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SCHOOL-BASED TEACHER LEARNING: A REFLECTIVE APPROACH

Tamas Kiss

National Institute of Education
1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616
Email: tamas.kiss@nie.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

Professional development is an important issue for every teacher. The recent trends in education favour teacher-centred, participant initiated and managed, school-based teacher development programmes, for example action research, lesson study, communities of practice, etc. Although there is no doubt that such initiatives offer ample learning opportunities for practitioners, it is important that higher level school or institutional development strategies be also considered, besides teachers' individual learning agendas. This paper argues that it is possible to merge the needs of both individual practitioners and schools through a reflective, school-based developmental programme which is organised and supported by the school administration for the benefit of all involved. Being conceptual, the paper outlines a model for such a professional development course and discusses the principles it should be based on, its knowledge base, including possible content areas, skills, and learning processes. This paper may initiate professional discussion and further our knowledge of teacher development.

Keywords: *Developmental strategies, individual practitioner, school administration, teacher-centred, teacher professional development*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has brought about an increased amount of research dedicated to examining how languages and language use evolve in response to technological and social changes. In English Language Teaching (ELT), where the subject matter and medium of education is the English language itself, these changes are probably even more rapid and significant than in any other field of language study. ELT professionals need to reconsider what materials they use, what teaching techniques they employ in the lessons, and reinterpret or redesign the syllabi they follow to meet the needs of their learners and socioeconomic demands. With an increased awareness of world Englishes and the role of English as a lingua franca, there is a call for a socially and culturally sensitive language pedagogy which takes into account the different (multi)cultural and educational contexts (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008) in which English is taught as a first, second or foreign language.

The changes that currently take place can be associated with the work of the New London Group (New London Group, 1996) and their concepts of multimodality and multiliteracies. The suggestions on how new literacies need to be addressed are increasingly reflected in revised syllabi of which an example is the English Language Syllabus in Singapore that

introduced two 'new' skills that teachers need to work on with their learners; viewing and representing skills that allow learners to interpret and create multimodal texts (Baker, 2015). As a response to the changes in the curriculum, teachers need to incorporate technology more than ever in their classrooms and learn how hardware (e.g. laptop computers, LCD projectors, tablet PCs, interactive whiteboards, etc.) and software (PC, mobile and/or web-based) can be effectively used with appropriate pedagogy to offer an enhanced learning experience for the 21st century learner (Chun, Smith, & Kern, 2016).

Unfortunately, pre-service teacher education, no matter how carefully designed and executed, cannot possibly keep up with and accommodate all the skills and knowledge required from a competent language teacher. These programmes are generally limited in their scope by three factors: time, content, and educational applicability. First, there is usually a limited amount of time – ranging from a couple of weeks to a few years – available for the course designers which influences how much content knowledge and what skills are to be included in the curriculum. Secondly, a careful selection of pedagogical content knowledge, i.e. subject knowledge and competencies, is needed as the growing knowledge-base of ELT does not make it possible to cover everything a language teacher will need to know. Thus, a decision on what is essential and what is optional for inclusion in the programmes must be made. Usually, the context in which future teachers start their work imposes a priority of needs that help determine what is relevant and essential. This takes us to the final factor, educational applicability. Course planners should examine the possible contexts in which future teachers will work and decide to what extent they would like to build their courses on the needs of any given educational system. The less specific the context, for example in the case of a short CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults), the more generally applicable the content and acquired skills should be. On the other hand, if a course is specifically designed to meet the needs of a given school context, then the strong links between the components and the setting will specify what exactly it is to be taught and learned during the programme.

The above make it necessary that pre-service teacher education is supplemented by further training and development opportunities to cater for the professional needs of teachers already in the field. The current trend in teacher development tends to support actions which are initiated by and rely on the teacher, and which are placed at the heart of practice: the schools (Allwright, 2003; Burns, 1999; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Roberts, 2016). It seems that in-service courses that aim to 'educate' or 'train' – a concept which involves an outside party or external organisation, rather than the teacher herself (Bolitho, 2011), are considered to be intrusive, prescriptive or interventionist. In this paper, I would like to argue that this may not always be the case and that training, education, and development should not be considered as exclusive categories but rather complementary features of any in-service programme. To support this, I will present a model for school-based in-service teacher development which is initiated, owned and controlled by educational decision-makers and not by participating teachers, but which offers ample opportunities for personal reflection and professional development.

