

A Review of Challenges for Professional Development of Malaysian Teachers

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Abstract

This paper reviews the strategies and challenges for professional development of Malaysian teachers. In relation to the government's effort to improve teacher professional development, many English as a second language (ESL) teachers register themselves to the 'Teacher's First-Degree Programme' organized by the Ministry of Education. The participants of the programme, somehow, face a number of challenges. The main challenge is the adult ESL teachers need to follow in doing the degree part time as all of them are full time teachers and teaching in different schools located at different districts across the state. The challenges reviewed in this paper may be relevant to administrative decisions concerning education policies and goals intended to prepare TESL professionals. Finally, it may also provide insights into EFL program administrators who are intending to foster greater levels of commitment and permanence of faculty members through a more holistic understanding of their teachers' needs and barriers in involving in professional development.

Keywords: English language teacher, Malaysia, teacher professional development, part-time degree, in-service teacher.

1. Introduction

In 1995, Education Ministry of Malaysia had set up a committee to look into teachers' professionalization, professionalism and professional development for teachers in Malaysia as a means to enhance the teaching profession (Jamil, Mohamed, Razak, & Raju, 2011). Based on the recommendations given by the committee, teachers are highly encouraged to attend in-service courses and further their education. Thus, teacher centers had been entrusted to provide facilities for teachers' professional development to upgrade their

teaching skills. Since the formal establishment of the teacher centers, it can be categorized as educational institutions which meet the continuing education needs of teachers where the needs are identified by administrators at higher levels or by the teachers themselves. They are also addressed through various activities designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom and their management skills (Singh, 1996).

The government has furthered its commitment of achieving a 25% target of teachers in primary school and 100% of secondary school teachers with degree qualification. Since the beginning of 2004 MOE embarked in a program to upgrade the quality of its primary education, with the hope to develop its teachers professionally. Due to that reason, teachers were encouraged to upgrade their teaching qualifications through distant education and in-service training in local or foreign universities, which was under the MOE's continuous professional development program. Despite having achieved an increase to 13,7% for primary school and 87.1% for secondary school by 2008, the government faces the challenges to ensure that all its graduates teachers are quality teachers and are able to face their curriculum delivery challenges efficiently. Further, it faces the challenge to administer frequent monitoring through administer supervision by the government agencies (Jamil et al., 2011).

2.0 Towards achieving the target of qualified graduate teachers (Teachers' First-Degree Program) and its challenges

The government has furthered its commitment of achieving a 25% target of teachers in primary school and 100% of secondary school teachers with degree qualification. Since the beginning of 2004 MOE embarked in a program to upgrade the quality of its primary education, with the hope to develop its teachers professionally. Due to that reason, teachers were encouraged to upgrade their teaching qualifications through distant education and in-service training in local or foreign universities, which was under the MOE's continuous professional development program. Despite having achieved an increase to 13,7% for primary school and 87.1% for secondary school by 2008, the government faces the challenges to ensure that all its graduates teachers are quality teachers and are able to face their curriculum delivery challenges efficiently. Further, it faces the challenge to administer frequent monitoring through administer supervision by the government agencies (Jamil et al., 2011).

In achieving the target of qualified graduate teachers by MOE, there are many obstacles being faced by the teachers. Silva, Calahan, and Lacireno-Paquet (1998) found that four specific factors can serve as barriers to further education for adult learners, namely lack of time, family commitments, location of course as well as cost of classes. They concurred with the idea that these constraints can directly and indirectly impact the time to receive a degree and the ability for a student to persist, which especially true for those adult learners who elect to attend school part-time while they hold full-time employment (Kazis et al., 2007).

2.1. Distance

The first obstacle is distance. The distance of the institutions of higher learning where the program is conducted and for the service teachers to attend classes can be in another district and even in another state compared to where they are residing and working. Thus, it takes days and many hours for them to reach the destination of learning, just to attend their classes for a day or two, where it usually held on weekends. Some of them need to search for an accommodation to stay for the weekend where in many cases are not provided by the institutions of learning. For that reason, they need to provide additional financial assistance for that purpose throughout the duration of their learning process. It would cause an issue of financial constrain for that matter. The flexibility or inflexibility of schedules and difficult access to locations, program duration, and pre-collegiate education make success in higher education difficult (Knowles, 1970; Cross, 1981; Zemke & Zemke, 1995).

2.2. Job commitment and allocation of time

Another major obstacle is that allocation of time for professional development is scarce and limited. Badri et al. (2016) and Rashid, Abdul Rahman, and Yunus. (2017) claim that the most significant barrier to participating in professional development are related to conflict with work schedule. Teachers are often burdened with endless duties and chores besides the main task of teaching. Ming et al. (2010) concur that teachers highlighted the lack of time as a barrier to their using the tools actively, which obviously affected their teacher professional development.

Following the challenges and the ordeal that the teachers have been gone through throughout their learning process, people must be wondering whether it is worth the budget allocation by the government of RM577 million in the Ninth Malaysian Plan (Leng, 2007) to produce a knowledge seeking culture among the Malaysians.

2.3. Financial woes

When someone has decided to further their studies, be it on full time or part time basis, they cannot run away from allocating some of their hard earned cash for that purpose. They might need to dig deep into their pockets. The amount the students will have to spend on, not only on financial need, but also the costs to attend school, student status, and plans to attend school for a full academic year or less" (FAFSA, 2008). There are different costs associated with university such as tuition fees, accommodation and utilities bill among others. The amount of payment that they have to pay depends on the course and the institution that they would have been enrolled. But, that is not the only consideration that they are to look into. Other than the tuition fee, there are a lot of other expenses to be made. Textbooks, transportations and accommodations are among others that they have to spend for the next three or four years of their studies. They might need to take up a financial loan from commercial banks or saving up for the purpose of education.

