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## Listening to Unheard Voices: Professional Development Reforms for Pakistani Tertiary Teachers

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## Listening to Unheard Voices: Professional Development Reforms for Pakistani Tertiary Teachers

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*Abstract: Fragmented, unfocused, and top down approaches to professional development are unrealistic, ineffective and do not promise anything significant to teachers and their contexts. This paper questions professional development for tertiary teachers in Pakistan. It does so from the perspectives of Pakistani tertiary teachers gained through a qualitative, ethnographic case study. The analysis of these previously unheard voices revealed themes that expand our understanding of the problematic nature of professional development. The results of this study indicate the need to reform professional development and to assist in these reforms, the study suggests that teachers need to gain a wide repertoire of teaching to become better practitioners. To do so, a school-based provision of professional development with social learning as the pedagogy is preferred as a design.*

### Introduction

Professional development opportunities for Pakistani tertiary teachers are woefully inadequate, brief and sporadic. Even today, when much has been known and written about the significance of professional development for teachers' success and students' learning, Pakistani tertiary teachers are completely deprived of it. Their workplaces are largely unsupportive environments that do not support building cultures of meaningful interaction among teachers for their learning and development and to have a significant positive impact on student learning. Lack of access to appropriate professional development, training and development funds, meaningful peer interaction, and research culture, has fast become the perfect norm and explains why tertiary teachers in Pakistan feel intellectually isolated.

In certain tertiary education settings, however, teachers' development needs are being met, that too rarely, through a transmission-oriented design of professional development (NAHE, 2010). These traditional approaches to professional development, as the literature also suggests, are congruent with old epistemological design by which agenda is determined by outsiders and participants are placed in a passive role. Such designs are often subject to criticism about their tight administrative control, poor intellectual rigour, and lack of connection to teachers' contexts, needs and career stages (Kennedy, 2005). This study is significant in this respect as it aims a) to collect tertiary teachers' experiences and viewpoints on their professional development practice and design; and b) to expand our understanding of what reforms are necessary for improvement.

## Research Question

Situated within the background we have outlined above, the research question this study aims to answer is: How are professional development opportunities for tertiary teachers in Pakistan currently experienced, and what changes, if any, should be made?

## Brief Literature Review

The common characteristics in the literature portray professional development as favourable or advantageous combination of circumstances that embody formal and informal as well as planned and incidental opportunities for teachers to grow and develop. Customarily, teacher development is the professional growth a teacher gains by achieving increased experience and examining his or her teaching systematically (Glatthorn, 1995). To be precise, professional development of teachers, unlike career development and staff development, is social and constructivist (Wenger, 1998; McLaughlin and Zarrow, 2001; King, 2004; Kelly, 2006), ongoing and long-term (McAlpine and Saroyan, 2004), purposeful (Guskey, 2002), and context, practice and reform related (Little, 1999; Nicholls, 2002; Knapp, 2003).

Several studies have argued for a stronger focus on adult learning theory as one of the key considerations in the design of professional development. Various authors, for example, Brancato (2003), Daley (2003), Lawler (2003), Lawler and King (2000), Piggot-Irvine (2006), disown passive approaches to professional development and propose to view teachers as adult learners and their professional development activity as adult learning. That being so, teachers can learn in a variety of ways; for example, through discussions with their colleagues, friends and family (Viskovic, 2006); through reflection by considering, explicitly or tacitly, their own experiences (Lawler, 2003; Schön, 1991, 1996); from their prior experiences in constructing new information and knowledge; and by performing active roles in their learning process (Devlin, 2007; Merriam and Caffarella, 2007).

Kennedy (2005), analysing various models of professional development, argues that designs with transformation as a purpose allow teachers larger amount of professional autonomy to continue to grow and develop and to link theory with practice. Studies also suggest that professional development designs that allow well-supported mixture of formal and informal learning and greater ownership and control of the process are more likely to be productive as they attend to personal, social, and occupational aspects of professional learning of its participants (Beckett and Hager, 2002; Fraser, et al., 2007). For this to happen, Lawler and King (2000) strongly suggest that we need to “move away from a deficit model of development toward one of professional development and growth” (p. 6).

