UNDERSTANDING CRITERIA OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: PERSPECTIVES OF ISLAMIC HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS IN ACEH

MEMAHAMI KRITERIA PENGEMBANGAN PROFESIONAL GURU YANG EFEKTIF: PERSPEKTIF GURU SMA ISLAM DI ACEH

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional qualitative study was conducted to understand teachers' expectations of their professional development that will inform the policy and practice of effective teacher professional development programs. The participants of the study were in-service English teachers who were alumni of professional development programs held at a training centre in Banda Aceh-Indonesia under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that teachers had high expectations when attending a professional development program. Another significant findings were teachers expected qualified trainers both instructional and interactional; the provision of good quality training facilities, resources, and infrastructure; adequate and equal teachers' access to professional development that meets their professional development's needs, career and learning journey. These elements were perceived by teacher participants as important criteria for effective teacher professional development, especially in Aceh's context.

Keywords: teachers' expectation; teacher professional development; trainer's quality; learning environment

ABSTRAK

Studi kualitatif secara cross-sectional ini dilakukan untuk memahami harapan guru terhadap pengembangan profesional yang dapat memberikan informasi terkait kebijakan dan praktik pada program pengembangan profesional guru yang efektif. Peserta penelitian adalah guru Bahasa Inggris yang sedang bertugas yang merupakan alumni program pengembangan profesional yang diadakan di sebuah pusat pelatihan di Banda Aceh-Indonesia di bawah Kementerian Agama. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan wawancara semi terstruktur, dikumpulkan, dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Temuan dari penelitian ini memberikan bukti bahwa guru memiliki harapan yang tinggi ketika mengikuti program pengembangan profesional. Temuan signifikan lainnya dari penelitian ini adalah guru mengharapkan pelatih berkualitas baik secara instruksional dan interaksional; penyediaan sarana, sumber daya, dan prasarana pelatihan yang berkualitas; akses guru yang memadai dan setara ke pengembangan profesional yang memenuhi kebutuhan pengembangan professional, karir, dan pembelajaran mereka. Unsur-unsur ini dianggap oleh peserta guru sebagai kriteria penting untuk pengembangan profesional guru yang efektif, terutama dalam konteks Aceh.

Kata kunci: harapan guru; pengembangan profesional guru; kualitas pelatih; lingkungan belajar

INTRODUCTION

Much has been studied and written that improving teachers teaching quality and student achievement has been positively linked to teachers' access to effective teacher professional development (Avalos, 2011). In light of this, student outcomes in school very much depend on the quality of teachers and their teaching (Gore, Lloyd Smith, Bowe, Ellis & Lubans, 2017), more than any other factor related to the school system (Qadhi, Hendawi, Mohammad, Ghazi, Al-Dosari & Du, 2020). In the same way, teachers' approaches to teaching influence students' approaches to learning (Cao, Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Toom, 2019). On this note, teachers need to continually professionally update their knowledge and skills in order to be able to provide quality teaching and learning in class for the benefit of their students and themselves, including remaining well-informed concerning the growth in knowledge in various domains of their teaching job (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Avalos, 2011, Philipsen, Tondeur, Pareja Roblin, Vanslambrouck, & Zhu, 2019) .

Teaching is a complex process, that involves much theoretically informed activity, and requires a high standard of professional practice (Sach, 2003; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007, Avalos, 2011). This notion implies that only those with the best and brightest academic credentials, dispositions, and personality traits should be in the teaching position (Gore et al., 2019). Gore et al (2019, p. 101) assert that to improve their teaching practice while also developing their efficacy, well-being, and professional engagement, those who are in the teaching job should pay attention to at least three dimensions of pedagogy: (i) Intellectual quality which include the elements of deep knowledge, deep understanding, problematic knowledge, higher-order thinking, metalanguage, and substantive communication, (ii) Learning environment that consist of the elements of explicit quality criteria, engagement, high expectations, social support, students' self-regulation, and student direction, (iii) significance that comprises of the elements of background knowledge, cultural knowledge, knowledge integration, inclusivity, connectedness, and narrative. Not only because of research in evaluating the best way to develop the quality teacher is limited (Sprott, 2019), finding sophisticated ways of evaluating the quality of teaching would have a limited impact on improving teaching quality unless it is linked to having effective teacher professional development programs (Gore et al., 2019).

