Perceptions, Engagement and Productivity of Teacher Professional Development (PD) Activities

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Abstract

Professional Development (PD) initiatives are the key for English as Second Language (ESL) teachers in Sri Lankan Universities for heightening their quality of teaching and students' performance. This qualitative case study is aimed at identifying ESL teachers' perspectives of engagement in PD activities and how their perceptions affect their engagement in PD activities. To this end semi-structured interviews were undertaken with ten ESL teachers of a government university in Sri Lanka, and for recognizing, analyzing and the interpreting of data, a Thematic Analysis was employed. The findings of the study indicate that the participants' behaviour and engagement in PD activities during sessions were largely controlled by contextual factors – the relevance of the content of the session to their practices, the interest in the session, the practitioner-centredness of the activities, and other contextual aspects - rather than their perceptions or type of PD. This means that, to which extent participants engage in PD activities, was mostly determined by the managerialist and democratic needs that decide the aims, the content, and the format of PD activities. The findings have implications for PD facilitators and policy-makers to introduce productive changes to the existing PD activities in all the universities in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the recommendations informed by the study can effectively be used for designing and implementing new PD activities for university ESL teachers. As such, ESL practitioners in the university sector in Sri Lanka may have opportunities to engage in focused and meaningful PD activities, and thereby enrich their knowledge, skills and professionalism.

Keywords: Contextual, Engagement, Factors, Perceptions

1. Introduction

English skills are vital for the university students in Sri Lanka to effectively acquire content knowledge and secure employment after graduation (Abeywickrama, 2020a, 2020b). Hence, a key role of university ESL practitioners is to improve students' English skills in a manner in which they can fulfil the workplace requirements (Abeywickrama, 2019). As indicated by previous research, enhancing teachers' knowledge, skills and expertise through PD can significantly heighten student outcomes (Coldwell, 2017; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Mohan, Lingam, & Chand, 2017; Saberi & Sahragard, 2019; Sixel, 2013). Therefore, policy-makers and governing institutions continuously pressurize ESL teachers in the university system to enrich their pedagogical knowledge and skills via PD programs to make their classroom practices more productive (Abeywickrama, 2020a). Critically, the impact of PD activities facilitated by the government and foreign agencies has been largely hindered by ESL teachers' lack of understanding of the need to engage constructively in PD initiatives (Abeywickrama, 2019; Abeywickrama & Ariyaratne, 2020).

On the other hand, many ESL practitioners engage in PD initiatives in order to align with requirements in their institutional and employment contexts or because PD sessions are mandated by their management. To effectively understand these gaps in their knowledge, focussed PD opportunities are vital. In particular, ongoing PD is largely beneficial for ESL practitioners in "managing curriculum development, innovation" (Wijeskera, 2012, p. 19) and pedagogical knowledge (Guskey, 2003; Merkt, 2017; Tinoca & Valente, 2015). In this context, gaining a holistic awareness of ESL teachers' perspectives of engagement during PD activities is essential to yield better outcomes from the existing sessions. Hence, the overarching aim of this investigation is to identify ESL teachers' perceptions of engagement in PD activities, how their perspectives regulate their engagement in PD activities, and to what extent PD initiatives are meaningful to provide them with better learning opportunities. The findings of this research will enable PD facilitators and policy-designers to organize meaningful and focused PD opportunities for teachers which may result in improving their knowledge and expertise.

2. Literature Review

Although leading teacher educationists (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Harwell, 2003; Richards & Farrell, 2005) have defined the term PD in numerous ways, "stipulative definitions, both of teacher development and, more generally, of PD are difficult to find, and almost entirely absent from the literature" (Evans, 2008, p. 14). Hence, "a definition that a majority of researchers agree upon is difficult to locate in the

academic literature" (Abeywickrama, 2019, p. 1). For the purposes of this study, teacher PD is defined as a continuous learning process across teachers' career for renewing their knowledge, competence and effectiveness that results in developing their efficacy and transferring of acquired knowledge to learners for enhancing their outcomes and quality of education.

2.1.   Issues in teacher PD

As researchers claim, most teacher PD sessions have no uniqueness, relevance and resourcefulness (Arikan, 2010; Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015; Bolam & McMahon, 2004; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Saberi & Amiri, 2016; Shirazi, Bagheri, Sadighi, & Yarmohammadi, 2013; Zheng, 2012), thus it is often "images of coffee breaks and consultants in elegant outfits" that retain in teachers' mind (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004, p. 1). This has led researchers and ESL practitioners to discussions on the value of the existing teacher PD programs (Gajadeera, 2006; Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013; Saberi & Amiri, 2016; Soleimani & Khaliliyan, 2012; Wichadee, 2012). As these authors underscore, flaws in the design and delivery of PD activities cause teachers to encounter unsatisfying experiences during PD sessions. Therefore, PD facilitators need to identify "where each practitioner stands in terms of convictions and beliefs" (Avalos, 2011, p. 10), and support them with appropriate instructions and leadership for development and change through PD activities. This will develop the belief among teachers that PD activities are capable of enhancing the quality of their classroom practices and hence, they may foster the confidence to use what they learn from PD to improve learner outcomes (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005).

