

Professional Development in the New School Model in the United Arab Emirates: Expectations and Realities

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore multiple voices from the New Model School with respect to the presented Professional Development (PD) activities. Individual interviews were conducted with seven teachers at the New Model School in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, in which the interviewees described their lived experiences of the PD activities that ADEC implemented to improve their performance. The data were analyzed using thematic coding. The findings of this study prompt recommendations for improvements that may inform the work of policy makers and school principals in their continued efforts to improve schools.

Keywords: New Model School, Professional Development (PD), United Arab Emirates.

Introduction

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC), the organization responsible for establishing education policy in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, declared in 2009 that the performance in Abu Dhabi schools was not satisfactory. Approximately 35% of young people could not attend university and over 95% of students needed remedial preparation programs. Therefore, the decision makers decided to endorse a program of school reform that would improve schools in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi to the extent that they would become internationally competitive. The reform program covers improving school leaders and teachers' capabilities, changing the curriculum to meet developing socioeconomic requirements, improving the assessment system, fine tuning the monitoring/inspection system for public and private schools, enhancing public school facilities, focusing on special needs education, and raising standards in Arabic and Islamic Studies, as well as Civic Education (Abu Dhabi Educational Council, 2012).

In 2009, the concept of the New Model School was introduced to improve the Arabic and English skills of students. Learning outcomes were made more realistic, and schools were provided with instructional materials in the areas of Islamic studies, Arabic and English literacy, mathematics and science. Teachers were better supported through the provision of curriculum guides and continuing professional development. ADEC is now clear about its achievement goals for schools. Unfortunately not all schools know how to achieve these

goals. Teachers are not always prepared to acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to fulfill ADEC standards. Therefore, professional development (PD) activities were offered to teachers by ADEC through Tamkeen program, meaning 'empowerment' in Arabic. The training materials are tied to international standards and best practices. Teachers should complete 36 hours of professional development. The providers of Tamkeen program are from Center for British Teachers for Education, LLC (CfBT), Cognition Education, GEMS Education Solutions of Premier Schools International, LLC (GEMS), Nord Anglia Education, Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT), Vanderbilt University, and the University of Florida.

Cycle One, grades 1-5, teachers engaged in PD activities since 2009. In 2014, ADEC started to include Cycle Two teachers, for grades 6-9, in the PD activities. Research shows that engaging teachers in professional development has an impact on their attitudes and beliefs toward the teaching profession because of the changes they undertake in their practices as a result following PD activities (Guskey, 2002). Thus, this study explores the lived experiences of PD activities that ADEC used to improve teacher performance in New Model Schools in Abu Dhabi. The findings prompt recommendations for improvement that may inform the work of policy makers and principals in their continued efforts to improve schools. Further, promising avenues for further research are suggested.

Literature Review

School improvement and reform literature consistently focus on teacher professional development as a cornerstone for improving education (Guskey, 2002; Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Desimone, 2009). Professional development activities are defined as "those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students" (Guskey, 2000, p.16).

The activities of PD could range from structured activities, such as workshop training, observation/assessment, involvement in a development/improvement process, study groups, inquiry/action research, individually guided activities, and mentoring (Guskey, 2000), to informal discussions in hallways (Desimone, 2009).

Western literature contains a plethora of studies on PD programs and activities. However, little has been written about PD activities in UAE schools except studies by Al Neaimi (2007) and Al Hassani (2012). Al Neaimi (2007) conducted a quantitative study, as a Master's thesis, to examine the attitudes of 78 English teachers in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah regarding the need for PD programs, the usefulness of these programs, and the rewards and challenges that teachers faced in relation to their participation in these programs. The study found that teachers were aware of the importance of in-service training and professional development. However, they believed they were not given the necessary resources to support their participation in these programs, and finally, that there were not enough PD programs.

Further, Al Hassani (2012) examined the perceptions of Al Ain primary English language teachers in relation to PD programs in Public Private Partnership (PPP) schools. The study was conducted through focus group interviews, as well as a survey that was conducted in the Al Ain Educational Zone. The study found that teachers perceived PD programs as unsuccessful because of the lack of consistent content, the disregard for teachers' needs, and the use of unqualified trainers.

