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Exploring Primary School English Language Teachers' Perceptions of INSET in Malaysia: Factors which Promoted and Hindered Professional Development

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Abstract

The national concern to improve the level of education in Malaysia prompted the Ministry of Education to conduct a comprehensive review of the education system and introduce the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) to transform the education system. One of the aims was to upgrade the quality of in-service teacher training for teachers. This has resulted in a reshaping of the type of courses and delivery mode for in-service education for teachers (INSET) into a top-down, national priority driven training model. The research reported here focuses on investigating the professional development needs of Malaysian primary school English language teachers. Teachers' perceptions of their professional development and the factors affecting it has so far been under-researched, at least in a Malaysian context. The research is informed by a qualitative survey approach investigating teachers' perceptions of their CPD through the use of focus groups and individual interviews. This research concerns teachers' perceptions of the INSET they had attended, their future expectations of CPD, their perceptions of CPD in relation to their pupils' needs and their views on whether it had changed their practice in the classroom. This paper focuses on the participants' perceptions of what factors promoted and hindered their professional development and what motivated them to attend programmes for INSET to enhance their skills.

1. Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a small scale qualitative study of a group of Malaysian teachers and their perceptions of their professional development through attending courses of in-service education for teachers (INSET). It focuses on these teachers' views of the factors which had promoted and motivated them in their professional development as well as the factors which had hindered them from progressing in

their continuing professional development (CPD) in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

Pupils' achievement is strongly influenced by their parental background, a range of school factors and society or culture (Desforges, 2003). The teacher has been found to be the most important school factor influencing pupils' achievement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Mincu, 2013). The role of the teacher has come under scrutiny in recent years and the quality of teaching seems to depend upon their professional development. Enhancing teacher quality through CPD is recognised as dynamic and continuous throughout a teacher's career (Schleicher, 2011).

In Malaysia, most CPD for in-service English teachers uses the cascade model, an apparently cost effective means to bring educational change to a large population of teachers with limited resources. Nevertheless, a smooth transfer of knowledge is not always achieved and the cascade model is not a guarantee of the training aims being applied in classrooms (Wedell, 2005). The training model of INSET is the dominant form of CPD used to train and re-train teachers (Kelly & McDiarmid, 2002). Training and educating teachers is a problematic concept as there is a fine line between both but it is difficult to separate the two as they are related.

According to Webster et al (2012), when experienced teachers progress in their careers, their needs change alongside the rapid developments in education which require them to re-orientate themselves. McGill (2013) suggests that teachers need to move from having a 'fixed mindset' to a 'growth mindset', be willing to accept changes and take responsibility for their professional growth.

Wheller and Morris (2010) identified that there is little evidence for the effectiveness of professional development and in-service training in any sector. In contrast, research by Cordingley (2003) highlighted

that collaborative professional development is effective in effecting change in teachers' beliefs and practice, resulting in an improvement in pupils' achievement. Thus, INSET which includes elements of collaborative activities is more likely to motivate teachers' to improve in their practice. This is in line with the point emphasized by Ball (1984) that motivation is central to education.

INSET has also been found to be more effective if it is delivered by experienced trainers and implemented as a whole school approach supported by policies. Lieberman (1995) believes teachers should have opportunities to try out new practices as this would encourage their growth and professional development.

3. Focus of Research

The research participants in this study were a group of English language educators who were teaching in primary schools in Malaysia and who had been given the role of School Improvement Specialist Coaches in the previous year. This paper addresses their perceptions regarding the factors which motivated them to enhance their skills and promote their professional development by attending INSET courses for English language teachers and the factors which hindered their development and growth in their role to teach as teachers of English. Their views will be linked to the previous INSET they had experienced, the intervention INSET programme they were attending and the professional development carried out using the cascade model in Malaysia. In addition, the research also aimed to identify the research participants' future expectations of INSET courses.

4. Research Methods

The broader research within which the present study was located was informed by the qualitative paradigm to determine diversity in a given population. The qualitative survey approach establishes variation in terms of values and dimensions that are meaningful within that population (Jensen, 2010). This research paper focuses on four case studies which examined research participants' perceptions of their previous and current experiences of attending INSET and their future expectations in relation to their roles as English language educators. The data for the case studies were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews with each of the four research participants taking part in two individual interviews. The first interview focused on questions about their previous experiences of attending INSET and the second interview focused on their views about the intervention INSET course and their future expectations of professional development.

4.1 Sampling

The study took place in a Training Centre in Malaysia from May to July 2015. The research participants had come from a variety of locations in Malaysia but attended the INSET course in one central location. This paper focuses on data gathered from four research participants selected from one group of 22 educators who attended an INSET programme, the 'Specialist Certificate in Literacy Development for Lower Primary Students'. The 22 participants were initially selected using convenience sampling as they were pre-selected by the English language officer (ELO) in their State Education Department. During the first meeting with the researcher, consent forms were given to all the course participants and 11 people agreed to take part in the study. The researcher then selected seven participants to take part in focus group interviews based on criteria including gender, teaching experience, type of schools they had taught in as well as types of CPD activities attended in the last two years. The other four participants were selected for the individual interviews using volunteer sampling.

5. Findings

Rita

Rita is a female educator with over 26 years of teaching experience in semi-urban primary schools in Malaysia. She preferred attending short INSET courses of about 3 to 4 days as it was not too demanding on her schedule. One of the factors which promoted her professional development from attending INSET was the opportunity to engage with enriching activities and read scholarly articles. In addition, she also received information from the trainers about upcoming courses and she did not have to pay to attend the course and the travel expenses were reimbursed. Rita found the activity of sharing in small groups helped her to engage with the content of the course before they did group presentations. She found it easier to open up in the small group and discuss any issues and questions. She also emphasized that about 80% of the INSET courses she had attended met her expectations and she was able to share what she gained with other teachers and some of them were willing to embrace some changes in their practice.

