

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A GLOBAL ISSUE**

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In most professions, the need for ongoing and proactive professional development is seen as a driving force both for learning and development within the organization. In this sense, organizations invest a significant amount of resources on activities aimed at furthering and deepening the knowledge and skills of the professionals they employ with the conviction that these actions have a positive impact on their day-to-day performance.

In the field of English Language Teaching (henceforth ELT) the status of professional development is not so clear as one would expect. Although embraced as a valid belief by many, the actual implementation of professional development programs has suffered from limitations, which render it ineffective at times.

At a recent gathering of ELT teachers from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Australia, this lack of direction in professional development became apparent. During the "Amazing Young Minds" conference organized by Pearson Longman in the United Kingdom in July 2005, I decided to explore the issue from a more global perspective. Through unstructured interviews and surveys given to the 50 odd participants, the following were identified as problems affecting all the teachers present in terms of their professional development:

### **Lack of adequate preparation for trainers**

Participants complained about the fact that most trainers do not contextualize their content to the situation of the schools they are supposed to advise, and that a one-size-fits-all approach is generally adopted.

### **Lack of systematization of professional development efforts**

Often, professional development events are a one-shot attempt at communicating new ideas. These ideas are generally dictated by current fads or trends in the profession thus failing to adequately respond to the pressing needs teachers experience on a day-to-day basis.

### **Lack of time**

Professional development events are seldom extensive in terms of their duration, and are limited to intensive communication of information for brief periods of time.

### **Lack of money**

Embarking on professional development endeavours requires adequate funding. Given the economic situation of teachers and educational institutions, these funds are not always readily available.

### **Abundance of courses to choose from**

In contrast to the fact that actual investment of time and resources on professional development is limited, the offer of development opportunities is vast, which makes it difficult for teachers to choose the most adequate source.

### **Lack of recognition and incentives**

Having completed their professional development session, teachers do not perceive significant rewards in terms of their professional positioning or in terms of economic improvements.

### **Lack of support and follow up**

Most professional development events do not provide adequate support systems for the teachers who are to implement changes in their teaching. Thus, the transfer of the knowledge gained in the event to the actual classroom is made even more cumbersome.

### **Low motivation on the part of teachers**

Most teachers seem to be weary of embarking on professional development initiatives given their many fallacies. These seem to lead to the generic de-motivation of teachers when deciding whether to participate in professional development programmes or not.

### **Inadequate timing of professional development opportunities**

As a general rule, professional development events are scheduled at times which are convenient, not to the teachers, but to the school. This renders the event inadequate, at best.

These problems are shared by teachers from all five continents and are recognized as the ones conspiring against the efficiency of professional development in their parts of the world.

In stark contrast with this reality, educationalists worldwide emphasize the power of professional development and the impact that such actions can have on student learning. A working definition of the term professional development sees it as “a career-long process in which educators fine-tune their teaching to meet their students’ needs” (Díaz-Maggioli, 2004:5). Taken in this context, it becomes a two way process of intellectual and professional dialogue which brings teachers closer to students. Guskey (2000) sees effective staff development as ongoing, intentional and systematic, highlighting the fact that only through sustained involvement in such actions can teachers effectively update their knowledge base so that it better relates to their learners’ learning.

At an empirical level, teachers frequently request opportunities for professional development but their voices are not always heeded. In general, professional development opportunities for teachers come in the shape of courses, seminars or lectures delivered by experts in a certain area of knowledge. Along the same lines, decisions on what professional development strategy to adopt are generally made by the educational institutions who contract with the experts thus causing a mismatch between the teachers’ perceived needs and the development opportunities on offer.

For professional development efforts to fulfil the promise of enhancing teacher’s careers and affect student learning, we should position teachers as diverse individuals, each with their own unique location in a historical and dialectical process of professional growth. Hence, professional development should start with the teachers and from the point in which they are in their careers.

West (1996) advocates collaborative, job-embedded learning on the grounds that “buy-in and ownership [by teachers] in the process is increased by collaboration and inclusion. This becomes especially important when diversity exists within the workplace, including not only cultural, racial and socioeconomic diversity, but also diversity of thought.”

In this respect, we see that the current state of professional development practices in general is far from this goal. Díaz-Maggioli (2004) sees professional development as a process which tends to vary along an axis moving from traditional to visionary. Traditional professional development is characterized by top-down decision making which is often the consequence of taking a deficit view regarding the issue. This deficit view seems to imply that teachers need to be “fixed,” hence the emphasis on prescription and the one-size-fits-all approach. To add to these deficiencies, delivery options offer little variety and there is little or no follow up. Also, the approach chosen for the delivery of professional development within the field of education, and ELT in particular, is a pedagogic one, positioning teachers as if they were learners, thus disregarding the wealth of knowledge and experience these professional bring to the course.

I would advocate for a kind of professional development, which takes a visionary perspective into consideration. This visionary perspective might be described as comprising:

- Collaborative decision-making. Involving teachers right from the start in assessing their professional development needs and selecting the

best alternative to fulfil those needs leads to ownership of the process and enhances its efficacy.

- A growth-driven approach. In contrast to the deficit view, truly effective professional development sees teachers as developing professionals who engage in these activities not because they need to change the way they do things, but because they constantly finely-tune their expertise to best serve their students' needs.
- Collective construction of programmes. Every school is a cosmos of experience and staff possess a wealth of knowledge, which ranges from novices to experts. Experience has demonstrated that, when these internal resources are tapped, the outcomes of professional development have a much greater impact than when they are not taken into consideration.
- Inquiry-based ideas. When teachers are given the chance to explore their praxis, revisiting the decisions they make and observing the impact of their actions on student learning, there is a greater chance of development than when an outsider comes into the school to prescribe the way things should be done. Teacher's experience can be legitimized through helping them engage into spirals of inquiry around topics of concern within the learning community they belong to.
- Tailor-made techniques. Teachers, pretty much like learners, have specific needs, which can be successfully met by tailoring the content, delivery and scheduling of the development program to these needs. When these needs are taken into consideration, the impact of the professional development strategy is longer lasting.
- Varied and timely delivery methods. While courses, seminars and workshops are the preferred delivery methods, the actual methodologies used during those courses make a deep impact on the teacher's understanding of the ideas communicated through the course. Making sure that courses actively involve participants in elaborating on the contents is a sure-fire step to their success.
- Adequate support systems. Transferring new knowledge into practical applications is no easy task. Hence, when consultation processes and adequate follow up are in place, there is a greater chance that the transfer of knowledge will be positive and result in less frustration for those involved. Establishing a mentoring or peer support system increases the possibilities of adequate transfer of knowledge.
- Context-specific programmes. The one-size-fits-all approach to professional development has proved impractical and ineffective in most cases. Designing professional development opportunities, which target teachers' needs within the context of their day-to-day work, significantly enhances the impact of the program.
- An andragogical perspective. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) describe andragogy as the art of facilitating adult learning. Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning event. If this experience is tapped into and valued, then the results of the learning experience will be greater.

By working close to teachers, and delving into the already existing expertise within the school, professional development initiatives have a better possibility of success. Collaboration, collegiality and collective decision-making are crucial elements of the process of professional development. In short, as Sparks (2002:14) aptly puts it: "Professional development as it is experienced by most teachers and principals is pretty much like it has always been—unfocused, insufficient, and irrelevant...professional development must be significantly different from what it has been in the past if it is to produce high levels of learning for students and staff members. At its core, it will have a professional learning team whose members accept a collective responsibility for the academic achievement of all the students

represented by the teachers in the group and who meet regularly to learn, plan and support one another in the process of continuous improvement.”

**References**

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