Amid the richness of western literature about PD, I focused on the most recent literature that is connected to the purpose of this study. I reviewed literature that remarks the factors that could impact the effectiveness of PD and its forms. For instance, Barnett (2004) used a

quantitative study to investigate the characteristics of effective teacher development practices in high schools in South Dakota, USA. He reported that there was a need for school leaders and teachers to collaborate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of teacher development programs. School principals and teachers have to share the presentation of PD activities. He also stressed the need for summative and formative evaluation of teacher development activities. Teachers should be encouraged and acknowledged for their commitment to improve their pedagogy. Finally, he suggested that PD activities should be short and practical.

On the other hand, Yates (2007) conducted a quantitative study in Australia to examine three hundred and ninety-five primary and secondary teachers' perceptions of PD activities. She found that teachers prefer long courses and activities for effective application. Moreover, effective PD focuses on specific content and open communication among teachers about their teaching practices.

Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman and Suk Yoon (2001) reported that content knowledge, opportunities for active learning, and connections with other learning activities increased the knowledge and skills of teachers and changed their classroom practice. They also found that teacher learning was affected by the mode of the activity – that is, whether it was a workshop or study group, group work at the same school, or conducted within the same grade or subject. The length of the activity was also a factor.

Certain formats of PD activities have been found to be especially effective in changing teacher pedagogy – specifically, those involving active learning approaches which encourage teachers' participation (Campbell, McNamara, and Gilroy, 2004). One example of such an approach might be a learning exercise (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Suk Yoon & Birman, 2002).

Action research also helps teachers to become more systematic and mindful in collecting, analyzing and reflecting on data from their own practices (Brown, 2002). Likewise, collaborative inquiry, which requires the construction of new knowledge about teaching and learning, leads to an improvement in the performance of teachers and students (Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger & Beckingham, 2004). Moreover, the use of teacher study groups improves teacher knowledge, which is then reflected in improvements in student performance, as emphasized by Gersten, Dimino, Jayanthi, Kim and Santoro (2010).

Using one particular format of teacher PD is not the only way to ensure the effectiveness of PD activities. Structuring and planning for learning opportunities and reflecting on teaching strategies and practices are essential (Schwille, 2008). Further, using formative (ongoing) and summative (overall quality) evaluation tools, such as action research, peer evaluation, surveys, focus group interviews and observation, provide feedback and data about the effectiveness of PD activities (Luke & McArdle, 2009). The use of a portfolio builds accountability and helps school leaders in evaluating teacher performance (Tucker, Stronge, Gareis & Beers, 2003). Furthermore, Tuytens and Devos (2014) found that teacher evaluation encourage teachers to engage in professional development activities when they recognize the usefulness of evaluation feedback.

Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon and Rowe (2003) found that multiple factors interacted to change teacher pedagogy as the result of participation in professional development. These include personal factors such as teacher motivation, years of experience in teaching, the place of one's first teaching experience, and level of education. Also important were factors related to PD programs, such as the number of hours attended and the quality of the activities, as perceived by teachers. System factors also had an impact. These included the access of teachers to benefits, the amount of preparation time they had as part of their job, and their access to decision making within PD program. Other factors include whether the school

allocated expenses to PD programs, whether there was sufficient release time, the degree of collegiality, the number of working hours, and the freedom to change the curriculum.

Personal factors may have more influence on PD than the actual activities or the work environment, as Kwakman (2003) has suggested. This researcher found that the beliefs of teachers, their preferences for certain activities, emotional fatigue and their sense of personal accomplishment stood out as particular influences on their perceptions of the effectiveness of professional development activities. Kwakman found that teachers prefer activities that are linked to their daily activities. Most teachers did not prefer discussion about feedback from a classroom observation or about their collaborative work. They would rather engage in professional reading and then share their ideas. Teachers only engage in PD activities if they believe they are meaningful.

Likewise, Telese (2012) found that a teacher's mathematics content knowledge was a better predictor of student achievement than his or her knowledge of mathematics-related pedagogy. Surprisingly, he found that the students of teachers who participated less in PD activities scored higher than students whose teachers participated in more professional development.

