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Focus of Professional Development on Teachers' Felt Needs: A Paradigm Shift in Policy

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Abstract: A professional development that is often mandated is exclusionary, less motivating, and provides teachers with little or no improvement in their professional practice as well as student achievement. This necessitates a fundamental change in policy from prescribing professional development to addressing teachers' self-identified felt needs. Hitherto, teachers are generally disenfranchised from specifying their felt needs for development, thus they feel uninterested, or enthusiastic to attend professional development programs that are prescribed for them by school leaders. When they do or are compelled to attend, they tend to be less attentive and are often indulged in reading newspapers, grading students' test papers, texting, playing video games, or simply doing something unrelated to the professional development. This practice stifles teachers' professional growth and student learning, hence it must not be allowed to continue unabated. Through a qualitative case study research design, using survey, interviews, and focus groups, this research brought to the fore, the debilitating effects of the current practice. Analysis of data yielded four major themes: choice, motivation, effectiveness, and satisfaction. The study proposed a paradigm shift in policy from mandating to granting teachers the autonomy to identify their own real or felt needs for professional development. Implications for practice, leadership, policy, and further research were also discussed.

Keywords: *Felt needs, leadership, prescribed needs, professional development, student achievement, teachers.*

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Introduction

An effective teacher's professional development starts by first identifying the felt need of the teacher. Among other things, this aids in planning a professional development that is meaningful and meets the goals of the school, the teacher, and the student. Early studies on how to improve professional development for teachers have always been predicated on such issues as funding inadequacy (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017); motivating teachers by increasing salaries (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2014); increasing participation by giving remunerations; regulating the frequency professional development in a school year (Klan, 2017; Theuma, 2012); and evaluating its efficacy (Guskey, 2000; Zepeda, 2012). There has been little or no attention to teachers' felt needs as focal points for professional development. Today, professional development for teachers continues to be highly mandated and focused on "prescribed needs" rather than addressing teachers' "felt needs." That is, the decisions as to what professional development teachers should attend are often mandated by the administrators without inputs from the teachers. This is antithetical to teachers' professional growth and development.

In the United States of America, the National Education Association (NEA, 2002) supports that professional development be required throughout a teacher's career, but argues that teachers should have a voice at all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation processes pertinent to the professional development. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, a national strategy for continuing professional development has focused on giving teachers increased opportunities for relevant, focused, effective professional development, and to place professional development at the heart of school improvement (Rhodes et al., 2004). A UK's code of practice for providers of professional development through the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) emphasizes the need to maximize the impact of professional development by closely identifying teachers' development needs and linking the benefits to meeting the personal and professional needs of individual teachers to improving students' learning outcomes (DfES, 2001a, 2001b). In order that

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school leadership and management teams may create cultures which link teacher professional development more firmly to student achievement objectives, a system of performance management was statutorily enforced in September 2000 for schools in England. This performance management framework (DfES, 2001c) leads teachers to expect a focus upon the improvement of their knowledge and skills, and also offers financial rewards for those who are deemed to be performing well. In other words, performance management may be viewed as an important element in raising professional development standards or as an element of governmental intervention to exact greater efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability (Rhodes et al., 2004).

Perhaps with the view to improving student achievement, most countries' school systems or districts tend to be spending a large chunk of their budgets on providing professional development programs for their teachers. While lots of financial resources continue to be invested on improving teachers' capability, the return rates per capital in terms of student outcome have not increased proportionately. One key reason for low student outcome is the fact that teachers have not been able to impact new knowledge, skills, or attitudes to their students because of the ineffective professional development they have always been compelled to attend. This means that when professional development programs are mandated or prescribed, teachers do not necessarily learn new things to impact to students to improve learning. Traditionally, teachers are often not been involved in the decisions pertaining to the "What", "Why", "When", "Where", "Who", and "How" of the professional development intended for them. In other words, neither are teachers consulted about their "felt needs" nor adequate needs assessment conducted to identify and prioritize their professional needs.

In a report of a study by *The New Teacher Project*, TNTP (a nonprofit organization) on professional development programs published in the *Washington Post*, it was stated that "Billions of dollars in annual teacher training is largely a waste" (Laton, 2015, p.1). Researchers in the study surveyed 10,000 teachers and interviewed more than 100 administrators in three large school districts and a network of charter schools. For over two years, this study examined if professional development programs had contributed to teachers' improvement in their job performance, using such measures as evaluation ratings, classroom observation and student test scores. Major findings of the study included the following:

- School systems made massive and laudable investment in teacher improvement.
- Most teachers did not improve substantially from year to year (about 3 out of 10 teachers improved over a two-to-three-year period after participating in training while 20 percent got worse, as measured by teacher evaluations).
- No evidence that any particular kind or amount of professional development consistently helped teachers to improve.
- School systems failed to help teachers understand how to improve (about half of the teachers surveyed agreed that they had weaknesses in the classroom).

