

When one size doesn't fit all: an appreciative inquiry driven study of teacher beliefs about professional development at an international school in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

Professional development (PD) is inextricably linked to how teachers develop and establish their own beliefs. However, PD often is planned without teacher input and with a “one size fits all” (Varela, 2012) mentality, failing to take into account teacher needs and motivations. This paper explores the attitudes towards PD of teachers from an international school in Bangkok, Thailand. Following principles of an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach, 25 teachers were asked to discuss their positive experiences and perspectives of ideal practices related to PD. Subjects' responses were paraphrased and open coded. Trends in teacher perspectives were identified from the interview data. Notably, subjects identified a preference for PD that was “interactive” and “directly applicable”. Other trends in subject responses, as well as proposed explanations and analysis of the significance of these trends, are discussed.

1. Background

1.1 Teacher attitudes towards professional development

Professional development (PD) is linked to teachers developing their own identity as teachers; it is a key determinant to how teachers view themselves as professionals as well as how they develop (Dixon and Ward, 2015). In developing their identities, teachers identify and implement practices which help them perform effectively given their ever-changing curriculum, context, and own personality and teaching beliefs. Therefore, PD tends to be more effective when planned and implemented with teachers' respective needs in mind.

Just as teachers' perceived needs vary, so too do their perceptions about how professional development could help meet those needs. However, according to Caddle, Bautista, Brizuela, and Sharpe (2016), “While there is widespread agreement that one-size-fits-all PD initiatives have limited potential to foster teacher learning, much existing PD is still designed without attention to teachers' motivations and needs.” PD opportunities may be readily available, but opportunities teachers perceive that they would benefit from and are motivated to attend are sometimes limited (Parise, Finkelstein, & Alterman, 2015).

It is not immediately clear whether this is due to what PD is actually planned, how it is being planned, or both. Does PD not meet teachers' perceived needs because they do not feel involved in the planning process, or does perceived lack of involvement in the planning process make teachers feel that their needs are not being met? Alternatively, are both issues part feedback loop in which teachers feel demotivated by a lack of involvement in the PD planning

process, leading to lack of interest in PD, thus making teachers feel further disconnected from the PD planning process?

Regardless of whether a perceived lack of teacher involvement in the PD planning process is a cause or result (or both) of teacher demotivation, it is an issue worth addressing. Varela (2012) identifies “a one-size-fits-all mentality” as one of the “three major sins of professional development” and stresses the importance of teachers’ own experiences and needs in determining the nature of PD. Notably, it is not only the subject(s) that teachers are responsible for in their classrooms which influences their perceived PD needs; the relative amount of teaching experience also impacts teachers’ respective purpose(s) when attending PD. Mandel (2006) suggests that first teachers are more interested in addressing immediate “survival” needs such as “setting up the classroom and preparing for the first weeks of school” and “dealing with parents”. On the other hand, Henry (1994) found that veteran teachers value “enhancing student understanding and motivation, and compatibility of the instruction to their own philosophy and experience of success” when it comes to their PD.

1.2 Action Research

While organizational improvement often is focuses on identifying problems using deficit-model approach, action research (AR) instead aims to focus on solutions rather than the problems themselves. As Ferrance (2013) explains:

[Action research] is *not* problem-solving in the sense of trying to find out what is wrong, but rather a quest for knowledge about how to improve. Action research is *not* about doing research on or about people, or finding all available information on a topic looking for the correct answers. It involves people working to improve their skills, techniques, and strategies. Action research is *not* about learning why we do certain things, but rather how we can do things better. (p. 2-3)

AR can be beneficial not just in terms of the results and suggestions generated from those results; the process of conducting research can also be beneficial in terms of developing collegiality, improving communication, and encouraging self-reflective practice (Ferrance, 2013). This is in part due to the iterative nature of AR; practitioners are expected to continually analyze their results and revise their practices based on those results.

1.3 Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an approach to improving an organization using the principles of AR. AI emphasizes the same focus on identifying and finding ways to expand on best practices. Kadi-Hanifi et al. (2014) describe AI as a “mutual celebration of what is good and life-giving in the present followed by the generative, co-creation of a vision for an even better future”.