2.1.1.   Issues relating to design and delivery

Current PD initiatives that mostly focus on "traditional or positivist principles, and behaviorist and objectivist traditions" (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012, p. 320) tend to transfer knowledge to teachers rather than supporting them to create new knowledge. As Pitsoe & Maila (2012) argue, traditional teacher PD initiatives are usually hierarchical because the power of an organization is often centralized among "policymakers or bureaucrats as the carriers of the knowledge that needs to be transferred to teachers, … [positioning teachers as receivers of] knowledge to be absorbed" (p. 320). Critically, this vertical knowledge transmission has entirely disregarded the valuable methods of teaching for learning (Freeman, 2002). Given the lack of provision to recognize the type of activities that are valuable and relevant to teachers' professional practice (Collins & Liang, 2014; Shirazi et al., 2013), the content of PD activities is highly unlikely to be used in a meaningful way in the institutions where practitioners carry out teaching (Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013; Wichadee, 2012). As a result, teachers may foster undesirable attitudes for PD, when top-down decision-making prioritizes PD providers' needs and offer activities that cannot be applied in average classroom

settings (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). In contrast, practitioners' interest and enthusiasm can be effectively maintained through the activities that include practitioner needs (Duta & Rafalia, 2014; Louws, Meirink, Veen, & Driel, 2017), and address diverse themes (Crandall, 1993).

In particular, teacher PD programs which use the most common method of instruction, the one-size-fits all workshop, instead of other effective formats and designs (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004), are the ones which receive the highest criticism (Alberth, Mursalim, Siam, Suardika, & Ino, 2018; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Hooker, 2017; Saberi & Amiri, 2016; Shirazi et al., 2013) By using a standardized one-size-fits-all approach for delivering PD across the board, overlooking experienced and novice teachers' needs, and teachers' students' age and cognitive development (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004), PD facilitators develop detrimental views towards sponsored PD among teachers. Previous research highlight that teachers may have various learning differences (Louws et al., 2017) and different PD needs in different stages in their career (El Afi, 2019; Mahmoudi & Özkan, 2015; Petrie & McGee, 2012). However, teachers are repeatedly enforced to attend workshops despite their unwillingness. For Shirazi et al. (2013), such practices cannot develop any significant changes in teacher-student learning.

Moreover, systematic mechanisms that can evaluate the productivity of PD programs, and re-structure them accordingly, is not maintained by many institutions and PD facilitators in the European countries (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). As a post-PD activity, a questionnaire that contains some superficial aspects is mostly circulated among participants instead of obtaining methodical in-depth feedback. Critically, teachers' genuine feedback cannot be uncovered in this manner (Shirazi et al., 2013). Besides, the dearth of practicum in teacher PD activities (Cornu & Ewing, 2008), the fragmented, and/or inconsistent nature of PD programs (Shirazi et al., 2013) have also largely been reported as issues (Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013). Attempting to accommodate the programs that were successful in foreign contexts (Saberi & Amiri, 2016) is also identified as an important issue in the design of PD for ESL teachers. On the other hand, teachers in the European context, always encounter issues and challenges in transferring their learning to classroom practices due to the unavailability of an authority or a facility to acknowledge the ownership and outcomes of activities that need to happen after a PD program (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Huberman & Miles, 1984). These issues emphasize the need for re-considering PD as a consorted effort of teachers, learners and facilitators (Abeywickrama, 2019), and thereby promoting improved learning, and providing benefits for all the stakeholders in the industry.

2.1.2. Less opportunities for PD

There is strong evidence in literature to validate that teachers' excessive classroom teaching and the possible burden of additional workloads are the main obstacles for participation in PD activities. Especially, as Cambone (1995) claims, administrators have negative attitudes towards PD, as teachers must deviate from their usual classroom practices during PD sessions. Therefore, prior to attending to PD activities, teachers are highly likely to consider to which extent their absence impacts on students' learning (Tan, Chang, & Teng, 2015). Even practitioners with a strong interest for self-development and growth can be discouraged by their fixed teaching plans (Breshears, 2004; Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013), as a result, they may not create an atmosphere for collaborative and communities of practice in their organizations (Shirazi et al., 2013). Due to this background, teachers are not prepared to leave their usual classroom schedules in order to attend to PD activities (Wichadee, 2012). Conversely, the classroom work they undertake alone, may not sustain and develop them professionally (Breshears , 2004).

