Voices from the trenches - secondary school teachers’ perspectives on continuous professional development

This research study explored continuous professional development at the secondary level of education in the small island state of Trinidad and Tobago. Its aim was to unearth what exists as continuous professional development at the secondary level and to highlight the factors which impact it. The study is qualitative in nature and adopted a case study design. A structured survey instrument was used to collect data from a total of nineteen (19) teachers and the data collected was augmented through a semi-structured interview with eleven (11) survey participants. Thematic analysis and open coding were employed in the analysis of the data collected through the survey and the semi-structured interview. The findings revealed that continuous professional development was considered critical to ensuring effective classroom practice and quality education; but that in the absence of a policy mandate and supporting systems, there were wide ranging practices of professional development in the schools and uneven experiences of the same. This result points to the need for more focused attention to continuous professional development in the education system to facilitate equity and access and to ensure that the maximum benefits of professional development is experienced by all teachers at the secondary level.

Keywords: continuous professional development; professional learning; effective classroom practice; quality education; school culture

Introduction

The Ministry of Education (MoE), Trinidad and Tobago has engaged in sustained efforts to provide quality education for the children of the nation. The link between quality education and quality teachers has long been established and there exists little doubt that teachers’ effectiveness is key to student success (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Superville, 2017; Hefnawi, 2017; Park, Kim & Moore, 2018). Continuous professional development (CPD) is seen as a means through which teacher quality can be improved and teacher effectiveness increased (Birman, Desimone, Porter & Garet, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Al Asmari, 2016). As a result, the MoE has longed desired to have CPD become an integral part of the education system. Over the years, slow but incremental attempts have been made to establish CPD as essential in the sphere of education and strides have been made to sustain it. Critical to this thrust was the formalisation of the Heads of Department (HoD) system which began in 2002/2003. A part of that renewed thrust was the inclusion of two key functions of HoDs - to monitor teachers’ classroom performance and engage in clinical assessment of teacher effectiveness (GOVTT Job Specifications, HoD (Secondary). Noteworthy within the job specification of school principals is “facilitating training of teachers and providing demonstrations of and guidance in the use of various teaching methods” (GORTT, MoE, 2019). In 2008, the
Teacher Education and Teacher Performance Project Unit (TETPPU) of the MoE, which in recent times has become the Teaching and Teacher Development Division, was introduced with one of its main goals being to support the professional development of teachers. Further to this, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) standards for the teaching profession (teachers, educational leaders and teacher educators) were approved in 2019 but are yet to be fully implemented. Within the five components of professional practice outlined in the CARICOM document is included “Continuing professional development” (CARICOM Secretariat, 2020 p. 9). To date, however, little research has been done on the state of professional development in the system. How has CPD been conceived? How has it been experienced by teachers? How impactful have been the efforts that were made? This research study, therefore, attempts to gain some insights into continuous professional development at the secondary level from the perspectives of the teacher. The research aims to unearth what exists as continuous professional development at the secondary level and to highlight the factors which impact it. Despite its focus on CPD, the research also lends some focus on Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) as it emerges in the data. It is anticipated that the study will augment local literature in the area of continuous professional development, underscore the importance of CPD at the secondary level and offer possibilities for future policy change.

**Literature Review**

**Conceptualising Continuous Professional Development**

Continuous professional development (CPD) is the ongoing education of teachers throughout their teaching career as a means on facilitating their continued growth leading to their effectiveness in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). It is viewed as a process which begins with teachers’ initial preparation and spans their entire practice to the end of their teaching careers. Through their intense research, Desimone and Garet (2015) have identified what, in their view, are critical elements of professional development: content focus, active learning, coherence, sustained duration, and collective participation. Birman et al. (2000) concur, putting forward a similar listing which includes form as an essential component. Form is seen as important because it speaks to the recognition that professional development must be targeted to the needs of the teachers for whom it has been prepared and presented in a manner that takes cognizance of the nature of the participants. Content is also identified as critical because what is offered must be meaningful, relevant and specific to need whereas duration speaks to the importance of providing sufficient time for teachers to assimilate, reflect on and build their learnings into their teaching repertoire. Duration also speaks to the continuity and sustenance of professional development (Wam & Lam, 2010). Like all skills, teaching has to be continuously honed in order to have the sustained desired effect.
Active learning and collective participation point to an approach to professional development which underscores how critical it is to ensure full participant engagement at all levels of the CPD process. Ultimately, all that proceeds must result in overall coherence which is recognised as essential if CPD is to be effective (Lindvall & Ryve, 2019). Opher and Pedder (2011) advance this notion further by proffering that professional development which results in teacher professional learning is a complex mix of a number of interrelated factors - its conceptualisation, context, goals and objectives, frequency, quality of content and facilitation as well as supporting systems. Thus, CPD can be considered a multifaceted process whose complexity cannot be overlooked if the anticipated outcomes are to be attained. It should indeed be embraced as “a complex system rather than as an event” (Opher & Pedder, 2011, p. 378).

