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The Components of Effective Professional Development Activities in terms of Teachers' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Teacher preparedness is linked to student achievement, yet regularly teachers are entering the profession unprepared. In-service training, or professional development activities, are increasingly being used to remedy this situation. There is little agreement regarding exactly what key components should be included in an effective professional development activity. This study seeks to provide the meaning of effective professional development activities and to offer a list of key components inherent in any effective professional development offering. Sixteen elementary school teachers (8 male, 8 female), from a large city in Turkey, were interviewed about their experiences with professional development activities offered over a 12-month period. They were asked to generate a list of the key components to be included in an effective professional development activity. Additionally, document analysis of result reports from Ministry of National Education trainings was performed. The findings indicate that any effective professional development activity should consist of the following components: 1) a match to existing teacher needs, 2) a match to existing school needs, 3) teacher involvement in the design/planning of professional development activities, 4) active participation opportunities, 5) long-term engagement, and 6) high-quality instructors. The researcher hopes that the Ministry of National Education will consider these findings and begin providing more effective professional development activities for teachers. With this means of on-going professional development Turkish teachers' growth will be enhanced and students will be better prepared to compete in a 21st century global environment.

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Keywords:
Teacher Perspectives, Effective, Professional Development Activities, Key Components.

Introduction

Educational systems often comprise multiple components: a superintendent, school administrators (principals), teacher organizations, professional development providers, teachers, students, and various other stakeholders (e.g. parents and community members). While each of these members is integral for reaching the overall aims of the system, teachers remain in a prominent position when it comes to accountability for student achievement (Borko, 2004; Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007; Visser, Coenders, Terlouw, & Pieters, 2010). Accordingly, Cheng (1996) found that having high quality teachers is important for the enhancement of quality education. Similarly, Guskey (1994) underscores this position of prominence by noting, "we cannot improve schools without improving the skills and abilities of the teachers within them" (p. 9).

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It is clear in a review of the literature that researchers and educators agree that teacher quality has a considerable impact on student learning and achievement. Numerous studies examining teacher quality focus on the preparation of teachers in pre-service training programs. Results often show that many teachers lack proper preparation for their assigned teaching positions (Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Porter & Brophy, 1988). According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) nearly a quarter of secondary school teachers need extra training because they lack adequate preparation in the subject they teach. Subsequently, students often do not have quality teachers (Hirsh, 2001).

These findings regarding the demand for better-qualified teachers compel policymakers, researchers, and educators to respond to the issue of teacher deficiencies by organizing professional development (PD) programs. As a result, the importance of these PD programs for improving teacher preparedness, in addition to their potential for impacting student achievement, has become accepted worldwide. These PD programs often come in a variety of shapes and sizes, varying greatly in design and focus. Even though researchers offer numerous explanations for how to define an "effective" professional development program, there is little agreement regarding what actually constitutes the key components of such activities (Guskey, 2000; Sparks, 2004; Starkey et al. 2009). Additionally, while the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 in the United States (US) prescribes "high-quality" professional development programs for teachers to increase student achievement, it too fails to provide any guidance related to the requirements of such programs nor does it allow for how they should be implemented (Borko, 2004).

In 1991, Eisner (1991) claimed that teachers' voices were important educational resources. The researcher agrees that the voice of teachers are of upmost importance when deciding on the key components of PD; as they are not only the ones participating first-hand in these activities, but they are also those responsible for translating this knowledge into effective classroom teaching. Therefore, in an effort to more clearly define what makes an "effective" PD program, the researcher in this study has explored teacher perspectives of key components of PD programs.

Review of Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to investigate related articles and books about professional development and determine the components of effective professional development activities. This chapter includes strengths and limitations of existing professional development studies. To that end, the researcher primarily talks about the importance of high quality teachers on education and student achievement. Subsequently, the researcher discusses the imperatives of professional development activities for having high quality teachers. After that, the researcher reviews traditional and nontraditional professional development activities.

