

## **Situating and Contextualising Professional Development for Sustained Practice and Learning in School**

Lee Shu Shing and Tan Liang See

### **KEY IMPLICATIONS**

- The feasibility and success of a school-based professional development (PD) model requires unpacking and aligning across system level policies with institutional goals and teachers' personal goals for school improvement.
- PD efforts could focus less on conceptual knowledge but more on practical knowledge to tackle pedagogical problems in order to inform classroom practices.
- School leaders and key personnel need to work in tandem with teachers to establish common understanding and buy-in of how PD topics look like in practice. School Staff Developers (SSDs) play key roles in linking school's intentions, teachers' readiness and involve other parties [NIE researchers and the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST)] in providing PD activities.

### **BACKGROUND**

One advantage of a school-based PD approach is that it is tailored to teachers' needs for school improvement. Few studies examine a customized school-based PD model by focusing on all four elements — the facilitator, programme, teachers as learners, and context. Proponents of PD also postulate higher chances for school-based PD framework to be of higher-quality because PD efforts are more aligned and coordinated. However, empirical data is needed to ascertain the enabling and inhibiting school conditions and context, the ways these conditions shape teachers' enacted practice, and

outcomes of the whole school PD approach. The effectiveness of PD is often measured by teacher change and student achievement. Researchers postulate that one reason that PD programmes fail is the lack of understanding the process of how teacher change occurs. This study attempts to understand the outcomes of the PD cycle involving both teachers and students.

### **FOCUS OF STUDY**

The Ministry of Education (MOE) recognises the importance of teachers' professional development (PD) by introducing the Teacher Growth Model (TGM). In line with TGM, the school in our case study adopts a 5-stage, school-based PD cycle. This study is situated in the third iteration of this PD cycle, focused on differentiated instruction. This study aims to understand the intended conditions for professional growth and teachers' perceptions of these conditions and ways in which PD informs enactment and sustenance of practice, as well as achieved outcomes of PD such as shifts in students' learning and teachers' readiness.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

Findings provide insights about the school-based PD cycle at the school, teacher and student levels.

Findings at the school level show gaps between the teachers' and the school's understandings of intended conditions for PD. Three themes show misalignments and mitigate between designed

PD conditions and teachers' understandings and needs:

1. Confusions between the leadership roles of the steering committee and instructional leaders in the PD process;
2. Opportunities for school leadership to emphasize cohesion between department, school and beyond school levels
3. PD model takes an administrative rather than instructional change stance.

Findings at the teacher level show gaps in the PD cycle. Also, the enactment and sustenance of classroom practice revealed the following themes:

1. The attempt to share and explore unfamiliar pedagogies without professional learning led to misconceptions and confusion;
2. The lack of direct support and affirmation to teachers' work in the classrooms did not entice teacher change;
3. The design and implementation of school-based continuous professional development did not situate teachers in the learning mode and hence little teacher learning took place; teachers were unable to reframe practice and modify their practice. As such, teachers were entrenched in the 'doing' rather than the 'knowing' instead of problematizing their practice.

The shift of teachers' readiness and student learning (21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies) under the implementation of the PD cycle that aimed for sustained practice and learning showed that the appetite for change among teachers declined in Time 2 as compared to Time 1. Among the students, the overall capacity for critical thinking and fluency score in creative thinking increased in Time 2 as compared to Time 1. However, flexibility and uniqueness scores remained unchanged among students.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

### Implications for practice

Findings show that teacher learning is a dynamic process driven by complex classroom problems. School-based PD enables teachers to question

their practice as well as revitalise their personal and institutional growth. PD efforts could focus less on conceptual knowledge and being administrative and more on practical knowledge.

### Implications for policy

While the teacher growth model is a system level PD model, school leaders and key personnel need to work in tandem with teachers to establish common understandings and buy-in of how PD topics look like in practice. SSDs play key roles in linking schools' intentions, teachers' readiness and involve other parties (NIE researchers and AST) in providing PD activities.

### Implications for research

Findings unpacking the feasibility of school-based PD to understand the enablers, inhibitors, and mitigates that school leaders and teachers faced as they made sense of the PD's purposes, goals, and refined the PD cycle. The success of school-based PD efforts requires alignment across policy, institutional, and personal goals for school improvement.

## PARTICIPANTS

This study situates and contextualises PD in Stanley School. The study includes these participants: (1) PD steering committee, (2) teachers across subject areas, and (3) students.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

A concurrent embedded strategy of mixed methods was adopted to collect and analyse qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data sources included focus group discussions, interviews, and lesson observations to elicit the school's context and conditions for PD and the enactment of intended pedagogical practice in the classroom. The outcomes of the PD are triangulated with teacher and student learning outcomes. Teachers' quantitative data involved using a classroom observation coding scheme to understand enactment of practices and Teacher Readiness Rating scale to elicit the shift in teachers' readiness for the intended pedagogical practice. Student outcomes were measured using Watson-Glaser critical thinking appraisal (UK version), Wallach-Kogan creative thinking test, and Pro-SDLRS.

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