The study revealed that the participating school districts spent an average of \$18,000 per teacher annually on professional development and that the 50 largest school districts spend an estimated \$8 billion on teacher development annually. At a town hall meeting in 2012, the Education Secretary, Arne Duncan remarked that the federal government was spending about \$2.5 billion annually on professional development but without much impact (Laton, 2015). As claimed by Gates and Gates (2014), professional development is viewed by teachers more as a compliance exercise in which they have limited choice than a learning activity. Indeed, "Fewer than one in three teachers (30 percent) choose most or all of their professional learning opportunities. Nearly one in five (18 percent) never have a say in their professional development" (p. 10).

Realistically, a teacher's professional competence is not complete at the start of a teaching career, hence the need for continuing development. However, when school districts do not engage in professional development programs that address teachers' felt needs, they are wasting valuable resources, especially in terms of money and time, but when schools attend to teachers' felt needs, they are actually addressing their deficiencies and what would make them perform better and impact students' learning. Fundamentally, the issue has not been so much of organizing professional development programs than it is that of organizing meaningful ones that actually address teachers' felt needs. Therefore, in order to be more efficient and effective, a paradigm shift in terms of policy and practice becomes imperative. That is, transitioning from mandating or prescribing teachers' professional development needs to empowering teachers to self-identify their own felt needs is inevitable.

By compelling teachers to attend professional development which they do not find valuable cannot be termed a worthwhile investment in the development of human potentialities. The fact is that too much emphasis on mandated or prescribed professional development neither improves teachers' repertoire of knowledge, skills, and attitudes nor student achievement. Rather, it makes professional development uninteresting and unattractive to teachers. This traditional practice of mandating professional development constitutes a chronic problem hindering the efficacy of professional development for teachers and unless it is changed, it would continue to generate worthless results and a waste of resources.

Operational Definitions

In order for readers to understand the concepts used in this study, the following operational definitions and conceptual framework are provided below.

Professional development: Antley (2020) refers to professional development as “continuing education and career training after a person has entered the workforce in order to help them develop new skills, stay up-to-date on current trends, and advance their career” (p. 1). According to Antley, professionals in various fields are required to participate in continuing education and ongoing learning as a prerequisite for keeping their job, maintaining their license, designation, or certification. As used in this study, a professional development is an essential instructional intervention designed to improve teaching quality and student achievement. Put another way, it is a revitalizing educational process aimed at improving teachers’ repertoire of knowledge, skills, and attitudes; and consequently students’ learning outcomes.

Need: A need represents something necessary to fill the gap between one’s present level of performance and expected level of proficiency. That is, the gap or deficiency that is lacking and/or preventing one to move from one point to the other. Put another way, the need is what it takes one to move upwardly from point “A” to point “B” in terms of performance (See Figure 1).

Needs assessment: A needs assessment is the process of determining what to be done to improve the present level of performance in order to get to the expected level of performance. Kaufman and English (1979) defined needs assessment as a formal process used to determining the gaps between current outcomes and required or desired outcomes; placing these gaps in priority order; and selecting the most important for resolution.

Need Indicator for Professional Development: Felt Need v Prescribed Need

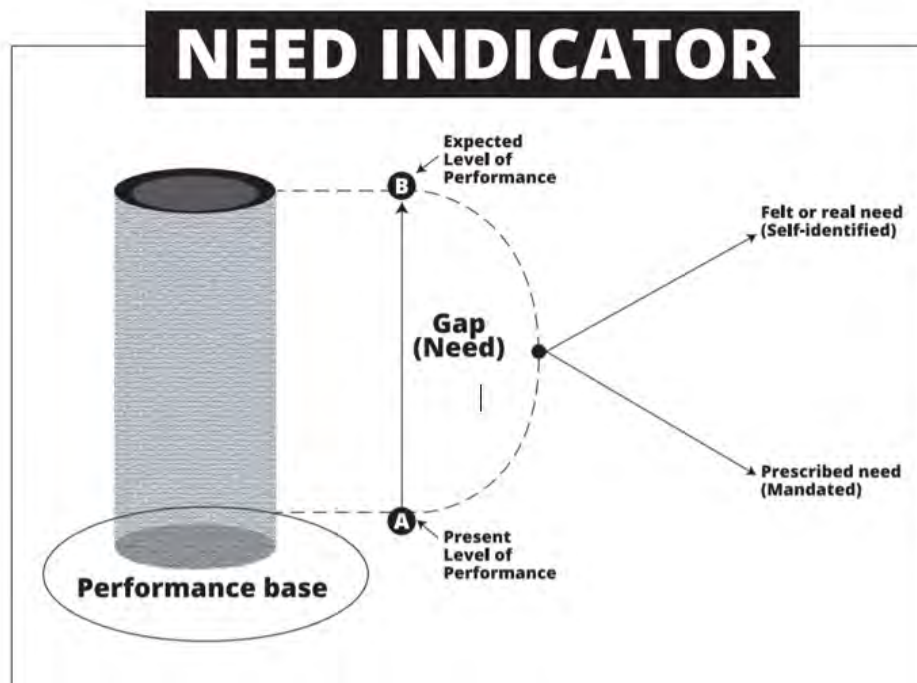


Figure 1. *Need Indicator for Professional Development: Felt Need v Prescribed Need*

Felt need: A felt need is the real thing people are desperate to have or perceived to be necessary to correct certain deficiencies preventing someone to perform a task at a particular level of proficiency. For all practical and psychological purposes, felt need is that thing preventing an individual from reaching a desired or specific level of proficiency. In other words, felt need is the real gap between where one is and where one is expected to be. It is self-identified through self-assessment or direct involvement of the teacher in its determination. In education, *felt need* connotes a teacher’s specific developmental need to improve capacity.