Another study conducted in Hong Kong by Wan (2011) added more factors that can influence the participation of teachers in PD. These factors might include the school's culture, its leadership, teachers' commitment and motivation in teaching, the cost of the PD activities, the time chosen, the quality of the courses, the activities provided, the location of the PD activities, the workload, family support, collegial support and government support.

It is also worth noting that after reviewing the literature, Opfer and Pedder (2011) identified three overlapping systems that interact with each other to make an impact on teachers' professional learning. The first system is the individual teacher. This comprises a teacher's prior experiences and his/her learning beliefs, and how all of these factors combine to influence classroom practices. The second system is the school-level system, which refers to the contexts of the school that support teaching and learning, the common learning beliefs, the shared learning goals and norms, the shared learning activities and the practices that a teacher participates in. The third system is the learning activity system and a teacher's learning beliefs and perceptions, and how these interact with his or her beliefs, perceptions and practices. These systems interact with each other differently, depending on the context, the individual teachers and the nature of the activities performed.

The prior literature review documented the effectiveness of PD programs depends on six main factors: personal variables, the school system variable, the content of the activities, mode of the activity, duration of the PD, and the location of the PD activities. The personal variables include: teacher motivation and commitment, years of experience in teaching, one's teaching experience, level of education, teacher beliefs, their preferences for certain activities, emotional fatigue, their sense of personal accomplishment, teachers' subject knowledge, and family support.

The school system variables include: supported resources, disregarded teacher needs, shared planning, unqualified trainers, school leadership support, informative and summative evaluation, teacher recognition, sufficient release time, supported colleagues, the workload, teacher access to decision making within a PD program, shared learning goals and norms, shared learning activities and practices, and unqualified trainers. Factors related to the content of PD activities include: practical/theoretical content and if it focuses on subject matter or on the pedagogy. Mode of the activity variables include: how an active learning experience is created by different methods such as study group, or action research. These six main factors could shape the lived experiences of PD activities that ADEC implemented to develop and improve teacher performance in New Model Schools in the United Arab Emirates, and particularly in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

The Methodology

A phenomenology design is employed in this study to describe the meaning the participants gave of their lived experience of a phenomenon which is their engagement in professional development activities (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological studies help educational researchers obtain rich details and information from participants and allow them to understand how the individuals lived the experience and how they experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Participants

Creswell (2013) suggests that the number of participants in a phenomenological study design can range from one to 10, depending on whether new information is being obtained from additional participants. When new information is no longer being received from additional participants, a point of data saturation is reached. Thus, seven teachers from Cycle One and Cycle Two schools in Al Ain were selected purposefully for a structured individual interview. Since only female teachers teach Cycle One, three female teachers from Cycle One schools participated. Four teachers from Cycle Two participated: two males and two females. The criteria for selecting participants were that they were known for their regular attendance of designated PD activities in the New Model Schools, that they represented Cycle One and Cycle Two schools, and that they taught in different schools in Al Ain.

The participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. Common names in the city were used. Female teachers were named Shaikah, Aisha, Fatmah, Salama and Hend, while the male teachers were given Rashed and Salem as names.

Shaikah graduated from a college of education. She has been teaching for 11 years, and taught Arabic language for 8 years to grades 1-3. She then taught Islamic Studies to students in grades 4 and 5. She started the PD one year after her appointment in 2004. She undertook six months of PD during the school day, led by university professors from different schools, on diverse educational topics, specifically educational strategies.

Aisha graduated from a college of education. She has been teaching for 14 years. Aisha taught all subjects (Arabic, Islamic, mathematics, and the science) for two years, to grades 4 and 5. Then she started teaching Arabic. She started her training immediately after being appointed. She attended training for two months, from 5 pm to 9 pm in a different school. The activities were presented by a subject supervisor and university professors from different schools, and covered diverse educational topics, specifically educational strategies.

