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Special Section: Community and family literacies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Critical analysis of current policies and practices

Community and family literacies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Critical analysis of current policies and practices <i>Jane Furness and Judy Hunter</i>	3
Family literacy and unit standards: Can they work together? <i>Anna Mosley</i>	5
E kore au e ngaro he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea: Literacy policy for the survival of Māori as a people <i>Āneta Hinemihi Rāwiri</i>	17
Everyday literacy practices of a former Syrian refugee: Strengths and struggles <i>Tajinder Kaur</i>	29
Creating spaces for Whānau wellbeing, literacy and numeracy in the context of neoliberalism in Aotearoa, New Zealand <i>Katrina Taupo</i>	41
Editorial <i>Noeline Wright</i>	53
Reflective journal insights from a first-year undergraduate class exercise <i>Edgar Burns</i>	55
The impact of context on Vietnamese EFL teachers' self-efficacy <i>Nga Thi Tuyet Phan</i>	65
Organisational learning and development: A Vanuatu educational perspective <i>Gayleen Tarosa, Frances Edwards and Christopher Branson</i>	77
Investigating the usefulness of Fiji's future school leaders' programme <i>Parmeshwar Prasad Mohan</i>	89
The role of middle leaders in New Zealand secondary schools: Expectations and challenges <i>Martin Bassett</i>	97
Te Whāriki and inclusive education—A survey of early childhood teachers' views <i>Carol Hamilton and Linda Vermeren</i>	109
Parent perspectives of children with autism spectrum disorder transitioning from primary to secondary school in New Zealand <i>Carol Hamilton and Tiffany Wilkinson</i>	121



Connection of a different kind: Teachers teaching mindfulness with children <i>Nicole Jacqueline Albrecht</i>	133
Developing algebraic understanding through talk and writing: A pilot study <i>Terry Locke and Sam Tailby</i>	149
A study on novice and experienced teacher perceptions of professional development in Fiji <i>Parmeshwar Prasad Mohan</i>	167
Transformative insights: A synthesis of threshold concept theory and graduate attributes <i>J. Dawn Marsh and Rosemary J. De Luca</i>	175



A study on novice and experienced teacher perceptions of professional development in Fiji

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Abstract

This research examines novice and experienced teacher perceptions of school-based professional development (PD). Using a qualitative research design, data were gathered by means of document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 10 novice and 10 experienced teachers from two case study schools (one rural and one urban). The major findings to emerge are: first, the PD needs of novice teachers and experienced teachers differ, secondly, all teachers need PD to sustain the changes made to their teaching practice regardless of their difference in experiences; and finally, teachers' PD should be well planned to meet the teachers' needs. Overall, both the novice and experienced teachers' perception is that PD enables them to work on improving their practice to ensure more effective facilitation of students learning and teaching. This study, by providing information on the PD of the novice and experienced teachers in Fiji, could be of interest to schools and the Ministry of Education (MoE).

Keywords

Professional development (PD); Ministry of Education (MoE); novice teacher; experienced teacher; perceptions; effectiveness

Introduction

Knowledge needed in today's educational arena is continuously changing and expanding. Guskey and Sparks (1996) state that "educators have a professional obligation to keep abreast of the knowledge base in order to be optimally effective" (p. 34). To do so, teachers must have opportunities to enhance their teaching skills on a regular basis (Guskey & Huberman, 1995). To bring about on-going improvement in knowledge and skills, it is important for teachers to undergo appropriate PD programmes to match the required standards.

The teaching profession in Fiji is experiencing generational change. As a result, PD and teacher standards are in the spotlight (Lingam, 2012). This study was aimed at comparing the PD needs of novice and experienced teachers in Fiji for the benefit of on-going improvement in their knowledge and skills.