On the other hand, Rita stated that there were factors which demotivated her in relation to professional development. Firstly, it was linked to the directive to attend INSET courses selected for educators by the officers at the State Education Department. She found it particularly intensive in 2015 as she had to attend many INSET courses and put various tasks on hold. She also found some of the INSET courses too demanding as she had to do an

action plan and complete an assessment component. In addition, she realized that the same course participants were instructed to attend various INSET courses.

Siti

Siti is a female educator who had been teaching for more than 30 years in rural primary schools. She said that one of the factors which motivated her to attend INSET was being nominated to attend courses held in capital cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang and the fact that all costs were subsidized. She did not mind being instructed to attend INSET which was compulsory as she needed the knowledge and the certificate. She shared that all the INSET she had attended was relevant to the primary school standard curriculum (KSSR) and her pupils needs. Siti stated that she would rank most of the INSET courses with a score of 8 out of 10 as they focused on content and were conducted via workshops.

In contrast, Siti shared the main factor which hindered her professional development was having to attend the same course every year and not having a choice of other INSET courses. She stated that she still needed to attend INSET for English literature as well as Phonics because she required the knowledge to improve her practice. She also mentioned that she did not prefer lectures during INSET and often could not follow what was being delivered through mass lectures.

Lily

Lily is a female educator with about 15 years of teaching experience in urban primary schools. She explained that what motivated her to attend INSET was the opportunity she had previously to attend INSET frequently when she was teaching in a rural area. The courses were taught by native speakers and were relevant to her pupils needs as they focused on the 4 basic skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. She had to do 16 credit hours in order to complete the INSET programme. Lily believed that the learning process was ongoing and she could learn from peers who were facing similar problems in relation to pedagogy and practice. She explained that since moving to an urban setting, she had not been offered to attend any INSET by the State Education Department and neither had she paid to attend INSET courses run by private organizations.

Kumar

Kumar is a male educator who had been teaching for about 30 years in urban primary schools. He explained that the factors which motivated him and promoted his professional development were attending INSET which comprised workshops with hands-on activities which could also be carried out in the classroom. He liked practical activities which could be used after completing INSET courses. In

addition, the teachers in his previous school attended INSET based on a rotation basis and they often had in-house training on Saturdays, with discussion among the English panel members. In addition, he had also paid to attend INSET courses offered by the Penang English Teachers Association (PELTA) as it was not expensive and the courses were run by officers from the British Council. He felt that he fully utilized the content he learnt from INSET courses which he chose to attend.

In contrast, Kumar highlighted that the factor which hindered his professional development was having the English language officers (ELOs) select INSET programmes for educators without considering their interests and needs. This practice did not cater for all course participants for any INSET course and was a waste of time. In addition, some of the content delivered by trainers during INSET was applicable to western countries and foreign contexts and the ideas suggested were not applicable to the local setting in Malaysian schools. He also found the new component of assessment for INSET course participants too demanding as he had to do an online assessment, prepare an action plan and carry it out as well as write a reflection of 3000 words.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the findings from the four case studies presented in this paper, the following themes emerged from the data.

Professional Up-skilling

One of the main aims of INSET initiatives in Malaysia by the Ministry of Education (MoE) is to develop the English language proficiency and teaching skills of English language teachers. The new INSET courses at ELTC include a component of assessment for participants and they need to complete an online assessment, prepare an action plan, implement it and write a reflective essay to be included in a portfolio of tasks for submission.

Rita and Kumar shared similar views that the structure of the INSET courses had changed as previously they only had to participate in INSET with no assessment components and received a certificate of completion. They both found the new model of INSET too demanding for the course participants. In addition, the last year had been very intensive for them as they were assigned to attend many INSET programmes and had to put work related tasks on hold. Nevertheless, the new assessment component of INSET was included as it is vital to aid in developing and enhancing the pedagogic competence of the participants who attend INSET.

On the other hand, Siti shared that the quality of INSET offered was good but she had been attending the same INSET course annually and would like to participate in INSET on Phonics and Literature as it

would cater to her current needs. Similarly, Lily has not been able to attend INSET since moving from a rural school to an urban context. She explained that the provision for INSET is not balanced for educators in rural contexts and cities.

INSET and Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning in INSET provides educators with the opportunity to engage in formal and informal discussions about pedagogy. They usually work together during workshops to plan and design new activities using effective teaching strategies or to modify and adapt them to suit different learners' needs. Thus, collaboration was prioritised during the workshop sessions and there was collective ownership of the task completed in groups. Harris and Jones (2012) emphasized that in the classroom, teachers can evaluate their teaching with purposeful collaboration. It can be effective especially when they use their knowledge, skills and understanding as well as data of students' achievement, thus linking improvements for the student and teacher.

Three case studies in this paper mentioned collaborative learning. Rita gave an example of how she had been able to share knowledge she gained with other teachers in her district and some of them were keen to embrace change. This is in line with the point by William and Leahy (2014) that the process of teacher change needs continuous support after INSET. Lily preferred to travel to the cities for INSET as she could exchange ideas and share views with educators from other states and districts. Kumar attended additional INSET on his own which was offered by the State Education Department for a small fee and run by trainers from the British Council. He found it necessary to plan what time of the year he was free to attend these courses and have the opportunity to meet other participants and learn by discussing about common issues faced in the classroom.

In conclusion, the case studies in this small scale research have identified some factors which had promoted their growth in professional development as well as issues which had hindered them from progressing at the pace they had hoped for to improve their practice. The role of educators and their professional development is closely linked to other areas such as varied teaching contexts and the provisions available for INSET in order for them to value the nature of teaching and have continuous support during and after INSET.

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