Exploring Continuing Professional Development in ELT Classrooms in India

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has gained prominence through the activities of professional associations and networks of teaching communities where professional development programmes are recognized and valued. It is clear that CPD needs to develop as a key feature in all professional work. However, in the context of Indian teacher education, CPD is a neglected area, with most of the teaching professionals participating in professional development only if it is mandatory. In this paper, we will explore CPD in the context of language teaching in Indian education. As this area is being revisited and restructured in order to foster higher levels of quality, CPD too is evolving. Educating our students to meet the challenges of the world requires that they be constantly engaged in self growth and development. We share their understanding and experiences in this regard, as they form a community of practice based on professional collaboration.

Key Words: Collaboration, professional development, professional collaboration

INTRODUCTION

The area of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) is gaining prominence through policies and programmes of professional associations worldwide. However, as a concept it remains ambiguous, with confusion regarding its definition and purpose in both academic and practitioner literature (Friedman & Phillips, 2000). Professionals themselves have a limited view of CPD—they see it as training, a means of keeping up to date, or a platform to build one's career (Friedman & Phillips, 2000). However, its importance lies in its close link with the ideals of professionalism. CPD has become synonymous with

formal courses or events that provide some form of training. Though there is a tendency to regard formal courses as the most appropriate mode of giving teaching instruction, professional learning takes many forms. Becher (1999) has identified seven categories or modes of continuing professional learning: attending courses and conferences; engaging in professional interactions; networking; consulting experts; doing personal research; learning by doing and learning by teaching. CPD needs to support the teaching faculty in enhancing their understanding of their preferred learning styles by making available opportunities for developing their practice. There is a growing recognition of the need to develop such frameworks of professional development that make the process self- directed.

In this paper, we have discussed "Mentoring" and "Lesson Study" models under the wider ambit of communities of practice. This is a forum for bringing together expertise in the field, knowledge exchange and innovation through professional exchange. It involves more than two people, who are not necessarily in a hierarchical relationship. Wenger (as cited in Kennedy, 2005, p.244), contends that learning within these communities, involves three essential processes—evolving forms of mutual engagement; understanding and tuning [their] enterprise; and developing [their] repertoire, styles and discourses. In our community of practice comprising two teacher educators and one higher secondary school teacher, we are attempting to adapt these processes to our needs. We conduct frequent meetings where we share our experiences and concerns in order to evolve and implement enhanced pedagogical strategies. This mutual engagement is aimed at building bridges between two disparate yet synergetic institutions of education. Writing this paper jointly is our effort to share our insights and endeavours with regard to our own development as ELT professionals.

CONCEPTUALIZING CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CPD incorporates activities that focus on enhancing the knowledge and skills of teaching professionals through orientation, training and support programmes designed to encourage professional development by providing the space and opportunity for applying the newly acquired knowledge in practice (Coetzer, 2001). Professionally, it is essential to guide teachers to develop their own ideas and to experiment with them in order to determine their viability. In addition, teachers must be encouraged to discuss their ideas with their peers, as their support and guidance is also integral to individual growth. Such interactions have an impact on the attitudes and approaches adopted by teachers and consequently contribute to the improvement in the quality of the teaching and learning process (Day & Sachs, 2004).

Another important aspect of CPD is to identify and address the specific needs of teachers. Once these have been identified, activities need to be planned to support teaching professionals in applying this knowledge and methodology creatively (Bredeson, 2002). Collinson (2000), states that the best results are obtained if the programme is formally and systematically planned and presented with a focus on the enhancement of professional growth achieved by broadening knowledge, skills and positive attitudes. Professional development requires not only informal and spontaneous learning from one another (Bunting, 1997; Kagaan, 2004) but also relies on prior knowledge (Bredeson, 2002), experience and the potential of each participant, which can be built upon and incorporated into further initiatives (Earley & Bubb, 2004; Greenberg, 1998). Acquiring new knowledge and sharing existing knowledge and skills with others are hence valuable tools for development and professional engagement.

CPD IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Bolitho & Padwad (2013), state that the strength and quality of any profession largely depends upon how it manages the three stages of preparation, induction and ongoing development of its members. The scope and the pressure to keep developing professionally are at the core of most professions. For instance, in the case of medical and legal education in India, there is a combination of theoretical and practical learning bolstered by on-the-job training, followed by systemic induction and CPD. In India, teaching is a popular option even though it is not considered as prestigious as other professions. While, there is no formal system of induction, usually a teacher is expected to teach and handle responsibility independently and autonomously from the very first day of teaching. There are limited opportunities for CPD for serving teachers beyond participating in workshops that are mandatory for promotion. Administrators equate CPD with in-service programmes, which are often held in isolation, and are short term and infrequent. At the tertiary level, the status is no better as novice teacher educators do not undergo any pre-service courses. In India, the broader notion of CPD as life-long learning—a process by which teachers review and extend their commitment to their profession by acquiring and critically developing knowledge and skills—is conspicuous by its absence (Bolitho & Padwad, 2013).

