

Institutionalizing School Teacher Portfolios for Continuing Professional Development

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Abstract

Language teacher portfolios are deemed instrumental for continuing professional development (CPD) particularly for primary and secondary school teachers as they allow teachers to reflect on their beliefs and practices, and enhance their knowledge and skills. A portfolio enables teachers to develop a record that keeps track of their improvements and professional knowledge and prompts them to supply documentary evidence for their practice (Crookes, 2003). This paper looks at the upsides and obstacles of portfolios among Thai teachers and proposes a concrete use of this professional development instrument that encompasses an effective strategy for implementation.

Keywords: teacher portfolios, continuing professional development (CPD), reflection

Introduction

Language teachers, however experienced they may be, need to ensure that the ways in which they facilitate language learning are practical and cultivating. Thus, self-assessment can play a key role in reflection and continuing professional development (CPD). Teacher portfolios can be used as a means of organizing various professional development accounts, including professional development attendance certificates and credentials as well as self-evaluation reports and classroom observation feedback. Self-assessment reports (SARs) and classroom or student feedback show that the portfolio is an important means of engaging in self-reflection. The portfolio is indeed a method to reflect on how one can progress in professional life as a teacher (Baume, 2000). For language teachers, important documents in the portfolio may comprise observation feedback received from their supervisors, self-evaluation reports they write or complete each academic year regarding their professional development and teaching competency as well as profiles they write about themselves as educators or academics. Thus, the portfolio affords teachers opportunities to reflect on what they believe in their teaching practices. No matter how much experience teachers have, there is always room for teachers to improve (Crookes, 2003).

Needs for Professional Development among School Teachers

CPD indicates the process of continuing growth of a person after joining a profession. The notion of CPD draws a difference between staff development and professional development. The former focuses on capacity building of the organization while the latter attempts capacity building of the individual. In this sense, CPD sees professionals as lifelong learners who are expected to constantly develop, upskill or reskill as long as they are still in the profession.

In education, CPD is perceived from different points of views. The specific view deals with skills and knowledge in order to cope with particular new requirements or criteria, for example, teaching a new subject, using a new textbook, and adjusting a syllabus to be more updated. On the other hand, the wider view sees CPD as a more profound and long-term process where professionals incessantly enhance their knowledge and skills along with their understanding and maturity in their career path in order to grow both as professionals and as individuals. Most educators in today's world in fact see CPD in its wider aspect. Padwad and Dixit (2011) defined CPD as an organized, continual, and lifelong learning process in which teachers try to develop their personal and professional qualities, and to enrich their expertise, skills, and practice which results in their empowerment, the improvement of their organizations, and the development of their students. Nonetheless, CPD is not a straightforward process. In terms of teacher professionalism, Hargreaves (2000) referred to the current status of CPD as a struggle between negative and positive forces. Thus, educators as well as administrators need to understand these critical forces to plan and support CPD in their own context.

In Thailand, in the primary and secondary school contexts, with the advent of the introduction of the CLT approach in the last two decades, there have been several initiatives on teacher development programs but most attempts have favored an in-service training approach with short-term objectives of acquiring a set of skills and some pedagogical knowledge needed for teaching and learning in prescribed syllabuses as mandated by the Thai Ministry of Education. Therefore, apparently the specific view of CPD has been followed. There is little short of no recognition of CPD as a lifelong, ongoing process. This illustrates what Hargreaves (2000) called the negative, in other words, de-professionalizing force. With Thai school teachers having to fulfill all the tasks including teaching, coordinating, student assessment, and administrative duties, most teachers seem hardly interested in CDP as positive reinforcement.

It is thus it is now time that innovation and change is necessary. Introducing this is not an easy. Wedell (2009) suggested that re-culturing be undertaken as a response to the local culture and context. Also, care and sensitivity need to be exercised both for and against (pro and con) teachers' beliefs, which could help them to elaborate and develop their schema about learning and teaching. In other words, teachers need to be able to link their beliefs to current knowledge about what professionalism entails. What is also needed is promising educational reforms to lift unyielding burdens off teachers' shoulders as the focus of learning and teaching should be on students, not on documentation to meet the

quality assurance standard. Developing a long-term strategy for sustaining professional development is also imperative.

With the significance of CPD as discussed, utilizing a teacher portfolio is therefore proposed as one useful method or platform for school teachers to strategize, adopt or customize, and finally implement so as to acknowledge the pros and positive forces that CPD can substantiate.

Upsides

The implementation of teacher portfolios is needed to uphold professional development. The portfolio can act as a record of their participation in various forms of ongoing professional development as well as that of a professional advancement. It would allow teachers to look back to the past, reflect on the present and ponder about what the future could be. Furthermore, the portfolio imposes a certain discipline and commitment to take part in educational seminars and conferences (Padwad & Dixit, 2011). In this regard, the portfolio could lead to professional change by providing teachers with a tool for self-reflection, a well-developed approach to classroom observation, and incentives to attend events or seminars on a regular basis. Therefore, this indicates that there can be a positive change in teachers' attitudes toward teaching and CPD as a result of the portfolio. Moreover, a change in overall school's CPD can emerge when teachers have a sense of accountability and professionalism (Carpenter, 2015). As a result, teachers would place more value on self-reflection and manifest pride in professional development as their improvement as a teacher would be recognized.

Obstacles

In addition to numerous benefits of teacher portfolios, a number of challenges should be taken into consideration in developing a strategy for effective implementation. The main obstacle could be directed to the time needed to maintain a portfolio as language teachers are normally loaded with a range of work comprising teaching, grading, administration, and certainly professional development per se. Moreover, it would seem that some teachers could have concerns with the portfolio's audience and purpose as this could become unclear to them as to what purpose the portfolio is for and who would read it. These challenges appear to suggest that for successful implementation of a portfolio system, teachers need to be provided with specific training that focuses on the knowledge and skills they need in order to use this instrument effectively. Training should also eagerly provide them with a sense of ownership over the portfolio by making them believe that it is not just a means of evaluation, but living proof of their continuing, lifelong professional development.

Conclusion

Using a portfolio is merely one of the practical tools to promote and support CPD in different school contexts. The portfolio could help teachers contemplate their teaching practices and self-assessment for improvement. Nevertheless, the true first step to sustaining professional development among school teachers could be to identify the negative forces at work and then working on an appropriate manner to blend them into positive ones. A starting point is to explore and identify areas where there are difficulties but being cautious and sensitive is needed. Above all, there must be some well-developed initiatives that can support and sustain a range of endeavors. Some of the positive strategies could be to encourage teachers to extend their professional orientation by going beyond a short-term goal. Moreover, the teaching community could engage more in mentoring and networking through teacher associations, networks, and collaborations. CPD then has to empower changes for ways to establish more applicable systems to embrace teacher development.

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