I will first offer an explanation of what I mean by teacher development, together with some factors which have an influence on how teacher learning unfolds, before moving on to discuss in detail a reflective model for school-based teacher development, its content areas and learning processes.

2.0 WHAT IS TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

The need for professional development is widely acknowledged and has gone through significant changes over the past decades due to an increased awareness of teacher cognition (Borg, 2003, 2006, 2015) and paradigm shifts towards a sociocultural model of teacher education (Richards, 2008; Johnson, 2006). While in the past teacher learning was primarily seen as the modelling and copying of certain teaching skills and the mastery of selected competences (Wallace, 1991; Ur, 1996), modern approaches aim at a more broadly defined concept of education and learning. There is an apparent move from training to education, from short-term performance goals to long-term development of professional practice, and ultimately to life-long learning. In fact, continuous and ongoing professional development is highlighted in several educational policy documents. One example is the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) 2007-2013 (European Commission, 2006). It emphasizes that teacher learning is a continuous and ongoing process and it points to the need "to stimulate excellence in teaching, research and reflection" (2006, p. 47). Yet, how this is achieved is not explained in detail. Therefore, the implementation of these ideas should be carefully considered, designed, and managed.

Actually, it is a very difficult task to define what professional development means. Richards (2008, p. 173), for example, claims that professional development "is intended to bring about change in teachers but change can mean many different things". Therefore, offering a specific definition which would be applicable in any particular context or which may describe the multitude of activities in which it is manifested would be very optimistic. As a result, I prefer to use a broad description, rather than a definition, as the framework for this paper: "all activities in which teachers collaborate for learning purposes can be considered activities which promote development" (Sonneville, 2007, p. 55). Although it is a general description, it still pinpoints two key points which need to be the foundation of any teacher development course: active involvement and collaboration.

3.0 FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

There are three main factors which may have implications for the success of teacher development: who initiates it, where it takes place, and how it is organised (time, logistics, outcomes, etc.). Those who are responsible for designing, organising and managing teacher development programmes should give proper thought to these three factors; otherwise, their efforts to support the professional growth of teachers may fail.

Teacher development can be initiated by either a) educational management, be it a national governing body, e.g. ministry of education, pedagogical institute, etc., local authorities and/or school management or b) teachers. When the development programme is planned and initiated by the management, it is usually aimed at supporting the implementation of educational change, for example the introduction of a new curriculum (Richards & Farrell, 2005). They often promote a view of professionalism which is approved and supported by the organisers and it is hoped that by the end of the activities, participating teachers will be able to demonstrate specific competences and learn a selected body of knowledge. In other words, the objective is to standardise teachers' thinking and actions towards an acknowledged and favoured view of professional conduct that Leung (2009) calls 'sponsored professionalism'.

In contrast, 'independent professionalism' (Leung, 2009) promotes a more personal view of teacher development and is based on the idea of reflection as a means to development (Farrell, 2015; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983; Wallace, 1991) that underlies reflective practice (Wallace, 1991) and envisages changes coming from inside rather than imposed on from an authoritative body. Most teachers initiated avenues to professional development, let them be individual or collaborative, embrace a view of independent professionalism and originate from a strong personal desire to improve one's practice. Even when teachers work together as a team, their individual and personal learning objectives and reasons for participating in the programme may be quite different. A major difference from the management initiated setup is that the ownership of the programme lies with the participants who have complete control over their own development.

These above two approaches of teacher development can also be referred to as 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' (or grassroot) approaches respectively. These terms point to the ever present hierarchical organisation and structure of education which may have an impact on the success of any programme. The power relations and the ownership of professional development are manifested in many different ways, for example in the choice of the venue. Removing teachers from their own professional contexts usually implies that they are not in charge. Teacher learning in that case is physically removed from where everyday practice takes place and it is thus alienated from the context of its application. This also means that the programme can only be successful if the organisers implement follow-up plans on how what teachers learn will be connected to the everyday realities of school life (Waters & Vilches, 2000).

Another option for the venue is the school itself. There is a growing trend in the teacher development literature that promotes school-based in-service training and professional development (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2015; Glazera & Hannafin, 2006; Imants, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Richards, 2008), mostly because it creates opportunities for communities of enquiry and practice to emerge, feeds into action research projects, and strengthens the links between theory and practice. Organising the programme at the school also helps with logistics, for example with time management. There is no need to plan for extra time for travel between the school and the venue of the development session, teachers can meet for a short session after classes or when the need arises, and meetings can be planned to take place during working hours rather than during the teachers' free time. Feeling 'at home' also has a positive psychological effect that contributes to the success of any programme that is organised at schools.