The importance of high quality teachers on education and student achievement. The impact of high quality teachers on student learning and achievement has been debated and the benefits accepted over the last several decades by many researchers, educators, policymakers, and teachers' unions. A considerable number of research indicates a positive relationship between teacher quality and student achievement (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009; Ascher & Fruchter, 2001; Borman & Kimball, 2005; Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004; Collinson & Cook, 2000; Hodge & Krumm, 2009; Guskey, 2002; Mahon, 2003; Okoye, Momoh, Aigbomian, &Okecha, 2008; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Pedder, James, & MacBeath, 2005; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rockoff, 2004; Vogt & Rogalla, 2009). Furthermore, recent studies have shown that student achievement relies predominantly on teacher quality (Meister, 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

With student learning and achievement being so greatly impacted by the quality of teaching, effective teacher development is important for any educational system to remain competitive in a global arena. Unfortunately, some researchers have discovered that pre-service teacher training programs often falls short in preparing teachers adequately for the classroom (Hirsh, 2001; Palardy & Rumberger, 2008; Porter & Brophy, 1988). Thus, leaving schools with an urgent need that can only be addressed via professional development programs.

The imperatives of professional development activities for teachers. Teachers' continuing professional development has become one of the most common central concerns in educational studies over the past several decades. As a result, ongoing research conducted in many countries has shown that professional development activities within and beyond the school day affect teachers positively (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Boydak & Dikici, 2001; Carver & Katz, 2004; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Easton, 2008; Jonson, 2002; McCaughtry, Martin, Kulinna, & Cothran, 2006; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Moir & Gless, 2001). Hirsh (2001) has consistently found that the professional development of teachers is the best way to affect their quality of teaching. Similarly, Birman et al. (2000) have shown professional development activities play a key role in teacher preparation and improvement. To that end, Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989) aver, "state legislators and administrators of local school districts saw staff development as a key aspect of school improvement efforts. Many school districts initiated extensive staff development projects to improve student learning" (p. 35). Borko (2004) further supported this position by asserting, "teachers' professional development is essential to efforts to improve our schools" (p. 3). Kwakman (2001) also stressed the relevance of professional development activities for teacher development. Similarly, Starkey et al.(2009) highlighted the imperatives of professional development activities for teachers by saying that "in-service teacher education is also often viewed as an extension of pre-service teacher education in ensuring teachers- whether new or experienced- have up to date snapshots of the knowledge needed to be effective" (p. 186). According to Starkey et al. (2009), professional development programs are necessary not only for new teachers but also for veteran teachers. Similarly, Rogers et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of professional development programs to veteran teachers for self-renewal. Therefore, there is no doubt in the literature regarding the potential of professional development activities to help both novice and experienced teachers in developing their existing skills and in acquiring new ones.

To this end, the US, and numerous other countries worldwide, have made significant investments in their teachers' professional development. For example, the United Kingdom (UK) has recognized the importance of professional development for teachers and provided great resources for this cause (McCaughtry et al., 2006). Additionally, Boyle et al. (2004) have examined the impact of teachers' professional development on student achievement. In conclusion, the on-going professional development of teachers will maintain a vital and critical role in the development of quality of teachers (Rogers et al., 2007).

Traditional and nontraditional professional development activities. There are two main types of professional development activities: traditional and non-traditional. The international literature has compared traditional professional development activities- consisting of short workshops, conferences etc. – to non-traditional professional development activities -consisting of mentoring, coaching, peer observation, and so on. The duration of a professional development program is a key determinant for deciding whether the activity is regarded as traditional or nontraditional (Ozer, 2008). Researchers have criticized traditional professional development activities, because, while shorter in the time commitment they require of participants, they tend to be less effective in reaching their desired goal (Birman et al., 2000; Easton, 2008). Therefore, they offer little or no impact on the skills of teachers (Boyle et al., 2004). Collinson (2000) also noted that traditional professional development programs lack efficiency regarding specific teaching and learning issues. On the other hand, nontraditional professional development activities (mentoring, peer observation, and so on) tend to utilize greater time on task; and as a result, are more effective than their traditional PD counterparts (Birman et al. 2000). Additionally, Hirsh (2001) criticized traditional professional development activities stating, "For years, educators have been confronted with poorly designed staff development. Scarce resources have been wasted because few understood or took time to understand what helps adults acquire the knowledge and skills that help students achieve" (p. 255). Birman et al. (2000) argued that traditional professional development activities do not provide enough time to the teachers; therefore, they do not have much influence on changing teaching practice. Abadiano and Turney (2004) stated that while traditional professional development programs are organized for a short time; they tend to be inefficient and unproductive. Corcoran (1995) also criticized traditional professional development programs and stated, "there is a growing body of opinion among 'experts' that the conventional forms of professional development are virtually a waste of time" (p. 4). Similarly, Kelleher (2003) criticized traditional professional development activities, indicating that they fail to demonstrate an observable effect on education.

The purpose of this study is to identify the components of effective professional development activities from teachers' points of view. Hence, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the meaning of effective professional development activities?
2. What are the components of effective professional development activities?

