

TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NEEDS: A STUDY ON GRADUATE TEACHERS IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the professional learning needs of graduate teachers. This study was conducted in Northern Sri Lanka. Target population of this study consisted of newly appointed graduate teachers who served in the government schools in three districts in northern Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach was adopted, in which data were collected from 30 graduate teachers through focus group interviews. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings indicated that 3 areas of professional learning needs such as classroom management and student discipline, subject content and theoretical aspects, and planning and implementation of teaching & learning were perceived as very urgent needs by the participant graduate teachers.

Key words: Graduate teachers, Professional learning needs, Professional development.

Introduction

High quality and sustained professional learning enable teachers to inspire students and to provide high quality teaching learning experiences. In other words, quality of teaching depends on the quality of teachers which in turn, depends on the quality of their professional learning. Professional learning enable teachers to become highly qualified by improving, increasing and advancing their knowledge through a better understanding of effective instructional strategies. on the other hand, to improve quality of professional learning programmes, teacher learning needs should be taken into account (Moeini, 2008). Professional learning programmes which focus on teachers' needs and interests, and enable them to improve their practice are those more likely to improve the quality of the teaching learning experience.

In the Sri Lankan context, a number of pre-service and inservice professional development programmes are available for teachers. Post Graduate Diploma in Education is the basic professional qualification for graduate teachers. Graduates who obtained their degrees in various subject areas enter the teaching force and start to teach in their schools without any professional training. In the following years they do Post Graduate Diploma in Education to obtain professional qualification. Graduate teachers may have wide range of specific knowledge and skill needs based on their education, experiences, subjects they teach and factors affecting their perceived proficiencies. Even though the existing professional learning programmes conducted by various institutions

emphasis the provision of essential pedagogical skills, instructional technologies, and practical experience for teachers, they may have some inadequacies to satisfy the professional learning expectations of graduate teachers. In addition, those programmes may inefficient to meet the challenges emerged from new educational initiatives. The professional development programmes are most effective when they are based on an analysis of the professional learning needs of teachers. The present study aims to examine the learning needs of graduate teachers in relation to their professional development.

Literature Review

The concept of need has diverse interpretations. The term “need” appears to be used interchangeably between a gap, an identified problem, and the wants, interests or motivation of an individual or a group of people so as to eliminate a lack (Wan, 2011). A need is generally considered to be a *discrepancy or gap* between the present state of affairs in regard to the group and situation of interest and the desired state of affairs (Council of Europe, 2016; Wittein & Altshuld, 1995). In the light of this definition, professional learning needs of teachers can be defined as the difference between the actual performance and the desired performance of the teachers in a variety of teaching tasks.

Teachers professional learning needs should be assessed before designing a professional development activity as it must be based on the needs of teachers. Because, teachers' needs will be the base for deciding the instructional objectives and selecting and designing the content of the programme. UNESCO (2010) emphasized this idea and stated that, people learn more enthusiastically when they have different alternatives which match their preferences, their interests and their styles.

Individuals' personal needs may come from intrinsic drives towards self-improvement through attaining new knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and dispositions. (Anderson, 2001; Johnson, 2017). Hence, it is crucial for teachers to engage in continuing career development that meet their own personal and professional needs (Oddone et al., 2019) and these needs vary according to the circumstances, personal and professional histories and current dispositions.

Villegas-Reimers (2003) has summarized different kinds of skills, knowledge, dispositions and values which teachers need to know and must be proficient. They include the followings:

- General pedagogical knowledge: Knowledge of learning events and instructional strategies, classroom management and knowledge of learning and learners.
- Subject matter knowledge: Knowledge of content and substantive structures and syntactic structures.
- Pedagogical content knowledge: Conceptual understanding of how to teach a subject, knowledge of instructional strategies and representations, knowledge of students' understandings and potential misunderstandings and knowledge of curriculum and curricular materials.
- Knowledge of student context and a disposition to find out more about students, their families and their schools.
- A repertoire of metaphors: Ability to bridge theory and practices.