Besides the above two possibilities, a power neutral venue - free of time constraints is cyberspace; programmes using the internet for online teacher education and professional development courses (Lima, 2015; Roskos et al., 2007; Dede, 2006; Dede et al., 2009; Ernest & Hopkins, 2006) are flourishing and are becoming increasingly popular. These online programmes provide participants with a reasonable control over the pace and scope of their learning and allow collaboration across cultures and borders. Learning can also spontaneously and informally emerge through interaction on social networking sites, as cited by Rashid, Rahman, and Rahman (2016) who investigated teachers' online social support. Yet, the internet as the medium of professional development may not meet every teacher's learning style and resistance against the use of technology could prevent good results.

This takes us to modes of teacher learning. In a top-down, 'traditional' approach one or a combination of any of the following modes would be possible: lecture, lecturette, tutorial,

seminar, workshop, etc. (Wallace, 1991) regardless of where the course is organised. Each of these has their advantages and drawbacks, thus, it is in the facilitator's capacity to decide what format or combination is more suitable to achieve the desired outcomes of the programme. Similarly, when professional development projects are teacher initiated and are school-based, participants need to consider what they are familiar and comfortable with as they can choose from many different forms and means: teacher study groups (Clair, 1998), narrative inquiry (Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Burns, 1999), cooperative development (Edge, 1992), or lesson study (Adamson & Walker, 2011). These can be formal or informal, small or large scale, subject specific or cross-curricular in their nature.

To separate teacher development projects into exclusive categories may not sound very wise. Usually, a healthy combination of ownership, venue and organisation is the best option that facilitates teacher learning; keeping in mind the two cornerstones for teacher development: active participation and collaboration. Also, in any form, such programmes should offer a chance for participants to reflect upon and examine their practice, to assimilate new theories with their existing values and beliefs (Dahlman, 2004) and create a possibility for ongoing professional development.

In the second part of the paper, a mixed-approach model of reflexive school-based teacher development will be introduced. I will discuss how the advantages of a small scale, i.e. school, faculty or department management initiated, i.e. 'top-down', approach combined with a personal and reflexive style of learning, that promotes both the individual's and the school's institutional development. The reason why I believe such an approach should be promoted is my growing concern that teacher development, if organised for and not by teachers, is increasingly viewed as something 'impersonal', not necessarily meaningful or useful; mostly as interventionist and authoritative in nature. However, this is not always true; a healthy balance between different approaches and avenues to teacher development is probably the most effective way towards teacher learning.

4.0 A REFLECTIVE SCHOOL-BASED TEACHER DEVELOPMENT MODEL

4.1 Context for teacher development

Although models are based on generalisations and tend to offer a simplistic view of teaching and learning, I try to put my model into a context to offer the reader a perspective of how it can be used in an actual situation. The idea for creating such a model for professional development which can address the professional learning needs of teaching staff and promote institutional development plans of a school was conceived through discussions with colleagues who were responsible for their institutions' professional development scheme. As I was explained, the major dilemma they face in their everyday work is how to balance the personal professional development needs of their staff with the overall development plan of the school. In most cases, it is the school that provides funding for professional development opportunities, thus, naturally, they would like to send their teachers on courses which are in line with the short and long term institutional plans and goals.

Funding is limited in most cases and the number of staff who can benefit from such opportunities is controlled by the available budget allowing only a few to go on training courses outside the school. However, in an attempt to maximise learning potential, schools usually request those who have attended a course to hold 'echo' seminars where they share

with other colleagues what they have learned. However, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of the 'echo', which is built on the principles of cascade training (Hayes, 2000), and how the newly acquired knowledge / skills are linked to what the school reality would demand (Waters & Vilches, 2000). As a result, it was felt that a new school-based professional development programme would be the most useful approach.

It is essential for such a programme to produce positive, immediate, and tangible outcomes for the school which provides the training. Therefore, a programme that a) offers opportunities for examining current teaching and learning in a reflexive manner, b) provides input in areas that may not be directly addressed in pre-service teacher education courses, c) facilitates critical thinking skills, and d) raises the awareness of participating teachers of their educational beliefs and values would lead to improved classroom practices, collaboration among teachers and, ultimately, improved exam results and better learning opportunities for the students.