This paper looks closely at the definition and components of effective professional development activities in terms of teachers' perspectives. The results of this study hold special importance to policymakers, researchers, and educators, as these findings will serve to inform the development of future effective professional development activities, which in turn serve to increase motivation, satisfaction, learning, and eventually teacher quality. Additionally, the findings of this paper will prove informative for the audience of this journal to learn more about serious on-going issues in educational systems globally.

Methodology

Sample

The researcher conducted this study in a large Turkish city. The researcher randomly visited 18 elementary schools and asked teachers to report the number of professional development activities in which they had participated over the past 12 months. From this population, the researcher selected 16 teachers (8 male and 8 female) to interview, all of who had indicated that had participated in at least three professional development activities over the preceeding 12 months.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher has employed a qualitative research approach in this study. Since, qualitative research "refer[s] in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data on people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.7) and "qualitative methods are used in research that is designed to provide an in-depth description of a specific program, practice, or setting" (Mertens, 2009, p. 225). Therefore, the researcher has found this methodological choice to be an appropriate means of addressing the above mentioned research questions.

In an effort to triangulation the findings in this study, the researcher employed the following techniques for data collection: interviews, a brief survey (brainstorming), and document analysis. First, the researcher conducted open-ended interviews with 16 selected teachers. The researcher asked the participants to explain the meaning of effective professional development and to discuss the components of an effective professional development activity based on prior personal experience. Each teacher interview lasted around 60 minutes, and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Second, the researcher asked the 16 selected teachers to brainstorm a list of components key to any effective professional development activity. Finally, the researcher reviewed and performed document analysis on the result reports from the professional development activities that had been offered by the directorate of the educational department from the selected city.

Throughout the data analysis process, the researcher was able to employ "rich, thick descriptions" and "adequate engagement in data collection" strategies (Merriam, 2009) in order to promote the reliability and validity of data analysis process.

Findings and Discussion

First of all, the researcher has wanted to know how teachers define effective professional development activities. After analyzing the collected data, the researcher has found that the teachers define any professional development activity as effective if it is organized based on teachers' needs and provided for a long time. For instance, one of the teachers stated, *"To me, many of us do not have any effective professional development activities in our whole career because they are mostly unrelated to our needs in real classroom situations"* (Participant 1, 2013, personal communication).

The perspective of another teacher is very similar to that of the above teacher. He pointed out that *"I personally believe that unless professional development activities has been organized according to teachers' needs and implemented for a long time, we cannot talk about its efficiency"* (Participant 2, 2013, personal communication). Similarly, another participant stated that *"I unfortunately admit that I could not participate in any effective professional development activities because they are both unrelated to my personal needs and organized for a short time"* (Participant 3, 2013, personal communication).

The findings of this study is consistent with Hirsh (2001), Hodkinson and Hodkinson, (2005), and Torff and Sessions (2008), who found the meaning of effective professional development activities depends on conducting based on teachers' needs and providing for a long time.

The researcher has also asked the participants what are the components of effective professional development activities. After analyzing the collected data, the researcher noted that teachers have participated in traditional professional development activities and have reported not being satisfied with the offered PD activities. The participants have determined that effective professional development activities should consist of the following components: 1) a match to existing teacher needs, 2) a match to existing school needs, 3) teacher involvement in the design/planning of professional development activities, 4) active participation opportunities, 5) long-term engagement, and 6) high-quality instructors.

A Match to Existing Teacher Needs

The participants have emphasized that professional development activities should be offered according to existing needs. For instance, one of the teachers explained, *"My needs are related to real classroom situations. That is why; when professional development activities are conducted based on real life situations, we can talk about effective professional development activities" (*Participant 4, 2013, personal communication*)*. This finding is consistent with the results of Harris et al. (2005), who found that when professional development programs directly meet individual needs of teachers, they are the most effective type of programs.

A Match to Existing School Needs

Some participants reported that professional development activities should be conducted according to the individual school-classroom needs, since needs may vary from school to school according to demands of the student populations. In this case, one of the teachers said, *"In order to have any effective professional development activities, the Ministry of National Education and Directorate of National Education Department should conduct professional development activities according to the reality of each school instead of offering the same professional development activities to all schools" (*Participant 5, 2013, personal communication*)*. This finding is coherent with the results of Sandholtz and Scribner (2006), who emphasized that professional development activities should be related to real school-classroom situations by stating, "Teachers need to see links and benefits between what they are learning and their own classroom" (Sandholtz & Scribner, 2006, p. 112). Starkey et al. (2009) also found that if professional development activities are related to the school setting, these programs become much more effective. In this regard, Meister (2010) and Opfer and Pedder (2011) claimed that the assumptions of teachers in either higher or lower achieving schools might differ. Therefore, professional development activities could be organized differently in each school.