## The Research Approach

This study subscribed to a qualitative research to enable modest, interpretative beginning. Qualitative research, deriving its strength from its inductive approach, lets the researcher enter ‘the subjective, lived in worlds’ (Funnell, 1996, p.51; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 3) of the research participants to unfold reality. This study employed ethnographic case study approach to investigate the specific professional development practice and design by interacting with the participants intimately and allowing them to speak for themselves in semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Stake, 2000; Creswell, 2007). The project began in 2010 in tertiary education settings in Lahore, Gujranwala and Islamabad, Pakistan. To gain an in-depth and highly contextualised understanding of the specific phenomenon, six information-rich cases were employed considering their significance to the specific purpose of

the study. Data was gathered in participants' indigenous languages - Urdu and Punjabi. A brief introduction to our study participants has been presented as follows:

*SAIRAN, Assistant Professor in Applied Linguistics, at a degree college in Lahore, has vast experience of teaching in rural and urban areas of Pakistan over about thirty years.*

*KHUSHI, Assistant Professor/Head of Urdu department at a degree college in Gujranwala, holds a PhD in Literature and has been teaching graduate and post graduate classes for the last twelve years.*

*BILAL holds a PhD in Education and has been working as Lecturer and a teacher educator at a degree college in Lahore since 2004.*

*SURRIAH holds a degree in Education Planning and Management and serves in the Ministry of Education Pakistan as a Director of a project for developing human resources for public and private universities.*

*AROMA serves as a Director of Quality Assurance and a teacher educator at a public university in Lahore. She holds a master's degree in Business Education.*

*VIOLA, a Lecturer at a private university in Lahore, holds a master's degree in Sociology and teaches undergraduate classes.*

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

To bring order, structure and interpretation to the collected data to answer the research question, Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework for data analysis was used. This framework consisted of three simultaneous flows of activity: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. Before analysing data, tape-recorded interviews and field notes were transcribed *verbatim*; interview responses were translated into English; the gathered data was edited where needed and was logged according to its type and occurrence. To seek an intimate familiarity, each research participant's transcript was read by us a number of times. Prolonged engagement with the data helped generate preliminary categories which acted as baskets (Marshall and Rossman, 2006) into which segments of text: categories, phrases, and statements were placed. These segments of text were then entered onto a Miles and Huberman (1994) -style grid to display it for further analysis. This grid design consisted of a matrix with respondents across the top and questions listed along the sides. At this point, the key issues and salient points were carefully examined and inductively coded (coding developed by directly examining the data) by underlining them with differently coloured highlighting pens. Categories, patterns and themes emerged which through contemplation and analysis brought meaning and coherence to the generated theme categories. This facilitated the drawing of conclusions and concepts. The emerging results, well-grounded in the data, were then written. The outcomes, highly contestable and worthy of further debate in a critical way, were a true reflection of the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of the teachers. They guided the understanding and description of the nature of phenomenon under investigation.

### **Rigour and Trustworthiness**

Throughout this project, rigour and trust were ensured by taking a number of measures. A well-defined sampling method was employed, i.e. a purposive sample of six professionals who were salient to the study was selected. Only those participants were engaged who were neither our colleagues nor in any dependant relationship with us; those who felt obliged were not involved in the study. Three different perspectives were gained by selecting three different types of respondent - teachers, professional development providers and professional development designer. An open disclosure of information was ensured by adopting different strategies: confidentiality of information and protection of the participants'

identity were assured; participants were asked to choose interview venues where they feel relaxed and comfortable; participants were encouraged to communicate in their indigenous languages. Data was transcribed verbatim, translated, and the participants were invited to review their transcripts and their translations. A thorough analysis was made certain through the use of flexible and transparent tools of analysis, i.e. Miles and Huberman (1994) - style grid. The analysis and the conclusions drawn as a result were further validated by inviting all participants to read them and provide comments.

## Findings

Five themes emerged to describe Pakistani teachers' experiences and the type of reforms needed in their professional development: lack of professional support, school-based provision of professional development, social learning as the pedagogy; generic and discipline-based teaching skill formation, and evaluation.

### Lack of Professional Support

The theme of Unhappiness recurred throughout the participants' responses as they unleashed a persistent critique of the present situation related to their professional development in Pakistan. Their responses unfolded four key aspects: the type of challenges that they were facing, the professional support or assistance that was available to them, the design of the existing professional development, and the measures that they considered could improve the situation. We have discussed these in order as follows:

Their challenges, although appearing to be multi-faceted, yet were mainly related to their teaching practice and the lack of professional support. Of these, the most noticeable was their being overburdened, unappreciated, and unsupported which, they felt, was further aggravated by the passive learners that they deal with everyday in their large, mixed ability classes. As they expressed it, they had not had any support system in practice within their setups to assist them in rising up to their challenges. *"... in time of need, most of us fail to figure out reasonable solutions to our teaching-related problems and we do not know where to go and who to ask ..."* (Bilal-1) painted this picture of the kind of professional cultures Pakistani teachers work in. Making the situation worse for them was the fact that most of the teachers in colleges and universities did not have to have any pre-service teacher education at the time of their entering the profession. This was demoralizing and had seriously undermined their work. Sairan expressed her feelings of abandonment and frustration:

*At college level, it is expected because teachers have done their masters, therefore, they do not need any training or professional development. It is only through trial and error method that we develop. Take my example, for the last thirty years nobody has ever asked me if I needed any kind of professional support or help, and there were numerous occasions when I thought of quitting ...* (Sairan-1-7).