Background

Teacher education is a field of PD with novice teachers at one end and experienced teachers at the other end (Hughes, 1991). Therefore, teacher PD is an integral part of teacher development and as such, it deserves top priority in any country's education system. Barnard (2004) categorized a teacher's career into three phases: student teacher, novice and experienced teacher. Scott (1987) asserts that the latter phase in the teacher's life is the longest and may be dynamic or relatively static. Whatever the category a teacher falls into, the need for teachers for on going PD during the course of their teaching career is vital. New knowledge and skills acquired through PD will create a balanced learning and teaching platform for practicing teachers to enhance their performance towards improving student learning outcomes. The extent to which these PD needs are satisfied plays a significant role in the quality of teacher performance and in turn productivity in the range of duties and extended responsibilities expected of them (Lingam, 2012; Scott, 1987; Sharma, 2012).

The initial training provided by the teacher training institutions is regarded as basic knowledge of teaching. The pre-service training is not enough for smooth transition into the teaching career as all schools differ in contexts, organization and processes of teaching, inter-staff relationship, relationships with wider community and assessment arrangements (Sharma, 2012; Tickle, 1994). Thus, PD programmes could even incorporate teacher induction to help familiarise and adequately prepare new teachers with their work environment. According to Darling-Hammond (2004), PD is a tool that keeps teachers abreast with the school's expectations, latest developments in pedagogical theories and practices.

Teacher induction is an area of PD that is critical to teacher education for the role it plays in initiating novice teachers into the teaching fraternity. Novice teachers should not take for granted that they are fully prepared for learning and teaching for the rest of their career on their graduation day (Hargreaves, 2005). On the contrary, they are just beginning their development as they enter the classrooms as teachers and need significant support to grow professionally (Fielder & Haselkorn, 1999; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000).

The way teachers are socialised at the initial stages of their career determines the pace at which teacher's progress on the continuum of move from novice to expert (Sharma, 2012). In many countries, plunging teachers into the classroom without a proper process of professional induction has been counterproductive (UNESCO, 1998). As a result, induction programmes are mandatory in many countries and they tend to emphasise the building of strong professional relationships among novice and experienced teachers, as well as the development of teaching practice.

Standards-based instruction can assist schools in establishing a culture of teacher reflection and self-assessment which contributes to new teachers' abilities to recognize mastery experiences and find gaps between desired and actual practices (Ross & Bruce, 2006); it can also enable new teachers to become self-directed learners (Weiss & Pasley, 2006). Simegn (2014) asserts that teachers' PD has shown a shift from formal institutional-based practices to individual driven activities where teachers are assumed to be self-learning, evaluating and reflecting. Similarly, Richards and Farrell (2005) say that teacher education has shifted its focus from being institutional and managerial dominated to being individual teacher's self-directed processes. The ultimate goal of educating teachers is not only helping them to master the scientific concepts of learning and teaching but also enabling them to make use of the skills and knowledge they have gained in actual classroom institutions. A self-initiated PD is a process in which a learner assumes primary responsibility for planning, implementation, and evaluating the learning process.