- Evaluation of students' learning.
- Knowledge of strategies, techniques and tools to create and sustain a learning environment and the ability to use them effectively.
- Knowledge, skills and dispositions to work with children of diverse cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds.
- Knowledge and attitudes that support political and social justice make teachers very important agents of social change.
- Knowledge and skills on how to implement technology in the curriculum.

Villegas-Reimers' classification indicates the needs of teachers that should be fulfilled by their professional development practices. Lloyd et al. (2005) remarked that effective professional development was fostered in contexts in which learning was relevant, meaningful, practical and designed to meet immediate and ongoing needs of learners. This reveals that the professional development programme that satisfies the needs and preferences of the teachers will be more effective. Considering these facts, the present study throws light on the learning needs of graduate teachers in relation to their professional development.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative approach. Newly appointed graduate teachers who served in the government schools in the three districts in northern Sri Lanka were recruited for this study. A study flyer was used to recruit the potential participants. Potential participants were screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were a) being a graduate teacher, b) having less than three years' experience as a graduate teacher, and c) serving in a government school in either Jaffna, Kilinochchi, or Mullaitivu zones in the northern Sri Lanka. Eligible participants who expressed their consents to participate in the study were invited for focus group interviews.

Data Collection

According to Cohen et al. (2007), focus group is a form of group interview, though not in the sense of a backwards and forwards between interviewer and group. This allows for emerging the views from the participants by being less pre-dominated by the researcher. In the present study three focus groups each included ten graduate teachers were organized. The focus group interview helped to broaden and enrich a deeper understanding of professional learning needs of teachers. Focus group interviews were conducted in Tamil. Responses for the interview were recorded and verbatim transcribed.

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the focus group interview included coding the raw data, repeated listening to the interview audio tapes and reviewing the copies of the transcribed interviews by reading and re-reading. Data gathered from the focus group interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The content analysis

involves the process of summarizing and reporting written data, main contents of data, and their messages (Cohen et al., 2007).

Results

The study participants consisted of 17 females and 13 males who on average had less than three years' experience. Many of the participants referred to the importance of learning professional skills for their classroom teaching. Three domains of professional learning needs each related to classroom teaching experience were derived from the elicitation of focus group interview data.

Theme1: Classroom management and student discipline

Teachers demonstrated their great concern about classroom management. They consistently recognized classroom management as their major issue in the field of teaching. Here are some of the examples that teachers explained the reasons why "classroom management" was their main concern. One of the teachers expressed that,

As teachers we face problems in classroom management due to lack of space, poor organization, noisy environment, lack of resources and deficiencies in school administration. (Teacher A, female, Focus group interview-I)

Another teacher added,

As discipline and values have declined among students due to increasing social disorders and decays, classroom management has become a challenge for teachers. (Teacher D, male, Focus group interview-I)

While agreed with this idea one teacher said

Today the classroom management has become a difficult task for teachers. Because, today's classrooms constitute more diverse students than ever before. (Teacher C, female, Focus group interview-I)

One teacher felt the importance of skills to manage classroom and explained the need for classroom management skills as follows.

There is higher need for studying about classroom management and student discipline. Because, there are more students with behavioural problems, some are hyperactive, and some are very calm. When facing them, I think there exists a problem. But I can't call it as a problem. It is natural. Every day there is a new thing. I cannot cater for every student. I do feel how to do better. (Teacher P, female, Focus group interview-II)

From all these expressions, it is found that, teachers perceived managing classrooms and maintaining students' discipline are the most responsible tasks for a teacher.

Theme 2: Subject content & Theoretical aspects

Under the “Subject content & Theoretical aspects” domain teachers perceived obtaining basic knowledge on Educational psychology as their most urgent need.

One teacher indicated the importance of this need by the following statement.

Knowledge in psychology is essential for teachers to understand students' diverse needs, identify their problems and plan teaching learning process appropriately”. (Teacher J, male, Focus group interview-II)

Another teacher had the same idea and said that,

Knowledge on educational psychology is inevitable for teachers. It is essential not only to identify students but also to cope with school administration, colleagues and school society. (Teacher D, male, Focus group interview-I)

Theme 3: Planning and implementation of Teaching & Learning

Teachers perceived “obtaining knowledge and application of teaching strategies and skills” as their highest urgent learning need under this domain. They explained their views as follows.