Commenting on the design and quality of externally-delivered professional development for university teachers, an overwhelming majority considered this to be a top-down, old fashioned, mechanistic view of professional development, which lacked respect for teachers and their learning needs. *"Links are very weak", "inflexible", "tightly structured" and "irrelevant"* were the voices heard consistently across teachers' viewpoints. Khushi made it a point as he stated: *"At the first place teachers' professional needs are not targeted and then these courses never build on what teachers already know or have experienced ... mere eyewash, you see"* (Khushi-5). Their displeasure with the traditional form of professional development resonates with McLaughlin and Zarrow's (2001) views who believe that professional development should be a constructivist rather than a transmission-oriented experience for teachers and must assume teachers as active learners. Furthermore, the

participants raised the issue of inequitable and unjust access to even this sort of professional development. As participation in these events was on a nomination-basis which, they believed, was never fair and equal, there were many who had never had any professional development in their long teaching careers. *Surriah*, a head of the national professional development project, revealed her department's constraints and incapacity to reach to all teachers:

*Though we claim but realistically we can't provide training to everybody every year. After all NAHE is a project and it will have its end somewhere in 2011. It was very difficult for us to continue even from the first phase to the second. Do you know why? Because of the financial crunch and the change in priorities! And, in these years, we could provide training to only 8.8% of the total teachers in the sector (Surriah-2).*

Professional development, besides being inadequate and inequitable, was largely unrelated to their teaching experiences and needs. The participants and their colleagues always felt the program content was too generic, tightly structured and highly inflexible to entertain their professional interests, issues and emerging needs. According to the participants, the information-based design of professional development had very little to offer to them, and was the least that they considered to be the target of professional development. They in fact liked active involvement, not only in the identification of their needs, but also in the designing and implementation of professional development programs for them. For example, Daley (2003) and Lawler (2003) are of the view that for professional development initiatives to be valuable and fruitful, their design has to be congruent with teachers' contexts, practices and learning needs and to do so it is important to move away from a deficit model of development toward one of professional development and growth.

The need for devising a coherent policy for professional development for college and university teachers was deeply felt and strongly suggested by the participants. They believed that teachers, being the main stakeholders, must act and play a central role in this regard. They also suggested that a certain level of teacher education in the form of teaching certificate or diploma be made mandatory for new entrants, so that professional development for them could focus and build more on their real classroom needs and experiences and not on superficial aspects.

### **School-Based Provision of Professional Development**

Our research found that teachers, professional development providers and designers clearly valued school-based provision of professional development and considered it more suitable to their contexts as well as to their learning needs. They believed that their workplaces, if transformed into more nurturing, supportive, and flexible environments, can undoubtedly ensure their sustained development and growth. The cultivation of such supportive contexts and communities will provide them professional development which is more realistic, accessible, continual, and equitable.

*Khushi* raised this issue when he expressed: "at the moment, training opportunities are available only to a chosen few, who have good relationships perhaps, with the department heads or deans. Not everyone is nominated to go and attend" (*Khushi-2*). *Surriah* addressed this concern and suggested a solution as she argued:

*Colleges and universities should have their own professional development centres for their on-going development. If it is a part of their own system and daily practice, teachers will be able to develop themselves continually and according to their own schedule. And, believe me, this provision at a local level will address teachers' local needs on a regular basis. And they won't have to disrupt their teaching or unnecessarily travel to attend workshops far away (Surriah-1).*

In fact, the sharing that can result out of a school-based design can spread good practice within the school and beyond, empower the novice to be more knowledgeable and experienced, enable accomplished teachers to stay current, and make it possible for the teaching community to generate new knowledge. This is supported by Wenger (1998), McLaughlin and Zarrow (2001), Piggot-Irvine (2004) and Kelly (2006). Little (1999, p. 253), for instance, argues that in contexts where professional development is a necessary part of school life, the workplace cultural norm is ‘learning enriched’ and ‘teachers form a disposition toward their own learning in the fabric of daily school work’. On the contrary, “if a teacher does not work in a professional learning community where teachers work collaboratively, sharing passion and purpose for their work, then professional development is short-lived” (Fullan and Mascall cited in Piggot-Irvine, 2004, p. 480).

