
LANDMARK

What do Expert Indian ESL Teachers' Development Journeys Tell Us about Impact of Continuous Professional Development? A Qualitative Meta-analysis

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Abstract

In this article, the current understanding on teachers' professional development is reported based on a critical analysis of seminal national level policy documents of India to underline the gaps existing in the systemic understanding of the concept. Thereafter, on the basis of this critique, a meta-analysis of qualitative research on teachers' professional development is attempted to show good examples of development opportunities from eight expert English teachers across India. The examples show how these teachers have created opportunities of learning and reflections for themselves and the impact such classroom practices have on promoting language education in class.

Keywords: Continuous professional development, teacher education, teachers' self-assessment rubrics, qualitative meta-analysis

Introduction

The term professional development in education, more specifically for language teachers in India who experience vast variations in teaching-learning contexts owing to socio-economic disparities and access to quality and sustainable education, has multiple interpretations. In the Global North, most educational institutions place a high premium on teacher development by employing trained teachers and supporting them with continuous professional development (CPD) activities and valuing such endeavors as part of their career growth (Boyle et al., 2004).

In comparison, in the Global South, not all educational institutions can provide such systemic support or recognise and value professional development activities owing to lack of time, awareness about its positive impact and attention to such teacher support activities. Rather, teaching as routine day-to-day work, takes away most of the time and leaves teachers exhausted from teaching, assessing and documenting the performance of a large cohort of learners. Such a scenario is common across both government and low-cost private school and college teachers in India where teacher support or training to engage in professional development activities or discussions around their usefulness and need is hardly ever taken up (Padwad & Dixit, 2014). Professional development activities are undoubtedly a necessary part of a teacher's personal growth and makes education sustainable. But much remains to be achieved in the Indian context in understanding the concept and its application by the stakeholders of education. In the following part, I first present the current understanding and prescriptions about teacher professional development based on an analysis of a set of seminal teacher education policy documents currently available in India.

Role of National Council of Teacher Education (NCTE) in Creating CPD Spaces

The NCTE was established as a statutory body in India in 1993 to take charge of teacher education and development across all levels of education and to research and train teachers to attain high standards in education. The council designed the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (NCFTE) in 2009 to provide reforms and directions of change in teacher education by bridging pre- and in-service teacher education and creating links between universities and schools instead of looking at the construct in isolation. The document has a chapter titled 'Continuing professional development and support for in-service teachers' (pp. 66-74) that lays out the support system available for in-service teachers for furthering their development individually and in the larger teaching community. The article presents an impressive list of steps and strategies to support CPD and duly recognises the absence of research evidence to argue for the effectiveness of such programmes and that currently the programmes are externally driven narrow measures. They fail to take into account the role of 'teacher agency' in CPD (Padwad & Dixit, 2014). To add to the limitation, the scope of CPD is charted

primarily for primary level teachers while there is a passing mention of university, college and pre-service teachers who are envisaged only as resource persons to help primary education teachers, giving out a sense that the former groups are not in need of pursuing CPD. Furthermore, the approach to CPD is rather top-down, prescriptive and could only be seen, at best, as a source of extrinsic motivation for teachers.

More recently, NCTE has brought out a draft policy document: National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST, 2021) in keeping with the guidelines of the National Education Policy (NEP) (Ministry of Human Resources Development [MHRD], 2020). In this document, teacher agency is recognised in that CPD is envisaged as a mandatory requirement of the teaching career but to be undertaken by a teacher based on her/his reflection and use of Teacher Self-Assessment Rubrics (TSAR) (National Council of Education and Research Training [NCERT], 2019, pp. 28-29) to identify the present level of professional skills and subsequently place him/her at the appropriate stage of development amongst the four levels from *beginners* to *proficient*, *expert* and *lead* teachers. In the NPST standards, professional growth and development is construed as the fourth strand of teaching skill and descriptive estimates of this standard are given across the four levels in a comprehensive manner from gaining knowledge and pedagogical skills to their application, conducting action-research and sharing knowledge to contribute to a collaborative professional development system (pp. 41-42). Thus, both NPST and TSAR contribute in a more positive and authentic conceptualisation by including teacher agency in professional development rather than it being externally driven where teachers are expected to participate in stipulated in-service programmes to fulfil the construct's systemic requirements. Thus, unlike the previous externally driven formulations of NCTE, the TSAR throws a positive light on our understanding of teachers' professional development by making the teacher responsible for his/her growth whereby the teacher can place himself/herself in a level appropriate to his/her skills and application of research to understand the power of individually driven CPD. The need to emphasise the role of teacher agency in professional development by urging them to take responsibility for their own learning and up scaling their skills through carefully observed classroom incidents can be an important site of CPD is what this article argues for.

