

Opportunities and Challenges of Online Professional Development Training: Perspectives of Private Schools' Teachers

فرص وتحديات برامج التنمية المهنية الافتراضية من منظور معلمي المدارس الخاصة

Sobhi Yousef Abuhattab¹, Ali Jamal Arafeh², Mohammed Suloom Alghafri³

¹ Part-time Lecturer, University of Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman

^{2,3} Assistant Professor of English, University of Nizwa, Sultanate of Oman

² ali.jamal@unizwa.edu.om

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Abstract:

Objectives: This study aimed to explore the perspectives of English Language teachers in private Schools regarding opportunities and challenges of online professional development (PD) programs. It also investigated their attitudes towards these online programs.

Methods: The qualitative method was employed to provide in-depth insights into the complex and nuanced perspectives of teachers regarding online professional development (PD), 5 Semi structured focus group interviews were conducted via Zoom platform with a subset of English Language teachers (N=20) randomly selected from a total of 100 male and female English Language teachers in 6 private international schools at Ajman Educational Zone. The interview main questions and follow up ones were validated by a jury of experts. Inter-rater reliability was also conducted to ensure the accuracy and precision of the results analysis. In addition, two research main questions were used to guide the study.

Results: The results showed that Online Professional Development Programs granted teachers professional development training opportunities in terms of quality and quantity as well as types and varieties since these programs are flexible, and affordable. They could also save time, efforts, money, and energy. In contrast, the challenges lied in language barriers, and appropriateness for the specific needs of teachers, students, subjects, and context. Additionally, most teachers developed positive attitudes towards online professional development programs.

Conclusion: It could be concluded that online professional development training programs were beneficial for teachers who developed mostly positive attitudes in various aspects like flexibility, affordability and variations though there were some barriers like appropriateness and language barriers.

Keywords: teachers; Online Professional Development Training; opportunities; challenges.

الملخص:

الأهداف: هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف وجهات نظر معلمين اللغة الإنجليزية في مدارس عجمان الخاصة بشأن الفرص والتحديات التي تواجهها في برامج التنمية المهنية الافتراضية. كما تناولت الدراسة التقصي عن مواقف المعلمين تجاه هذه البرامج.

المنهجية: تم استخدام المنهج الوصفي النوعي في هذه الدراسة بهدف الحصول على رؤى عميقة حول وجهات نظر المعلمين المعقدة والمتنوعة فيما يتعلق ببرامج التنمية المهنية الافتراضية. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة على منهجية نوعية لجمع البيانات من خلال إجراء خمس مقابلات جماعية مركزة وشبه موجهة عبر منصة زوم مع مجموعات من المعلمين تم اختيارهم عشوائياً من إجمالي 100 معلم ومعلمة من جنسيات مختلفة يعملون في 6 مدارس دولية خاصة في منطقة عجمان التعليمية. وقد تم التحقق من صحة وصدق أداة البحث وأسئلة المقابلات الرئيسية والتابعية من قبل لجنة من الخبراء. كما تم التأكد من ثبات الأداة من قبل المقيمين بطريقة (Inter-rater Reliability) لضمان دقة نتائج التحليل. تم استخدام سؤالين بحثيين رئيسيين لتوجيه الدراسة.

النتائج: أظهرت النتائج أن برامج التطوير المهني عبر الإنترنت وفرت للمعلمين فرص تدريب للتطوير المهني من حيث الجودة والكمية، وكذلك الأنواع والتنوع، نظراً لمرونة هذه البرامج وتكلفتها المناسبة. كما أنها تسهم في توفير الوقت والجهد والمال والطاقة. وعلى الجانب الآخر، تمثلت التحديات في حواجز اللغة ومدى ملاءمتها للاحتياجات المحددة للمعلمين والطلاب والمواد والسياق. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، طور معظم المعلمين مواقف إيجابية تجاه برامج التطوير المهني عبر الإنترنت.

الخلاصة: يمكن الاستنتاج أن برامج التدريب على التطوير المهني عبر الإنترنت كانت مفيدة للمعلمين الذين طوروا في الغالب مواقف إيجابية في جوانب مختلفة مثل المرونة، والتكلفة المناسبة، والتنوع، على الرغم من وجود بعض العوائق مثل مدى الملاءمة وحواجز اللغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المعلمون؛ برامج التنمية المهنية الافتراضية؛ الفرص؛ التحديات.

1 Introduction

Professional development programs face to face or virtual continue to be a significant tool for teachers in today's ever-changing educational landscape. The pandemic required educational institutions to reevaluate instructional delivery and introduce innovative technology to facilitate online lessons. Such programs enhance teachers' skills, knowledge, and overall performance; thus, improving students' performance and attainment.

Educational reform has become a vital necessity and a strategic goal of all nations due to 21st century digital dramatic changes. Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning continues to be a top priority worldwide. The quality of the education that students receive depends upon their teachers' effectiveness (García & Weiss 2019). The attainment of students in learning also depends upon their teachers' effectiveness and experience, having undertaken relevant professional development (PD) experiences to support their students' learning (Reeves, 2010).