Studies in teacher professional development provide evidence that teachers learn with satisfaction when the provision of professional development is consistent with their needs and expectations (Muijs, et al., 2004; Bissaker & Heath, 2005; Avalos, 2011). Professional development for teachers is not merely about offering teacher trainees new theories of teaching on either technical or instrumental knowledge. Rather it should challenge the teachers to realise the importance of the interactions between teaching theories and practice and to question their own current teaching beliefs and practice, and further, to facilitate them to keep

involving themselves in a continuous professional development (Cao, et al. 2019). An important message is that it is the characteristics of activities of a professional development program in which teachers are engaging that determine whether or not it is effective (Desimone, 2009, Ubit and Bartholomaeus, 2018). Professional development for teachers should enable teachers to experience the five core features in professional development which include content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation if the professional development is to be effective and increases the teachers' knowledge and skills, and affects their attitudes and beliefs, which the teachers then use to improve their instruction and/or their approach to pedagogy, with an increase in student learning as the final result (Desimone, 2009, Philipsen, Tondeur, Pareja Roblin, Vanslambrouck, & Zhu, 2019). In addition, the structure of the teacher's professional learning as well as the environment in which it occurs has an impact on the effectiveness of the professional learning (Avalos, 2011).

At the very core, teacher professional development deals with teachers' learning (Avalos, 2011). It is about conditioning teachers as being a learner and having a learning (Timperley et al., 2007). Gore et al. (2019) assert that effective professional development programs for teachers involve teachers as both learners and teachers that are needs-supportive, take place within the school day, are integrated in practice, cohere with school and system policies, and promote the transformative practice, rather than accountability (p. 100). It is

therefore important to recognise that "teacher learning and development is a complex process that brings together a host of different elements and is marked by an equally important set of factors. But also, that at the centre of the process, teachers continue to be both the subjects and objects of learning and development" (Avalos, 2011, p. 17). It "requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine where each one stands in terms of convictions and beliefs and the perusal and enactment of appropriate alternatives for improvement or change" (Avalos, 2011, p. 10). On that grounds, teachers' professional development starts from their pre-service education period at a teacher training institution and goes along their in-service career by means of on-the-job training at educational institutions they become part of (Sumaryanta, Mardapi, Sugima, & Herawan, 2019). Pantaziz & Styla (2020) argue that even if they have received a quality initial teacher education, teachers at all levels of education and teaching competence need to be trained continually to stay abreast in their professional teaching career path.

However, although a great amount of money has been invested in teacher professional programs along with elaborate regulatory systems to ensure quality teacher professional development programs (Gore, et al., 2017), not every professional development program available or provided for teachers is relevant to all teachers (Fullan &Hargreaves, 1996; Avalos, 2011, Ubit & Bartholomaeus, 2018) with a clear and direct link to teachers' classroom practice (Gore, et

al., 2017). More specifically, many professional development programs for teachers neglect teachers' needs, gender, age, years of teaching experience, and career development (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996), and very often such programs have a lack of clear and direct links with classroom practice, including on teaching practice and student outcomes (Gore, et al., 2017).

A training centre in Banda Aceh, in this case, as one of the training centres under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) across Indonesia, is mandated with providing professional development for all civil servants under MoRA both in the educational and administrative sectors. More specifically, the centre has run many professional development programs for teachers from elementary to senior high school level that cover various subjects including religious-related subjects, natural sciences, and languages such as Arabic and English.

From my informal conversations with teacher trainees or alumni who had attended some kind of teacher professional at the centre, I have understood that some of the programs, in one way another, are perceived as ineffective. Therefore, understanding teachers' points of view on their own learning needs and expectations is paramount (Bissaker and Heath, 2005).

This study is aimed at understanding teacher trainees' experiences and expectations when attending a teacher professional development program that will inform the policy and practice about effective teacher professional development to assist teachers to meet the needs of enhancing their teaching practices at school. The findings from this study can serve as guidelines and recommendations for training centres which will not only be useful for a training centre in Aceh, but it is hoped that they will also be useful and applicable to other teacher training centres in other areas with similar contexts, especially the training centres under the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Indonesia Republic (MoRA).

