The Benefits and Pitfalls of the Use of the Open Discussion as a Delivery Strategy in One CPD Program for Newly Qualified Teachers in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: This paper draws upon recently completed doctoral research that examined the development of a continued professional development (CPD) program for newly qualified teachers in Saudi Arabia. The purpose of this paper is to share some findings concerning the benefits and pitfalls from the use of ‘open discussion’ as one delivery strategy within this program. Five newly qualified teachers, who participated in four CPD sessions, had an opportunity to openly discuss various issues in each session related to their teaching and wider professional work. By adopting a qualitative approach, data were collected by means of observation of the CPD sessions, semi-structured interviews with the teachers, and a teacher reflective diary. Teachers’ responses were largely positive, but at the same time, they raised a few concerns related to the use of time and the importance of remaining on task. Whilst there is much to be learned from the adoption of an open discussion strategy acting as a forum to surface newly qualified teacher’s perspectives, closer attention needs to be paid to session planning, the use of time, and careful session facilitation.

Keywords: CPD, Newly Qualified Teachers, Open Discussion, NQTs Concerns and Perspectives

Introduction & Review of Literature

STUDIES HAVE REVEALED newly qualified teachers can encounter a range of difficulties and challenges including reality shock, feelings of isolation and a lack of professional support (e.g. Bosch & Kersey, 1994; Corum, 2001; Veenman, 1984). The literature also documents uncertainty about their future career and an ability to manage the classroom to be some of the concerns shared by novices (e.g. Conway & Clark, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Fuller 1969; Harrison et al., 2005; McCormack, 1996, Poulou, 2007).

However, early professional development can facilitate new teachers’ transition by providing a range of support and input which can potentially reduce teacher turnover rates (Feiman-Nemser 2001). Such input largely includes focus on the development of more effective classroom management techniques, lesson planning, pupil assessment and the development of alternative teaching approaches.

Guskey (2000) states that professional development comprises the “process and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitude of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students” (p.16). Considerable research on novice teachers has demonstrated the importance of a systematic plan for professional development to help new entrants make the transition from student teacher to newly qualified teacher (Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Holloway, 2004; Lynn, 2002; Serpell, 2000; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wong, Britton, & Ganser, 2005). Eick (2002) revealed that
newly qualified teachers learned from each other through a range of professional development activities which foregrounded cooperation, collaboration and action research. Indeed Dillon et al. (2000) discovered teachers wanted opportunities to not only describe their experience and practice but also interact with other teachers with a view to listening to and exchanging ideas.

During periods of early continued professional development teachers are provided opportunities to actively participate enabling them to construct knowledge with others and at the same time are encouraged to respect others’ views while reconsidering their own ideas about teaching and learning (Cobern, 1995). New teachers have been shown to be more comfortable both sharing their experiences and discussing issues in a safe environment where they feel they are neither judged nor evaluated (Brock and Grady, 1997). The literature therefore suggests novice teachers are more likely to improve professionally when they work in integrated and supportive environments learning with and from other practitioners (Johnson and Kardos, 2002). Engstrom and Danielson (2006) found that teachers believed meetings were more useful when collective action contributed to both their learning and the growth of friendship. For some teachers working in a team and developing a network of information and resource sharing was a preferred model of professional development (Starkey et al., 2009). Mawhinney (2010) documented that teachers benefited from professional conversations with each other leading to a deeper understanding of educational practice and more positive feelings concerning the teaching profession.

This paper investigates newly qualified teachers’ perceptions of one particular element within their CPD in a geographical region where teacher professional development is currently underdeveloped. Specifically, prospects for sustained professional development programs for newly qualified teachers in Saudi Arabia are very limited where there is a general lack of cooperation and exchange of experience between relevant stakeholders. Schools in Saudi Arabia have no autonomy to offer CPD ‘on-site’ therefore CPD tends to come under the jurisdiction of local education authorities (LEA). However, some authors point to the ineffectiveness of the content, structure and management of in-service teacher training programmes in Saudi Arabia (e.g. Alhameed, 2005; Alsonble et al. 2008). Partly in response to the paucity of CPD opportunities for teachers, this paper draws upon doctoral research which examined the development of a 12-week CPD program for newly qualified primary teachers. One of the research questions described teachers’ perceptions of this program in terms of the content, modes of delivery and aspects of organization and structure. The purpose of this paper is to share some findings concerning the benefits and pitfalls of the use of open discussion as one delivery strategy within the CPD program.

