



Teachers' Lived Experiences of Professional Development and Its Influence on Instructional Quality: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Teacher professional development is widely promoted as a lever for instructional improvement, yet teachers' own experiences of how it shapes their classroom practice remain underexplored, particularly in public secondary school settings. This study investigated the lived experiences of teachers regarding professional development and its perceived influence on the quality of their instruction. A qualitative phenomenological design, anchored on Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological tradition, was adopted. Fifteen secondary school teachers with at least five years of teaching experience were purposively selected from four public schools and engaged in in-depth, semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions. Data were analyzed through Moustakas's modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, involving epoché, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, and the construction of textural and structural descriptions. Five essential themes emerged, namely fragmented exposure to one-off training, the transformative power of sustained collaborative learning, the role of school leadership in enabling instructional change, the gap between training content and classroom realities, and the centrality of reflection in translating learning into practice. The findings highlight the importance of sustained, contextually grounded, and collaborative professional development models, and argue that instructional quality is most strongly shaped by ongoing professional learning communities rather than episodic seminars.

Keywords: - Professional Development, Instructional Quality, Lived Experience, Phenomenology, Teacher Learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Teacher professional development is consistently identified as one of the most important policy and practice levers for raising the quality of teaching and, in turn, learner outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Yet decades of investment have yielded uneven results. Many teachers continue to describe professional development as fragmented, decontextualized, and disconnected from the classroom realities in which they work (Borko, 2004; Kennedy, 2016). Quantitative evaluations have produced inconsistent effects on instructional quality and student achievement, partly because professional development takes many forms and the conditions under which it succeeds are highly contextual.

To understand why some forms of professional development transform teaching while others do not, it is necessary to examine professional development as it is actually experienced by teachers. The literature offers strong frameworks for what effective professional development should look like, including a focus on content, active learning, coherence, sustained duration, and collective participation (Desimone, 2009). However, frameworks alone cannot explain how teachers internalize, resist, adapt, or repurpose professional development experiences in their everyday work. Phenomenological inquiry, which seeks to uncover the meaning of lived experience as it is consciously perceived by participants, is particularly suited to this gap (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014).

In many public-school systems, teachers attend a wide range of training activities ranging from one-off seminars and orientation workshops to school-based learning communities and online courses. The extent to which these experiences translate into improved planning, classroom delivery, assessment, and reflection, which together constitute instructional quality, depends on a complex interplay of personal disposition, institutional support, and professional culture (Fullan, 2016;

Vescio et al., 2008). Understanding this interplay from the inside requires methods that allow teachers to articulate the meanings they attach to their professional learning experiences.

The present study contributes to this conversation by exploring the lived experiences of secondary school teachers regarding professional development and the ways in which these experiences shape their instructional practice. The study is anchored on Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, which posits that meaningful change in adult learners arises through critical reflection on disorienting experiences, and is informed by Desimone's (2009) framework of effective professional development as a heuristic for organizing the analysis of teacher accounts.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of the study was to explore the lived experiences of secondary school teachers regarding professional development and the meanings they attach to its influence on the quality of their instruction. Specifically, the study sought to:

- Describe the range of professional development experiences encountered by secondary school teachers in their careers.
- Explore the meanings teachers attach to these professional development experiences.
- Identify the ways in which these experiences are perceived to shape teachers' planning, classroom delivery, assessment, and reflective practice.
- Examine the conditions that teachers identify as enabling or constraining the translation of professional learning into improved instruction.
- Surface the essential structure of the lived experience of professional development as a contributor to instructional quality.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design rooted in the transcendental phenomenological tradition developed by Moustakas (1994), which seeks to describe the essence of a shared lived experience as it is consciously perceived by those who have undergone it. The design was deemed appropriate because the research questions called for a deep, interpretive understanding of teachers' subjective accounts rather than the testing of relationships among variables. The phenomenological orientation also enabled the researcher to set aside preconceptions through the practice of epoché, allowing the participants' experiences to emerge as they were lived (Husserl, 1931).

The study was conducted in four public secondary schools situated in urban and semi-urban localities and selected for their representation of varied institutional cultures and professional development practices. Participants were 15 secondary school teachers selected through purposive criterion sampling, in line with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation that 5 to 25 participants are sufficient for phenomenological inquiry. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least five years of full-time teaching experience, current involvement in classroom instruction, and prior participation in at least three professional development activities of varied formats. The sample comprised nine female and six male teachers, with subject specializations spanning the sciences, humanities, and languages, and a mean teaching experience of 12.7 years.

Two main data collection methods were used. The primary method was an in-depth, semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60 minutes with each participant, conducted face to face in private rooms within the participants' schools. The interview guide was developed in line with phenomenological principles, beginning with broad invitations to recount professional development experiences and progressing to focused probes about meaning, perceived influence on instruction, and contextual conditions. The secondary method was two focus group discussions, with seven and eight participants respectively, designed to allow shared meanings and contrasting perspectives to emerge through dialogue. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with written consent and transcribed verbatim.

The trustworthiness of the inquiry was established in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement, member checking with five participants who reviewed their transcripts and the preliminary themes, and peer debriefing with a fellow educational researcher. Dependability was strengthened through a detailed audit trail documenting all methodological decisions. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of context and participants. Confirmability was supported by the practice of epoché, in which the researcher journaled assumptions and prior beliefs about professional development before and during data collection in order to bracket their influence on interpretation.

The study followed the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2017). Institutional ethical clearance was secured, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were briefed on the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the study, including their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and schools, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and analytic memos.