As the world around us is experiencing tumultuous change, the role and functioning of teachers and educational institutions, have also been affected. Teachers are expected to teach in classrooms that are increasingly multicultural and multilingual. They are required to place greater emphasis on integrating students with special learning needs into the mainstream, effectively use information and

communication technologies for teaching and most importantly, plan lessons with evaluative and accountability frameworks firmly in place. This holds even truer for pre-service teacher education programmes. No matter how good pre-service teacher education is, it cannot be expected to prepare teachers for all the challenges they will face throughout their careers. Education systems, therefore, need to provide teachers and teacher educators with opportunities for in-service professional development that is ongoing, and that involves updating knowledge of their subject area to incorporate recent advances in order to maintain a high standard of teaching while retaining a high quality teacher workforce in schools and in teacher education programmes. It is important to create spaces for exchange of information and expertise in schools as well as teacher education programmes. With this objective, there is a need to adopt teaching strategies that can help us in providing sustained support and development. These can be provided through mentoring, collaborative planning and teaching and reflective practice. In the next two sections, we will describe in detail the two-pronged approach towards CPD—Mentoring and Lesson Study.

MENTORING AS CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mentoring is a process through which teachers are supported in their learning and development through individual support from a more experienced colleague with whom they develop a relationship of trust over a period of time (Asención; Hargraves as cited in Corrigan & Loughran, 2008, p.1). Mentoring embodies many features which are considered to be important in promoting effective professional development. It is based on and feeds back into classroom discourse and stimulates reflection, thereby encouraging a positive, collegial and collaborative relationship between mentors and teachers. Mentors fulfil many roles including acting as models to inspire and demonstrate expected professional behaviours, while showing the novice teacher the proverbial ropes (Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999). Moreover, mentors act as cathartic sounding boards for the mentees as well as create learning opportunities for their mentees, a mutually beneficial situation for both as both mentor and mentee can arrive at viable solutions to the challenges they face in the classroom. As part of CPD, the teacher mentors assist teachers with lesson planning, conduct weekly/monthly department meetings, collaborate during professional trainings, learn and share resources, observe teachers' classes, and give them feedback on their practice.

The objective of mentoring is to strengthen the teachers' content knowledge and planning skills, with a focus on instructional implementation and classroom management. The discussion that follows post class observation builds the

teacher's understanding of how to handle himself/herself in challenging situations, make decisions based on acquired knowledge, work within given timelines and deal with parents and administrators. Mentoring exposes teachers to authentic teaching experiences and rich reflection daily from the mentors. It is most effective when undertaken in a non-threatening context, with the basic premise that a process that stresses on interactive learning is truly effective.

It is important to understand that in a vast country such as India, with so many students and teachers, the mentorship programme helps to support and foster the growth of ELT teachers. Buoyed by these examples of CPD through mentoring, we conducted various ELT training programmes for in-service teachers. The programmes involved a collaborative effort between the teacher educators and teacher practitioners, hence juxtaposing theory with informed practice. One such example of CPD was "Activity Based Teaching through Collaborative Learning", which was undertaken for a group of ten English language teachers (primary and middle) of a premier Delhi school. We first discussed the plan for initiating CPD, taking into consideration the problem areas identified on the basis of a needs analysis. The problem areas mainly involved issues pertaining to group and collaborative activities and their integration into regular classroom teaching.

In the workshop, we presented well-structured activities that the participants could relate to, resulting in a positive response. The feedback comprised reflective journals written by the participants sharing their learning experiences. The effectiveness of the workshop was evaluated after one month, in which the mentor observed the classes of the mentees to study the impact of CPD. The self-assessment proforma filled by the mentor and the mentees revealed the following benefits: increased confidence in teaching, improved communication and reflection skills and better understanding of the linkages between educational theories and classroom practices. The mentees added that because of the mentoring programme, they were more motivated and interested in their professional development, which in turn would improve the learning experience of the children in their schools.

Reflecting on the feedback of the workshop, we considered various other interactions which could also fall under the ambit of CPD. For instance, we looked at conversations between teachers about the effectiveness of an activity or strategy they had used in the classroom, and how it could be improved upon. We also discussed how observing their peers' classes, or inviting other teachers to observe their own lessons was also part of CPD.

Many of the teachers we met in the course of these workshops have become friends. We are connected with them on social media platforms, where we

exchange ideas, activities and web links of teaching resources. This reciprocity of interaction has helped us gain an insight into the nuances of the ELT classroom.

The second model which we will examine now is the Lesson Study approach.

LESSON STUDY FOR CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Lesson Study approach has its roots in social constructivism, and combines the benefits of both action research and community of practice. It is indigenous to the Japanese education system since the nineteenth century, and was introduced in the United States by Stigler and Hiebert in the late 1990s. Since then, it has been adapted to suit the instructional needs of students across schools as well as colleges. "Lesson study is a process in which a team of instructors jointly design, teach, observe, analyse and revise a single lesson, called a research lesson" (Lewis & Hurdas cited in Demir, Czerniak, & Hart, 2013, p. 23). Lesson Study can therefore play an important role in fostering teacher professional development. This is especially true of the Indian scenario, where there is a lag between research and practice, or an inability to apply the learning from teacher development workshops in the classroom. Hence, the need for an approach that evolves out of partnership and mutual engagement among practitioners rather than one controlled and dictated by "experts".