In the context of school-led provision of professional development, the study revealed that, besides benefiting from mutually supportive relationship within their professional communities, there is an immense need to consolidate it further by providing two-way support: firstly, supportive leadership and secondly, provision of latest self-access materials (books and journals) and access to expertise of researchers to broaden their reflection, thinking and repertoire.

The fieldwork particularly recognised the indifferent, unsupportive, and conventional leadership roles that existed in Pakistan. Most of the participants stated that their workplace leadership: “... *don’t appreciate, encourage or support*” (Bilal-7); “*after training we go back and try to replicate it, they set us aside and say, ‘you have had enough twenty four day fun, get back to work now’*” (Surriah-1); and “... *when we [teachers] come up with new ideas or innovations, they (department heads) resist us ...*” (Viola-1). On the contrary, teachers demanded concerned, supportive, and unconventional roles from their leadership to build, sustain, and communicate cultures of mutual development and growth. This is exactly in line with what Piggot-Irvine (2004) argues in the claim that development is phenomenal when the leadership has an enormous appetite to reflect, learn and develop themselves, and create opportunities for others to develop too.

The study, thus, discloses that professional development, available within teachers’ local control, complemented by supportive policies, promising leadership, sufficient reading materials, and a positive climate within their institutions, would be more befitting in providing the means to address their learning and development needs at a local level, and on a regular basis.

### **Social Learning as the Pedagogy**

The study indicated that the participants cherished social learning as the pedagogy. Most of the participants, when asked about what they preferred to do during professional development, advocated: “*establishing a culture of sharing*”, “*group work and reflectivity*”, “*collaboration with their colleagues*”, and “*peer reviews*”. They expressed their liking for developing cultures of collegial support at their workplaces where they could collaborate, share and reflect upon their strengths and weaknesses, and make meanings with the help and support of their peers. This pedagogy which is collaborative, active, connected, and ongoing was considered suitable for their purposes and needs. Research is filled with information on the importance of developing a collaborative culture within learning organizations. The works of Lawler (2003), King (2004), Kelly (2006) and Fraser, et al. (2007) resonate with the beliefs shared by the participants in the study.

The study further illuminated the precise nature of social learning to which the participants felt inclined. An overwhelming majority preferred learning through holistic means where focus is on personal as well as social aspects of learning. To put it another way, they preferred learning individually through on-the-job experience and reflection, through

peer reviews of teaching, and with the help of educational researchers and other outside perspectives. For example, *Aroma* illuminated this in these words:

*I would not advise one particular method because we learn in many different ways. You can learn from a teacher, you can learn from your well-informed colleague, you can learn on your own or with the help of a supervisor. So a collective form of professional development which is both formal and informal can be more practical and useful for us (Aroma-8).*

This form of professional development can be viewed further through the lens Kennedy (2005) has provided in the context of professional development designs. This inside-outside design resonates with Kennedy's 'transitional' spectrum of professional development, e.g. mentoring and a community of practice model, with increasing amount of professional autonomy. 'Transitional' design as stated by Kennedy has the capacity to oscillate between transmissive and transformative designs. Put another way, transitional design supports the process of acculturation into an established community of practice, where teachers construct knowledge by engaging expert tuition, like workshops, to focus on technical aspects of the job. In addition, teachers can profit from transformational designs, like action research, to enjoy huge professional autonomy in internalising new concepts, reflecting on their practice, constructing new knowledge and applying it in their contexts.

### **Generic and Discipline-based Teaching Skill Formation**

All of the participants on numerous occasions in their interviews expressed their strong desire to seek continual support to become better practitioners. Based on our fieldwork, two elements appear to be fundamental in the context of what teachers wish to do during professional development and what teachers should achieve as an outcome of professional development. These were: a) teachers needed to gain and enhance their instructive strategies to become effective classroom teachers and to produce a change in their student learning; and b) they needed skills and abilities to experiment any new knowledge to see how it manifests in their daily work within their classroom and workplace. We turn to elaborating these two points now.

