

Professional Development (PD) Strategies for Teachers – A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Education is derived from the Latin word ‘educare’, which means ‘to bring up’ or ‘to raise’. Education is of value in itself (intrinsic value) and is valued for what it can do (instrumental value). ‘Value drives customer satisfaction’ and the value of educational services is directly proportional to the quality of human resources providing the services, the front line managers, namely the teachers. With a lot of resources invested in the professional development, there is a need to etch strategies that work and evaluate, if the inputs are effective and lead to positive impact on student achievement.

Teacher quality (i.e. performance competency) enrichment is a function of improvements in instructional practice focusing on enhancing content knowledge and pedagogical skills. This in turn, is a function of the strategic (planned) Professional Development, which is achieved through systematic in-service training and development programmes for the teachers.

In- service PD for Teachers is not an option for schools today. The key findings suggest, the fact that Teacher in-service PD interventions need to be looked into with a systemic perspective. Present scenario indicates no need assessments are conducted before any training and development programmes are conducted, neither is there any in-depth time bound training evaluation done post any training interventions. The programmes when conducted are more because of the need in the ‘content’ part (syllabus changes) not many which cater to the ‘process’ of knowledge imparting, advocated to move towards a ‘constructivist ‘ approach to education. A lot of time, efforts and resources as spent on training and development activities, but scant attention is paid to the evaluation of the benefits of these training activities.

Key words: Teacher, Professional Development

Professional Development (PD) Strategies for Teachers – A Qualitative Study

India's US\$40b education market is experiencing a surge in investment. According to finance industry sources, more than 350 private equity and venture capital firms in India are all set to invest a massive \$10 billion (Rs. 45, 000 crore) in Indian education this fiscal. - Education World, The Human Development Magazine, Nov 2010. Budgetary allocation for school education increased by 16 per cent from Rs.26, 800 crore in 2009-10 to Rs.31, 036 crore in 2010-11. There is an overwhelming demand for quality education from all segments of Indian society. Gradually, there is a sharp awareness in the minds of the collective public that *quality education* is the magic mantra to redeem generation next of the pains of poverty and Teachers are the backbone of an education system. 'Value drives customer satisfaction' and the value of educational services is directly proportional to the quality of human resources providing the services, the front line managers, namely our teachers. Variations from classroom to classroom, from school to school, in what students learn is due to primarily the variation in what their teachers know and can do.

Literature Review

According to the thesaurus of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database 2004, Professional Development refers to “activities to enhance professional career growth.” Such activities may include individual development, continuing education, and in-service education, as well as curriculum writing, peer collaboration, study groups, and peer coaching or mentoring. Fullan (1991) expands the definition to include ‘the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one's career from pre-service teacher education to retirement’ (p. 326).

Evidence that the quality of what teachers know and can do has the greatest impact on student learning is available from a variety of sources (Ferguson, 1991; Ferguson and Ladd, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2000, Wenglinsky, 2000; Muijs and Reynolds, 2000). Greenwald, Hedges and Laine (1996) examined the impact of a range of investments designed to improve student-learning outcomes. They summarized their research in terms of the relative increase in student

achievement for every \$500 spent on the various strategies like increasing teacher salary, teacher/student ratio. The highest increase in student achievement is seen when resources are spent on teacher education or their professional development.

Hattie's (2003) large-scale study of excellent teachers, involving the review and synthesis of over 500,000 studies clearly indicated the impact of 'expert' teachers and has important implications for Professional Development. Expert teachers do differ from experienced teachers - particularly in the way they represent their classrooms, the degree of challenge that they present to students, and most critically, in the depth of processing that their students attain. Students who are taught by 'expert' teachers exhibit an understanding of the concepts targeted in instruction that is more integrated, more coherent, and at a higher level of abstraction than the understanding achieved by other students.

Need for the Research

Teacher quality (i.e. performance competency) enrichment is a function of improvements in instructional practice focusing on enhancing content knowledge and pedagogical skills. This in turn, is a function of the strategic (planned) Professional Development, which is achieved through systematic in-service training and development programmes for the teachers. With a lot of resources invested in the professional development, it is also necessary to evaluate, if the impact is effective.

This area of research is not explored fully in the Indian school context. The quantum of past researches in this area of knowledge is not substantial; hence generalization could be difficult. Therefore the need was felt to conduct research in this domain.

Methodology

Sample size was 159 teachers were from a mix of ICSE, CBSE and SSC schools from the Mumbai Suburbs. The schools were a mix of private unaided and aided recognized schools. A standing of five years was an essential criterion in selecting schools, to ensure stability in their systems, internal practices and policies. The qualitative responses emerged from discussions, group discussions and open ended questions posed to the teachers.