Fatmah graduated from a college of education, specializing in social studies. She was a classroom teacher for two years. She taught math, science, Arabic and Islamic studies to third grade 3 students. She was given training when she was hired for one year, and attended PD activities from 5 pm to 9 pm for six months in the evening. She taught math and science for five years. In the sixth year, she was under the supervision of a partnership company that was in charge of helping schools to improve their performance.

Salama graduated from a humanities college, in Arabic Language. She received an educational diploma in 2001 from a college of education. Immediately, she was hired to teach Arabic in a Cycle Two school. At the beginning of her appointment, she attended professional workshops presented on the subject matter by the subject supervisor. These workshops were held during the school day, between 9 am and 1 pm.

Hend graduated from a college of education as a math teacher in 2004. She is teaching in a Cycle Two school. Hend received her training from Singaporean trainers when she was appointed for one year. The training was held during the school day, for a six-month period.

Rashed graduated from a humanities college with a degree in history. He started teaching in 2006. Rashed gained experience of teaching from his colleagues and by visiting classrooms. He received general training in educational topics from his school.

Salem was appointed as an Islamic teacher in 2004 after his graduation from a college of education. He gained his experience in teaching from classroom visits and attending school workshops in his role as a school librarian.

Instrument

The interview questions were in-depth, semi-structured questions. The questions drew upon the literature review, starting by level of teacher's education, years of experience in teaching, subject knowledge, and the place of teaching and marital status. The teachers were asked about the provided PD format and addressed the differences between the old PD activities and the current ones; the total number of PD hours, the type of PD activity, the topics, the impact of the current PD activities on performance in the classroom, their preferences for certain activities, available resources, the connection between their needs and the content of PD, qualification of trainers, the type of school leadership support, how they are evaluated, and their colleagues' reactions to the PD.

Procedures

The participants were selected by a full-time teacher in a Master's students program in the college of education where I teach. The researcher contacted the participants to secure their approval for their involvement in the study, and the participants were informed about the purpose of the study. They were assured that their identities and their schools would not be revealed. Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted after selecting a convenient time and place for the participants. All of the participants were interviewed in the school settings, except for one teacher who volunteered to visit the researcher in her office. On average, the individual interviews lasted from one to one-and-a-half hours. The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed into English by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through a thematic analysis. I extracted emerging themes after carefully reading all of the transcripts, highlighting quotes and sentences that illustrated how the participants experienced the PD. Then I coded the significant statements and clustered these statements under themes (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness of the Finding

The validity of qualitative study is defined as trustworthiness and is assessed by a consistency check (Suter, 2006). The researcher used various strategies based on Creswell's (2013) recommendation to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and the interpretation. For example, the participants' reviewed the themes to ensure their accuracy to discuss discrepant information. Then, a peer review from an expert faculty looked through the themes that had been identified, and examined the connection to the quotations used to support them, pointing out some quotations that needed to be explained. Finally, an external auditor reviewed the entire study and raised some questions about the methodology and discussion sections, which addressed by the researcher.

Limitations

This study was conducted with the purpose of fully understanding the teachers' experiences with PD in the New Model Schools in the United Arab Emirates. One of the qualitative design's limitations was that the findings could not be generalized. Teachers' responses could be affected by their own different individual experiences. Further, the interview could have occurred at a time when some of the participants were loaded with PD activities, a situation that could affect their responses.

The Results

The current study aimed to answer the following question: What are teachers lived experiences of the PD activities that ADEC uses to improve their performance in the New Model Schools in Abu Dhabi? The themes that emerged from the interview data reflected how teachers viewed and responded to the PD activities offered by ADEC. Such themes included: PD content addressed teachers' needs; variety of formats of PD is offered; insider trainer is preferable; external motivation is essential; informative evaluation as a new requirement; unsupportive colleagues; obvious improvement of student achievement; clear involvement of school leadership; tiring activities; and the discrepancy about the time required for PD. Below is an analysis of each individual theme.