Cooperride and Whitney (2005) describe AI as a “4D cycle”, with four interrelated steps:

- “Discovery” to identify the best of what is and/or people have already experienced
- “Dream” about what could possibly be

- “Design” a plan implement changes
- Reach the “destiny” of having improved

AI is typically implemented as an iterative process, designed to support continual research and planning, implementation of plans, and reflection on the effectiveness of the plans as they were implemented. Thus, the “destiny” phase should not be considered as an end to the AI process, but rather a gateway to further “discovery”.

This paper will mainly focus on the “discovery” phase. While not always formally structured, the “discovery” phase essentially consists of two steps. First, the general goal(s) when using AI should be determined, with deliberate consideration for the needs of all stakeholders within an organization. While determining goals, guiding questions should also be created that encourage participants to open up and share constructive views. This leads to the second step: conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all stakeholders (or barring that, sample representative of all stakeholder groups), focusing on positive beliefs, experiences, and aspirations. Practicality is not a major consideration, nor is strict adherence to the questions asked. Instead, interviews should be conducted with the goal of going “beyond the conventional boundaries of their thinking and conversation” (Klimek, Ritzenhein, & Sullivan, 2008).

2. Methods

2.1 Nature of the research

Subjects were interviewed using principles of an AI approach, notably the explicit and continued focus on positive beliefs, experiences, and aspirations. The focus of this study was on the initial research (i.e. “discover”) and suggestion/explanation (i.e., “dream”) phases; later phases and further iterations of the research are not explored. In addition, the subjects of the study were only a single group of stakeholders (i.e., teachers), with other groups (such as students, parents, support staff, etc.) being outside of the scope of the study. Therefore, this study should be considered only a partial representation of AI research, as not all stages are addressed.

2.2 Participants

Semi-structured interviews of 25 subjects were conducted between August and December 2015. All subjects were teachers were employed at an international school in Bangkok, Thailand which uses an American curriculum; the 25 subjects constituted approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of all teachers. Subjects were chosen on the basis of availability and willingness to grant an interview; it should therefore be considered a “convenience sample”. Subjects varied in terms of country of origin, years of experience teaching, and academic subject(s) taught.

2.3 Nature of the interviews

Semi-structured interviews of the subjects were conducted following guiding questions. Subjects were encouraged to elaborate on their answers, focusing mainly on their positive experiences and views. Interviews generally took around 20-30 minutes total. The four principal guiding questions used were:

1. *Tell me about a job you've most enjoyed to date and why.*
2. *Tell me about a time when you had a positive experience with staff development.*
3. *How has staff development helped you in any of your jobs?*
4. *What would the ideal staff development program at [the school we currently are employed by] look like?*

Summaries of responses were recorded and tabulated in a digital spreadsheet. After collecting data, researchers open coded data using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1998; Scott, 2009), identifying and classifying frequent responses as a “0” (did not explicitly mention) or “1” (explicitly mentioned), aiming to determine subjects’ perspectives on the criteria of effective PD, and allowing both qualitative and quantitative content analysis.

To avoid incorrectly identifying subjects as valuing certain criteria, subjects were only deemed to have identified specific criteria when it was explicitly mentioned in their responses. Therefore, the number of subjects that might agree with the importance of certain criteria may be *underrepresented* in the results. For example, when asked “about a job you’ve most enjoyed to date and why”, J_____ described his time as a landscaper and mentioned his appreciation for a supportive employer that allowed him to manage his own time. His response was coded as identifying “meaningful autonomy and responsibility” and “the trust and support of their supervisors” as key criteria of his job. However, because he did not explicitly mention “opportunities to interact, learn, and express creativity in [his]work”, he was not identified as valuing it.

Because these interviews were used to inform PD planning at the school in which the subjects were working, two additional questions were asked. These questions were:

- 5) *What staff development topics would you find most useful?*
- 6) *Would you be willing to lead any staff development at [the school we currently are employed by]? If so, what?*

Subjects were not asked to elaborate on their answers to the same extent as they had been asked to for previous questions. As answers therefore lacked the same depth, as they had for previous questions, subjects’ responses for these questions will not further explored in this paper.

2.4 Disclosure

The majority of the interviews were conducted by me, though several interviews were conducted by Gordon Cormack. At the time of the interview, we personally knew and worked at the same school as the subjects.

Subjects were informed that their answers would be recorded and might be used to inform PD planning at the school as well as additional research.

Subjects received no compensation (financial or otherwise) for their participation in this research.

