

School-based Professional Community Learning: An alternative to reinforce quality teachers¹

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Abstract

Teacher professional development is becoming an important issue in the education system of Indonesia as a result of an increase in teachers' perceived importance. Consequently, various number of teacher professional development (PD) programs are designed. Most of the devised PD programs, however, are considered not very supportive, particularly in terms of putting things gained in the PD programs into practices in the classroom. It is therefore necessary to find an alternative program that enables schools to take part in reinforcing teacher PD programs. Among the alternatives is the school-based professional community learning. This type of PD program accentuates the roles of schools in providing possibility for teachers to put training or other PD programs materials into real practices.

Keywords: *teacher professional development, professional community learning*

A. Introduction

It is widely believed that teachers contribute significant effect on the quality of education, or more particularly on the success of an instruction. Quality teachers are supposedly considered a promising factor in achieving learning success. It does therefore make sense that a great deal of effort is allocated to improve the quality of teachers, with the expectation that they can play a better role in promoting successful learning. Teacher quality, however, is still a significant issue in the education system in Indonesia despite the efforts to improve it through various government-initiated professional development programs. There seem to be a fact that there is little

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contribution of the efforts on the changes in teachers towards better practices in the classroom.

An example of programs that in either long or short run is aimed at improving teachers' quality is the teacher certification program, together with the accompanying PLPG program. In general this certification program is an effort to fulfill one of the eight National Education Standards, the *standar pendidik*. This standard governs the idea that there should be similar minimal level of competencies among teachers. This also means that teachers throughout Indonesia should perform according to those minimal standards. The problem is that there are still debates with respect to the effectiveness of such programs in improving the teachers' quality performance. For example, though there are still not many research conducted to investigate the effect of '*being certified teachers*' on their improved professionalism, there is a concern that there is only little effect on ELT teachers' performance.

An important question readily to arise is related to the ability of teachers to bring into practice what they got in the professional development (PD) programs. Others might also question the ability of school to provide atmosphere or support so that teachers can implement them in their practice. These two questions might be important starting points in reinforcing teacher PD program. The next question needed to answer concerns the types of effective teacher professional development in developing quality teachers. Regarding the problems, there should be alternatives of teacher PD that might guaranty the sustainability of the PD program in the daily practices at school. Among the alternatives is the school-based professional community learning (PCL). The basic assumption initiating the increase in the perceived importance of PCL is the increase in the recognition that teachers cannot work individually. Collegiality and collaboration are emphasized to give venue for teachers to learn. This type of PD program, therefore, encourages school to take an important role in establishing, supporting and thus

sustaining the PD program. This paper is aimed at addressing those two issues by providing reasons and arguments based on literature and logical reasoning.

B. In a search for teacher professional development that makes different

Gordon (2004) has proposed three elements to be covered in a successful PD program that can be further divided into seven elements that should be combined to optimize the effect of a professional development. Those elements cover 1) individual educators, 2) educational teams, and 3) the educational organization to improve 4) curriculum, 5) instruction, and 6) student assessment in order to 7) facilitate student growth and development (Gordon, 2004, p. 5). The first three elements belong to the capacity building, and therefore have no direct effect on student learning but increase the ability of individuals, groups, and schools to affect student learning. The next three elements belong to the core element of a PD program and have direct effects on student learning. The last element, to facilitate student growth and development, is the ultimate purpose of a PD program (Gordon, 2004).

In terms of the models of teacher PD, many have often proposed categories like (skill) training, workshops, seminars, action research, and some other models. Recently, however, there seem to be more simple classifications of professional development. Little (1993), for example, uses the term alternative models of professional development to refer to what she assumes to be 'more reformed' models of trainings. Although she seems to be unsupportive of teacher training as a model of professional development, she suggests that the present practices of teacher training have demonstrated greater sophistication.