Furthermore, although PD is perceived by practitioners as important in improving their career trajectories (Breshears, 2004, p. 32) "the economic conditions in which many teachers are entrenched" do not encourage them for participating in programs of teacher development that restricts their capacities of performing as professionals. For instance, many ESL practitioners who serve in rural contexts, or on contract basis are reluctant to invest much time, energy, or finance on their PD (Abbott & Rossiter, 2011). Having to travel widely to attend PD activities may also hinder teachers' enthusiasm and interest to engage in PD activities (Crandall, 1993).

2.2. The evaluation of productivity

Institutions and policy-designers tend to consider to which extent investments in teacher PD provide tangible benefits when education budgets become constrained (Guskey, 2000; Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2003; Tan et al., 2015) In this context, the evaluation of PD has a broader significance than ever (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019; Smylie, 2014). The methods used to evaluate the effect of PD activities on teachers' classroom practice and on students' learning should be valid and reliable. This can result in gaining a real assessment of the changes in productivity by all the stakeholders of teacher PD. Being aware of the strengths and the limitations of the existing evaluation process is essential, prior to the planning of any new system of evaluation for sponsored PD activities.

Growing evidence in literature demonstrates that the evaluation of teacher PD is usually undertaken in the form of a questionnaire to obtain feedback from participants for pre-designed enquiries (Edmonds & Lee, 2001;

Ingvarson et al., 2003). Questions related to delivery, effectiveness, applicability, attainment of expected objectives, participants' interest to gain similar experiences, and observations of how PD activities can impact on their classroom teaching are mostly included in such evaluation (Edmonds & Lee, 2001). Critically, as Edmonds and Lee (2001) claim, the most effective methods of follow-up that assess the real impact of teachers' PD on student performance have not been applied yet. More specifically, most evaluations have ignored long-term monitoring of the impact of PD. However, there are more reliable and focussed teacher PD evaluation models for assessing the effectiveness of PD activities. As Hanover Research (2015) state, they have gained wider acceptance during the past decade as standard methods.

Guskey's (2000) five critical levels of evaluation is considered a more systematic approach to measure the impact of PD at various stages of teacher practice. Due to its flexibility, it can effectively be contextualized within "different orientations" to achieve "intended outcomes" (Muijs, Day, Harris, & Lindsay, 2004, p. 229). For Guskey (2000), as each level depends on the level preceding that, gathering information for the five levels of evaluation can be somewhat complicated. Despite this situation, currently, Guskey's model has gained a broad acceptance as a method for evaluating teacher PD activities. The first critical level in Guskey's model, *participants' reactions,* functions as the most common and unchallenging stage of collecting data for evaluation. This is mainly because participants' responses at this stage are extremely personal and generalizable (Guskey, 2000). In contrast the second phase evaluates participants' learning: cognitive, affective or behavioural improvements, from PD.

Notably, as Muijs et al. (2004) underscores, Guskey's level three, *organisational support and change,* which is the most important phase in the model because organizations' genuine interest to follow the new practices incorporating them into organizational policies and providing adequate support and resources, is demonstrated at this point. The fourth phase in this model has special implication for both PD providers and practitioners as it evaluates participants' capability of application of new knowledge and skills in the real classroom context, and the retention of new knowledge and competencies by participants (Guskey, 2000). In this sense, the outcome of constructivist PD is evaluated in the fourth level (Pitsoe & Maila, 2012). The most critical phase of the entire process may be the last level that assesses students' performance. This is because the ultimate aim of any teacher PD program is to enhance learner performance, either cognitive or non-cognitive (Guskey, 2000).

Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002, p. 951) have developed an "interconnected model of teacher professional growth" based on Guskey's (2000) *critical model*. Conversely, the graded levels have been omitted from the model, and the evaluation method has been organized according to domains. This means that changes that take place in any domains can create a change in

the progress of teacher professional growth (see Hanover Research 2015). Several useful conventions for planning and guiding the evaluation of teacher PD are also proposed by Haslam (2010). For him, there is no a "single best approach to evaluation" (pp. 9-10) because the evaluation method is always decided by the nature of the PD activity, and therefore, the intended PD goals, learner outcomes, and the relevant indicators should be identified by program designers by integrating evaluation in to PD planning. For others, the most significant method for evaluating PD is obtaining teachers' contribution for developing the evaluation, as teachers' interest for the proposed PD activities is promoted by their sense of participation (Day & Sachs, 2004; Haslam, 2010). Conversely, Haslam emphasizes that PD evaluations must be separately undertaken and institutions must not use them in order to value the teachers' performance.