PD content addressed teachers' needs: ADEC selects topics that all teachers should be knowledgeable and skillful at based on data from the schools. Aisha felt that she had gained a lot from these workshops topics, stating, "ADEC started to plan for PD based on what we need for each year by sending a survey for schools to ask them for a list of topics for training. Now, the workshops are more related to our needs. The workshop topics are divided on the school year." Salama reported, "The workshops topics are different from before. This year, for example, we were asked to select one of two main topics to be trained on, based on our needs: evaluation for learning and students' individual differences."

On the other hand, Salem mentioned that before ADEC took over the education sector, his school had already been conducting workshops that met its own needs, "We used to plan for our workshops in the school, and they were presented by the university professors. Now ADEC is involved and started to take professional activities seriously after 2010 and try to meet our needs." Finally, Rashed stated, "Now the trainers give us topics that come from our needs."

Variety of formats of PD is offered: The participants reported different formats for the presented professional activities, ranging from theoretical presentations, sessions that were taught by hands-on methods, and classroom observations. Hend remarked "Most of the current formats of PD activities are practical workshops. For example, we plan for our lessons collectively, with each other, in the session. The old fashioned way of giving the PD activities was lecturing, but now we have practical workshops." This is what Shaikah asserted, too. "The training was in lecture format, where teachers sit and listen to the professors from the university or subject supervisor." Rashed agreed with Shaikah. He said, "Before ADEC, the workshop topics were general, and they were not related to how to implement the subject or how to implement the nice presented ideas."

Another format for PD is classroom observation. Teachers in the New Model Schools are required to visit each other and to collect practical evidence that supports their learning and also builds their teaching portfolios. Aisha said, "It is required for us to visit each other's classrooms to see if we are implementing the given ideas in the workshops. I videotaped many lessons as evidence for practicing what I learned." Fatmah added that some trainers use a discussion to offer the topic: "Some workshops depend on discussion and dialogue."

On the other hand, Salem reported that still some workshops are general, and do not offer teachers in depth knowledge in the subject matter they are teaching. He remarked, "I had some general workshops that talk about how we can discipline students! And in one of the workshops, the trainer came, and he was supposed to tell us how we could teach the subjects to students, but he talked about the book in general because he was the author!" Similarly, Rashed mentioned that the PD activities were sometimes presented in lecture form and sometimes through workshops. For example, Rashed mentioned, "Some trainers come and give lectures about a certain topic, such as individual differences among students, and leave us. So what, and how, can we implement that? I have students who forget easily. I try to teach one a phrase from the Quran every two days, and he cannot remember even a word. How can I deal with this student; how can I evaluate him?"

Insider trainer is preferable: At the beginning of the PD programs, ADEC worked with professional companies. Most of the trainers were native English speakers, and the workshop topics were presented in English. The trainers needed translators to communicate the content to teachers, which wasted time. As Aisha noted, "Most of us could not get the content because of the English language, so they hired translators to translate for the Arabic teachers, and to translate for the English teachers when the training was in Arabic, which wasted our time."

Gradually, the training companies started to train some of the local school teachers in school leadership and asked them to deliver the training workshops in Arabic, under their supervision. The training company only then sent a supervisor to make sure that the workshops were presented as planned. As Aisha reported, "The contracted company with ADEC recognized that we were not satisfied with the presented workshops because most of the time we were silent and we did not know what was going on. The translation was just an interpretation for us, as Arabic teachers, and for the English teachers when the translator started to translate for us [from Arabic]." HEND remarked, "The outstanding teachers are the ones who train us now." She added, "We are more comfortable because the trainers know how to deal with us and we speak the same language." Fatmah added, "The trainers now modify the content of the workshops to fit our environment."

External motivation is essential: Not all teachers have the intrinsic motivation to attend and participate in PD activities. Teachers want external motivation such as a certificate or accreditation of their training hours. Salem said, "We need appreciation and recognition, not only from the school principal; we need ADEC to send an appreciation certificate. Not all teachers attend." Aisha said that ADEC started to inquire who are not attending the workshops in order to cut from their salaries, "They count the attending hours by the attendance sheet; this year they sent a list of teachers' names and their PD hours. I attended 13 hours and still I have to cover 2 hours, but thank God, they did not cut off my salary." Fatmah stated, "We want recognition or payment; there is no difference between who attends and who does not attend! And not all of us attend the workshops; why doesn't ADEC investigate that and try to see if teachers' performances are really improving from these workshops!" Salama confirmed that they are obligated to attend the workshops. She said "We have to sign an attendance sheet, but still some teachers do not care or even attend!"