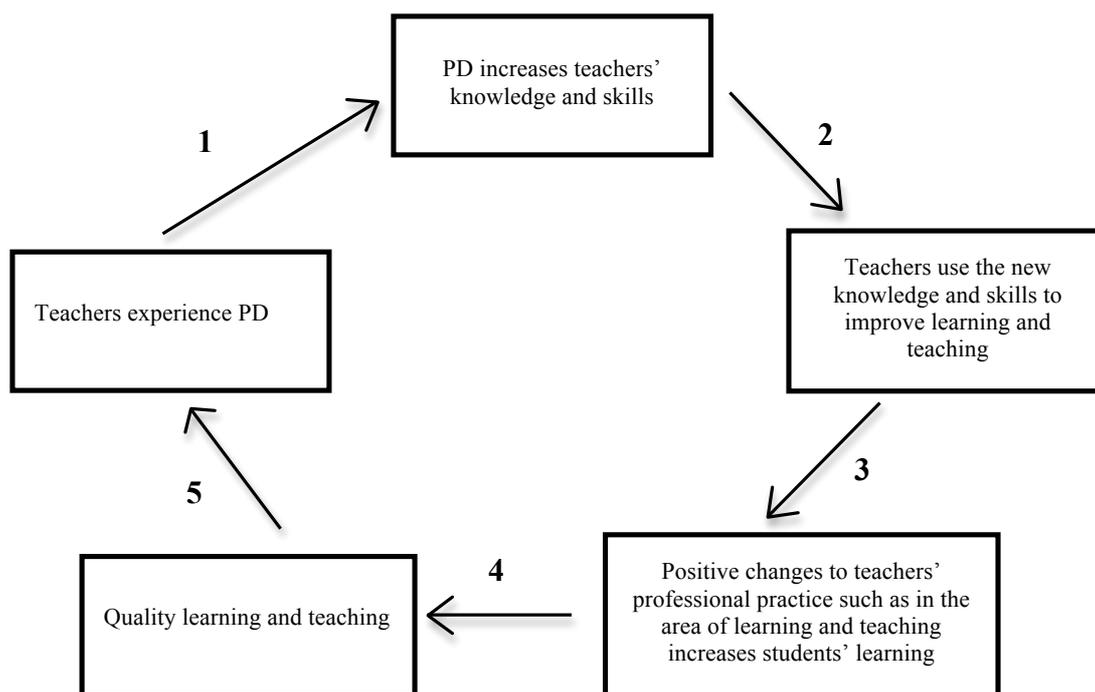
In the PD and teacher education literature, there is a strong concern for teachers' reflectiveness. Schon (1983) discusses how to help teachers develop a stance of looking at their own practice by analysing, adapting, and always challenging their assumptions, in a self-sustaining cycle of reflecting on their own theory and practice, learning from one situation to inform the next. Ferry and Ross-Gordon (1998) found that a reflective stance was not automatically related to years of teaching experienced. Some new teachers had already adopted a reflective stance and demonstrated a cyclical approach to problem solving, whereas some very experienced teachers used a sequential approach to problem solving: when faced with a problem, they summoned their existing knowledge and chose the best-fit solution from what they already knew (Ministry of Education, 2014c). Self-reflection encourages

teachers to become aware of their thoughts (intellectual) and feelings (affectional) that relate to a particular learning experience or areas of practice (Lingam, 2012).

Collaborative PD for teachers is also believed to be more effective than the traditional model as it focuses on collective participation. Collective participation refers to the participation of teachers from the same department or subject or grade in the same PD programme (Aminudin, 2012). She further asserts that collective participation in PD is more likely to afford opportunities for active learning and are more likely to be coherent with the teachers’ other experiences. Moreover, teachers’ PD that involves collective participation, especially for teachers in the same school, is believed to be able to sustain the changes made to their teaching practice. This is because they are more likely to have more opportunity to discuss the concepts, skills and problems that arise during their professional development experiences (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Collective participation in teachers’ PD programmes also engendered collaboration among the teachers. One of the advantages of collaboration is that it increases the capacity for reflection (Hargreaves, 2005; Lingam, 2005) which is argued to be a critical point to teacher’s professional learning experience. Collective participation in PD also gives teachers more opportunities to learn from each other’s practice. Kwakman (2003) says that feedback, new information or ideas do not only spring from individual learning, but, to a large extent, also from dialogue and interaction with other people.

The study is guided by Mohan’s (2015) conceptual framework of teachers’ PD for quality learning and teaching (Figure 1). The framework affirms that PD is a continuous process which enables teachers to increase their knowledge and skills which then is used in the classroom to improve students’ learning and teaching to uphold quality.



Source: Mohan, 2015, p. 22

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for teacher PD

Research methodology

This study collected qualitative data, focusing on the phenomenological aspect of qualitative research in incorporating teachers’ perceptions, both emotional and intellectual, about PD needs of novice and experienced teachers. For the purpose of this study, open-ended semi-structured interview and document analysis were considered appropriate. These interviews were approximately forty-five minutes in length and focused on seven structured open-ended interview questions. The researcher

asked additional questions for clarity and accuracy of the responses. With permission from participants, the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder to maintain accurate findings. The transcribed data were subjected to qualitative analysis through the process of coding, which allowed categories and themes to be derived from the actual data. According to McMillan (2004), triangulation is necessary in qualitative research as it enhances the credibility of the data. Thus, as well as interviews, documents associated with school PD were also examined, which included consulting the Fiji Education management information system (Ministry of Education, 2014a) and the Fiji Education staffing appointment database (Ministry of Education, 2014b).