METHOD

This study is a cross-sectional qualitative study that focuses on teachers' perspectives of the criteria of effective professional development programs for teachers. Participants of the study were purposively selected, considering their employment status and their attendance of any teacher professional development. They were from four groups of English teacher training alumni who had attended at least one teacher professional development program at a training centre in Banda Aceh, that provides training and professional development program to all civil servants under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) between 2017 and 2018. Two were from junior high school (Madrasah Tsanawiyah) level and the two others were from senior high school (Madrasah Aliyah) level. Each group consisted of in-service English teachers teaching at Islamic junior and senior high schools from all districts across Aceh. They were invited to participate in the study through their WhatsApp group. In the end, eight alumni voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, and their agreement was considered as being their informed consent. Those who consented were contacted by phone for further discussion regarding their

participation, including the procedure of the interview, time, and their rights.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews using broad opening questions (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Punch, 2005; Rapley, 2004; Silverman, 2000). The questions in the interviews were constructed mainly within the following issues: 1). Participants' experience of their professional development at the training centre. 2). Participants' expectations for an effective teacher professional development program. Participants' responses during the interviews became the sources of the follow-up questions and led the rest of the discussion during the interview rather than to strictly delimit the interview to predetermined questions (Rapley, 2004). The interviews, using the Acehnese language, Bahasa Indonesia or English, took place about 20 minutes individually, conducted via phone considering that the distance between the residence of the alumni and me (one another) is far away in addition to finding a time that fits both the participants and me. I believed that this method of interview saves time, energy, and costs associated with the data collection process.

Thematic analysis was used in analysing collected data. There were no predetermined themes to focus on in this study; rather they emerged from my insider's sense of issues that are likely to occur in real life but still, data will be driven by the interpretation of collected data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In analysing the collected data, I listened and relistened very carefully the recorded interview to get myself familiar with the data and to develop good understanding of the participants'

responses, coded each emergent theme, and kept comparing the codes across the data between the newly and previously coded to report as themes for findings (Ubit & Bartholomaeus, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study highlights the criteria of effective teacher professional development program based on alumni perspectives from their experiences attending teacher professional programs at a training centre in Banda Aceh. Data from this study provide evidence that teachers in the Aceh province especially those working at 'madrasah' (i.e., junior or senior Islamic high schools) have high expectations when attending a professional development program. Teachers in the study talked about the need for supportive learning environment that includes good quality learning facilities, resources, and infrastructure, the good quality of teacher trainers including their instructional and interactional process with teacher trainees, and the adequate and equal teachers' access to professional development. The teacher participants perceived these as means of enhancing their professional knowledge and skills in their in-service teaching career and learning journey.

The learning environment

Research shows a strong positive correlation between perceived learning environment which include physical objects such as buildings and teaching learning materials and learners' attitude and commitment towards their learning (Frenzel, Pekrun & Gnetz, 2007). In this study, teacher alumni attended professional development at the training centre in Banda Aceh seemed to

struggle with their learning and participations in the program due to limited resources available in the centre that supported their learning process and involvement in the training session.

The training centre is a relatively new training centre, established in 2013. Before, all the civil servants of MoRA in Aceh had to go to the training centre in Medan, North Sumatera for their professional development. Up to now, the training centre in Banda Aceh has not had its own buildings. Rather it borrows one of the buildings of MAN Model Banda Aceh, an Islamic senior high school. The rooms given to the training centre are limited with only two rooms for teaching and learning and several small rooms for administrative needs, including rooms for the employees and a dormitory since the trainees would be staying in the centre during their professional development. Since it is a borrowed building, the facilities and resources are limited such as the size, number, and quality of the rooms, the yard, the internet, and other facilities to support programs offered by the centre. Many times, the training centre has to run professional development programs at other places such as hotels or buildings of nearby universities due to limited rooms and facilities available in the centre.

Although the study participants did not openly complain about the limitations the training centre had, data from interviews with the particiapants provided evidence that the lack of resources including facilities regarding their accommodation, internet, teaching and learning facilities had affected their participation in their professional development activities. For example, one teacher alumni mentioned that *"I have seen some friends who arrived late at class or were late to the morning assembly because they had to queue to take turn using bathroom"*. He continued to say that *"Sometimes participants did not mean to ignore the regulations or being not discipline. The limited facilities especially when they had to share it with others had caused them to break the regulations such as entering the class after the trainers had been in class, and so on"*.