Informative evaluation as a new requirement: ADEC started to collect evidence that teachers are implementing what they have done in the PD workshops. As Aisha mentioned, "We visit each other's classrooms to collect evidence that we are implementing what we had trained for. We include evidence from what we learned for our portfolios." Aisha added, the school leaders, including the vice principals, are supervising and evaluating teachers in classrooms and seeking evidence that teachers are implementing what they learned from the workshops. It is not enough to attend; we have to show them that we learned." The evaluation system has been changed to reflect teachers' growth. As Rashed stated, "The school principal entered more than once into my classroom for different evaluation purposes; one of the purposes was to find out if I was implementing what I had learned in the workshop. Had I

changed my methods of teaching?" Salama confirmed that teachers have to present evidence by the end of the year that they have implemented what they learned in the workshops. She said, "The school principal examined our portfolio, and saw how many times we had attended the workshops, and what we got out of it. She looks for artifacts and real improvement."

Unsupportive colleagues: Some teachers asserted that their colleagues do not collaborate with them to implement the learned activities from the PD workshops. Henda claimed that her colleagues hesitate to visit her class to give her feedback, "I begged my colleagues to visit me and to give me feedback; they visited me for 10 minutes. They did not want to refuse my request. Therefore, they signed the evaluation sheet and left the class!"

Obvious improvement for student achievement: Teachers recognized the improvement that students are making because of their participation in the PD activities. Aisha asserted, "Students are enjoying learning; they started to like school because of the new ideas that we bring to classrooms. We started to think of how more than what." Salem expressed earlier that he did not like the new PD activities. However, he admitted that his performance is better than before and that is reflected in his students' achievement. He said, "I see that student performance is better and improved." Salama recognized that her student achievement is changed, too. However, she said that this change may also be because of the new grading system.

Clear involvement of school leadership: The school leaders are now involved in the PD activities. As mentioned earlier, training companies involved many of the school principals and vice principals in the content of PD activities, which was later transferred to all teachers. In addition, a supervisor from the training company observed how the sessions were implemented in schools. Shaikah commented, "My school principal and the vice principals are trained at the training company center itself on the PD activities, and then the trainers come to the school and present them to us, with company supervision." The training is not exclusive to school leaders only. Fatmah asserted, "The school administrators started the training for one hour for 3-4 days weekly, for two years, and then the training started to be twice a week for one to one and a half hours. At the beginning, the New Model School administrators gave us the workshops but since 2013 the head of the faculty -- who is in charge of supervising Arabic, Islamic studies, social studies subjects as well as English language, math and science subjects -- is training teachers."

In Cycle Two, where the New Model School started in 2013-2014, Salem stated that his school leaders are attending the workshops but they do not participate in presenting them: "The school principal elects a teacher to attend the assigned workshops from the training company and then he comes and train us."

Tiring activities: The two male teachers were not satisfied with the length of the workshops and the selected times for presenting the workshops. Salem reported, "It is at the end of the day where I am tired from teaching classes and working with students' activities." Salem supported Rashed's assertion by saying, "By the end of the day, I want to go home, I am thinking of when I will pick up my children from school and other things; why can't they try to find a time between the classes and among the subject teachers, instead of making teachers wait to the end of the day?" Therefore, some teachers felt that the timing of PD activities was better before ADEC's involvement. Salem asserted, "The PD activities were better before ADEC because the school conducted the activities in the evening, and it could be once a month." Salem raised the question: "Is it necessary to conduct the activities for all school teachers at the same time?" He suggested, "allocating time that suits the relevant subject teachers, based on their timetables, and this could be in the early morning."