The Lesson Study cycle implemented in this study has been drawn from the work of Demir, Czerniak, & Hart (2013). The Lesson Study Process has four stages, which are as follows: setting up a goal and planning activities, research lesson, lesson discussion and consolidation of learning. We will take up each of these.

SETTING UP A GOAL AND PLANNING ACTIVITIES

The Lesson Study process begins with setting a goal and planning activities for students which the teachers aim to address through their instruction. According to Ertle, Chokshi, & Fernandez (as cited in Rock & Wilson, 2005, p. 80), "These goal statements are constructed based on a gap that the teachers perceive between their aspirations for their students and how students are actually developing in their school." In the context of our study, the goal was formulated as an outcome of our discussion on the pedagogy of newly appointed school teachers. We had observed a lack of critical thinking amongst the newly appointed school teachers, especially in the context of formulating questions. This in turn would have an impact on the development of critical thinking among high school students. Therefore, based on inputs or feedback from the field (here school), we planned our lesson.

We asked the teachers to design a set of activities that would help to achieve

the stated goals. We decided to select the activities that involved individual free writing and collaborative planning of higher order thinking questions based on the text "Sultana's Dream" by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. The activities were decided keeping in mind the needs and abilities of the learners, and thinking about their expected responses. At this stage, teachers were asked to decide on the method of data collection to assess student learning; we selected observation, self-assessment rubric and reflective journal. It may be noted that the students are familiar with both having encountered them in earlier assignments.

RESEARCH LESSON

In this stage of the Lesson Study cycle, one of the members (in this case a teacher) volunteers to teach the lesson as other members observe the class and make field notes, or use other tools of observation. Students were asked to read the story at home a day before the lesson. The warm-up activity was a free writing task. Following this, the students were divided into groups and were given the task of framing critical thinking questions based on the story they had read the previous day. The students were provided with sample questions from the text to help them compare and analyze the level of the questions. It may be noted that students have read about the different levels of questions before this class. The questions framed by one group were answered by another group. Since, it was a text on a feminist utopia, students were given charts to draw their own versions of utopias (not necessarily feminist). Lastly, students were asked to fill a feedback form in the class. They were assigned the task of writing a reader response journal at home.

LESSON DISCUSSION

The third stage of Lesson Study entails a discussion among the team members wherein they examine their observations and experience of the lesson. The focus of this discussion was on gauging the success of the lesson in achieving its prescribed goals. At this stage, the field notes, self-assessment rubrics, feedback forms and reflective journals of the students were shared and discussed. The data collected from these sources indicated that the activities evoked critical thinking among the students, especially when it came to analysing and critiquing the questions they had formulated. However, the transaction also brought to light the scope for improvement. It is precisely the provision of this space for reflection that is the strength of the Lesson Study approach.

CONSOLIDATION OF LEARNING

This is the stage where, based on the discussions held, changes are made to the lesson either in terms of changing the goals, or the teaching-learning activities or

the assessment tools. In our case, we decided to do away with prior reading of the text as students reported that they found it difficult to restrict themselves to the assigned sections of the texts while formulating questions. We also found that the discussions based on the sample questions did not provide sufficient support to the students, and they faced difficulties in formulating questions of their own. We decided that in the revised plan, the volunteer teacher would take up an excerpt from the text and brainstorm with the students to demonstrate the formulation of higher order thinking questions before asking the students to work in groups. We also decided to ask the students to not only answer the questions, but also give feedback on the questions formulated by their peers stating whether the framed questions required critical thinking or not. Lastly, bearing all these changes, the time allotted to the lessons was also increased.

The Lesson Study approach, with its emphasis on teachers as researchers who work collaboratively to share the efforts and results of their teaching in their respective communities of practice, helps to overcome the lacunae of fragmented and occasional learning events that is generally characteristic of CPD programmes. The cyclical nature of the Lesson Study approach might seem daunting at first. However, it can be adopted for one lesson at a time, and not necessarily for all the lessons taught during an academic year. The protracted nature of the Lesson Study process is a blessing in disguise, for it provides ample time for the teacher to reflect on his/her action. It is rather like a case of educational reform at a micro level, where the teacher is the researcher and in charge of enhancing her competence through collaboration and reflection.

CONCLUSIONS

"The primary theoretical principle of social constructivism asserts the social nature of knowledge and the belief that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and is a shared rather than an individual experience" (Gergen; Vygotsky as cited in Rock & Wilson, 2005, p. 79). Mentoring and Lesson Study approaches provide avenues to teachers and educators to work in socially collaborative environments, which is vital for successful CPD. Teaching professionals need to be supported in these collaborations, enabling them to build insights and thereby inform their practice. Although organizing effective CPD in schools and teacher education programmes is not an easy process, it is worthwhile to overcome the barriers and facilitate the good practices that it generates.

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