resourced, imposed rather than professionally owned, and lacked intellectual rigour and professional relevance.

What raises further concern is the fact that no research or scholarship is available on Pakistani tertiary teachers’ experiences and perceptions about their professional development, nor have any efforts been made to date in this regard. It is within this contextual background that I have designed this study to explore how professional development opportunities for tertiary teachers are currently experienced in Pakistan and what changes, if any, should be made to improve them.

Key factors identified by the literature

Effective teaching is a vital aspect of a tertiary educator’s role and it employs continuing professional development to keep faculty vital, productive, and working together as a community of learners (Atkins et al. 2001, Devlin 2007). Professional development refers to the opportunities for teacher learning and it embodies formal experiences such as workshops, meetings and mentoring, and informal experiences that are a natural part of the work of the professionals (McKinney et al. 2005). Professional development has been characterised as ongoing and long-term, collaborative and context and practice-related (Nicholls 2000, King 2004).

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Lawler and King (2000) suggest that educators themselves need to be viewed as adult learners and their professional development should be grounded in the principles and practices of adult learning and adult education. The authors propose that we need to move from a deficit design of development toward one of professional development and growth that promotes social construction of meaning, reflection, prior and authentic experiences, a climate of respect, and teacher empowerment. Such a form of professional development, according to Kennedy (2005), ensures a larger amount of professional autonomy and links theory and practice. Fraser et al. (2007) conclude that professional development, which allows formal and informal opportunities and greater ownership and control of the process, is more likely to be productive as it attends to personal, social and occupational aspects of professional learning.

The research approach

Since no research related to professional development for tertiary teachers was available to inform this inquiry, a qualitative approach was considered to enable a modest, interpretive beginning to be made, which, since it was located in the ‘natural’ experiences of Pakistani life, would confer some epistemological authorities on its findings.

Along with the case study that helped in defining the boundaries of the phenomenon to be investigated (Stake 2000), this inquiry is ethnographic too, as it allowed me to enter the subjective, lived-in worlds (Creswell 2007) of my participants in their settings. As qualitative research emphasises in-depth and highly contextualised understanding of specific phenomena, samples sizes are usually small and are judged according to how well they serve the purpose of a specific study (Morgan 2008). So for this study, which started in 2009, six information-rich cases from Pakistani tertiary settings were employed in semi-structured, open-ended interviews and the data were collected in their indigenous languages – Urdu or Punjabi.

Data analysis procedures

The data collected by semi-structured interviews were analysed using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) framework for data analysis. For the purpose of this study, a semi-structured style grid was used that consisted of a matrix with questions across the top and respondents listed along the sides. The key issues and salient points arising from the data were carefully examined and inductively coded by underlining them with differently coloured highlighting pens. Categories, patterns and themes emerged which through contemplation and analysis brought meaning and coherence to the generated theme categories. This facilitated the drawing of conclusions and concepts.

Findings

The analysis of the different strands of the participants’ responses brought to the surface five themes. These initial findings have helped to start the process of designing relevant and practical professional development that has helped some colleagues in the tertiary sector with the hope that with further research and development it will spread good practice throughout the sector.
Unhappiness
Analysis of the participants’ responses revealed the emergent theme of Unhappiness as they unleashed a persistent critique, across their responses, on the present situation of professional development in Pakistan. They felt their professional development was extremely inadequate, unrelated, and impractical for their real classroom experiences and a far cry from enabling them to meet their challenges. Most of them felt in a situation that was sink or swim. Their persistent critique of professional development in Pakistan indicated their unhappiness and their desire for change. What could this change look like? I turn to this now.

School-based provision
While discussing their problems in accessing professional development and delineating its characteristics that best identified with their needs, participants favoured professional development available in their workplaces. To them, professional development must be within their local control and should be complemented by supportive leadership and policies, peer networks, ample self-access materials (books and journals), and a positive climate within their institutions (Lawler and King 2000). It would provide them with the means of addressing their professional development needs at a local level regularly and effectively.

Social learning as the pedagogy
Based on details of the participants’ responses when they narrated their past experiences related to professional development, its characteristics and its forms, a theme of social learning emerged. Participants expressed their liking for developing cultures of collegial support within their workplaces. They believed that their cultures of mutual growth and development should provide profound opportunities to all teachers to get together and share and reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses, individually, collectively and with the assistance of experts in the field. As also suggested by King (2004) and Fraser et al. (2007), this pedagogy that is collaborative, active, connected, and ongoing was considered suitable for their purposes and needs.

Personalised generic teaching skill formation
Another theme that the data analysis unfolded was personalised generic teaching skill formation – to transform, to improve, and to become a better teacher, practitioner and researcher were the dominant opinions expressed. Their responses clearly indicated the value they gave to self-directed, reflective, and experiential learning. The participants, resonating with Devlin (2007), believed that their professional development must make them autonomous learners, strengthen their own potential and abilities, and empower their thinking, knowledge, skills and instructional approaches on a regular basis.

Evaluation
A close investigation of the data categories brought to the surface the theme of Evaluation. Evaluation, as most of them explained, would help them make thoughtful,
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responsible decisions about various aspects of professional development: its quality, its processes and its effects on teachers’ learning, students’ achievements and workplace cultures.

A model of effective professional development

In this section, I have woven the emergent themes of my research together to generate a model of effective professional development for tertiary teachers in Pakistan. Shown in Figure 1, this model is more dynamic, systematic, focused, and engaging. A critical feature of this model is that each of its sections needs to operate positively in order to achieve the best results from professional development.

Explanation

On the part of teachers, a spirit of inquiry and sustained enthusiasm is crucial to not only examine their own teaching and its contexts, but also open up their classrooms for others to share and learn, and eventually better their students’ learning and achievement. Secondly, a visionary and sustained assistance from college and university leadership is essential to foster the growth of development culture within their schools and to nurture a disposition in teachers as continuing learners and developers. Thirdly, evaluation – undertaken by both internal as well as external agencies – has to

Figure 1. A model of school-based professional development with social learning as the pedagogy.
be frequent, transparent, and efficient in order to investigate the effectiveness of professional development on a regular basis and to introduce, where and when needed, improvements to enhance its success. Furthermore, alongside socio-constructivist learning and development within their own colleges and universities, networking with the neighbouring institutions needs to be established for the purpose of sharing best practice and for benefiting from each other’s experiences and expertise. Finally, on the part of government education authorities, the provision of a cohesive professional development policy that is complemented by the dedicated allocation of funds is required for the continuation of professional development.

Concluding remarks

Tertiary teachers are ‘at-risk’ practitioners in Pakistan and they have a pressing need for a new beginning. As suggested by the results of this study, they need sustained support and assistance in a new form of professional development that is school-based, continuing, and collaborative rather than brief and remedial. As such, the model presented above gives some structure for the suggested reforms. These reforms must be provided with fiscal, human and intellectual support by the concerned authorities.

References