Shaikah felt overwhelmed: "We start at 1:30 and continue until 3 pm every Sunday and Tuesday for one and a half hours. I reach home at 4 pm, tired and barely able to help my

children with their school homework. If there is something urgent and I have to submit it the next day, it means staying up late.” Salama agreed with Aisha, “Most teachers do not like the allocated time for professional development, and even when I tell them about developed countries, such as Finland, and how their schools work until evening in their workshops, the teachers laugh at me and say, “Oh yeah, also the suicide rate is high!” Henda suggests specified days only for PD and other weeks for practicing in the classroom. She said, “Every two days PD workshops is too much; we need time to implement what we have in each workshop; we have no time. They have to specify certain days in every month or every two months and give us the space to implement what we have learned.” On the other hand, only Aisha considered PD activities to be part of her job, and felt that these activities were a satisfactory end to her workdays. She stated, “I feel that these workshops are beneficial and they will reform teachers’ performance.”

The discrepancy about the time required for PD: Five out of seven participants did not recall exactly how many hours they should achieve in order to meet the PD benchmarks that ADEC demands. Aisha mentioned, “We have to achieve fifteen hours of training.” Fatmah said, “We have to accomplish at least 25 hours.” Salem said, “I do not know how many hours I have to attend; I only go when there is a workshop.” Teachers from Cycle Two schools both reported that they have 30 hours of PD activities.

Discussion

The present study provides the lived experiences of teachers engaging in PD activities that ADEC uses to improve teacher performance in the New Model Schools in Abu Dhabi. The findings of the current study revealed crucial themes that shaped teachers’ receptiveness to and experiences of engaging in PD activities: PD content addressed teachers’ needs; variety of formats of PD is offered; insider trainer is preferable; external motivation is essential; informative evaluation as a new requirement; unsupportive colleagues; obvious improvement of student achievement; clear involvement of school leadership; tiring activities; and the discrepancy about the time required for PD.

The study findings indicate that teachers experienced their involvement in PD activities in similar ways. Salem and Rashed appeared confused. At one point both Salem and Rashed said that the presented PD activities from ADEC were based on their needs. At another time, they stated that the previous activities that had been presented by their schools met their needs better than the ADEC topics. One possible explanation for this could be the times that were selected for undertaking PD activities, a factor mentioned as significant in some way by all the participants. This explanation would be consistent with the findings of Wan (2011), which showed that the chosen time can influence the teachers’ perceptions of school PD activities. Therefore, it is vital for ADEC to consider the PD time and to think of alternative times. As the participants suggested, it should consider conducting the PD workshops based on subject teachers’ time throughout the day, not exclusively at the end of the day. Alternatively, it could select certain days when teachers are not teaching in order to have less resistance to engagement in PD activities. Another explanation for male teachers’ confusion is the late raise that they got from ADEC. It was around 150 to 500 dollars, which they considered small. They reported that they are not satisfied with their salaries and are searching for other jobs which pay more for them to meet their responsibilities.

A variety of PD formats were presented to teachers, ranging from a few general lectures to more practical workshops and classroom observations. Most of the teachers noted that most of the PD activities were practical. The exceptions were Salem and Rashed, who are from the Cycle Two schools and thus were only newly introduced to the New Model School. These participants were not satisfied about the new requirement and felt overwhelmed and unappreciated. The selected times for conducting the PD activities did not help.

All teachers stated that they prefer insider presenters who spoke their language and could give them hands-on experience. Therefore, they liked the idea of having trainers from their own schools who spoke Arabic. ADEC also recognized this. As a result, it started to depend on local expertise from the schools and trained local educators. ADEC now understands that teachers' beliefs have an influence on how teachers perceive the usefulness of a PD activity, as Kwakman (2003) found. It is worth noticing that ADEC trains the trainers in the training center, and then sends them to schools. This ensures the consistency of the PD delivery.

All teachers stated that they need rewards and appreciation, that is, external motivation, for their participation in PD activities. This might take the form of a recognition certificate or accredited hours that are connected to salary. This finding is supported by Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, and Rowe (2003). Barnett (2004) and Wan (2011) agree that teacher motivation impacts on how teachers participate in PD activities. This factor needs to be considered. Otherwise, teachers will find excuses not to attend these activities.

