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Key features of effective professional development

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Introduction

Professional Development (PD) is generally defined as intentional efforts to improve practices based on continuous learning in every practice to acquire integrated knowledge (Guskey, 2000). It has been playing a key role in all aspects of career development as people keep sharpening their current skills to improve their performance in their workplace. In the field of language education, teacher professional development means teachers' learning, which is concerned with the way teachers learn and the ways their pedagogical skills are applied in their classrooms to support students' learning during the fulfillment of their teaching careers (Postholm, 2012). Generally, teachers' ongoing learning has been underscored because the success of their careers will never depend solely upon the acquisition of knowledge from schools (Karacabey, 2020), regardless of their preparation at the end of their pre-service training (Bailey, 2013). According to Çimer et al. (2010), to keep teachers flexible, innovative and well-informed about the trends in language education, ongoing PD during their teaching careers are vitally important for them to increase their knowledge and skills to deal with any issues in their teaching.

In the context of Cambodia, where human capital is relatively scanty (Chen et al., 2007), PD has been playing an outstanding role in equipping teachers with pedagogical knowledge and practical skills to improve their teaching performance, which in turn can help students achieve their desired learning outcomes. Thus, effective in-service training offered for teachers in PD courses should not be underestimated as it can ensure the high quality of teaching and learning in the ever-changing world. However, what contributes to the effectiveness of PD courses or programs seems to remain doubtful to many

educators, program coordinators and school principals. This article provides a review of key features of effective professional development.

Key features of effective professional development

What does effective professional development mean? According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective PD is structurally designed training that triggers positive changes in teachers' practices in the classroom, which helps to bring about improvements in students' learning attainment. This definition emphasizes the positive links between teachers' practices and students' learning outcomes as an indication of effective PD. In the past, the provision of professional training to teachers was deemed less effective as the result of the poorly structured and poorly organized implementation of professional training. Therefore, to tackle this concern, educators and researchers have endeavored to find attributes of effective professional development; however, thus far, there seems to be no consensus on what constitutes effective PD. Despite the lack of an agreement on the qualities of effective PD, a review of the literature suggests that researchers appear to agree on common core characteristics of effective PD. The key features of effective PD include (a) content, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration of programs and (e) collective participants (see Birman et al., 2000; DeMonte, 2013; Desimone, 2009; Sokel, 2019).

Content: The PD centering on specific content (e.g., English, mathematics, physics and science) that teachers teach in their classrooms has a great impact on students' learning outcomes. However, the specific content knowledge alone is less likely to improve students' learning gains (Quick et al., 2009). Thus, the emphasis of professional learning on content knowledge and relevant pedagogical skills enhances students' learning attainments (Lambert et al., 2007; Lieberman et al., 2008). King and Newmann (2004) explained this connection that the mastery of the teaching subject content is a must for teachers in anticipation of students' misconceptions and in engaging students in learning by means of divergent teaching strategies.

Active learning: The second hallmark of effective professional learning, developed from contemporary theories of teaching and learning, emphasizes active and interactive learning experiences. It is directly linked with the

changes in teachers' practices and students' learning growth (Çimer et al., 2010; Sokel, 2019), and the activities to promote active learning take many forms such as problem solving, sharing and discussion, simulations and role plays and so on. Through active learning, teachers can deeply learn from one another, try out new techniques, reflect on their teaching performance, and appreciate new learning experiences rather than just lecturing, considered to be a traditional teaching method.

Coherence: In a broad sense, coherence refers to an alignment between educational policy on national, local and school levels and the content of PD courses (Desimone, 2009). In a narrow sense, however, coherence refers to the connection between PD courses and authentic classroom contexts, such as challenges and concerns of the teachers (Sahin & Yildirim, 2016), teaching materials and contribution to teachers' learning (Desimone & Garet, 2015), and theoretical and practical contents (Posnanski, 2002).

Duration of program: The fourth characteristic of effective PD is also critically important to ensure that teachers have sufficient contact hours to attend professional learning. Research shows that when teachers spend more time getting engaged in PD, their teaching practices will improve (Porter et al., 2003; Quick et al., 2009). However, Guskey and Yoon (2009) argued that unless the time is utilized wisely, providing more time on PD will be wasted.

Collective participants: Working collaboratively toward common goals is an asset for all educators. Consequently, PD courses should be organized in a way that allows teachers and educators to have opportunities to be interactive on the reflection of teaching practices and in sharing strategies and ideas (Guskey, 2003), as well as in providing solutions to any concerns (Garet et al., 2001).

Conclusion

As teachers are at the center of any changes and innovations in their teaching performance, investment in teacher education is necessary for the sustainable growth of schools, teachers and students. Sustainability can be ensured only if schools can provide effective professional training to teachers. In the Cambodian context, to make professional development programs effective

and meaningful for all concerned stakeholders, school principals should enact school policies agreed by all relevant individuals to allow the existence of PD in their schools and provide appropriate supports to teachers in order to encourage them to partake in pre-service training conducted inside or outside their schools. In so doing, not only do teachers have more opportunities to engage in professional training, but they can also build a network with other teachers with shared concerns, goals and values, both inside and outside the school settings.

The provision of any kind of professional learning should, however, be conducted in a careful manner, which means that PD courses must ensure positive changes in teachers' pedagogies and in their actual classroom practices. To ensure the effectiveness of PD activities, it is necessary to take the aforementioned key features (i.e., content, active learning, coherence, duration of the course and collaborative participants) into account. With the assistance of critical observations, interviews and questionnaires as the follow-up activities to evaluate the impact of the PD courses, professional learnings can be effectively enhanced.

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