4.2 A proposed model for teacher learning

The model which provides the framework for the development sessions is based on the following principles:

a) The teacher learner should be in the centre of learning;
b) It should be built into the everyday work of the school;
c) It must offer a chance to collect evidence of and opportunities for examining student learning with the aim of improving the syllabus and fine-tuning its execution in the school context;
d) The development scheme should be beneficial for individual teachers as well as for the school as an institution;
e) It should provide opportunities for getting acquainted with new developments in education through lectures, readings, and other sources of input together with hands-on activities which generate experience for reflection;
f) Activities which promote reflection should be systematically used to help teachers understand what they need to do to create ample opportunities of learning for their students.

It is suggested that the professional development programme should be initiated by the school management and built into the timetable. With this arrangement, it is made sure that every teacher can and, as it is held during work hours, must attend the sessions.
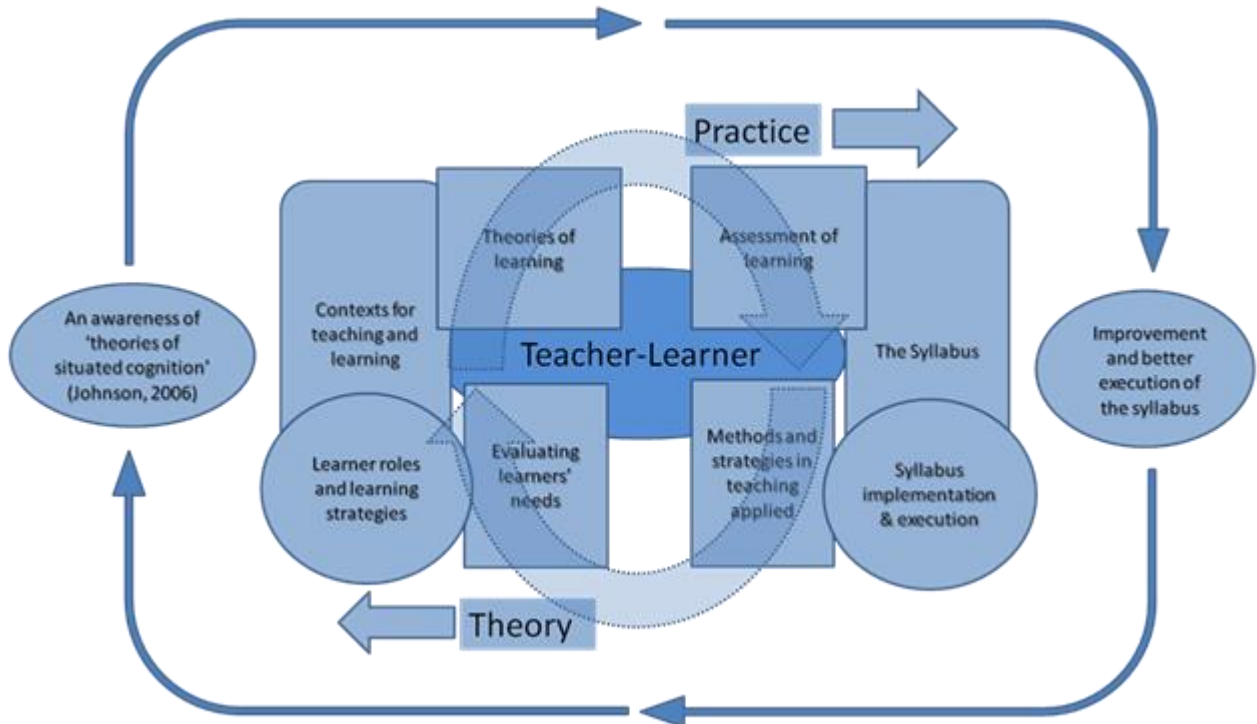
Figure 1: Double-cycle reflective teacher development model

4.3 The knowledge-base of the model: content, skills, and processes

The model aims to bring together two seemingly separate domains of teaching: theory and practice. However, these are linked together and interact with each other all throughout the programme and the learning that takes place in these areas informs and feeds into further development respectively. Thus, while some elements specifically address practical issues, the procedural knowledge of teachers, and others aim to work on theory, i.e. their conceptual understanding of principles connected to teaching and learning, they are not to be seen as separate fields but as complementary parts of a whole. This is in harmony with the knowledge-base that Freeman and Johnson (1998, 2005) suggest and which focuses on a) the teacher-learner, b) the context of schools and schooling, and c) language teaching.