Overall, five common key areas are emphasized by these methods of evaluation: feedback of participants, application of learning, organisational response, participants' learning and change in practice, and impact of knowledge transmission and change in students. As argued, in many occasions, a more refined and systematic approach need to be applied when undertaking evaluations to recognize the complexity of institutional and individual differences, "whether evolutionary, incremental or transformational" (Muijs et al., 2004, p. 303). Therefore, it is highly doubtful whether the tangible outcomes of continuous PD can be measured in the Sri Lankan university context without such approaches.

3.   Methodology

The current study discusses university ESL practitioners' perceptions of PD, the relationship between those perceptions and engagement in PD activities, and the implication of meaningful engagement in PD activities for their growth and students learning. According to researchers, the qualitative case study method is the best method to achieve this kind of objective because it could "bring understanding, interpretation and meaning" (Lichtman, 2013 p.17) to the entire phenomenon of ESL teacher PD in Sri Lankan universities.

3.1.   Context and participants

A regional state university in Sri Lanka was used as a case in point to answer the research questions. Such a university was selected for the study after carefully analysing the nature of teacher PD opportunities received by them; sometimes, regional universities have inadequate provisions to strengthen PD, however, occasionally, they are provided with broader opportunities for attendance to PD activities (Liyanage, 2010). The study selected ten in service ESL practitioners in the Department of English Language Teaching (DELT) as the participants.The previous investigations

have recommended the purposeful sampling method and a small number of respondents for this type of qualitative research. Selecting participants purposefully has allowed the researcher to develop a broad analysis of "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 46). As such, despite the sample size, (Given, 2008; Hogan, Dolan, & Donnelly, 2009), for obtaining comprehensive awareness of participants' perceptions and of the work context, the study analysed all cases broadly (Savenye & Robinson, 2005). This means that, it is the nature of the study and the extent to which it discovers "the complex in-depth phenomena" that mostly determine the validity of the investigation (Lichtman, 2013, p. 22).

A group consisting of seven female and three male teachers were chosen for the research (n= 10), and the group represented both novice and experienced teachers. Sinhala is the first language of all the participants except for Participant 2 who speaks Tamil as the first language while the second language of all the participants is English. All respondents in the selected group have postgraduate qualifications, either Masters or PhD or both and most have offered Linguistics as a major in their Masters degrees. All teachers, except for 2 respondents, have more than twenty years of experience in teaching in the higher education sector. All respondents teach English as a Second Language (ESL) while some participants among them teach other English courses such as English Literature, English for Business Communication, English for General Purposes (EGP), and Business English. None of the participants have overseas teaching experience. The participants' demographics reveal the diversity of the subjects chosen for the study. However, the relationship between those variables and teacher perceptions was not examined by the current investigation as such variables are insignificant for the theoretical aims of the research.

3.2.   Instrument

Qualitative interviews can provide a new understanding to a complex situation (Folkestad, 2008). In particular, semi-structured interviews are the most valid instrument for use in this kind of research (Abeywickrama, 2019; Abeywickrama & Ariyaratne, 2020) given its potential as a qualitative data collection method and its broad application for case studies. As far as the other data collection methods are concerned, semi-structured interviews have more flexibility and depth of questioning (Burns, 2000; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Zacharias, 2012). Semi-structured interviews support the researcher to undertake the inquiries in a manner in which the participants are encouraged to provide more comprehensive answers, and identify their motives for such reactions (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Cohen & Manion, 1994). This supports the researcher to understand the phenomenon more holistically and resolve misconceptions, if any. Given this background, this research instrument is

likely to be "most favoured by educational researchers" (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 157). Accordingly, the current study also utilized the semi-structured interview in order to gather data from the participants.

The inquiries in the semi-structured interview were designed in a way that the researcher could gain a comprehensive understanding of the overarching aim of this research;   examine ESL teachers' perceptions of engagement in PD activities, how their perspectives control their engagement in PD activities, and to which extent PD initiatives can provide them with productive learning opportunities. For instance, participants' perceptions of engagement in PD activities were gathered through Question 10: *What factors may compel or hinder your engagement in a PD activity?* Similarly, Question 19 and 20 explored participants' views on how to design and deliver a PD activity in a way it meaningfully contributes to their classroom practices and professional growth; *Is there any post-monitoring program to identify whether ESL teachers transmit the knowledge and skills that they acquire from PD activities to their learners? Do you think PD activities are appropriately and systematically evaluated?*