Although training has been one of the most widely used models of professional development, research has suggested that it is the least favor professional empowerment and has often been discussed with a negative connotation and portrayed

as antithetical to authentic professional development (Gordon, 2004, p. 33). Such negative responses are mainly based on the common practices conducted in training in which there are no adequate opportunities for the participants to implement the newly trained skills with good supervision. This is caused by the lack of consultation participants might have when they try to implement the new skills. This is in line with Little's idea about what an effective training should provide (Little, 1993, p. 132) In the discussion on the professional development that supports education reform, she has recommended that the level of effectiveness of training is related to the ability of the training to provide teachers with opportunities for practice, consultation, and coaching (Little, 1993).

C. Possible effects of teacher professional development on teachers

The most pragmatic expectation people put on teacher PD is that it will eventually contribute to improvement in teacher performance. This pragmatic, expectation however, does not seem to be easy to reach. There have been quite many PD programs initiated by the government with relatively small perceived improvement on teachers' performance. At least there are still many people believe that teachers still perform under their expected performance.

An important effect of teacher PD that to some extent is neglected is its effect on teacher efficacy belief, teacher judgment about their ability in doing their teaching duties (Bandura, 1977a, 1997; Guskey, 1988; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Although there are not many research saying that there is direct relationship between teacher efficacy and teacher performance, many research suggest that efficacy is an important aspect of teachers' profession. Research has suggested that efficacy affects commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992; Evans & Tribble, 1986), persistence and resilience (Ashton & Webb, 1986), the amount of time and efforts dedicated to teaching (Burley, Hall, Villeme, & Brockmeier, 1991; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Glickman & Tamashiro, 1982),

greater enthusiasm for teaching (Alinder, 1994; Guskey, 1984; Hall, Burley, Villeme, & Brockmeier, 1992).

In terms of the effects of training on teachers' sense of efficacy beliefs, a number of research studies have suggested that there is an effect of training as professional development on teachers' sense of efficacy. Ross and Bruce (2007) for example stipulate the possibility of professional development on the level of efficacy beliefs. They theorize that professional development contributes in multiple ways to the four sources of efficacy information (Ross & Bruce, 2007). By attending a training program, there is a possibility for teachers to feel that there is an increase in their level of mastery in the field transferred through the training. The increase of perceived mastery will potentially elevate the level of efficacy. Communicating with colleagues and seeing other teachers' success while in the training can also provide vicarious experience, which in turn will help increase the teachers' sense of efficacy.

Therefore, improvement in teacher efficacy beliefs is an important antecedent of improvement in teachers' performance given teachers are provided support to materialize the improved efficacy into their day-to-day teaching practices. This is why the role of schools is important in teacher PD program. The problem now is what type of teacher PD program has the ability to enable teachers to put into practice.

D. School-based teacher professional community learning

As the term suggests, there are two key aspects in this PD program. First, it should be school-driven, and second it should be in not a 'usual' professional development type. The term teacher professional community learning, or it is famous even more learning community, was originally derived from teacher learning used to match with the more famous teacher professional development. Many argue that what dominant in teacher professional development is that it is not teacher driven, while professional learning on the other hand is teacher-driven. This being teacher driven is very important in that it is

about and for teachers from the very beginning. With this, it is expected that it can elevate the level of teachers' engagement in the program. Another strong point from this is that teachers participating in this type of PD share their vision.

In addition, a professional learning is considered an effective means to build a culture of collaboration among teachers. It is design to create a collective responsibility within a school. It therefore correct to say that in the framework of professional learning the success of instruction is not the responsibility of one individual teacher, but a shared responsibility of all elements in the school. Good professional learning is student-centered.

Lieberman and Mace (2008) propose more comprehensive differences between teacher PD and professional learning are as the followings.

Instead of building a culture of professional learning, teachers are faced with a "culture of compliance." Instead of learning from and with their fellow teachers as well as learning from research, teachers are being given a script that tightly binds them to a narrow curriculum that may or may not fit the needs of the teachers or their particular classrooms. Instead of creating the conditions for teachers to teach each other, support their peers, and deepen their knowledge about their students, teachers are being given a "one size fits all" set of professional development workshops that deny the variability of how teachers teach, and how they and their students learn (Lieberman & Mace, 2008).