Prescribed need. A prescribed need is that which is mandated or dictated by the supervisor or superordinate as deemed necessary to correct a deficiency that impacts the performance of a particular task. This excludes the teacher’s input in its determination.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework, Figure I, provides a diagrammatic visual representation of a need indicator for teachers' professional development. As shown in the Figure, professional development is depicted by a movement from point "A" to point "B". There is a gap or space between points A and B to be covered or bridged. In other words, this gap represents the real need and the essence of professional development. The Figure shows teachers' professional development need as either being mandated by the superordinate or self-identified by the teacher. However, evidence abounds that professional development is often dictated for the teacher than being autonomously identified by the teacher. In other words, teachers' felt needs are always not considered. This means that teachers lack flexibility or autonomy regarding their choice professional development. The argument is, if professional development is meant to ameliorate teachers' professional capability, then ignoring their felt needs is counterproductive to enabling them to perform a new task or perform an existing task better. Autonomy per se enhances teachers' feelings of professionalism and consequently their teaching effectiveness and students' learning outcomes. As claimed by Pink (2009), autonomy has a powerful effect on individual performance and attitude; and that if given more flexibility, teachers might be more driven to participate in professional development.

Methodology

This section explains the research method and design adopted for the study, purpose of the study, the participants, data collection and analysis. As earlier indicated, the research methodology for the study was qualitative while the research design was a case study.

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), a qualitative research methodology is "a type of research that refers to an in-depth study using face-to-face or observation techniques to collect data from people in their natural settings" (p. 489). A case study research design was chosen for this study since the aim was to gain concrete, contextual, and in-depth knowledge of teachers' perspectives regarding professional development in their world of teaching over the years. Typically, a case study research design allows the researcher to explore the key characteristics, concerns, and implications of the case and uses multiple techniques of data collection and analysis. (Creswell & Creswell, 2013, 2018; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). As claimed by McMillan and Schumacher (2010), "A case study promotes better understanding of a practice or issue and facilitates informed decision making" (p. 338).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perspectives regarding the need for a shift from mandating professional development to empowering or enabling teachers to identify their own professional development need. The justification was predicated on the responses to the following four key questions:

1. Have you ever been given the opportunity to make a choice of a professional development of personal interest? Yes or No? Explain your answer.
2. Were you always excited or motivated about attending professional development programs? Yes or No? Explain your answer.
3. Would you say that most of the professional development programs attended have helped to improve your effectiveness as teacher? Yes or No? Explain your answer.
4. Overall, would you say that you have been satisfied with the professional development in which you have participated to date? Yes or No? Explain your answer.

Participants

The participants for this study were teachers across Connecticut State and were purposefully and conveniently sampled as they pursued graduate programs in educational leadership at Central Connecticut State University from Fall 2015 to Fall 2019. The selection of the participants was purposeful because they were all teachers and they suit the purpose of this study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The sample selection was convenient because participants were adult learners (i.e., graduate students) in several of the classes that I taught between Fall 2015 and Fall 2019, and were willing to participate and readily available, hence, they were easily recruited. A convenient sample is a group of participants or subjects selected on the bases of being available, accessible, or expedient. This could, for example, be a university class of a professor who is doing a research relevant to the students in some ways (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, 2010). In all, 132 teachers participated in the study. These teachers have been teaching for 2-34 years in public schools and have attended a minimum of two professional development programs as at the time of this study. Demographically, a total of 23 (17.4%) of the respondents were male and 109 (82.6%) were females. Their ages were from 22 and up and they all had a minimum of Bachelor's degree or its equivalent.

Data Collection

The study was conducted in three phases: completion of a survey, interviews, and focus group discussions. A survey was administered to the 132 participants during nine classes. Each class constituted a focus group. I ended up having nine focus groups and eleven nonstructured follow-up interviews (one-on-one interviews). The arrangement into nine focus groups enabled participation by all individuals and was instrumental to gathering an extensive data for this study. The survey took about 12-20 minutes each to complete while the focus groups took between 20 and 30 minutes each. The interviews took about 15-35 minutes. About 80% of the interviews were tape-recorded while about 20% were hand-written. Discussion highlights from each of the focus group sessions were noted and recorded in a notebook.

Data Analyses

The recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed. Transcripts and responses to the survey were content-analyzed by using codes, theming, frequency counts, and percentages. Analysis by theming (i.e., “thematic analysis”) helped to organize and present the interpretations drawn from participants’ comments, interview transcriptions, written responses, and field notes in a more meaningful way. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) multi-stage “thematic analysis” procedure was adopted as a form of content analysis for this study. This “involves the searching across a data set ... to find repeated patterns of meaning (p. 86). As explained below, the analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke’s six stages or phases thematic analysis procedure: familiarization with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; refining and naming themes; and producing the report.