3. Results

Coded responses of frequent results, as well as examples from specific subjects, are provided below.

3.1 Responses to “Tell me about a job you’ve most enjoyed to date and why.”

Table 1. A job you’ve most enjoyed and why

% of subjects that explicitly mentioned	Subjects described jobs they felt provided:
72	a community that the subject liked and felt connected to
64	meaningful autonomy and responsibility
60	opportunities to make an impact, as well as a sense that they made meaningful contributions
56	opportunities to interact, learn, and express creativity in their work
36	the trust and support of their supervisors

Subjects described a wide range of positions they had held and why they enjoyed them. R_____ was one of the many subjects who described a teaching position, focusing mainly on her experience interacting with parents when asked to elaborate on “why” she most enjoyed it. In her response, she also mentioned explicitly mentioned appreciating the trust that parents placed in her and the feeling that she made a difference in both her students’ and their parents’ lives. She was coded as mentioning:

- a community that the subject liked and felt connected to
- meaningful autonomy and responsibility
- opportunities to make an impact, as well as a sense that they made meaningful contributions

Like R_____, U_____ was one of the many subjects who identified their experience as a teacher for this question. He described interacting with parents of students and developing rapport with them as what made the position especially enjoyable. However, he did not explicitly mention a “meaningful autonomy and responsibility” or “opportunities to make an impact, as well as a sense that they made meaningful contributions” in his response. Therefore, while it was possible that other characteristics were important to him, he was solely coded for as mentioning:

- A community that the subject liked and felt connected to

Several subjects chose to discuss non-teaching experience; for instance, K_____ described her field experience working with a small team of owl researchers in which she had, specific responsibilities and a great deal of guided autonomy. She was coded as a subject who explicitly mentioned:

- meaningful autonomy and responsibility
- opportunities to make an impact, as well as a sense that they made meaningful contributions
- opportunities to interact, learn, and express creativity in their work
- the trust and support of their supervisors

3.2 Responses to “Tell me about a time when you had a positive experience with staff development.”

Table 2. A positive experience with staff development

% of subjects that explicitly mentioned	Subjects said that PD they enjoyed:
48	provided opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and exchange of ideas
36	was practical and directly applicable to their position
36	exemplified effective teaching practices (i.e., the leader of the PD modeled behavior which could be used by the subject)
32	helped them develop their own teaching beliefs and practices

Fewer clear trends emerged for this question, with no single characteristic identified as being mentioned by more than half of subjects. H_____, a math teacher, said that his best PD experiences were practical, interactive, and immediately applicable. He was coded as explicitly identifying PD that:

- provided opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and exchange of ideas
- was practical and directly applicable to their position

Because subjects taught at the same school, many identified some of the same PD experiences. However, even when discussing the same experiences, subjects sometimes focused on different traits. For instance, both J_____ and U_____ gave a training on “international mindedness” as an example of a positive experience. J_____ said it helped him develop personally and professionally; he was coded as mentioning that it:

- helped them develop their own teaching beliefs and practices

U_____, on the other hand, focused on the excellent attitude and persona of the person leading the PD; he was coded as appreciating PD that:

- exemplified effective teaching practices (i.e., the leader of the PD modeled behavior which could be used by the subject)

S____, a veteran teacher with more than 40 years of experience, focused primarily on the importance of “practical and directly applicable” PD in her response. For her, useful PD had “makes” and “takes”; it involved “making” something (such as a poster, lesson plan, etc.) that she could “take” and immediately use/display/etc. in her classroom.

3.3 Responses to “How has staff development helped you in any of your jobs?”

Table 3. Characteristics of helpful PD

% of subjects that explicitly mentioned	Subjects believed that PD was most helpful when it:
48	was practical and directly applicable to their position
44	helped develop a sense of community and/or empathy with their peers and other stakeholders
32	provided opportunities to share wisdom
28	provided opportunities to see effective practices being used

When discussing the ways PD had helped them, subjects tended to mention characteristics of previous jobs they enjoyed. When discussing “a job [they] most enjoyed”, more than half mentioned “a community that the subject liked and felt connected to” and/or “opportunities to interact, learn, and express creativity in their work”. Similarly, nearly half of subjects said that PD helped them cultivate the interconnectedness emphasized in their responses, saying that PD “helped develop a sense of community and/or empathy with their peers and other stakeholders”. For instance, W____ said that PD had helped him develop awareness of real-world problems that both he and his students faced. Similarly, P____ valued the way that PD had helped her form a different vision of how other colleagues envisioned their jobs and their goals.