Meanwhile, the alumni of a group who attended English teacher professional development held by the centre at a hotel, cheerfully commented that they were very happy with the facilities provided by the hotel including quality bedrooms, meals, study rooms, and the internet. One alumnus quoted that *"I had been to the training centre for a professional development program a while ago. And I can tell that we were very happy to be placed at a hotel for our professional development program, not in the training centre. In the hotel the bedroom was good, the classroom was good, and the food was great"*.

Most study participants believed that it was crucial to have good and adequate facilities and infrastructure including those that support teaching and learning sessions although they seemed to understand that the training centre is still newly established, and it takes time to improve its facilities and infrastructure. Consistent with other research findings, they believed that learning becomes more enjoyable if the resources are supporting their participation in the learning programs (Frenzel, Pekrun, and Gnetz, 2007).

Clearly, the availability of adequate resources to support teacher professional development programs is among the important factors that need to be taken into consideration in order to

provide effective professional development such as the ones for the English teachers at the training centre in Banda Aceh.

The quality of the trainers

Research has time and again provides evidence that how learners learn is very much affected by their teachers or instructors. This is because the quality of the teaching and learning process much depends on the quality of those who conduct the teaching (Gore et al., 2019). Findings from the study suggest that in addition to their appreciation towards the teacher trainers' competence in subject content knowledge, they put stress on the importance of trainers' classroom management skills. In this case, teacher trainees appreciated trainers who exhibited the ability of educators to provide a supportive classroom environment during the teaching and learning process.

Frenzel, Pekrun, and Gnetz (2007) argued that supportive learning environment is not merely about having quality space and physical environment such as good classrooms and buildings or quality teaching learning materials, but include the provision of quality teaching and learning process that include instructional and interactional between learners and instructors (i.e. teachers or trainers). Bissaker and Heath (2005) asserted that the interaction between instructors and learners was central to the structure of any professional learning program. Moreover, Frenzel and colleagues (2007) argued that teachers' or instructors' clear and structured instructions and their behaviours towards their learners can reduce learners' anxiety, boredom,

or even anger which in turn enhance their enjoyment and participation in the teaching and learning. However, as the findings of the study suggest, this seemed to be missing in one or more sessions during the English teacher professional development at the training centre in Banda Aceh. According to some study participants, there were trainers who taught in the English teacher professional development sessions who were not very supportive in terms of building interactional and transactional relationships with training participants. In this case, they were talking about trainers' teaching methods, referring to their monotonous and boring ways of teaching.

Furthermore, two of the study participants mentioned that there were trainers who seemed to be a little bit unfriendly when they responded to questions and comments from the participants during the teaching and learning process. More specifically, they noted that "*The way the trainer responded to our questions made us feel as if we did not quite understand the topic being discussed. It is intimidating*". In this case, the trainees asserted that "*The trainer's attitude, in particular, had to some degree affected the willingness and commitment of the trainees to participate in the training session*". For example, one male teacher trainee mentioned "*In one particular session, a trainer insisted that what he had explained was the absolute truth and did not accept other opinions or views from trainees about one particular topic being discussed*". They reported that they lost a sense of enjoyment to fully involve in the training activities. Consequently, trainees then seemed to be reluctant to

participate actively during the particular trainer's session.

In accordance with Murray-Harvey (2010), it is therefore important that trainers at any training centre especially the one in Banda Aceh pay attention to the attitude and relationship they have with trainees, particularly when related to the instructional relationship since this kind of relationship affects the way the trainers manage the teaching and learning process and interact with the trainees. Murray-Harvey (2010, p. 113) argue that the effectiveness, classroom climate, and the way teachers, in this case, the trainers, manage their classrooms and the values and behaviours they model, as well as the way they provide feedback, and their effectiveness in developing learning orientations is relationship-based.

Teachers' access to Professional Development

Studies in the field of teacher professional development programs suggest that teacher professional development programs which are sustained and extended are to be more effective than those which are short and single sessions (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Desimone, 2009). Some teacher trainees expressed low expectations over teacher professional development at the training centre in Banda Aceh when they talked about opportunities to access TPD. They complained that they had limited and unequal opportunities for teacher professional development. They were thinking that the training centre might not have good data about alumni and future participants. *"Maybe the training centre does not have data on who had been*

trained and who had not been trained", remarked an alumnus. Another trainee commented that *"There were teachers from some schools who had been attending some if not many teacher professional development programs including those held by the training centre in Banda Aceh while there were teachers in other schools who had not attended any"*.