Firstly, to learn about teaching and build expertise, teachers advocated a balance to be created between generic and subject-specific pedagogic knowledge and understanding. They were of the view that their professional development workshops merely focus on generic or put it singular methods rather than a range of teaching techniques. They believed generic teaching skills to be important to seek a multi-disciplinary approaches but in their opinion, will not be sufficient unless these skills are linked with the subject content. *Khushi* attempted to address this fine balance in his words:

*I am not saying that we all need same skills to teach different subjects. What I mean is, a teacher needs specific skills for a specific subject but it would be nice to sit sometime with a teacher from another subject or field too, have a conversation, see how they teach, listen to their experiences, and you never know, you find a practical solution to your problem in hand ... I have experienced it (Khushi-9)*

Secondly, to test new knowledge and to check its validity in their practice, all of the participants suggested certain practices that professional development programmes should also focus and teachers be encouraged to employ in their teaching. These were learning how to reflect on events during or after their teaching, how to learn from and build on their experiences to construct new meanings, and how to do research in their own classrooms with the goal of improving teaching and student learning. Here some of the participants specifically expressed their desires to introduce 'action research' and 'peer-review of teaching' as a norm to their practice and workplace. When asked to indicate professional

development practice that could best fit their work and the context, the majority preferred learning by doing and by reflecting on their teaching individually and together. The participants, as a whole, believed that, as reflective practitioners, they would be more self-reliant and autonomous learners, and would “*start making their own decisions on rational basis and also learn to take the responsibility of their own actions and decisions*” (Saira-10).

There is copious amount of literature available that supports these opinions of the participants, for example, Schön (1991 and 1996), Lawler (2003), Knapp (2003), Devlin (2007) and Merriam and Caffarella (2007). Knapp (2003), for instance, expressed these views as:

high quality professional development must concentrate on classroom teaching, focus on building teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge, model preferred instructional practices (e.g. active learning), locate professional learning in collaborative, collegial - and generally school-based - learning environments, offer rigorous opportunities for professional development over time, and align with reform initiatives (p. 119).

## Evaluation

At two different places, the majority of participants referred to evaluation as a complementary means of determining success of professional development. ‘To improve, to transform, and to become a better practitioner’ was the overwhelming response of the majority of the participants. Besides, they also emphasised that the element of change should shuttle back and forth – ‘change in teachers’ practice should in turn be felt in their classrooms also’. They believed evaluation will help them understand whether professional development system or opportunities are performing as desired, resources are used appropriately, goals are being reached, and what interventions, if any, are needed to improve. *Viola* expressed her strong desire for adopting necessary measures to make development initiatives a permanent feature of her workplace culture:

*“Problem here is, at first place, things don’t start and if they do, nobody is there to look after them; everybody is interested in point scoring! That is why we never know whether or not they would continue and be there tomorrow. So, I would be very happy if somebody could ensure me that, for example, professional development starts and be there for us, whenever we need, without a problem (Viola-12).*

The study participants’ desire for a good monitoring and evaluation system for studying and improving shortcoming or pitfalls in the professional development initiatives resonates with Guskey (2002). According to the author, for any professional development system to desire a strong link between teachers’ improvement and students’ learning outcomes, presence of a meaningful evaluation process is necessary to judge its merit and performance. This evaluation process, as Guskey explains, must identify participants’ reactions, participants’ learning, organizational support and change, participants’ use of new knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes. The author further argues: “regardless of professional development design its form, professional development should be a purposeful endeavour and through evaluation, we can determine whether these activities are achieving their purposes” (Guskey, 2002, p. 46).

## Conclusion

This study was undertaken to gain insight into what tertiary teachers thought about the current professional development practices and to explore what changes could be made to

improve them. During our fieldwork in Pakistan, all of the study participants expressed their displeasure and disapproval of the current professional development practices. They considered them as sporadic and incongruent with their classroom experiences, development needs, and their contexts. They explored, in detail, their professional challenges and needs, supports and resources, and their perceptions of the professional development which they considered can be more suitable to their needs and their contexts. Therefore, based on these initial findings, we have concluded that the professional development practices for tertiary teachers in Pakistan need to be reformed. To make the beginning, these reforms should draw on the following points:

- To develop and grow, teachers need professional development opportunities that are continuing, school-based, and which support learning through reflection and in other experiential ways.
- Teachers need to gain a wide repertoire of teaching to become better practitioners, and, to do so, they need to work closely with their colleagues to benefit from individual, as well as social, aspects of their professional work.
- School-based provision of professional development must be well-supported by their leadership and steps should be taken to improve them to be more effective, rewarding and sustainable for teachers and their workplaces through a system of evaluation.

At this stage, these initial findings are important for three reasons: a) these contribute towards filling up the knowledge gaps related to the Pakistani context and the practice; b) these open a debate and provide a strong foundation for further research on effective professional development; and c) introduce a new vision and provide a basic fabric and some structure for the suggested reforms to take place. Any professional development that is unfocused, fragmented and unaligned with teachers' needs, contexts, and student learning will remain ineffective. Therefore, policies should be amended to introduce school-based professional development, leadership should nurture stimulating environments for teachers to grow and develop, and the concerned authorities in Pakistan must ensure fiscal, human and intellectual support without a compromise for sustainability.

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