Discussion of Key Findings

Well-prepared, highly qualified teachers are essential if we are to ensure that all students achieve the high standards necessary for them to lead fulfilling lives and become productive students. Therefore in- service PD for teachers is not an option for schools today. It is a necessity and should be built in the system of the school.

The teachers have expressed the need for a good professional development design which includes both strong content and an effective process for making initial and ongoing decisions. They also agree that, good PD content without strong decision-making and organizational process to support it will be short-lived. Therefore, the suggestion from the teachers of using a cross functional (inter – disciplinary subject) teams to design professional development to help ensure a broad base of leadership for sustaining PD changes. The breadth of participation and level of decision-making authority for PD reflects the overall management structure and approach of each school.

The teachers have strongly felt that needs assessment before the PD programmes is very important. The rationale being, the PD interventions require a lot planning and resources and should have a value attached to it. Need analysis made PD more focused and growth oriented with measurable outcomes. The teachers unanimously valued high-impact professional development activities which were ones that directly and immediately improve teaching and classroom interactions. Therefore it is important that the content, the process and activities relating to PD are carefully planned. Hence, The PD interventions should be preferably job embedded.

The principals and the school leadership acknowledged the gap in the evaluation of PD processes on all the levels. Evaluation of PD combines simple tools to evaluate specific activities, and more extensive analysis of teacher effectiveness and student learning progress. This could probably be due to the lack of systemic thinking in the schools or this itself could be an emergent need from the principals and school leadership for their training and development agenda.

When PD interventions are discussed, the principals and the teachers tend to relate them only to the in-house / external lecture based or expert imparted training. There is a need for a paradigm shift among these practitioners about PD through action research, reflective practices, mentoring, moderation and assessment and internal learning communities. There is a need for evaluation of PD at all levels and during the planning of any PD the evaluation components should be taken care of.

Summarizing the findings, the research has thrown light on the fact that teacher in-service PD interventions need to be looked into with a systemic perspective. Present scenario indicates no need assessments are conducted before any training and development is conducted. They are conducted mostly due to the need in the 'content' part (syllabus changes). There are very few programmes which cater to the 'processes' of knowledge proposed in the schools advocated to move towards a 'constructivist' approach to education.

Recommendations

1. The school leadership, state education departments and the government have to fulfill their respective responsibility in providing teacher in-service related to prescribed learning. This will help teachers remain current and competent in their teaching practices.
2. Schools require strengthening the practice of reflective practices among its teachers. The school leaders (principals) need to stress on the importance of reflecting on practices and integrating observations into emerging theories of teaching and learning. This helps teacher as professionals, become both the producers and consumers of knowledge about educational practices.
3. The teacher assesses the student by posing questions, observing activities, and evaluating work in a planned or impromptu way. The information obtained may be partial or fragmented, but repeating such assessments over time will allow the buildup of a solid and broadly based understanding of student attainment. Such assessment can certainly be formative. Such assessments and moderations, that are internal to the school are more professionally rewarding to the teacher in terms of enhancing teaching and learning and should be institutionalized and operationalized by school leadership.

4. Novice (new) teachers benefit through the system of ‘mentoring’. Mentoring provides an intentional and systematic support system in place as they transition to new roles. Principals need to understand that creating a structure that allows experienced teachers to work with novice teachers ultimately benefits the students of both novices and mentors, and the overall organization will be stronger as a result of the increased capacity of teachers serving as mentors. Mentoring is the least expensive mode of professional development and gives the maximum benefits to both the novice and the experienced teachers.
5. If majority of the PD activities happen during school hours the school leadership would have to find ways and means to maintain the teaching schedules through teacher rotation or if need be through substitute or part – time teachers taking some classes. There is a loss of internal motivation amongst teachers if the workload is not adjusted while participating in PD interventions.
6. The school leaders in education need to pay attention to the aspiration and self identified personal interests of the teachers, when they think of providing professional development avenues. Linking an individual’s career aspirations to organizational goals can be challenging, however it is the foundation for personal and organizational success. Learning from the corporate, more emphasis given to career development paths of a teacher, would ensure better retention rates in this profession and also provide satisfying and meaningful career prospects for our teachers.
7. The Professional Development programmes should be designed in such a way that they would satisfy the following criteria;
 - They should be need based. Focus on the subject matter (Content) ‘what’ and ‘how’ (Process) they will be teaching.
 - Align the teachers learning opportunities with their real work experiences, using actual curriculum, material, and assessment.
 - Provide adequate time for professional development and ensure that the extended opportunities to learn emphasize observing and analyzing students’ understanding of the subject matter.
 - Provide support for implementing the new behavior and practices learned through professional development.

- Ensure that schools have reliable systems for evaluating the impact of professional development on teachers' practices and student learning.

The quality of teaching is by far the most important influence on cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes of schooling. If the agenda is 'quality' in education, the teachers are amongst the first stakeholders that need to be addressed through strategic professional development.

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