Understanding and Applying CPD in the Classroom Context

Though the conceptualisation of CPD in India is not without its shortcomings, my goal in this article is to demonstrate through a meta-analysis of nine qualitative studies by expert teachers that individual endeavors in class can serve as valid attempts at CPD. Through the meta-analysis I intend to show the expert teachers' practical ways of engaging in meaningful professional development activities and in a way taking the TSAR of professional development forward to create an avenue for intrinsic motivation. The studies serve as good examples of the effectiveness and impact of CPD in the life of teachers and students involved in the events within the ambit of the classroom context.

CPD Formulations and Research in India: Directions Given by Expert Teachers

I am using the term 'expert teachers' in this article to refer to teachers in India who have actively *engaged* in CPD, and *integrated* the experiences by documenting their research stories through in-depth qualitative analysis of their experiences in the last two decades (British Council model 2015, p. 4). So the studies by the expert teachers form the basis of selection of the meta-analysis of CPD qualitative research in India that I present in the rest of the article. The studies are taken from two primary sources: (i) Bolitho and Padwad, 2013 (pp. 59-107) and (ii) a section titled CPD (pp. 129-185) in Kaushik and Khanna, 2022 and another recent study by Shankar (2022).

In the first source by Bolitho and Padwad (2013), there are studies of five expert teachers who work with smaller communities of in-service teachers to initiate CPD through conscious reflections of their classroom practices and present their beliefs and attitudes to change, provide feedback and track growth. The first study by Mathew (pp. 59-70) employs writing weekly diary notes and discussions around it as tools to gather reflective data from twenty-five teachers and finally presenting their experiences at a conference and publishing it. Group discussions make teachers less anxious about being judged and help them think about CPD in a concrete and positive manner while the preparations for the conference presentation and writing a paper make them more conscious of the role of reflection in personal growth and stay motivated to engage in reflections beyond the duration of the study. The second

study by Shivakumar (pp. 71-79) reports three expert teachers' journeys as members of an ELT forum for three decades and their individual efforts through a wide range of activities that brought about gradual changes. The author stresses on the importance of networking, decentralising avenues of growth and undertaking collaborative activities with teachers and documenting such experiences to reflect, learn and sustain professional development through intrinsic motivation. The third study by Menon (pp. 80-87) is a social initiative on CPD of teachers who form a Facebook community and use the online forum as a source of engaging in self-driven development through four aspects: reflecting on practices, building peer networks to discuss, sharing classroom practices as examples of reflections and generating e-content on teaching. The author reports that though the initial participation and activities of the teachers were low, the pace improved as teachers understood how to reflect; experienced benefits by reading posts of one another and gradually built trust and confidence to share work and strengthen the bond of peer group members as well as be open to feedback without feeling judged. The fourth study by Bedadur (pp. 88-95) is on examining the efficacy of using mobile to get a group of 30 teachers, who have minimal exposure to English outside the classroom context, to enhance their proficiency in the target language. The researcher conducts this exploratory study through a design-based research model, which allows her flexibility to adapt the steps of using mobile learning according to the needs of professional development of the teachers. The study concludes with the finding that though individual teacher engagement is difficult to sustain through mobile learning but when initiated into collaborative work with peers, the teachers seem to take charge of their learning through creation of content and sharing reflections about learning. In the fifth study, Kapur (pp. 96-107) considers the significant role of mentoring in creating awareness about how to engage in CPD practices and talk about the benefits and limitations of such practices amongst a community of fifteen in-service teachers. She observes a gradual change in teacher attitudes to engage in reflections through diary writing from negative perceptions of lack of time and poor learner abilities to reporting about learning or pedagogical practices that worked in class, recording learner feedback and picking up strategies from mentor discussions to implement in class.