Professional development of staff broadly refers to providing enabling conditions to staff to enhance their productivity in the various dimensions of their day-to-day responsibilities, including those related to their technical and personal spheres of the profession (Ibrahim 2021). The main goals of education system are teaching and learning, improving students' performance, providing a safe school learning experience.

Teachers' professional development is vital for distinct reasons. Continuous training and professional development help teachers develop new knowledge and skills to serve their students better (García & Weiss 2019). It enhances the quality of teacher and student's performance, and it is an ongoing process" (Paper, 2021). However, researchers argue the importance of professional development as to whether professional development programs contribute to teachers' learning or not. (Benthum, Gulikers, Jong & Mulder 2011).

On the other hand, teachers' attitude toward professional development is not positive all the time. Smith & Reynolds (2014) pointed out that large majorities of teachers do not believe that professional development is helping them prepare for the changing nature of their jobs, including using technology and digital learning tools, analyzing student data to differentiate instruction, and implementing the Common Core State Standards and other standards.

Smith & Reynolds (2014) stressed that the most often-cited barriers are insufficient time, lack of financial resources to pay for the professional development they want, and most PD sessions are not, customized to address the skills they need to develop. Lack of continuity between professional development sessions and follow-up decreases teachers desire to participate in training as well. Administrators cite a lack of time for training, and resources as key barriers.

DeMonte (2013) claimed that professional development is about teaching teachers. High-quality professional learning does so with an eye on using what teachers already know and building on that expertise to improve their teaching—it is not about pouring content into teachers and then expecting them to use what they learn instantly.

Saberi & Amiri (2016) concluded that teachers' most professional development agendas follow the "one-size-fits-all" philosophy. Furthermore, the study's findings revealed that neither teachers nor administrators had a clear understanding of the importance of professional development, nor did they have a deep desire to incorporate new products in this area.

With the technological revolution, all coaches and trainers are in the continuous training process and educating teachers about innovation, effective use of technology, and many other hot topics to enhance students' performance. Meanwhile, teachers are learners during professional development sessions.

Shifting to online professional development can eliminate some of the teachers' concerns towards standardized professional development, with several interactive, accessible, easy to use, and accessible places. The advantages of online professional development are time, flexibility, and affordability. Recorded sessions provide teachers with the opportunity to watch the training at time convenient for them. Online professional development affords teachers with a plethora of training choices from around the globe tailored to their needs.

Online PD sessions provide multiple training interactions, such as teacher-learner, learner-learners, learner-technology, teacher-technology, and learner-content (Vrasidas & Zembylas 2014). Johnson highlighted that online PD is helpful; it can include an interactive and live discussion between participants and trainer (Wesley Johnson 2014).

Professional development is known as “a systematic and formal group process in which a group of (educators) are required to get together for purposes of developing and/or advancing the goals of the institution” (Richardson & Hamilton, 1994, p. 109).

Modern reform efforts in science education place student sense-making and participation in the practices of science as a priority. If the learning of science is to result from productive sense-making, there must be a major change in the method of science teaching (Southerland, Granger, Hughes, Enderle, Roseler, Saka, & Tekkumru-Kisa, 2016; Torff & Sessions, 2009). Teachers will need to develop a profound craft of content knowledge of how to approach science as a knowledge-building activity (Southerland, et al, 2016). It has been widely argued that teachers themselves need to actively engage in the practices of science that lead to productive sense-making so that they may develop a fluency that can only come from ongoing wide of research experiences (Southerland, et al, 2016; Elliott, 2017).

Students in the UAE fail to meet the international benchmarks in English assessments. This is due to the quality of teaching & learning and ineffective professional development programs. There is a scarcity of research about the attitudes toward professional development programs of teachers. Another focal point has arisen from the experience of the researcher as a teacher. For a long time, observations show that the professional development programs conducted locally online need more focus in quality. Currently, online professional development programs in the Ajman School Zone are still in its infancy stage and developing.

1.1 The Purpose of the Study

This study investigated the opportunities and challenges of Online Professional Development Programs and teachers' attitudes towards them in an American Curriculum Schools in Ajman.

1.2 Research Questions

- What opportunities and challenges of online professional development?
- Do teachers have a positive attitude toward online professional development?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study may function as a basis for informing policy makers in the education sector about the need to adopt online Professional Development Programs. The study may add to the research locally and beyond in the field of professional development in the online context. The study may help in identifying the opportunities and challenges with regards to professional growth of teachers and schools as well.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

The main limitations of the study are that most participants were from two private schools in Ajman, and, it was conducted for one academic year only, 2020-2021. The online professional development training phenomena arose recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic as schools grappled with how to teach students in this new learning medium.

1.5 Research Design

This qualitative research study employed a phenomenological research type that seeks reality from individuals' narratives of their experiences and feelings that produced profound descriptions of the phenomenon of online professional development context (Creswell, 2013).