Likewise, the same characteristics that subjects identified when discussing “positive experiences” were also explicitly mentioned when describing the ways PD had been helpful. For both questions, subjects identified PD that was “practical”, allowed them to interact and connect with peers, and see effective practices in being used. K____ said that seeing experienced teachers in action helped her get acclimated when she was beginning as a teacher,

3.4 Responses to “What would the ideal staff development program at [the school you currently are employed by] look like?”

Table 4. Characteristics of the ideal PD program

% of subjects that explicitly mentioned	Subjects believed that, for their context, PD should:
40	be interactive
32	have a clear purpose
20	have varied group dynamics (i.e., some sessions in groups of 15-20, other sessions as an entire faculty)

Once again, subjects emphasized the same traits as they had for previous; the “ideal staff development program” should be interactive and purposeful. J_____’s ideal professional development was both interactive and well-rounded; his “ideal” PD would assist with both personal and professional growth, and would also relate to both mental and physical development. H_____ chose to focus more on the importance of PD having a “clear purpose” involved, suggesting that a combination of subject-specific intensive workshops and online courses would be especially helpful for him.

4. Discussion

When discussing “a job they’ve most enjoyed”, financial compensation was rarely mentioned an important attribute. This may be due to subjects most enjoying jobs they were intrinsically motivated by. Alternatively, it could also be due to “money” being a taboo (Brecht, 2016) that the subject, perhaps considering their lack of anonymity and relationship with the researchers, preferred not to discuss.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, many subjects did not mention a teaching position as the “job they’ve most enjoyed”, despite most subjects expressing a passion for teaching and desire to stay in the field.

When describing their “positive experience with staff development”, subjects expressed an almost-universal preference for PD which provided opportunities for group discussion and self-reflection. As a feeling of connection to a community was a common trend throughout responses to all four guiding questions used for the interviews, subjects may have appreciated the opportunity to get connect with and develop alongside their peers. Subjects may also have preferred more interactive PD because in doing so the PD leaders modelled effective practices; a growing body of research suggests that learner-centered teaching tends to be more effective than top-down teaching (Russel, Van Horne, Ward, Bettis, Sipola, Colombo, & Rocheford, 2016; Van Tassell, 2014).

An emphasis on the importance of providing multiple options, as well as differentiation based on specific teacher needs, was frequently mentioned. This is consistent with previous research (Varela, 2012) emphasizing the value of considering teacher preferences and needs when planning PD.

There were fewer clear trends in subjects' responses to "what would the ideal staff development program look like?" This seems to reflect more of a difference in terms of how they chose to approach the question than of conflicting beliefs. For example, M_____ said she would appreciate a session led by the counseling department on how to support and differentiate for students with conditions such as dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Other subjects answered more on the general nature and of what they believed would constitute the "ideal" program. B_____, for instance, believed that the planning of PD should be informed by teacher self-evaluations, and that when PD is held teachers should self-select based on what teachers believe would be most useful for themselves as individuals.

An emphasis on PD being practical and directly applicable was continually made for all questions, including when subjects discussed how "staff development helped [in their jobs]". What was relevant to individual subjects varied widely. Previous research suggesting that "one-size-fits-all" PD tends to be ineffective (Varela, 2012) seemed to hold true for this context as well.

Subjects believed the "ideal staff development program" should be "interactive", with several arguing that they would also like to have "varied group dynamics". This suggests that while some staff believe that speaker-focused presentations to large groups can play a limited role in PD, they should be used in conjunction with more interactive and hands-on tasks in small groups.

4.1 Limitations

Subjects were chosen as part of a "convenience sample", and cannot be considered a completely accurate representation of the population. Convenience samples may result in certain members of a population being underrepresented or overrepresented (Mackey & Gass, 2005). In particular, convenience samples may result in outliers having a disproportionately large effect (Farrokhi, 2012). However, the sample represented approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the population, with the majority of subjects who were asked agreeing to give interviews. Additionally, it is unlikely that outliers are overrepresented, as coded responses were only considered when a clear trend in responses from multiple subjects emerged. While selection bias may still be an issue, the data can still be considered at least somewhat reliable.

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