This study involved the population of teachers from the two case study schools (one rural and one urban) secondary schools employed in Fiji in 2014. The participants included 10 novice and 10 experienced teachers from both case study schools which consisted of male and female. For the purpose of this study teachers with three years and less teaching experienced were classified as novice teachers.

Findings

The interviews from the two schools are analysed in Table 1 under the identified themes. Some typical responses of the participants from novice and the experienced teachers are also included.

Table 1. Identified themes with examples of responses from novice and experienced teachers

Themes	Examples of responses from Novice teachers	Examples of responses from Experienced teachers
Effective PD	For me an effective PD is one that gives me knowledge other than what we learnt in training college (T2N, 2014)	An effective PD is one which gives me new knowledge example something to do with ICT. (T4E, 2014)
Impact of PD on students' learning and teaching	We learn new teaching strategies from the experienced teachers which we then use in our teaching. This improves students' performance. (T8N, 2014)	It has impacted my students' learning because now I am able to use technology to teach. Students enjoy the class. (T6E, 2014)
PD needs	We need PD on topics like: teaching methods, school culture, classroom management, exam paper preparation, preparation of marking scheme etc. (T4N, 2014)	I personally feel that we should have more PD on: new policies, new reforms and use of ICT in teaching to mention a few. (T2E, 2014)
Factors that affect the effectiveness of PD	PDs are affected by: lack of time for PD, when it is about something we already know it becomes boring, when there is no use of technology only the presenter talks and when it is not relevant to us. (T3N, 2014)	Long PDs affect teaching time, when the content is known to us it's waste of time, when PDs are too often and when PDs are not planned. (T5E, 2014)
Challenges of PD	We lack resources; multimedia, showing actual videos, things like this will make it interesting. (T1N, 2014)	When the PD's are in the afternoon, we get late to attend to our children. Another challenge is sometimes we have to travel very far to attend PD specially when ministry organizes it. (T2E, 2014)
Recommendations for improvement	I feel PDs can be improved if the principal asks us what we want assistance on and not whatever they feel like to present on. (T7N, 2014)	We should do our own assessment and request principal to arrange PDs according to our needs. (TE10, 2014)

Table 2. Themes with summary of comments

Theme	Summary of Comments	
	Novice teachers	Experienced teachers
Effective PD	PD that gives new knowledge to make them better teachers	PD that up-skills them with new technology which could be used in teaching
Impact of PD on student learning.	Teachers' increasing knowledge and skills contribute towards better student learning	Builds knowledge and skills to teach students better
PD needs	PDs on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> teaching strategies; Classroom management; school culture; preparation of paper; and preparation of marking scheme. 	PDs on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New policies and reforms; Latest technology usage; and community partnership.
Factors that affect the effectiveness of PD.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content; timing; selection of PD; and resources. 	Content knowledge; after hours PDs; non relevance; too frequent PDs; and no planning.
Challenges for PD provision.	Lack of resources and shortage of time during school hours	Travelling distance and attending PD after hours
Recommendations for improvements.	Teachers to suggest on PD topics	Teachers to do self-assessment and recommend topics to the principal

Discussion

The analysis of the data shows most teachers were searching for something different within their professional careers. Throughout the interviews, novice teachers expressed their desires to become better teachers in the classrooms. The novice teachers commented repeatedly that PD helped them to acquire new knowledge and skills. They also revealed that they learn a lot from the facilitators and experienced teachers through PD, which helps them improve their teaching and classroom management. These findings confirm the assertion made by Sharma (2012) that novice teachers are just beginning their development and they need support to grow. This also is echoed by Hargreaves (2005) who asserts that it should not be taken for granted for beginning teachers that on graduation day they are fully prepared for learning and teaching for the rest of their career.