1.6 Instruments & Sampling

The sample population for the present study comprised of one hundred male and female teachers who are using English as a medium of instruction in teaching English, science, and mathematics in private schools in the Emirate of Ajman, United Arab Emirates. The participants (N= 100) in the research project were selected as convenience sampling. Collection of the data done via semi-structured Zoom interviews with a subset of English Language teachers (N=20) randomly selected from a total of 100 male and female English Language teachers in Ajman Educational Zone. The five semi-structured focus groups consisted of two males and two females from the two schools. These groups were interviewed through Zoom platforms. The instrument was subjected to a process of validation by a jury of experts and educators. The interviews were recoded and transcribed accurately to ensure a reliable record of the participants' responses by another rater. Inter-rater

reliability was also conducted to ensure the accuracy and precision of the results analysis. Then, key themes and core ideas were categorized within the data. This involves assigning codes to specific segments of the interviews that relate to particular topics or ideas. The core themes were refined to identify patterns, trends, and themes. Also recurring ideas, contradictions, and unexpected findings were regarded.

2 Results

2.1 Results of Research Question 1

The organization of Question 1 responses is classified according to main core themes, and it is divided into two categories: opportunities and challenges. Professional Development (PD) activities are opportunities for growth, as viewed by the four focus groups. The strengths and opportunities lend themselves to one another. For instance, online PD saves time, energy, and effort as well as expenses; it is recorded, and you can refer to it any time; it also encourages all to participate in several types of PD at home. One participant quoted *"online professional development has time flexibility, and affordability. It has the provision for recorded sessions so teachers can watch them at their convenience."* Virtual professional development opens the doors for online networking with other schools, which widens opportunities for shared learning opportunities. One is able to moderate and discuss solutions for problems and challenges that arise with colleagues from other schools that may have valuable information or knowledge that is power once it is shared. Online PD expands networking with educators from all over the world; thus, enabling teachers to share the best practices, experience, and expertise. One participant stated, *"As an individual you are given a flexible opportunity to grow in knowledge and skills."* Another one added that *"Success in the classroom will increase the motivation of the educator as well as the learners."* Lastly, teachers are not restricted to the PD sessions provided by the school, they can find multiple kinds of interactions, such as teacher-learner, learner-learners, learner-technology, teacher-technology, and learner-content.

There are common factors that may pose a challenge to the effectiveness of professional development, including language and technical barriers, teachers' teaching loads, school support, content, and context. A group of participants had negative attitudes towards professional development due inadequate technical and digital knowledge and expertise. Other participants referred to the challenges of inappropriateness of online PD to teachers' needs, interests and readiness. The participants stated, *"PD programs are not selected carefully to meet the staff needs (One size fits all)."* Another issue raised was *"Online PD is sometimes boring and lacks live interactivity due to lack of interpersonal and social communication and interaction"*. Participants also stated; *The expectations of the presenter for educators attending the PD program are not realistic and practical. All classrooms are different with unique needs for their students that need to be addressed with expected differentiation to be implemented. If an educator cannot effectively participate in PD programs, how will they implement the expected standards in their classrooms?*

2.2 Results of Research Question 2

The participants' responses were divided into two positions; the first half developed a positive attitude towards Online PD and justified their position as follows: Online professional development increased the chance of interactivity, accessibility, affordability, and comfortable use as well as having time flexibility in which teachers could watch these PD sessions more than once and at their convenient time. Additionally, online training might provide a reasonable amount and types of interaction between all stakeholders either live or recorded as highlighted by Vrasidas and Zembylas (2014) and Wesley Johnson (2014). Some female participants stated that *"online training is more comfortable for the working mothers who can stay home to take care of her children and training at the same time; moreover, online training can be recorded and used later."* Another lady added that *"Online training is culturally appropriate to Emirati female teachers specially some teachers would not like to emerge with the male teachers."*

In contrast, the second half developed a negative attitude towards online PD and justified their opposing position as follows: female participants group claimed that their negative attitude resulted in the lack of time, language barrier and technical problems due to internet and others. While the male groups developed their negative attitudes as a results of technology acceptance and fed up with technology that caused a stress and anxiety. Both males and females added that they preferred the PD that meet their professional development needs, subjects, and interests as well as their students' needs, readiness and context as supported by researchers (DeMonte 2013; Saberi & Amiri 2016).

It can be inferred that the participants responses for Question 2 is closely related to the respondents from Question 1. Both group of respondents expressed positive attitudes about the number of opportunities Online Professional Development Programs provide for teachers and the negative aspects were connected to the challenges.

3 Conclusion

Online Professional Development Programs have provided opportunities for teachers in terms of quality and quantity as well as types and varieties. Such programs are flexible, affordable, and promising in developing teachers' knowledge and skills. They also save time, efforts, money, and energy. In contrast, virtual professional development has challenges like language barriers, appropriateness for the specific needs of teachers, students, subjects, and context. Most teachers developed positive attitudes towards online professional development programs and showed preferences towards them rather than face to face professional development programs.

3.1 Recommendations

In light of the findings from the current study, these are recommendations to consider: design PD activities that meet the needs of all teachers, subjects, and students; focus on readiness, workload, time, school context, language and technical levels when organizing professional development. Further studies are needed to include public schools and other geographical areas. The schools also need to seize the opportunities of digital platforms to carry out professional training for the staff and building global and local networks to share the knowledge and best practices.

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