Familiarization with the Data: The first stage in the thematic process involves familiarization with the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), familiarization entails the repeated reading of the data gathered and searching for meanings and patterns. To become familiarized with the data collected, I immersed myself actively in the collection process by designing and directly administering the data collecting instrument (i.e., open-ended survey, interviews and focus groups). Hence, because I was fully immersed in the data collection process, I was deeply familiarized with the depth and breadth of the data collected.

Generating Initial Codes: This stage involves the initial production of codes from the data and requires revisiting the data as many times as possible and gradually moving from unstructured data to the development of more structured ideas about the content of the data.

This involves grouping the data in chunks or segments and utilizing a word or words to depict the chunk. In this study, I used labels to index key information which facilitated the sorting and organizing of my data.

Searching for Themes: The third stage begins when all data have been initially coded and collated. The phase involves sorting and collating all the potentially relevant coded data extracts into themes and subthemes linking key parts of the data together. When searching for themes, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest starting by using initial codes to form main themes and subthemes and temporarily retaining miscellaneous codes. In this study, the initial codes were derived from the four key words emphasized in the research questions (i.e., choice, motivation, effectiveness, and satisfaction). These keywords constituted the main themes for this study and provided valuable insights to answering the research questions. Other coded words that bear similar meanings or have less versatility than the main themes were categorized as subthemes or miscellaneous.

Reviewing Themes: This stage emphasizes the need to review and refine the themes to ensure validity. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this helps to determine whether the themes accurately reflect the meanings evident in the data collected. In other words, this phase emphasizes the need to review the coded data extracts for each theme to consider whether they appear to form a coherent pattern. The validity of the evolving themes (i.e., main themes and subthemes) was determined when the aggregation of coded comments adequately reflected the intent of my research questions. In thematic data analysis, the assertion is that the investment of sufficient time in the development of the themes enhances the probability of developing credible research findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). On several occasions, I returned to the raw data to ensure that the themes were reflective of participants’ comments. There were no doubts that the amount of time spent in this phase and the preceding one was enormous.

Defining and Naming Themes: This stage focuses on determining what aspect of the data each theme captures and naming the identified themes. According to Braun and Clarke, by the end of this phase, researchers should be able to clearly define what the themes are. However, King (2004) cautioned that theme naming should not be considered final until all the data gathered have been vetted or thoroughly read and the coding scrutinized at least twice. To ensure that names given the themes were in sync with participants’ responses and that the participants comments were adequately stated, I reviewed my notes several times as well as played the tapes repeatedly.

Producing the Report: The writing of my findings followed the defining and naming of the themes. The write-up of a thematic analysis should provide a concise, coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting account of the data gathered within and across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). As suggested by King (2004), direct quotes from participants were made an essential component of the writing of my findings. In addition, the “member checking” technique was used to validate the accuracy of respondents’ views, ideas, or comments. According to

Creswell and Creswell (2014), member checking is used "to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (p. 201).

Findings

Table 1 presents a general perception of the state of the art regarding PD for teachers in various schools in Connecticut. Participants' responses to the four questions used in this study were categorized into four main themes using the key word in each of the questions.

Table 1. *Emerging Themes from Participants' Perspectives (N = 132)*

| # | Themes | Questions | Yes | | No | |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|-----|------|
| | | | f | % | f | % |
| 1 | Choice of a PD | Have you ever been given the opportunity to make a choice of a PD of personal interest? | 11 | 8.3 | 121 | 91.6 |
| 2 | Motivated or excited To attend PD | Were you always motivated or excited about attending PD programs? | 28 | 21.2 | 104 | 78.7 |
| 3 | Effective-ness of PD on teaching | Would you say that most of the PD attended have helped to improve your effectiveness as teacher? | 12 | 9.1 | 120 | 90.9 |
| 4 | Satisfaction with PD | Overall, would you say that you were satisfied with the PD? | 13 | 9.8 | 119 | 90.2 |

Theme 1: Choice.

Question: Have you ever been given the opportunity to make a choice of a professional development of personal interest?

Answer: Yes (11); No (121)

About 92% of the respondents expressed concern of being denied the opportunity to choose or being involved in choosing professional development of their interest. In most schools and school districts, it is forbidden for teachers to have the free-hand of deciding what they think is good for them. In other words, the choice of a professional development is the prerogative of the principal or the superintendent while teachers are compelled to attend whatever type or form of professional development is chosen for them. The following comments alluded to the theme of choice.

- "Choice is no option in my school district"
- "Choices are strictly limited in my school district"
- "Having the opportunity to make a choice of a PD in my district is a dead end"
- "You just have to attend the PD mandated or else you face some consequences".
- "Whether you like it or not, you have to attend."
- "I attend PDs simply because they are mandatory. . . they don't really address those needs I'm desperate about"

Theme 2: Motivation

Question: Were you always excited or motivated about attending professional development programs?