3.3.   Thematic analysis

As indicated in literature, qualitative studies have effectively used both inductive and deductive methods of Thematic Analysis (TA) (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Halldorson, 2009; Jugder, 2016). Particularly, as the focus of the inductive approach is on "individual meaning" and understanding of complex situations (Zadrozny, Mcclure, Lee, & Jo, 2016, p. 219), significant dimensions could be recognized from the general patterns in the cases, and also various existing associations among dimensions can be identified (Patton, 2002). As a result, the qualitative paradigm mostly used the inductive method of TA to identify patterns in data which are gathered through the interviews with participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ibrahim, 2012; Jugder, 2016; Yukhymenko, Brown, Lawless, Brodowinska, & Mullin, 2014). TA has extensively been used in educational research over the last decade by many investigators (Abeywickrama, 2020b; Coldwell, 2017; Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015; Liyanage & Bartlett, 2010; Skinner, Leavey, & Rothi, 2019; Tan et al., 2015; Tuckett, 2005). As such, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of inductive method of TA was identified appropriate for this study. The phases of TA: (1) familiarizing with data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report broadly supported the researcher for recognizing, analyzing and interpreting data.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Attendance and engagement in PD

This section presents findings under two main components: participants' attendance to PD activities and their focused engagement. To achieve this, the researcher carefully observed the determinants which influenced participants to take part in PD activities, and the factors that affected their perceived engagement during PD sessions. Sponsored and independent PD activities regulated by managerialist and democratic principles respectively are the two types of PD that determine goals for participants to attend PD sessions. More specifically, the participants' perceptions are significantly connected with these goals that determine their attendance at PD sessions and largely influence in deciding the type of PD they participated. For example, PD activities were perceived by Participant 5 as a way for initiating collaborative practices, upgrading subject knowledge and instilling continuous learning, among others. As exposed, these perceptions worked as a stimulus in attending PD sessions.

> One thing is, you know, when we say language teaching, uh… specifically in second language teaching context, things you know change very often. So, I think we have to be lifelong learners otherwise, we cannot update ourselves. New technology comes to the field and also we can learn by observing others and talking with them. I mean sharing with others, and even by teaching itself. (Participant 5, Lines 205-209)

In another instance, Participant 1 regarded PD as a means for enhancing her content knowledge and a skillset thereby creating a better teaching learning environment to face classroom challenges:

> Interacting with students is also a very motivating factor for me as well. Because when I want to have a very quality discussion with the students, you know back of my mind, I feel that I have to keep on reading and have to keep on searching for new things to tell them. Because otherwise I'll be repeating myself and that's not what's required. (Participant 1, lines 301-305)

Managerialism always administers sponsored PD activities, determines "professional standards and frames the content and aims" of them (Evans & Esch, 2013, p. 137), while independent PD controlled by democratic professionalism considers teachers' needs and values as the key constituents and inspire them to reach their goals through self-directed learning (Abeywickrama, 2019). In this context, teachers have the responsibility of choosing the type of PD: sponsored or independent, through

which their goals for attendance to PD can be achieved. As Day and Sachs argue (2004), these two orientations to PD should not be regarded as "polarised or exclusive" (p.7); however, as indicated, managerialism and democratic principles that regulate sponsored and independent PD activities respectively define them as per the nature of the approach (Gurney & Liyanage, 2015).

4.2.   Determinants affecting teacher engagement

Although the participants reported various perceptions of sponsored and independent PD activities regulated by managerialist and democratic principles respectively, they could not always achieve those goals from each PD session. This is mainly because, practitioners' perceptions or the types of PD did not determine their level of engagement in PD activities but the perceived contextual determinants relating to each session. Perceived interest in the session, the relevance of content of the session to ESL, practitioner-centredness of the activity and other contextual aspects such as facilitator/s' individual disposition and the use of technology were the key factors that decide participant interaction and engagement (see Figure 1).
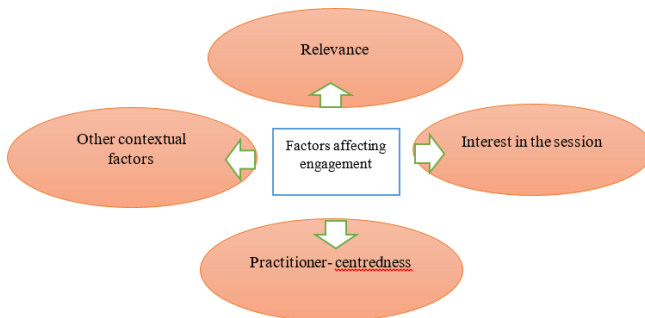
Fig 1: Factors affecting engagement in PD activities

The managerialist and democratic regulations that controlled the content and format of PD activity decided the extent to which these pre-defined factors delimited participants' engagement in PD. So as to uncover this intricate connection, the following sections discuss ESL practitioners' engagement in institutionally-facilitated PD activities compared to their engagement in independent activities promoted by democratic goals.