Teaching without planning is difficult. I experienced many problems when I implemented unplanned lessons and students were also seemed to be bored with my poor teaching. However now I realized the importance of lesson planning. (Teacher S, male, Focus group interview-III)

Another teacher expressed her view as follows.

If we use better teaching methods, then we can manage the classroom effectively. Further, students can be motivated by the use of different teaching methods”. (Teacher P, female, Focus group interview-II)

However, some teachers perceived “obtaining knowledge on curriculum design, implementation & improvement “as their highest urgent need. Teachers emphasized their views by the following explanations.

We have been teaching for a long period. However, we have no clear idea on the implementation of subject curriculum and 5E model teaching. Different people provided different explanations. Therefore, we preferred to get clear idea on this aspect.” (Teacher B, female, Focus group interview-I)

As the needs under this domain are related to class room teaching, teachers perceived them as urgent needs. Hence, teachers' perceptions of PD needs may be based on their classroom experiences.

Discussion

The above findings may reflect that teachers' professional development needs mostly originate from their practical issues in teaching. Their perceived needs are actually related to their current classroom context and that are not only restricted to teaching and learning but also to classroom management and student discipline.

Findings indicated that classroom management and student discipline domain was the highest urgent professional learning need for teachers. It is arguable that teachers are highly motivated towards this domain as they greatly concerned about their students and their wellbeing. Participant teachers appear to perceive managing classroom and student discipline as their ultimate responsibility. In line with this finding, Isuku (2018) identified classroom management as one of the critical aspects in achieving a successful teaching learning environment. In the same vein, many researchers claimed that discipline problems among the students can be controlled through strong and consistent management and organizational skills (Babadjanava, 2020; Froyen & Iverson, 1999). In short, teachers expressed their interest in classroom management and student discipline as they may believe it as a very crucial requirement for the implementation of successful learning environment.

One important theme that emerged from this study was subject content and theoretical aspects. Participant students prioritized their need to obtain knowledge in educational psychology. This finding confirmed the perceived importance of psychological knowledge for teachers. In support of this finding, Poulou (2005) also found that prospective teachers rated learning psychological concepts, principles, and theories as an essential need as they believe psychological knowledge could enhance their sense of efficiency, motivation, reflection, and consequently their professional development. However, this finding showed contrary to the perceptions of Singapore pre-service teachers who were less inclined to rate highly theoretical knowledge (Tan, 2006). Nevertheless, many researchers argue that psychological knowledge at least provides a rationale and useful information which could guide educational decisions and teaching practice. Fortunately, most of the teacher education programmes in Sri Lanka include one or more courses in educational psychology as major components as knowledge in educational psychology enables teachers to understand their students' motivation, social and environmental contexts as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

For this group of teachers in this study, planning and implementation of teaching and learning appear to represent an important learning need in relation to their professional development. Some teachers believe obtaining knowledge and skills in relation to the application of teaching strategies might help them to successfully implement their teaching learning process. In supporting this Johnson and Barrett (2017) established that the use of broad teaching strategies by the teachers can lead to active learning among students. In addition, the participant teachers expressed their desire to obtain knowledge on curriculum design, implementation and improvement. A similar finding was obtained by Alsubaie (2016) who maintains teachers should have knowledge, experiences and competencies to develop and introduce the curriculum to the class room.

To sum up teachers perceive classroom management and student discipline, subject content and theoretical aspects, and planning and implementation of teaching and learning are the urgent needs in relation to their professional development. The teaching learning context that exists in the Sri Lankan schools especially the

government schools in the war affected areas in northern Sri Lanka may contribute to this finding. Given that poorly equipped classrooms, lack of facilities, and poor socio-economic conditions, for example, could contribute to greater student disinterest, increased behavioral problems, or unruly and disorganized classes.

Conclusion

Graduate teachers in this study expressed and articulated three major areas of needs in relation to their professional development. The findings generally showed that, teachers perceived their role of a teacher from a limited perspective. In other words, teachers were aware of their major responsibilities as a subject expert, planner, and manager. To sum up, teachers' perceptions on professional needs seemingly are determined by their personal needs and expectations in relation to their career.

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