Answer: Yes (28); No (104)

Out of the 132 respondents, 104 (78.8%) claimed that they were not always excited or motivated about attending professional development programs. For some teachers, motivation to attend a professional development maybe to gain new repertoire of knowledge, skills, and attitudes; for others, the motivation to attend may be just to socialize and network with colleagues. Howbeit, an unvalued professional development is merely a waste of valuable resources in terms of funding from the sponsors and time on the part of the teachers being compelled to attend. The following comments are in support of this claim or theme.

- "I am never excited to attend PD because it's nothing to write home about"
- "One particular thing I'm always excited about is that PD days are days we always close early."
- "Some PD topics are motivating, but the presentations are demotivating or demoralizing."

- “Perhaps excitement is the right word for me. I am always excited simply because the PD time gives me the window of opportunity socialize, network, and to do other things, such as grading papers, reading novels, or chip-chatting with colleagues.”

Theme 3: Effectiveness.

Question: Would you say that most of the PD attended have met your felt needs and helped to improve your effectiveness as teacher?

Answer: Yes (12); No (120)

Effectiveness per se connotes the achievement of a goal and it is an important determinant for growth. When about 91% of the 132 participants claimed that the PD they have attended over the years have not been effective, it means that their desire of the outcomes of the PD programs offered to date was yet to be accomplished. This was simply because teachers' felt needs have not been properly addressed. It is like chasing the shadow while leaving the object behind. Hence there is no tangible or appreciable growth in their teaching capacity. When professional development is prescribed or mandated, the effectiveness is haphazard because it does not meet the felt needs of all teachers. According to Blandford (2000), professional development in effective schools must relate to both individual teacher's needs and school needs. The following comments speak to the ineffectiveness of the prescribed or mandated professional development programs of today.

- “PD does not produce any changes in my teaching”
- “I don't find anything tangible about PD programs because they are repetitive and lack creativity or versatility.”
- “I hate the lecture format of PD. I like it when it is pragmatic and readily applicable to my teaching.”
- “Most PD programs are not content specific.”
- “PD is not directly relevant to my content area.”
- “PD cannot be effective because important concepts or new stuff are always brushed over, therefore making it difficult to understand and apply in my classroom.”
- “Most PD are supposed to be based on cutting edge research, but they are not.”
- The information garnered from the PD is not relevant to my grade level”

Theme 4: Satisfaction.

Question: Overall, would you say that you were satisfied with the PD in which you have participated to date?

Answer: Yes (13); No (119)

Satisfaction of a program is an expression of how people feel about the program in meeting their real or felt needs. It is logical for teachers who experience high satisfaction with their professional development to be happy and manifest higher teaching performance and student achievement. If only 13 (9.8%) out of 132 claimed to be satisfied, it means more than 90% of the participating teachers are dissatisfied with several aspects of the program, including the exclusionary choice, its nonmotivating effect, and its fruitlessness. The comments below speak to the “satisfaction” theme of the study.

- “I'm never satisfied because it's always a waste of time!”
- “The presenters, especially the so called experts or consultants often do not respect adult learners.”
- “The presentation is always boring. It is not interactive or collaborative.”
- “There is no satisfaction because there is no follow up to anything we do. It's always a done deal stuff.”
- I'm often dissatisfied with the places where they are held.”
- I'm often dissatisfied because of lack of accessibility online.

Out of the four questions, teachers' responses to the question on whether they were always motivated or excited to attend PD had the highest number of respondents in the “Yes” column. During both interviews and the focus groups discussions, some of the teachers stated that their excitement was not in their interest in the PD topic or content, but simply because the PD period often serve as relaxation or off-teaching time for them. As stated by one of the teachers “I use the PD period to have a break from the hustle and bustle of the classroom.” Similarly, another teacher remarked: “Since most of the PD are repetitious and often not in my content areas, I'm always excited to attend PD because that is the period I use to catch a break.”

Discussions

The findings of the study revealed that more than three quarters of the participants claimed the following: have never been privileged to choose the PD that met their felt needs; have never been motivated or excited to attend PD programs; have never felt the impact of PD in their teaching; and have never been satisfied with PD. The foregoing speaks volumes of the negative effects of mandating professional development for teachers. Indeed, there is no gainsaying the fact that one of the causes of organizing ineffective professional development for teachers relates to the persistent bureaucratic culture of giving mandates without due consideration for teachers' felt needs. To a large extent, this is typical of a centralized system of administration worldwide. For instance, the centralized nature of the Greek education system provides little or no space for teachers' autonomy. As a result, decisions concerning teachers' professional development are basically made as a finished product without teachers' inputs (Karadimou & Tsioumis, 2021). Bureaucratization has also been criticized for suppressing teachers' passion, creativity, individual autonomy, and professional independence (Koybasi et al., 2017; Mak, 2003).