4.2.1. Participants' engagement in Sponsored PD

As reported by most participants, at least one of the two contextual factors determines their focussed engagement in PD activities: the perceived relevance of the content of the session to their classroom practice (Participants 1, 2, 5, 7, 8 & 9), individual and professional concern to the topic of the session (Participants 4, 6, 7 & 9). When there was a significant mismatch between what they exactly expected from the session and the informational content of the session, or when the content perceived to be discussed in the session was familiar to the participants, they tended to maintain a very low level of engagement, as in the case of Participant 1, "we might have wasted a whole day to learn something which was not related to our subject, so, then of course it was very difficult for us to engage in" (Lines 333-334). Similarly, for Participant 3, there was "nothing new to learn" from many sessions, as a result, they had no high engagement (Line 281). On the contrary, when the content of the PD session had a high level of relevance to teachers' professional practice due to its originality and creativity their level of engagement increased drastically (Participant 6).

Participants' focused engagement was also largely determined by the other pre-determined factor, the perceived level of interest in the topic (Participants 4, 6, 7 & 9). In this situation, regardless of other external determinants that obstruct teachers' participation, they were likely to engage in the activity, as Participant 7 reflected:

> If the topic is really interesting and really useful, so, I do attend even without considering the distance problem and get engaged, although we do have a lot of works. But, if it is not interesting so then we have to think twice. (Lines 112- 114)

This indicates that participants' low interest in the topic could prevent their full engagement in the PD activity. Moreover, practitioner-centeredness and the task-based nature of the session largely influenced the extent to which they engage in the PD activities. As reported, when participants were the prime focus of the activity given the interactive nature and the authenticity of the learning context, they were highly likely to engage in a session effectively and with interest. All participants broadly revealed the implication of this perspective. Participant 8, for instance, exposed how collaboration of a PD session promotes active engagement and involvement enabling her to achieve the expected learning outcome:

> Actually, the session was very interactive. It was based on evaluation and plagiarism. The facilitator gave us a list of activities to do as groups, and so. Rather than we being just the passive recipients of the knowledge we were asked to perform some activities. So, we could get the first-hand experience related to that. (Participant 8, Lines 102-105)

Conversely, when practitioners did not become the key stakeholders in the activity, especially in sponsored mandatory PD, they were directed to disengagement, this is mainly because, such activities could not create any meaningful opportunities to inspire participants' interaction, as in the case of Participant 4:

> I think we need to participate actively, not just listen passively during PD activities. Mostly, what we find is that we just go there, sit and listen to the lectures and enjoy their demonstrations and come back. But there are fewer opportunities for us to practice, for us to engage in task-based activities. So therefore, I think we should, the participants should engage in such activities very actively and involuntarily. (Lines 105-109)

Other contextual factors further had a substantial impact on practitioners' engagement (Participants 1 & 9). Specifically, Participant 9 reflected on how the facilitator's personal presentation influenced her engagement negatively in one of the sessions she participated in. For her "the facilitator was a sound academic, owever, when it came to the delivery, communication and building relationship with the audience, he was not that professional or capable" (Lines159-160). As conceptualized earlier, mostly contextual factors determined practitioners' active engagement in institutionally-sponsored PD sessions in spite of their goals for attendance.

4.2.2.   Participants' engagement in independent PD

Contrarily as participants were able to regulate the format of independent PD activities they can minimize the effect of contextual factors and maintained a high level of engagement. Participants had more satisfaction with their involvement in self-directed PD initiatives rather than mandatory activities sponsored by their management or any other regulatory bodies (Participants1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 10). For instance, as reported by Participant 1:

> We actually have to engage in independent PD activities…By doing it, and by taking the initiative in it, by being an independent person in it, it of course ensures that we are passionate about something, and that we are truly interested in the subject unless of course we cannot think of an instance where we take the initiative on our own. It can be more beneficial as the true interest. So, irrespective of the time matter, irrespective of the workload, we may be interested in engaging ourselves in a professional manner (Lines 92-98),

This demonstrates ESL practitioners' passion, active engagement and accountability for PD activities that originate from their own. Even though participants' engagement was considerably low in certain cases; the independent PD mostly establishes teacher autonomy and agency.

However, a facilitator's or a skilled person's intervention may be required to optimize participants' engagement in some cases (Participants 2 & 6).

4.3. Optimizing engagement and learning

As indicated prior even though participants aimed to reach a number of goals via institutionally- facilitated activities, the nature of each PD session mostly determined their engagement and learning outcomes. If this is really the case, strategies need to be identified in order to heighten participants' engagement in sponsored PD activities, and thereby enhancing learning outcomes. Conversely, participants can effectively achieve the expected learning outcomes via self-directed PD activities as such initiatives allow participants to regulate and monitor their motives. These findings validate that individually-driven PD activities are more meaningful and possess potential than the externally-facilitated conventional formats (Gurney, 2015), however, optimum results can be obtained through independent PD by promoting collaborative practices among practitioners rather than by undertaking PD activities individually. On the other hand, communities of practice should be properly established within and beyond the practitioners' employment context through a careful institutional mediation to maximize their learning.