With that in mind, one of the ultimate objectives that the model proposes is that teachers gain an understanding of their own theories of teaching and learning, i.e. an awareness of what guides their personal pedagogical knowledge in a specific educational context which Johnson (2006, p. 237) refers to as "theories of situated cognition". The other main objective is creating an improved, more contextualised syllabus that caters to the specific needs of learners, and is executed with enhanced professional skills. While the first objective is aimed at personal professional development, the latter targets the institutional agenda. In the following, I will examine how these objectives are achieved and what exactly happens at the practice and the theory domains of the model.

4.3.1 Practice

Areas targeted at the practice domain are (1) the syllabus, (2), syllabus implementation and execution, (3) methods and strategies in teaching, and (4) assessment of learning. When working on 'the syllabus', teachers examine the underlying principles of the syllabus they work with. They identify the educational philosophy on which the syllabus is built and discuss how it is linked to their own theories of teaching and learning. They also need to examine the aims, objectives and learning outcomes that the syllabus identifies and consider

how these relate to the overall educational experience their institution aims to provide. Furthermore, coherence and cohesion within the syllabus is discussed. Then the focus shifts to the 'implementation and execution' of the syllabus. Teachers need to assess and critically reflect on whether the aims and objectives of the syllabus were met in the previous academic year, or if there were items they thought they failed to accomplish due to certain intervening factors. They attempt to identify what contributed to the successful achievement of the aims and objectives or pinpoint what factors may have hindered their efforts to succeed. They also need to consider if the aims and objectives set in the syllabus are realistic and manageable in the given socio-economic context the school operates and suggest changes if necessary.

Moving on from the planning stage to the act of classroom teaching, participants in the 'methods and strategies in teaching' area first look at what successful teachers did in the previous academic year. This part of the programme is a showcase of 'best practice' at the school. The presentations, discussions, and hands-on activities are facilitated by fellow participants and thus are closer to teacher-learners than solutions offered by the professional literature or an external trainer. Actually, the involvement of participating teachers in the execution of the programme triggers reflection on two different levels; a) those who are sharing their experiences, techniques and activities are forced to think about what makes these effective in the classroom, and b) those who participate in these sessions are encouraged to reflect upon how what is shared can be incorporated in their own practice. At this stage, teachers can also come up with a consensus on what particular methods or strategies can be successfully applied in their lessons and proceed to design a teaching plan (lesson or unit) that they all can try out in their respective classes.

Of course, what is successful or not is debatable and thus it needs to be supported by evidence. This is addressed in the 'assessment of learning' section where teacher-learners can raise and answer questions like the following: Did our students learn what we were teaching? What evidence have we got to prove it (apart from test scores)? What made them learn? Do our students enjoy learning? How do we know it? This stage is crucial in the professional development programme as it makes teachers aware of what impacts their actions may have on student learning in the classroom and that it is just as important to focus on how students learn as to how teachers teach.

4.3.2 Theory

In the other domain of the programme, the theory part, teacher-learners are given input which feeds into their understanding of learning and teaching, and prepares them for adjusting the syllabus and their teaching techniques for the learners they are working with. In this area, the programme focuses on the following issues: (1) theories of learning, (2) evaluating learner needs, (3) learner roles and learning strategies, and (4) contexts of learning and teaching.

'Theories of learning' offers an insight into different interpretations of how learning, especially language learning, may take place in order to provide an opportunity for teachers to reflect on how their classroom practices support student learning. This is closely linked to 'evaluating learner needs' where they can acquire skills and techniques necessary for needs analysis and understanding their students' learning styles. Moving on, 'learner roles and strategies' examines how traditional teacher dominant practices can be replaced by more student-centred approaches and how the use of technology requires new roles to be assumed by both students and teachers. This content area also addresses learning strategies with special emphasis on metacognitive strategies to prepare students for being autonomous, self-directed learners. Finally, 'contexts of learning and teaching' aims to question the traditional,

classroom-based language instruction, in the complexity of multiliteracies and multimodalities, where it is difficult to classify students as first, second and foreign language users, where learners may be exposed to more language and language acquisition outside the educational context, and where both global and local Englishes contribute to the learning process.