Denying teachers such privileges as freedom or autonomy can be demotivating to continuing improvement, undermining of their professional integrity as well as being grossly disrespectful of their specialized training. Realistically, when a teacher has the freedom to decide his/her professional development need, he or she becomes more motivated to acquire new knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to impact students' learning. Moreover, teachers with unique or specific felt needs can be motivated to pursue professional development through self-directed learning approach. Malcom Knowles, known as the father of contemporary adult learning theory "proposed self-directed learning as the way to meet specific needs of adult learners" (Husby, 2005, p. 7). According to Husby, a self-directed professional development program helps to cater to the development and professional needs of the individuals while responding to larger school goals. Since teachers' felt needs are peculiar to individual teachers, the importance of improving teachers' productivity by personalizing their professional development needs cannot be underestimated. Among other benefits, when professional development is personalized, teachers have the opportunity to participate in virtual professional development from the comfort of their homes through any online format of working remotely (e.g., synchronously, asynchronously, blended or hybrid).

Mandating professional development for teachers is like prescribing medication to a patient without any diagnosis of ailment. This practice contributes little or nothing to improving teachers' quality of teaching and student learning. In other words, unless teachers' felt needs are addressed in the planning of professional development for teachers, improvement in both teacher capacity and students' learning will continue to stagnate. This study also provides a plausible explanation for the inefficiency of the huge financial resources expended on professional development. This persistent ineffectiveness observed in most professional development programs offered today calls for a stronger sense of urgency among educational leaders and policy makers to shift the focus of professional development away from giving mandates to granting teachers the autonomy to choose the professional development they think will address their real or felt needs. When a professional development addresses teachers' felt needs, school leaders have the opportunity to be more focused in providing specific support in terms of resources such as expertise, funds, time, and so on.

Furthermore, for the purpose of ensuring the sustainability of an effective professional development, addressing teachers' felt needs should be a priority for every school district and leader. Hitherto, teachers are generally not empowered to decide on the professional development of their choice or being involved in making decisions that are germane to the professional development initiatives in which they are meant to participate. Traditionally, enacting and enforcing policy mandates is what educational leaders do. However, the findings from this study indicate that the current top-down exclusionary policy does not support the effectiveness of professional development programs for teachers. It suggests that teachers are homogenous group with the same need for enhancing their teaching capacities. On one hand, this can be true, especially in terms of basic human needs. On the other hand, beyond this basic level of need, sameness of needs may not hold for all teachers considering varying individual needs for personal and professional growth and development. Hence, new policies should be in place to nurture this practice. Lack of such policies will only help to exacerbate the perpetration of the dysfunctional top-down leadership culture that exists in our school systems today. As remarked by one of this study respondents, "The objective of the type of professional development offered does not meet our needs at all because it is always initiated from the top."

Conclusions

Noting that prescribing professional development for teachers does not do anyone any good, this study concludes that a shift in policy for professional development is imperative. That is, professional development should no longer be mandated or prescribed. Rather, it should be based on the felt needs identified by the teacher. For all practical and psychological purposes, addressing teachers' felt needs is a way of maximizing their capacities and performance. As asserted by Gupta (2007), in a professional development, a focus on teachers' felt needs is "necessary to perform efficiently in their jobs" (p. 155). The reality is that when teachers are empowered to select the professional development programs that address their felt needs, they are more likely to be accountable to the consequences of such decisions. Moreover, since the sustainability of the motivation to learn is stronger when it comes from within the

learner than from outside, then teachers as adult learners deserve the opportunity to identify or being actively involved in deciding what they require to be proficient in performing their professional duty.

The outcome of this study can be corroborated with the study conducted by the 'Boston Consulting Group' on needs identification in a professional development for teachers. The study which was sponsored by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation concluded that "teachers with more choice report much higher levels of satisfaction with professional development—those who choose all or most of their professional learning opportunities are more than twice as satisfied with professional development as those with fewer options" (Gates & Gates, 2014, p. 10). Moving away from mandating professional development to empowering teachers to choose the professional development that is most beneficial to their growth is the right thing to do. Indeed, this should be their professional right. This not only addresses their felt needs and efficacy, but also opens the door to improving student achievement. However, in order to guarantee successful paradigm shift, it is essential to educate teachers in the nitty-gritty of making effective self-assessment of their felt needs.

Recommendations

The implications of the findings evolving from this study call for a change in policies that impact professional development theory, practice, and subsequent research. The findings are antithetic to the theory and practice that underscore the belief that professional development has to be effected by policy mandates. Rather, the study's overall outcome demands for a shift in policy that focuses on teachers' felt needs and enables them to make informed decisions as to what is best suited to their professional development need. Some of the salient recommendations evolving from this study include granting teachers' autonomy of choice; personalizing professional development; organizing professional development for teachers with common felt needs; transitioning from professional development to professional learning; transitioning from exclusionary to inclusionary decision making on professional development; and furthering research to improve the status quo.