In the second source of Kaushik and Khanna (2022) there is a section on

CPD with four papers. The section begins with the first paper by Rod Bolitho (pp. 129-143) where he charts out the concept to signify *progression*—respect and commitment to continue the learning trajectory. To build a shared understanding of the term, still lacking in education, Bolitho conceptualises CPD as a process of development, a continuation of the opportunity to learn and establish links between teaching and learning and that such opportunities have to be individually sought rather than rely on any external agent to provide such training. Following this, there are three studies on practical examples of three expert teachers of conducting CPD in the ambit of individual lessons and what they learn as result of examining their practices closely through two sources, namely the eyes of the learners combined with self-observations. The first study by Shankar (pp. 144-159) reports learner feedback on perceptions about the content, delivery and assessment of a course on SL classroom. Learner feedback collected on well-aligned semi-structured forms at three stages of the course helped Shankar track her CPD to make adjustments to her pedagogical knowledge, both for immediate need and long term goals. The second study by Palini (pp. 160-171) presents an example of teacher-led CPD by using video data of her sessions for a group of pre-service teachers to reflect and write in her journal about four different roles—a presenter, a monitor, an observer and a feedback provider. The detailed qualitative analysis shows the finer instances of her teaching and feedback in the video-recorded data and identifications of parts that would need improvement. The third study by Pande (pp. 172-185) reports her action research on setting up a peer-monitoring system and its impact on learners. Based on the positive results of the mentoring tool, she garners support and is able to institutionalise the peer-monitoring system. Her reflections are on practices of building learner autonomy when scaffolded by more able peers in heterogeneous multilingual classes.

A recent study by Shankar (2022) on 20 university teachers' awareness, motivation, avenues and assessment of professional development, is a positive example of how the teachers work within a context that gives them an opportunity to strive for self-driven CPD practices. This in turn contributes to their growth and provides support to their learners. It is encouraging that the participating teachers have a heightened view of the role of CPD and therefore strive to use it to reflect upon their practices and vocalise the deep affective impact of their engagements.

In sum, all the expert teachers have shown successful examples of CPD

because of two reasons—one, they have been trained to continuously strive to become better in their profession which makes them intrinsically motivated to practice classroom-based CPD; and two, they all work in contexts where such work is valued and appreciation comes in the form of promotion and participation in wider academic activities of prestige like getting funding to attend conferences and be a part of larger academic forums.

Findings of the Meta-analysis of CPD Research

All the nine studies presented above are good examples of establishing teacher agency in CPD by way of engaging with the process deeply and identifying valid steps of what worked in their individual contexts. I now draw from these studies a few seminal findings as attributes of how teachers can engage with classroom-based CPD.

Selecting Valid Tools of Data Collection Aligned to the Goals of Individual CPD Research

The expert teachers have been able to systematically design tools to collect data from participants who range from learners, pre- and in-service teachers to the self-reports of the expert teachers—all important stakeholders of education. The tools range from diary and reflective writing (Mathew, 2013; Bedadur, 2013; Menon, 2013; Shivakumar, 2013), to interviews (open-ended and semi-structured) and opinion and self-assessment-based questionnaires (Shankar, 2022; Pande 2022), to classroom observations and recordings (Palini, 2022; Pande, 2022). The expert teachers find a combination of tools closely aligned to their research objectives and questions, which help validate claims through data triangulation.