4.4 The structure of the teacher development programme

First, I need to point out that the content areas discussed above are not to be treated as individual sessions or modules. They are not stand-alone, compartmentalised units in the model, but rather indicate the areas of concern on which course designers can build their sessions. In other words, they only mean to identify a possible knowledge-base of a school-based teacher development programme and show how these elements in the practice and theory domains can relate to each other and offer a holistic learning experience for participants. As the cycle in the middle of the model indicates (see figure 1), programme elements can be utilised in each and every session in an informed, creative way as individual contexts may require. The cycle also indicates that there is no prescribed beginning or end of the programme; it may start with any of the areas and stop where the facilitators deem adequate.

Thus, as far as the structure and the logistics are concerned, this teacher development model is very flexible due to its reflexive philosophy and cyclical arrangement. Although the two main domains in the programme, i.e. theory and practice, have specific content elements, these may be covered in any particular order, depending on the needs of the school and the participating teachers, the availability of facilitators, and the time available. Since the content elements in this model only serve to exemplify how such a programme can be arranged, it is also possible that some areas be substituted, or that the number of content areas be changed.

Likewise, time allocated for the programme may vary, both in its length and how the different areas are balanced. Some areas may need more emphasis in certain contexts, while others may be sailed through in a relatively short time. It can be executed in 2 days (12 contact hours), a week (30 contact hours) or through an extended period of one or two months, giving opportunities for participants to collect data, experiment with techniques and reflect on their experiences in a structured, organised manner in the framework of the sessions.

4.5 Discussion of the learning processes

As can be seen in Figure 1, the teacher-learner is in the centre of the learning experience. The model in fact acknowledges that development must come from within and cannot be forced upon the participants (Bolitho, 2011). Thus, it only aims to create opportunities for learning. It is also acknowledged that the level of such learning will essentially be different for each individual participant depending on their commitment and the breadth and depth of their reflective processes (see e.g. Burns, Freeman, & Edwards, 2015; Kiss, 2012). The model which is based on principles of reflection, follows a double-cycle reflective process. At the first level, which is the core of the professional development, different elements from the theory and the practice domains allow participants to consciously examine and reflect on their teaching (or their students' learning) by comparing and contrasting their own individual experiences with those of others and the ones reported in the professional literature and research projects. This leads to a higher level of awareness of their personalised theories and

pedagogical content knowledge that, at the second level of reflection, feeds into an improved understanding and execution of the syllabus.

In fact, the learning processes in this reflective model can be described as immediate and medium/long-term (or continuous). During the organised sessions participants have a chance to take part in guided, collaborative reflection which does not determine exactly how or what they reflect on; it offers a framework that regulates a sometimes abstract, and not always productive process (Davis, 2006). This helps them focus on a particular problem discussed in the sessions and avoids their attention being diverted to minor or less important aspects of teaching and learning - often a case with individual reflection. Therefore, the reflection that takes place in these sessions is immediate and its effects and impact can be seen in certain problem-solving activities or designing action plans for the future.

The other reflection process targets individual reflection and operates on a longer-term basis. It helps participating teachers relate what they learn during the sessions to their own personal educational philosophies and theories that guide their classroom practice. It is an ongoing process in the domain of personal professional development which fine-tunes the participants' understanding of their roles in education, heightens their awareness of their own attitudes towards certain pedagogical practices, and allows them to consider how their values and beliefs contribute to their teaching in the classroom. All this leads to an improved execution of the syllabus (i.e. if I understand why I do certain things in the classroom then I will be in a better position to choose what is appropriate to achieve the educational goals set out in the syllabus).

5.0 CONCLUSION

In this paper I argue that professional development can, and in fact should, be initiated and controlled by an educational authority without compromising the basic principles on which teacher-learning is based. I proposed a school-based teacher development model which keeps long-term institutional development objectives in sight and at the same time allows individual professional growth of participating teachers. This was based on the concept that education is never an individual enterprise; it is a team effort and thus it needs teachers who are capable of working together and learning and supporting each other in becoming better professionals and individuals. It is a further bonus that such a programme is logistically more manageable and beneficial than one-off, off-site training courses which take teachers away from their school contexts and which may not link their content to the educational reality that needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, the double-cycle reflective model is flexible enough to cater for a personalised learning experience for each participant and at the same time offer a platform for collaborative problem solving and team effort. In other words, the model addresses issues that are important for the school as an educational institution, but it also provides opportunities to cater for the individual learning needs of its teachers. This, I believe is the key to a successful partnership and it can enhance teacher commitment and promote continuous (even life-long) professional development.

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