Teachers' autonomy of choice: Professional development based on 'felt needs' relates to giving teachers the autonomy to decide on what they need to make their work better. This entails making a conscious effort to empower teachers to make the selection of the professional developments they consider worthwhile. That is, as adult learners, teachers should be given the latitude to make choices regarding the following:

- What: What the teacher is desperate to know in a professional development.
- Why: Why is professional development important to the teacher.
- When: What time during the school year is the professional development most appropriate.
- Where: Where is the professional development most suitable or convenient to be held.
- Who: Who is most qualified to facilitate the professional development.
- How: How should the professional development be delivered to engender effective learning.

Teachers' autonomy per se entails the professional freedom to control an educational environment that enhances effective teaching and learning transactions. Sehrawat (2014), describes autonomy as:

A capacity to take charge of, or take responsibility for, or control over your own learning. It involves ability and attitudes that people possess, and can develop to various degrees. The ability to self-assess for the sake of his/her learners, the capacity to develop certain skills for oneself as a teacher, the tendency to criticize oneself, self development, self observation, self awareness of his own teaching, continuous reflection, sustainable development, self control, taking responsibilities for his learners, being open to change through co-operation with others, questioning oneself in particular position improving oneself so as to keep up with changing condition of the century, an attempt to compensate for what he lacks as a teacher. (p. 3)

Overall, the concept "autonomy" provides the link pin for transitioning professional development for teachers from a prescribed-based approach to a more personalized felt need-based approach.

Personalization of professional development: As claimed by Stegman (2020), a paramount benefit of personalized professional development is that it can easily be individualized to fit the goals and needs of each teacher. As narrated by a teacher, "I love the convenience and flexibility" afforded by personalizing professional development. With the advent of technology, individual teachers are exposed to numerous professional learning opportunities that are available virtually. For example, individual teachers can gain access to educational materials such as those focused on instructional strategies, motivational learning strategies, differentiating instructional strategies, social and emotional learning principles, diversity and equity practices, and culturally relevant pedagogy, to guide self-paced learning ventures (Stegman, 2020). Professional development at home can take many forms, including webinars and podcasts. Webinars can be live or recorded. Live webinars allow participants to ask questions through an online chat option while recorded webinars provide participants the opportunity to watch them on their own time. Other forms of social

media such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and so on, are also valuable in aiding personalized development from home (Lieberman & Miller, 2014; Stegman, 2020).

Organizing professional development for teachers with common felt needs: In view of the fiscal limitations of organizing a professional development solely for one person, teachers with similar felt needs can be grouped together to attend the same workshop. In such situations, the onus is for the school administrators to work with their teachers individually or collectively to discover their common felt needs and then seek to address them collectively. For example, in a school, the principal should consider sending out a survey to teachers before the end or beginning of a school year asking them to identify the main gap or deficiency in their performance, rank their importance based on their frequencies from among the pool, then organize professional developments around the most common felt need, one after the other in a school year.

Transitioning from professional development to professional learning: In order to better serve teachers' specific needs for improvement, the need for transitioning from professional development to professional learning cannot be further delayed. While it is a general belief that continuous professional development is needed to help teachers to continue to grow and improve practice, educators today believe that the way it's being conducted is obsolete and ineffective, hence the need for it to be revamped and/or transformed. This is why many schools and school districts today are implementing a system of professional learning as a replacement. This undertaking is more than a paradigm shift in language, but a shift in format and strategies as well (Carroll, 2009; DuFour et al., 2016; Easton, 2008; Moir, 2013; Scherff, 2018). A key outcome of this shift is addressing teachers' felt needs as a means of improving students' achievement more effectively.

Proponents of professional learning contend that professional development is typically a one-time, nonrecurrent activity or one-size-fits all workshop for teachers with little or no consideration for individual learning needs while professional learning focuses on teachers' specific learning needs and it is typically more interactive, sustained, pragmatic, and customized to teachers' felt needs (Carroll, 2009; DuFour et al., 2016; Easton, 2008; Marcinek, 2015; Moir, 2013; Scherff, 2018). While emphasizing the critical importance of professional learning in improving educators' professional practice and providing new perspectives on the ever-changing teaching profession, Marcinek (2015) recommends that professional learning opportunities should be a natural part of educators' professional life and should be the responsibility of school leaders to provide time and space with which educators can continue to grow professionally and engage in conversations around common ideas. Further, he recommends that professional learning should also be a personalized experience that gives every educator the autonomy to select his or her own specific learning need and the appropriate format to addressing it.

Attesting to the efficacy of professional learning, Moir (2013) presented a report of a task force titled "Greatness by Design" convened by a "Superintendent of Public Instruction" to explore the need to making changes to the way teachers were recruited, trained, brought into the profession, mentored and evaluated. A key element in the report was the need for a sweeping change from professional development to professional learning. On one hand, the report described professional development as a typically single-shot, one-size-fits-all workshop for teachers based on the expertise of the facilitator or presenter. On the other hand, the report described professional learning as been:

- Targeted and based on the specific learning needs of the students and school community.
- Individualized for the strengths and needs of the teachers.
- Grounded in the principles of adult learning theory.
- Sustained and supported through implementation with coaching and follow-up strategies.
- Consistently monitored and assessed to evaluate its impact on teachers and student learning with the view to making adjustments when necessary.