Doing Thematic Analysis of Classroom Data Gathered from Different Stakeholders of Education

An engagement with CPD research essentially requires one to collect reflective data of pedagogical practices and teacher opinion and beliefs. So the data comprises mostly longish texts that need to be qualitatively analysed based on salient attributes of the content or emerging themes in the data. An understanding of how to handle large amounts of qualitative data in a manageable summarised format to show evidence of claims and arguments is crucial to report and publish from CPD experiences.

All the expert teachers have attempted thematic analysis of the data they have collected from participants, but with varying levels of success at presenting holistic trends and showcasing finer nuances of change. Two broad themes have featured in all their papers: One, *identification of pedagogical (or assessment) moves (or steps) that have shown a positive impact on learning* and two, *reflections on practices or shared beliefs and attitudes about the teaching-learning context to provide self-feedback*.

Presenting thematic analysis of data has a lot of internal challenges like that of coverage, representation, reliability, validity and so on. Identifying themes to code the data aligned to the goals of individual research, usually proposed through research questions or statements, is a crucial step for summarising qualitative evidence. This is an area where teachers need training while the expert teachers can move towards making their data presentation more comprehensive and systematic and summarise the trends of change in behaviour using descriptive statistics and visual displays.

Deeply Engaging with Classroom Practices and Learners as a Result of Individual Efforts

Through the studies, all the expert teachers show that they have deeply engaged with their work to understand how the initiatives positively impacted them as well as a larger community of learners and colleagues. They have also pointed out the limitations or challenges of their research. They are all examples of building a teacher agency where they show a willingness to continue with good models (Pande, 2022; Menon, 2013) or change their present practices and plan future steps (Shankar, 2022; Palini, 2022) based on contextually driven evidence.

Acknowledging the Support of Community, Peer Networking for Effective CPD

The studies show that an important trend for success of CPD initiatives is networking and creating a community of practitioners. This motivates teachers to move beyond their isolated pockets of work to engage with the reflections of other colleagues (Mathew, 2013); feel appreciated and heard (Shivakuamar, 2013); learn from one another (Menon, 2013; Pande, 2013; Shankar, 2022) and feel secured to negotiate in the supportive environment (Kapur, 2013).

Sharing Knowledge Gained from Professional Development Activities by Writing about CPD

The studies by the expert teachers reveal that a primary step to initiate teachers (pre and in-service) in documenting changes in behaviour can happen through diary writing (Mathew, 2013; Kapur, 2013). Through this kind of reflective writing (Menon, 2013; Shankar, 2022) teachers can move towards research writing to further grow professionally and share knowledge through conference presentations and publishing papers.

Using Technology to Self-Reflect, Support CPD Initiatives and Wider Training Outreach

The studies by three expert teachers—Menon (2013), Bedadur (2013), and Palini (2022) give examples of strategic use of technology that could be easily implemented by teachers in class to track their CPD journey through devices like Facebook pages, mobile messages and video recording apps. In a recent paper Jose (2022) suggests another creative instance of using technology through web 2.0 tools to engage with CPD. She explains how the tools can be used to create open educational resources in a multidisciplinary manner, a timely enumeration of the NEP 2020 formulation (pp. 36-37, 56-59). The model supports teacher agency because while developing content-based language lessons, one can collaborate with teachers of an institution and take CPD forward. The technological tools are all user-friendly, low-cost or free, innovative and can easily document change by recording all instances of communication in an easeful and authentic manner, which can be cumbersome otherwise.

Conclusion

In the article, I have presented examples from Indian classrooms and teacher networks to show what works as sustainable practices of professional development when teachers are self-driven and create opportunities of growth either through personal efforts and/or create a network amongst trusted colleagues. Teacher self-agency helps in charting out a plan for CPD and then with the implementation of the plan teachers are able to reflect and record instances of growth. This is not to say that for professional development self-agency is sufficient but it is a *necessary* condition, which then has to be recognised by the system and supported. This would make teachers feel appreciated and engage in more such activities in a life-long manner. The examples provided

in this article could be well taken up by other teachers as guidelines to plan and select valid research tools for CPD activities and experience the impact of such activities in their career.

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