Methodology

This paper focuses on seeking the views and responses of participants to one particular element of the CPD program which featured at regular points across the program, the element was known as ‘open discussion’. Adopting a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with the newly qualified teachers, observation of the CPD delivery sessions, and reading the contents of the teachers’ reflective diaries. These data were analysed inductively to identify recurring themes (Merriam, 1998).

For purposes of this research, the CPD program was developed by a “steering group”. Individuals known to the researcher who represented the key education stakeholders in Saudi
Arabia were contacted to determine if they would be willing to volunteer to join this group. The group’s task, following a specific brief from the researcher, was to meet and collectively develop the CPD program, identify the purpose and content of the program, plan appropriate learning activities and attendant modes of delivery. The steering group ultimately consisted of six members (a) a trainer from the teacher training center, (b) a teacher with nine years classroom experience (c) two newly qualified teachers approximately half way through their first year in the profession (d) a university professor, and, (e) a member of the LEA. The researcher attended all meetings of the ‘steering group’ which amounted to a total of some eight hours. The researcher only contributed if there was need for clarification or to reiterate the purpose of the task. Newly qualified teachers who had been allocated to schools within the region known to the researcher were then contacted. Five teachers [Ali, Mike, John, Omar and Rami] from three primary schools in the western region of Saudi Arabia volunteered to participate in the study and complete the CPD program. Specifically, these newly qualified teachers participated in four CPD sessions and had opportunity to openly discuss various issues in each session related to their teaching and professional work. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants and settings.

Findings

Open discussion time was a particular period within each CPD session where the newly qualified teachers discussed issues amongst themselves. The content of the open discussion was not predetermined, although as newcomers to the profession teachers were encouraged to discuss items that were related to the topic of the session. Open discussion time lasted about 45 minutes to an hour in every CPD session. Data revealed participants’ opinions concerning open discussion time were positive for a range of reasons.

Open discussion was regarded by teachers as a setting in which they could talk freely about respective experiences in the classroom. This conversation also appeared to serve as a source of reassurance for the teachers. Ali explained what open discussion had meant to him; “it gave a space to participants just to talk and ask…it’s like checking with them” (Interview). Furthermore, open discussion for others was an; “…opportunity to bring to discussion un-discussed issues” [Interview, John]. Fieldnotes described teachers discussing a number of topics which had not been a part of the CPD program. These topics included the assessment of pupils, school regulation, and arrangements for the classroom observation visit which, in Saudi Arabia, is undertaken by the local education authority Inspector.

According to the newly qualified teachers open discussion was a time for:

“…..healthy debate, agreement and disagreement between participants…it [the discussion] was healthy and good for everybody to see what was good and to share some ideas as we move through the program” (Interview, Omar).

Whilst a culture of sharing was evident within the observations of the open discussions, there were times when teachers did disagree with each other. For example, field notes described one open discussion where John described how he would use more able students to work in paired arrangements with other pupils who were less able. Whereas both Mike and Omar supported John’s suggestion, Ali and Rami expressed some concern about relying on “…students to teach students” (Interview, John).
Though disagreements did sometimes persist, observations also indicated that some open discussion between participants led to a collective agreement. For example, all participants eventually agreed that the current policy within Saudi schools limited their freedom to choose homework assignments and make arrangements to undertake educational visits outside of school.

Open discussion also allowed teachers to express anxieties and concerns. Rami pointed out that he sometimes did not feel supported in his setting. He shared his story about his head teacher who, in his opinion, didn’t support the strategies he was using related to achievement rewards within his teaching. Rami pointed out that he eventually decided to reward his students by himself. Fieldnotes also described teachers concerned about being assessed by the local education authority Inspector. All participants were anxious about whether they would pass or fail their first year and they questioned this visit and observation. As Ali remarked “…we all graduated and got a bachelors degree. Why does the LEA test us again?” (Fieldnote). Data indicated that participants wanted others to perceive them as qualified teachers.

Other topics which featured during open discussion included a perceived lack of resources and suitable equipment within schools. Furthermore teachers felt disposed to discuss a lack of collegiality within their buildings. A common picture painted by teachers was that either lunch or break-time was the only opportunity for them to get together and talk with other teachers in the school. Omar was quite vocal on this issue as he informed the other teachers he was the only newly qualified teacher in his school.