For instance, in a system of traditional professional development, a principal might bring teachers together for one or more hours after school to learn about a writing strategy to be implemented. Whereas, in a system of professional learning, the principal would engage teachers that are already using the writing strategy to collect and analyze data on its effectiveness and develop a plan to roll it out across the school based on the readiness and specific or 'felt' needs of the teachers through training, coaching, and monitoring. According to Scherff (2018), effective professional learning manifests most of the following characteristics:

- It is tied to specific content and standards;
- It incorporates active learning;
- It is job-embedded;
- It is collaborative;
- It provides models;

- It includes coaching;
- It is sustained and continuous; and
- It is aligned with school goals, standards and assessments, and other professional learning activities

Among other merits, professional learning encourages the formation of teams or communities of learners with a common goal or need. Some professional learning occur individually to address individual development goals while some occur in teams or small groups to address common problems and goals. These professional meetings often engender collaborative efforts, collective responsibilities, cooperative support, and so on. According to Tichenor and Heins (2000), "The process of exploring questions and sharing in a trusting and supportive environment paves the way for renewed teaching and learning and facilitates the development of professional learning communities" (p. 317).

Today, the moral imperative for engaging fully in the process of professional learning community (PLC) has never been stronger (DuFour et al., 2016). Since Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker published their groundbreaking book on PLCs in 1998, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, interest in adopting the process continues to grow. The PLC process has become widely accepted as the best strategy for improving schools. Indeed, "some educators are 'married' to the PLC process" and the process is so deeply embedded in the culture of their schools that it has become "the way we do things around here" (DuFour et al., 2016, p.3). The Learning Forward, formally known as the National Staff Development Council and one of the nation's most prominent agencies recognized for supporting teachers' professional learning, believes that professional learning that increases educators' effectiveness and results in improving students achievement occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment (Learning Forward, 2015). The rationale for transitioning from professional development to professional learning cannot be better stated than Lois Easton (2008):

It is clear today than ever that educators need to learn, and that's why professional learning has replaced professional development. Developing is not enough. Educators must be knowledgeable and wise. They must know enough in order to change. They must change in order to get different results. They must become learners, and must be self-developing. (p. 756)

Transitioning from exclusionary to inclusionary leadership and decision making on professional development: Among other things, effective management and leadership are twin catalytic factors amenable to transforming the approach of professional development offered today from exclusionary to inclusionary. According to Evans (as cited in Rhodes et al., 2004), leadership can shape contexts in relations to equity and justice, organizational efficiency, interpersonal relations, collegiality, self-conception and self-image, as well as enacting policies that can make significant interventions to enhancing the working lives of teachers. Also, leaders "can influence the emotional climate of their organizations and, in so doing, motivate staff and impact positively upon teachers' working lives" (Rhodes et al., 2004, p. 4). Changing policies in a paradigm shift of this nature is a crucial strategy for effective leadership and sustainability of the change necessary to improving professional development for teachers. That is, to change from mandating professional development to granting teachers the autonomy to self-identify their professional development needs, requires a change in leadership and/or policy practices that involve teachers in such factors as selection (i.e., choice), planning, implementation, and others. For examples, policy about choice should provide convincing details of including teachers' felt needs through needs assessment, learning goals and objectives. Policy on planning should specify strategies and include inputs from teachers and experts. Policy on implementation should involve teachers and include consideration for 'Where, When, Who, and How' as well as fiscal matters-- budgets or funding. It is clear that the adoption of the policy of "autonomy of choice" will be more enabling, engaging, and motivating to teachers. Among other merits, a focus on teachers'-self-identified felt needs encourages them to take more responsibility for their own learning and professional practice.

Further research

The results of this study suggest future direction for organizing professional development programs that focus on teachers' felt or specific needs. Although most of the continuing education publications emphasize the importance of professional development for teachers, little research has been carried out in focusing professional development on teachers' felt needs. Furthermore, research should be conducted into such issues as establishing criteria for funding or sponsorship, especially in schools where teachers have several diverging felt needs. Over time, further research is needed to determine the effect or impact of focusing on teachers' felt needs compared to prescribed needs as commonly practiced today. Also, more studies are necessary in the following areas:

- The impact of empowering teachers in their choice of professional development on student learning.
- Changing approach to policy formulation from top-down to bottom-up approach.
- Engendering policies that support professional development for teachers in an era of reform.
- Review of educational policies governing professional development with the view to forestalling unsuitable practices.

- Impact of needs assessments on effective professional development
- The influence of a school culture on the success of professional development
- Strategies of increasing accessibility to technology toward the success of self-directed professional development.
- Re-tooling educational leaders in the intricacies of management and leadership or transactional and transformational leadership as related to change.

Limitations

As with all research, this study experienced some limitations. One obvious limitation was the difficulty of getting all participants at one setting or one academic year. This difficulty prolonged the data collection period for over a period of four years (2014-2019). Another limitation was the restriction of the study to the teachers that happened to register for Master's degree programs at a particular university at the same time. As a case study, except for settings that share similar characteristics, the results of this study may not be generalizable to all teachers in all states or countries across the globe.

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