Notably, as far as the sponsored PD activities are concerned, no design for PD specifically supported practitioners' engagement and learning. Even though workshops are being broadly criticized as a delivery mode, findings of this study validated that the format of PD activity is not the key factor that determined the productivity of PD sessions. Most research undertaken previously investigated teacher perspectives in terms of format and the design of PD activities rather than other variables that might hinder participants' attendance to PD, for instance, issues in the employment context and of individuals. Although research examined how the irrelevance of the content (Meng & Tajaroensuk, 2013; Wichadee, 2012), and the lack of practicum in PD sessions (Saberi & Amiri, 2016) negatively influenced teachers' attendance and such research have not examined the impact of those aspects on participants' engagement in PD activities. Although sponsored PD activities are increasingly being criticized due to their failure for maintaining practitioner engagement, institutions also have a responsibility to align the content of PD activities to reach managerialist goals (Gurney, Liyanage, & Haung, 2018).

If this is the case, it is important to discuss teachers' perceptions in parallel to the findings of previous studies so as to recommend certain principles and strategies that could be utilized for optimizing participants' active engagement in institutionally- facilitated PD sessions, and thereby heightening practitioners' learning outcomes. Most participants claimed that, the teachers' needs, interests, and experiences must be incorporated into the design of PD activities rather than trying to transmit the knowledge to

participants via one-size-fits-all PD sessions which were largely based on top-down decision making. This means that, when a PD activity catered to participants' real needs they had better interaction with enthusiasm as in the case of Participant 4:

> The course [PA activity] should address the needs of participants not the providers. I don't think that the existing PD programs do a need analysis. If they do it, they have to do it recurrently because participants and their needs vary. Then, participants can contribute effectively. (Lines 275-278)

This perspective has also been supported by many researchers (Gravani, 2007; Shirazi et al.,2013).

In addition, practitioners reported that the impact of various sponsored PD activities can effectively be heightened through strong post-monitoring, especially in the situations where the teachers' considered PD activities were not beneficial for their professional practice. In such cases, "for teachers to feel the implications of the activity [PD] for their work place, its application should be facilitated carefully by some kind of system. If it doesn't happen, teachers have no motives to follow it up" (Participant 2, Lines 211-213). Most importantly, teachers were highly likely to introduce drastic changes to their existing practices when they are given personalized feedback in relation to their classroom teaching and practice-based needs (Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013).

In establishing this type of facility, participants' negative perceptions with regard to sponsored PD activities could be re-oriented which may develop their interest for attendance and focussed engagement in PD.

Moreover, participants reported their dissatisfaction regarding the existing evaluation system, which was typically a questionnaire encompassing some peripheral questions in its place of systematic inquiries for detailed feedback. As Gurney (2015) claims, administering a questionnaire after the PD session for the evaluation is not a meaningful way to gain an understanding of its effectiveness. As participant 4 reflected, "we go on practically ticking, ticking, ticking and ticking without sometimes reading it" (Line 328). Their perspectives indicate the need for implementing a result-oriented evaluation method to measure the level of knowledge that they may retain sometime after completion of the activity. For instance, Participant 10 reported that, this is important to institutions, policy, designers, PD provides and practitioners as well.

> It [post-evaluation] will enable the participants to understand their development, the administrators to realize whether they have invested money on productive PD practices and the program

designers to obtain a proper evaluation to design the next program accordingly. (Participant 10, lines 463-467)

The availability of a systematic instrument to receive feedback from participants can largely support PD facilitators to re-examine and re-structure PD programs including participants' perceptions which may finally result in aligning activities as per participants' need and thereby, heightening engagement. As such, this can "nurture a greater depth of reasoning for attendance to PD and create optimal learning context" (Participant 10, Line140). These perspectives emphasize the need of objective-driven evaluation that can evaluate PD activities in line with the actual targets (Borg, 2018).