2.4. Family commitments

Many of the in service teachers who are following the Graduating In-service Primary school English teachers program consist of matured and long service teachers that have been teaching English language for many years in government schools throughout the country, though there is a small percentage of teachers who have been teaching for a few years and had decided to take up the program earlier while they are still young and having not much family commitments. But, for the majority of others, they have already started a family and having children and young babies. With them following the program, had taken up a lot of their time in school and institutions. Family responsibilities were reported as a barrier by 23.8% of teachers on average (Badri et al., 2016). Due to that reason, they need to sacrifice their weekend with their family most of the time on going away to school to be a 'matured student'. Hence, the support from their close family members, be it their spouse and children is very much needed.

3.0 Recent Studies on Primary School English Teachers' Professional Development

There are a number of research being done on teacher professional development, specifically on Primary school English Language teachers. Nonetheless, little research has been done on teacher's challenges in doing their first degree, what more on part time basis. This section reviews three recent studies that focus on the challenges on doing a part time degree: Kabilan and Veratharaju (2013), Jamil, Petras, and Mohamed (2013) and Badri et al. (2016). However, none of these studies analyze the challenges of teachers in pursuing their professional development on part-time basis. Thus, there is a need for more studies to explore on Primary school English teacher's challenges in doing their professional development.

Kabilan and Veratharaju (2013) examined the needs of primary school English teachers in relation to professional development. He reported the professional development (PD) needs of Malaysian English-language teachers teaching in the primary schools using quantitative and qualitative data. The study, which was carried out in 2010 for six months (January to June), concludes that the Malaysian teachers prefer, mainly, PD program that emphasizes their pupils' needs as well as their own professional needs and interests. He had suggested that the Ministry of Education to assist the schools and teachers to take more responsibility to plan, develop, implement and assess teachers' own professional development program. He concurred that professional development is not only an ongoing process that contribute towards personal growth of teachers, but also an integral element in improving the quality of schools. The study done by Kabilan and Veratharaju (2013) mainly focuses on the needs of teachers for professional development. Nonetheless, teachers tend to be facing various kinds of obstacles and challenges to gain their personal growth that is yet to be tapped by any researcher. It would be interesting to go into the integral part of their challenges and explore the kind of obstacles that they have been through before they managed to gain the personal growth in their life and contribute their knowledge to the education fraternity and to the society at large.

Another study on professional development program on primary school teachers have been done by Jamil et al. (2013). The analysis of his research is based on the data collected of an ongoing nation-wide survey of Malaysian teachers, which has been conducted since 2011. The survey is aimed at the investigation of the professional identity of Malaysian Primary and secondary school teachers. The responses were taken from 467 teachers from Malaysian Primary and secondary school teachers, assessed by convenient purposive sampling based on those practicing teachers enrolled in postgraduate studies in Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. Based on the findings of his research, he reported that teacher's professional development program is not only an ongoing process that contributes towards personal growth of teachers, but also an integral element in improving the quality of schools. Hence, educational authorities have invested significantly in the program with the aim of enhancing teachers competencies so that they become professionally competent. His study concludes that the Malaysian teachers prefer mainly professional development programs that emphasis their pupils' needs and interests. Somehow, professional development programs are criticized for not meeting the practical needs of teachers and teachers are blamed for going to their comfort zones despite their participations in professional development programs. This suggests that a suitable program is needed to cater to the teachers' needs. The findings suggest that the graduate teachers developed skills in pedagogy and the utility of those pedagogical skills in their classrooms reshaped their beliefs of teaching, learning and learner.

Badri et al. (2016) report on findings from the TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey) 2013 for Abu Dhabi which gathered teachers' views on teaching and learning with a focus on professional development. The aim of the study is to better understand teachers' perception of professional development needs and impacts as well as the barriers faced by teachers from secondary schools in Abu Dhabi. The sample of schools and teachers were identified randomly. Further, a minimum representative sample of at least 20 teachers from each of 20 schools was randomly selected. The teachers included lower secondary teachers and their school leaders in both public and private schools. Around 2,352 teachers from public schools and 2,553 teachers from private schools participated in the study. The study provides some insights into the variations of those perceptions relative to other independent variables such as teacher's age and gender, and type of schools. Regarding the perceived needs for professional development activities, the most significant variation is observed with regard to public or private schools. As to the impact of activities of professional development, it was reported that male teachers almost consistently assign higher perceived impact scores than female teachers. Public schools have been also assigned as higher perceived impacts scores for all activities that they participated in. However, female teachers were reportedly to be significantly higher perceived barrier scores to five of the seven listed barriers to participating in professional development activities.

4. Conclusion

By exploring the in-service Primary school English teachers' challenges in furthering their studies part-timely might give the people who are involved in the process of planning and implementing teachers' professional development programs of the ideas and consideration in understanding language teachers' selves and needs while pursuing their first degree. It will also be of beneficiary and insights to the in-service teachers who are intended to further their studies on part time basis, on the challenges while following the program. In one way or another, it can prepare the teachers on unforeseen challenges that are to be faced by them if they were to follow the program.

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