A notable feature was that novice teachers have often been very positive and excited about reflection on their first few years in the classroom. This is affirmed by Barnard (2004) who states that novice teachers often view the profession of education through rose coloured glasses in the beginning. Barnard further affirms that after becoming experienced in the field, these positive thoughts tend to fade and a more complex reality comes into focus.

The triangulating documents indicated that novice teachers typically were assigned extra duties outside the classroom such as supervising morning and afternoon classes and coaching sports. It was found that the list of demands being placed upon them had been dramatic. However, novice teachers received limited training and orientation about school procedures in the first year of teaching. This contradicts Sharma (2012) who contended that the best way to assist a novice teacher was through a teacher induction programme. Sharma further asserted that PD should begin before the teacher ever sees a classroom. This is supported by Lingam (2012) who states that effective induction programmes help new teachers establish classroom procedures, routines, classroom management plans, and instructional practices.

According to Feiman-Nemser (2003, as cited in Barnard, 2004), novice teachers need at least three years to achieve competence and several more to reach proficiency. These novice teachers need to learn things that cannot be taught in a one-day in-service workshop. Therefore, continuous PD is vital. With this in mind, novice teachers need assistance in learning how to integrate the standards into their teaching. This is echoed by (Hargreaves, 2005) that novice teachers often look to experienced teachers for advice in their new profession. On the other hand, novice teachers need to work collaboratively with experienced teachers and have a positive mindset to learn new ideas and skills to become better classroom teachers.

The analysis of the data illustrates that the experienced teachers are in the stabilisation stage and are more concerned about improving their knowledge in subject areas with incoming technologies and learning new teaching styles. They are interested in learning about new policies and new reforms, and it is also noted that the teachers mentioned that self-reflective and improvement for teachers had helped assess change within them. This is supported by Ministry of Education (2014), which states the teacher who is a reflective practitioner uses that learning to increase professional knowledge and skills to the benefit of not only himself/herself but more importantly, the students. Honest reflection (self-assessment) is the best evidence to prove whether PD has brought about improvement within them. This is also echoed by Lingam (2012) who asserts that reflection encourages teachers to become aware of their thoughts (intellect) and feelings (affect), which relate to a particular learning experienced or area of practice.

Experienced teachers should also learn how to educate new teachers on their teaching techniques. The PD conducted by the experienced teachers must be able to convey their teaching strategies in ways that are understandable to novice teachers. Ongoing opportunities need to be made available to the experienced teachers to discuss effective methods of teaching and develop ways in which to discuss teaching in nonjudgmental ways. Feiman-Nemser (2003, as cited in Barnard, 2004) affirmed that these opportunities not only provide experienced teachers with time to discuss the current situations but also allow them to learn how to discuss educational concerns and become a learning community.

Conclusion

Novice and the experienced teachers both have proposed (Table 1 & 2) that for any PD to be effective it needs to be planned well. To plan a good PD programme for its teachers, the school heads or the MoE should follow the bottom-up approach. The findings also affirm that the teachers should be consulted in PD planning so that they could suggest, in a candid way, the topics of need as they are the best people to reveal their strengths and weakness. This way teachers can feel part of it and hence take ownership.

The study has also found that there is a difference in the needs of novice and experienced teachers for PD. Novice teachers need PDs on topics like teaching strategies, classroom management, school culture, preparation of exam paper and the marking scheme. On the other hand, experienced teachers PD needs are on topics such as new policies and reforms, community partnership and the latest technology usage in students' learning and teaching. Teachers' PD experience allows them to keep up with the changes taking place in the education system and as a result ensures their teaching practice remains relevant to their students' needs (Aminudin, 2012).

The present findings have indicated that whether it is a novice teacher or an experienced teacher, all need PD to bring about maintenance and improvement in their teaching. To embrace quality in our education system in Fiji, planned PD on the basis of the teachers' needs should be embraced.

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