In summary, a careful analysis of participants' comments established three principles for PD: (a) analysing learner needs, (b) post-monitoring, and (c) post-program evaluation that should be considered seriously in developing PD activities in order to ensure participants' active engagement and learning. Therefore, all the stakeholders of PD should re-examine their practices and make sure that these principles are incorporated and carried out appropriately in PD programmes. First, PD activities must integrate practitioner needs, interests and prior experience rather than trying to transfer knowledge and skills via one-size-fits-all PD sessions. This practice can reflect teachers' authentic needs and maximize their participation and engagement. Notably, previous investigations have also underscored various standards, criteria and principles for use at all these phases in PD to enrich participants' engagement and learning, however, to which extent they are effectively employed in PD activities in the Sri Lankan university system is a question. Specifically, the potential tools such as the six principles proposed by Wasserman (2009) and the model introduced by Loucks-Horsley et al., 2010 (as cited in Wilde, 2010), have not yet been applied effectively in the designing and delivery of PD activities in a manner in which they address learner needs. Most importantly, the key aspects of the models: connecting practitioner's prior knowledge with new knowledge, creating numerous opportunities to use the learned skills and opportunities for practicing and obtaining feedback, and nurturing follow-up as collaborative practices, can encourage participants' autonomy and learner engagement.

Second, there is a serious need of forming a special body or a proper mechanism to undertake the responsibility of follow-up activities that should be accomplished upon the completion of institutionally- facilitated PD sessions, in order to heighten the effectiveness of what participants learned. With the support of such a facility, practitioners are able to re-visit their perceptions and develop their readiness to participate and engage in sponsored PD activities with more enthusiasm.

Finally, a productive evaluation for sponsored PD activities should be introduced instead of the prevailing method, which was mostly attempting to gain feedback through several peripheral questions rather than in-depth methodical inquires.

Receiving a more accurate feedback from participants through a well-designed device, can support PD providers and policy-designers to re-examine and re-structure PD sessions in a manner they heighten participants' interaction and engagement.   As far as the post-program evaluation is concerned, as indicated earlier, Guskey's (2000) five critical levels of evaluation can be considered a potential approach to observe the productivity of PD activities. However, the method of evaluation currently practiced at the Sri Lankan universities only considers the first level of the assessment. Critically, the most important levels of evaluation- "teachers' cognitive and behavioural changes, facilitation of the governing institutions for application and implementation of activities, participants' use of acquired knowledge and skills, and student learning" (Abeywickrama, 2019) have entirely been marginalized. More specifically, the fourth level of the evaluation model (Guskey, 2000), functions as a facilitator for the application of new knowledge which is   similar to a post-monitoring program that participants proposed.

This means that by integrating these aspects, the context supportive of practitioner autonomy can be established. In such a context, learners are situated as the main stakeholders (AL-Qahtani, 2015) and their needs and choices mostly determine the content and format of learning opportunities (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). As Aitken (2009) claims, this can secure teachers' space and foster their identities. In such a context, teachers have the opportunity to improve a strong sense of professionalism, and thereby optimizing their engagement in PD and efficacy in their practices. Conversely, to achieve this outcome, as indicated earlier, teacher agency should be acknowledged and accommodated properly within the teacher PD activities (Dadds, 2014). However, strictly adhering to the institutional and industry protocols may hinder teachers' opportunity for developing their space and identity (Gurney, 2015). The findings of the study indicate the critical need of re-examining the strategies that are employed for designing, implementation and evaluation of PD activities. Finally, the outcomes of such initiatives would provide validity for all the stakeholders in the industry.

5.   Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed that contextual determinants mostly regulated ESL teachers' engagement in PD activities during sessions more than their perceptions and types of PD. In other words, practitioners' level of engagement was dependent on the managerialist and democratic principles that determine the aims, the content, and the format of PD activities.

Participants could engage in independent PD activities more productively as they were able to control the impact of contextual factors. Teachers are strongly motivated in undertaking self-directed PD activities as they prioritize practitioners' democratic goals, principles, and needs over managerialist conventions.

The study points to the critical need of designing sponsored PD sessions in a manner in which they optimize practitioners' engagement, and thereby supporting them to attain their goals. Therefore, based on the findings, the study recommended certain principles that may be used to heighten participants' engagement in sponsored PD activities and thereby improve their learning from PD. Especially, by incorporating these principles, the autonomy supportive context can be developed where participants become the main stakeholders and learning opportunities are created as per their requirements and preferences. This can accommodate and acknowledge teachers' agency within teacher PD programs providing them the required identity and space rather than maintaining rigid intuitional policies and protocols.

5.1 Limitations and future research direction

The study used semi-structured interviews to examine ESL practitioners' perceptions and engagement. What participants reported in these interviews is connected to all PD sessions in general. This means that, the data collected to examine their interaction with PD activities are related to their perceived engagement and experiences. Even though this was an effective method to uncover participants' perspectives in relation to their engagement and learning in PD, gathering data as a post-participation would have limitations. Future studies need to be carried out in order to test the research questions with different groups of ESL practitioners in Sri Lanka or any other non-English and English-speaking countries to understand whether their perceptions relating to engagement and learning from PD deviate or conform to the findings of the current study.

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