One female teacher participant, in particular, mentioned that she never had the opportunity to attend professional development since becoming a teacher for almost twenty years. The one that she attended in 2017 held by the training centre in Banda Aceh was the first teacher professional development she has attended during her professional career as a teacher. She asserted that *"Actually, I was not the one who would attend the TPD. It was for my colleague. But I was then appointed to attend the program because my colleague was for some reason unable to attend it. So, I then went to the program."*

Meanwhile, one male teacher participant of the study, who had been to many teacher professional development programs either the ones run by the training centre in Banda Aceh or by other training providers, commented that *"I do not understand why I am very often appointed by the school principal to attend TPD"*. In this case, he believed that *"May be my school principal might have misunderstood believing that the program is a follow-up program, so he has to send the same teachers to attend the professional development programs"*. As a result, some teachers attend so many professional development programs while others had missed the opportunities.

What concerning according to some study participants was that there were trainees who seemed to be less

committed to their participation. They believed those who were not committed were the ones who might have been to many professional development programs. The participants of the study believed that the reason for those being less committed was because the teachers get bored with topics and teaching-learning materials they might have received in their previous PDs. The study participants also suggested that some of the trainees went to the program just to escape from their routines at school or for other personal reasons including to visit their families or relatives in Banda Aceh while attending the professional development programs at the training centre.

In addition, as noted by Bissaker and Heath (2005) that teachers as successful learners are valuable to help them work with their colleagues and their students, alongside curriculum and new sciences. Another concern expressed by the study participants was the absence of evaluation and monitoring post-training or when the professional development was done. In this case, the study participants said that *"We were required to share what we had learnt during their PD at the training centre with our colleagues at school and implement what we had learnt in our classrooms. We also have to write a report to the training centre of what we had done in their school regarding our sharing with colleagues and what we had implemented from what we had learnt".*

In this case, teachers would not receive a certificate of attendance or participation if they do not submit their report. However, teacher trainees complained that *"There was no evaluation or monitoring from the training centre to whether or not we did all the requirements for getting the certificate".* Teacher participants of this study believed that their PD would be more effective if there are some kinds of evaluation, monitoring, and supervision conducted by the training centre once the program is over to make sure that teachers implemented what they had learnt and they are valuable to others in their institutions or schools. As a consequence, many alumni continued to teach in the ways they used to regardless of the new knowledge and skills they had learnt when attending the teacher's professional development.

One important point to highlight is that teachers can be successful learners if they have some kinds of activities where they can share their knowledge and expertise with each other since each teacher is competent in their own right with much knowledge and skills of value to others. Research provides evidence that teacher professional development programs will be more effective if teachers, especially when they have a similar background, get together for learning activities in which they have opportunities to share issues around their teaching practices, discuss them, and plan some ways to solve the challenges they may have faced or are facing during the professional development activities or in their daily work routines (Birman et al., 2000; Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, & Beckingham, 2004; Vrasidas & Glass, 2004; Desimone, 2009; Ubit & Bartholomaeus, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers need to be aware of the need for continuous professional development and be provided with

access to quality professional development in order to help them enhance their knowledge and skills in performing their roles at school. Despite the fact that any teacher training centre should provide quality professional development programs, the training centre in Banda Aceh indeed needs to improve its services and run a well-designed teacher training that meets teachers' needs and expectations, particularly for teachers within the Aceh province.

The quality of the facilities, resources that support the teaching and learning process during the training session, the quality of the trainers, especially their instructional and interactional relationships with the trainees as well as teachers' opportunity to access professional development programs and share what they had learnt to colleagues and students with some kinds of monitoring, supervision, and evaluation from the training centre are among important issues that need to put into considerations when the centre runs a teacher professional development program. The training centre in Banda Aceh has to seriously pay attention to these aspects if a teacher professional development program they are providing is meant to be an effective one.

The findings of this study might be biased due to the method used for collecting data and the participants involved since it only used phone interviews with only eight English teachers for their perceptions regarding their experiences when attending the teacher professional development programs at the training centre in Aceh. A more variety of methods for data collection and the source of data might result in different and more comprehensive findings regarding the phenomenon under study.

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