Data were analyzed through Moustakas's (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The researcher first engaged in epoché, recording personal experiences and assumptions about professional development. Each transcript was then read multiple times to obtain a sense of the whole, after which significant statements relevant to the phenomenon were extracted in a process called horizontalization, in which all relevant statements are treated as equally significant. The statements were grouped into meaning units and clustered into themes. Textural descriptions were constructed to convey what participants had experienced, and structural descriptions were developed to capture how they had experienced it. Finally, textural and structural descriptions were synthesized into a composite essence statement representing the shared lived experience of the participants. The qualitative analysis software NVivo Version 14 was used to support data management, coding, and theme development.

IV. RESULTS

Five essential themes emerged from the analysis, each capturing a distinct facet of the shared lived experience while contributing to a unified composite essence.

The first theme, fragmented exposure to one-off training, captured the dominant pattern of professional development described by participants. Most teachers recounted attending short, often externally mandated workshops, summer in-service courses, and one-time seminars that introduced new ideas without subsequent follow-up, mentoring, or classroom application support. Participants described these experiences as informative but rarely transformative. As one participant remarked, repeated training sessions blurred together over the years, leaving fragments of ideas without a coherent professional growth pathway.

The second theme, the transformative power of sustained collaborative learning, captured a contrasting and more positive dimension of teachers' experiences. Participants who had taken part in school-based learning communities, peer-coaching arrangements, or sustained subject networks reported strong influences on their instructional practice. They described iterative cycles of trying ideas, observing peers, exchanging feedback, and refining lessons over time as the most powerful avenue through which their teaching changed. These accounts emphasized continuity, trust, and a sense of shared professional inquiry as distinguishing features.

The third theme, the role of school leadership in enabling instructional change, captured the perceived importance of principals and academic coordinators in shaping the conditions under which professional learning translates into instruction. Teachers spoke positively of leaders who protected time for professional dialogue, modeled instructional curiosity, and used supervision as developmental rather than evaluative. Conversely, environments in which leadership treated professional development as a compliance exercise were associated with low transfer of learning into classroom practice.

The fourth theme, the gap between training content and classroom realities, captured a recurring source of frustration. Participants described professional development sessions whose content was generic, theoretically dense, or pitched to ideal classroom conditions that bore little resemblance to their own large, mixed-ability, resource-constrained classes. The disjuncture often left teachers uncertain about how to translate ideas into their everyday work, particularly when training was delivered by facilitators with limited recent classroom experience.

The fifth theme, the centrality of reflection in translating learning into practice, captured the cognitive and emotional process through which teachers internalized and adapted professional learning. Participants who described their teaching as having improved most significantly were those who actively reflected on their practice through journals, post-lesson conversations with colleagues, or guided reflection within learning communities. Reflection emerged not as an optional add-on but as the mechanism through which abstract training content became personally meaningful and practically useful.

The composite essence statement that synthesized these themes is as follows: For these secondary school teachers, the lived experience of professional development as a contributor to instructional quality is one of episodic, often disconnected exposure to ideas, made transformative only when situated within sustained collaborative settings, supported by enabling school leadership, grounded in classroom realities, and made meaningful through ongoing reflective practice.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate why teacher professional development so often falls short of its promise and what makes it effective when it succeeds. The dominance of fragmented, one-off training in participants' accounts confirms a long-standing critique of conventional professional development models (Borko, 2004; Kennedy, 2016) and resonates with Desimone's (2009) framework, which identifies sustained duration and coherence as essential features of effective professional development that are routinely absent from short workshops.

The strong presence of the theme on sustained collaborative learning supports the consistent finding in international research that professional learning communities, peer coaching, and lesson study yield more durable changes in instructional practice than discrete training events (Vescio et al., 2008). Teachers' descriptions of iterative cycles of trying, observing, and refining lessons closely mirror the conditions that adult learning theory identifies as conducive to meaningful change, including active engagement, social interaction, and connection to authentic problems of practice (Mezirow, 1997).

The emphasis participants placed on school leadership echoes Fullan's (2016) argument that the conditions for change are at least as important as the content of change. Leaders who treat supervision as developmental and who protect time for collaborative inquiry create the relational and structural infrastructure within which professional development takes root. The contrasting accounts of compliance-oriented environments serve as a cautionary reminder that policy investments in professional development are wasted when school cultures do not support the transfer of learning into practice.

The gap between training content and classroom realities is a particularly important finding for policy and program design. It suggests that professional development must be planned with deep knowledge of the actual teaching contexts in which participants work, including class size, learner diversity, and material constraints. Training that ignores these conditions risks being experienced as irrelevant, even when its content is intellectually sound.

Finally, the centrality of reflection underscores that professional development is not transmitted but constructed. Teachers translate inputs into improved instruction through cognitive and emotional processes that require time, structure, and a sense of professional safety. Schools that build reflective routines into their professional learning are likely to see more durable improvements in instructional quality than those that rely on intellectual content alone.

The study has several limitations. The use of a small purposive sample, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limits statistical generalizability. The reliance on self-report introduces the possibility of recall and social desirability biases. The study also focused on secondary school teachers with at least five years of experience, and the experiences of novice teachers and primary school teachers may differ. Future research could extend the inquiry to these populations and integrate observational data on instructional practice to triangulate teachers' accounts.

VI. CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of secondary school teachers reveal that professional development influences instructional quality not through the accumulation of training events but through sustained, collaborative, contextually grounded, and reflectively engaged learning experiences. Episodic exposure to ideas, though common, contributes little to enduring instructional change. Schools, school systems, and policymakers seeking to raise instructional quality should therefore reconfigure professional development around school-based learning communities, supported by enabling leadership, content that respects classroom realities, and routines that institutionalize reflective practice. Investments aligned with these conditions are likely to yield significantly stronger returns than continued reliance on one-off seminars.

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