Open discussions revealed participants were not supportive of existing homework policy within schools since they were of the view that this limited their freedom. During one CPD session John shared how the head teacher had advised him not to ask students to complete homework outside of the boundaries of the textbook. John discussed this during an interview; “…my argument was that I believe that it is for the student’s advantage to find out some information by themselves and to teach them, and at the same time that the textbook is not the sole knowledge. However, this did not fit the head teacher policy!!”

The teachers did point to some of the more negatives aspects of open discussion. Whilst teachers recognized that much of the discussion was spontaneous, they also saw the need for a degree of structure and agreement as to which topics would be included. Related to this, teachers also wished for closer attention to the time spent on the respective topics/issues. Indeed, data indicated some topics took up the entire discussion period. Mike shared his observation:

“I think the negativity of discussion can be avoided when teachers are committed to time and give the opportunity to discuss other issues rather than spend all the time in a long debate that might not finish”.

On a few occasions the conversation deviated from the topic of discussion. Omar stated “…one challenge in engaging in discussion others was that some people did not adhere to the subject matter being discussed, which was really annoying”.

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Discussion

Data indicated that these newly qualified teachers in Saudi claimed to experience some isolation which they mostly attributed to the limited opportunities for professional contact with colleagues in their schools (e.g. Bosch & Kersey, 1994; Corum, 2001; Veenman, 1984). These teachers claimed that social interaction was quite limited in the school setting. In contrast, open discussion was identified as a mostly positive and particularly valued feature of the CPD experience where these professionals could talk. As has been observed elsewhere these new entrants also placed high value on the chances to exchange ideas and the opportunities to converse with teachers from other schools (Hustler et al. 2003).

The findings of this study suggested that open discussion also provided these newly qualified teachers with an opportunity to freely discuss and debate issues of relevance to them all in an environment characterized by trust (McIntyre, Hobson, and Mitchell 2009). The teachers both described situations where others did not always agree with their point of view (Cobern, 1995), and situations where initial disagreement eventually led to a more collective endorsement of a particular idea. At a time when the teachers were sharing some less than positive interactions with senior members of their school, open discussion permitted these teachers to seek a degree of reassurance, largely through learning, that others were also experiencing similar challenges and difficulties in their settings. In reference to comments about homework policy, there is a suggestion here that these teachers did indeed “…have the opportunities to discuss, think about, and try out new practices” (Lieberman, 1995; p.503), even if these practices did not entirely fit with the particular policy of a school.

Mawhinney (2010) revealed teachers benefited from professional talk which served to foster the development of professional relationships. Similarly, in this study, open discussion helped these newly qualified teachers to learn from each other and begin to develop a network of support in their professional lives. In their analysis of talk within a teacher’s lounge, Ben-Peretz & Schonmann, (2000) pointed to the knowledge exchange that takes place when teachers meet each other and as they share information and knowledge. In this study, though not a teacher’s lounge, open discussion appeared to offer a further ‘congregational space’ (Mawhinney, 2010) for the newly qualified teachers to exchange thoughts and feelings and experiences in order to reach consensus, disagree on particular issues or vent their collective frustrations, all within a climate of mutual respect.

Accepting the many positive messages concerning open discussion, it would appear that these discussions were left almost entirely to the teachers and that session leaders neither interjected very much nor monitored very closely the division of time to particular topics. The reasons for this are unknown, but in the absence of facilitation, the content of teacher discussion risks ‘downward spiraling’. Though not observed, here negative discussion can lead to a reduction in teachers’ motivation and can potentially lead to more negative views of teaching and schooling (Thomas, 1987).

In conclusion, from the experiences of these Saudi teachers open discussion offers an ideal place to promote interaction among learners, in this case teachers, for two main reasons. Firstly, the process of teacher open discussion may take a form of social learning in a social context. Secondly, teachers are provided with a space to tell their stories and exchange knowledge in a secure environment where teachers not only feel comfortable but appreciate that they are ‘all in this together’.
Teachers in this study have raised some concerns regarding the management and oversight of open discussions. However, data would also point to this strategy potentially featuring within future CPD programs for teachers and specifically teachers in Saudi Arabia. Future research might examine the ways in which open discussion opportunities can contribute not only to teacher professional growth but also their contribution to enhancing learning outcomes for children and young people.
References


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