Teacher İnvolvement in the Design/Planning of Professional Development Activities

The majority of teachers (12 out 16) complained that they had no input in the planning of professional development activities; therefore, they often felt disconnected from the subject matter and found the topics unhelpful and irrelevant. They believed that being given a role in the design would improve ownership and relevancy of the activities. For instance, one teacher stated, *"I really do not understand why we are not invited in the process of conducting professional development activities" (*Participant 6, 2013, personal communication*)*. The perspective of another teacher is very similar to that of the above teacher. She emphasized the importance of teacher involvement in the design/planning of professional development activities by saying that *"I wish I could have more opportunities to participate in the process of planning of professional development activities. Because, I personally believe it could motivate me more than any other things in professional development activities"(*Participant 7, 2013, personal communication*)*. This finding is consistent with the results of Sandholtz and Scribner (2006) and Starkey et al. (2009), who found the importance of teacher involvement in the design/planning of

professional development activities and declared that teachers should be included in developing and approving of professional development activities.

Active Participation Opportunities

Another important component of any effective professional development activity is a design that allows the participants to engage in active participation during the activities; they want to learn by doing. Participants mostly complained that they did not have any opportunity for active engagement with the materials because of time limitation. They complained about being forced to sit and listen to instructors drone on and on. According to them, without active participation there is no possibility of learning effective teaching strategies. For example, one teacher pointed out, *"When I participate in any professional development activities, I just sit and listen to instructors like all other participants. To tell the truth, it is really boring and I do not get any benefits in these non-effective professional development activities. To me, it is just waste of time" (*Participant 8, 2013, personal communicatio*n)*. This finding is consistent with the results of Sparks (2002), who pointed out the importance of providing opportunities for active participation. Starkey et al. (2009) also emphasized the importance of providing opportunities for practice and said that if teachers have appropriate time for educational practices, these activities may become much more effective than any traditional professional development activities.

Long-term Engagement

Participants in this study also mentioned that the offered professional development activities are mostly short-term and they tend to lack the depth necessary to have a last impact on teaching skills. For example, one of the participants highlighted the deficiency of short-term professional development activities, *"In order to talk about any effective professional development activities, the Ministry of National Education should provide long-term professional development activities" (*Participant 9, 2013, personal communication*)*. This finding is coherent with the results of Hirsh (2001), and Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005), who argued the inefficiencies of short-term engagement in professional development activities and found that long-term engagement in professional development activities have a deep and lasting influence on teachers' learning. Guskey (1994) also talked about the benefits of long-term professional development activities and pointed out professional development programs must be accepted as a continuing process, not any incident in a short time. Torff and Sessions (2008) stated that prolonged (long-term) professional development activities are more effective than shorter ones.

High-quality Instructors

The participants overtly complained that the instructors, who taught the professional development activities, were not well prepared; limiting the overall effectiveness of these offerings. For instance, one of the participants said, *"As I see the low-quality instructors in the offered professional development activities, I lose my enthusiasm to participate in any more professional development activities for next year" (*Participant 10, 2013, personal communication*)*. The perspective of another participant is very similar to that of the above teacher. He emphasized the importance of high quality instructors by saying that*"In my opinion, unless the Ministry of National Education provides high-quality instructors for offered professional development activities, we cannot receive any effective professional development activities. Because, high-quality instructor is the heart of any effective professional development activities"* (Participant 11, 2013, personal communication). This finding is consistent with the results of U.S. Department of Education (2002), who declared the importance of high-quality instructor for professional development activities.

Conclusion

The researcher believes in the value of teachers' voices in educational research; therefore, he has invited teachers to this study to better understand what the components of any effective professional development activities should be. As the participants reported in this study, any effective professional development activity should consist of the following components: 1) a match to existing teacher needs, 2) a match to

existing school needs, 3) teacher involvement in the design/planning of professional development activities, 4) active participation opportunities, 5) long-term engagement, and 6) high-quality instructors.

The researcher hopes that the Ministry of National Education will consider these findings and begin providing more effective professional development activities for teachers. Without this means of on-going professional development activities Turkish teachers' growth will be stunted and students will fail to be prepared to compete in a 21st century global environment.

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