Lieberman and Mace further defined teacher learning as the following.

Professional learning ... is rooted in the human need to feel a sense of belonging and of making a contribution to a community where experience and knowledge function as part of community property. Teachers' professional development should be refocused on the building of learning communities. It is this understanding, along with some important shifts toward studying teachers' practice, that have helped focus teachers' professional development on the building of learning communities (Lieberman & Mace, 2008, p. 227)

From those two quotes, it is clear that there are characteristics of teacher learning that are missing in the usual teacher PD. Such characteristics relate the fact that teacher

learning tries to build learning culture among teachers. When learning is a culture, it is supported and reserved. In addition, teacher learning is also collegial; it emphasizes the collaborative nature of learning. When these two aspects are fulfilled, learning becomes a need and is an internally-driven professional development.

There are several forms of school-based teacher professional learning that can be done as efforts to improve teachers' performance. As examples, I quote one proposed by the Department of Education and Training – Victoria, Australia (DET, 2005). Some of them are also proposed by the Minister of education through various programs.

Action Research

Action research is a strategy for learning more about the teaching and learning process. Teachers decide what questions are important to examine in order for them to gain insight into what is happening in their classroom. It involves selecting a focus, collecting, analysing and interpreting data and then taking action. The model is based on the belief that teachers have the ability to formulate valid questions about their own practice and pursue objective answers to these questions. Action research assists teachers to become more reflective practitioners and more systematic problem solvers.

Examination of Student Work

Collaboratively examining students' work enables teachers to understand how students think, permitting them to develop appropriate learning and teaching strategies and materials. Teams first identify a clear focus for their work and what outcomes they expect. The most fruitful discussions result from using examples of student work that are varied in nature and quality, for example, written work from several students in relation to the same assignment that includes students' explanations of their thinking. The team then reflects on the implications of what is learned for teaching. The discussions highlight the ways in which teachers can

enhance their teaching based on what they have learned about student understanding of important concepts.

Study Groups

Study groups engage in regular collaborative interactions around topics identified by the group. This provides opportunities to reflect on classroom practice and analyse student learning data. Groups can also read and discuss educational research publications in a collaborative and supportive environment, over an extended period of time. The study group model can include the entire staff of a school in finding solutions to common problems. Opportunities are then provided for groups to share their findings and recommendations with other staff members.

Case Discussions

Case discussions provide teams of teachers with the opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning by examining narrative stories or videotapes depicting school, classroom, teaching or learning situations or dilemmas. They are usually brief, rough-and-ready evidence of what students have done, said or written in class. Case discussions promote reflective dialogue and enhance teachers' ability to describe, analyse and evaluate their teaching.

Peer observation

One of the most effective ways to learn is by observing others, or being observed and receiving specific feedback from that observation. Analysing and reflecting on this information can be a valuable means of professional growth. The most effective observations are well planned, focused on specific issues and with follow-up to document improvements. Peer observation promotes an open environment where public discussion of teaching is encouraged and supported.

Lesson Study

Lesson study helps teachers to prepare lesson plans and develop a deeper understanding of how students learn specific subject matter. A small group of teachers meets regularly to plan, design, implement, evaluate and refine lessons for a unit of work. One member of the team conducts the lesson while other members of the team observe it. In concert with their observations and reflection, the lesson is modified and may be taught again by another member of the team. The aim of the model is to promote a process whereby teachers experience gradual and incremental professional growth through the collaborative development of lessons.

E. Conclusion

As an alternative PD programs, school-based professional community learning is encourage to be done because of several reasons. First, it is believed to be more sustainable in terms of the real support from the school. This support is possible because such program is designed based on the perceived necessity shared by all elements at school. Secondly, this type of PD enables a ‘shift’ in responsibility from certain elements of school to school as a whole. Success of instruction at school is no longer responsibility of certain elements but school as a whole. Third, thorough planning and execution of this program will lead to initial formation of school culture.

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