All of the teachers interviewed recognized that ADEC is serious about implementing and connecting what teachers have learned in the workshops to classroom practices. Accordingly, ADEC asks teachers to collect evidence of how they practice their learned teaching strategies and include relevant artifacts in their portfolios, which are evaluated by the school principal, as Luke & McArdle (2009) have recommended. Further, teacher evaluation encourages teachers to engage in professional development activities (Tuytens and Devos, 2014).

Reports that colleagues are unwilling to visit and evaluate their peers in classes suggests a need for school leadership to engage in the development of more collaborative school cultures, as Forte and Flores (2014) advocated. Another consideration is whether teachers' refusal to visit and evaluate their peers in classes could be explained by their lack of observation skills. In this case, a need for appropriate training and supervision for teachers in how to conduct peer observations is suggested.

Teachers admitted that their students' achievements are better than before, supporting the need to assess the relationship between teacher attendance of these activities and the improvement of student achievement across their academic subjects. Also, this observation from teachers suggests assessing teacher performance before and after a PD activity.

Involving school leaders in PD activities encourages teachers to take these activities seriously and to implement them (Barnett, 2004; Wan, 2011) found. Thus, school leaders are required by ADEC to be involved in PD activities. Female school leaders are more engaged than their male colleagues. On the other hand, male teachers reported that their school principals are involved in evaluating teachers' performance in the classroom only. This could explain why female teachers complain less about PD activities than male teachers.

Most of the participants in the study reported that the professional development activities were tiring, especially when they are held at the end of the day. This raises concern about the best time to conduct these activities, as Wan (2011) has indicated. The only exception was a female single teacher (Aisha) who did not perceive the PD activities as tiring, perhaps because she has fewer family responsibilities to worry about. In contrast, other participants reported wondering about when they would pick up their children from school, when they would be able to take care of their children at home, and how they would prepare for the next day.

The discrepancy regarding the amount of time required for PD in the schools raises questions about the commitment of teachers to PD activities and the lack of responsiveness by ADEC to PD activities in New Model Schools. Another explanation is that male teachers are from Cycle Two schools, where the PD was provided by the school until recent times. It could be

that there are still some teachers who are not used the idea of having regular PD activities and being accountable for their participation.

In summary, the findings of this study concerning the factors impacting the effectiveness of PD activities are similar to the international findings that are documented in the literature review. These findings suggest that the content of the activities should come from teachers' needs, using different formats for delivering the activities, to meet the individual differences of learning. The findings of the current study emphasize the following factors that influence how teachers respond to PD activities such as: the importance of long term of PD, the necessity of considering external motivation, the allotted time for PD, the necessity for school leadership in promoting participation in the PD activities and in creating a collaborative culture among teachers. Notwithstanding, the UAE government provides rich resources to improve teachers.

The study findings clearly suggested implications for practice and future research.

First, the implications for practice include:

- Teachers need rewards and recognition for their commitment to PD activities.
- Teachers need to be trained on how to observe their peers in the classroom and give feedback under the supervision of school leaders.
- The involvement of school leadership in PD activities needs to be assured.
- The school leadership needs to foster collaborative culture among teachers.
- Teachers need to be given the flexibility to select PD activity times that suit their schedule. It is not necessary for all teachers to attend all the workshops at the same time and place. Teachers need to be given the chance to select times that might be during the school day, and not always at the end of the day.
- All teachers should be aware of how many PD activities hours are required from them. They need to be reminded about this from time to time, whether this is by a formal letter, an electronic email or message.

Second, the implication for future research might be to examine how the themes of this study could be used as measurable variables in an assessment instrument for future quantitative or mixed-methods studies for purposes of generalization. Another study could be a quantitative study to examine the variables of PD activities that contribute to the improvement of teacher performance and student achievement. Still another area of research is to observe teacher performance in the classroom before and after a PD activity. The study findings indicated that teachers did not believe in the value of classroom observation as a type of professional development activity, which raises a question of what types of activities do UAE teachers mostly prefer. Another study issue that could be investigated in UAE schools is how the culture of the school (norms and values) influences the effectiveness of the professional development activities.

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