The teacher is at the core of professional development and in fact, should be seen as integral to all activities and initiatives related to professional development. As a result, effective professional development should be conducted in partnership with teachers whose peculiar teaching experience and individual needs have been considered together with institutional needs and school environment factors (Day, 1997). Indeed, professional development is for the teacher, therefore, the teacher’s growth and development should be the ultimate goal because, as has been established, it is through quality teachers that quality education is attained (Anderson & Olsen, 2006). Professional development should also entertain professional development activities created and enacted by the teacher, so that teachers are not merely receivers of professional development (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke & Baumert, 2011). This all leads to deepening collegiality and mutual sharing which facilitate both individual and collective growth among teaching professionals.

**Professional Development and Teacher Effectiveness**

There is no doubt that professional development significantly contributes to teacher effectiveness and consequently positively impacts student learning (Green, Eady & Anderson, 2018; Ingvarson, Meiers, Beavis, 2005; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). Professional development spans a range of activities, including short courses, seminars, mentoring and training sessions (Al Asmari, 2016). These activities target the growth of knowledge, the enhancement of pedagogical skills and the refinement of attitudes and dispositions (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017; Richter et al., 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2009; Desimone & Garet 2015). Therefore, through their engagement in professional development, teachers acquire a depth of knowledge which keeps them up-to-date in their classrooms, able to keep pace with what is current and support their students in their search for knowledge which is pertinent and relevant (Al Asmari, 2016). This depth of knowledge includes conceptual understandings which grant them the ability to reconstruct the knowledge gained and present it to their students in a form that is easily accessible to them (Ball & Cohen,
This depth of knowledge can result in the creative and imaginative teaching so longed for in the classroom and the movement away from the traditional technical approach to teaching which frequently exists.

Equally significant is the honing of their pedagogical skills which can ensure that learning remains fresh, stimulating and engaging for their students. Sustained professional development targeting specific areas of need has proven to positively impact teacher pedagogical skills (Borko, 2004). The impact is even greater in learning communities where teachers are given the support necessary and feel free to practise in a non-judgmental, risk-free environment (Little, 2002; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Ingvarson et al., 2005). Feimer-Nemser (2001), however, points out that schools are rarely so organised to allow for collegial and collaborative work to take place and for teachers to engage in frank and open discourse on matters that concern their teaching. Engagement in situated practice is also viewed as vital so that existing strategies are not merely passed on to teachers but teachers are given the opportunity to practise, develop and integrate their newly acquired pedagogical skills into their practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000). At the base of these skills are the right attitude and the disposition to continue to maintain the interpersonal relationships necessary to support learning, to cultivate the classroom environment in which students can strive and to continue to engage in professional activities which can facilitate their professional growth and development (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Through professional development, interpersonal relationship skills can be fostered and honed, equipping teachers with the ability to connect with their students so as to more effectively teach them. The right attitude towards their teaching and professional development itself can also be shaped thus underscoring its importance to effective teaching, the growth of teacher efficacy and resultant confidence.

Professional Development and School Culture

How CPD can theoretically benefit teachers does not always align with how they experience it. Three issues that may impact teachers’ experience of CPD are a school’s culture, the role of school leaders and teachers’ own agency. These three issues are encapsulated in the conceptualisation of the Self-assessment Framework designed by the Department of Education and Training in Melbourne (2005) which placed emphasis on, among other features:

- “customised individual teacher development plans based on individual development needs
- quality professional development to meet individual development needs
- belief by teachers that the school has a performance and development culture” (p. 6)
That department was convinced that effective professional learning is necessary for improvement of individual teachers’ professional practice together with collaborative professional learning (PL). What has emerged over the years is the enhancement of teachers’ professional practice through professional learning instead of only professional development, the latter being driven by others such as school leaders. Effective PL is dependent on a performance and development culture which provides an enriching, supportive and motivating environment. Significant school improvement is the goal (Department of Education and Training in Melbourne, 2005). PL for teachers, then, takes a holistic approach.

However, despite the recognition of what constitutes effective professional learning, its enactment may be complex due to various factors. In their 2018 study of 515 secondary school teachers in Malaysia, Rauf, Ali, Aluwi, and Noor found that school culture does have a positive correlation with school professional development management. Sullivan’s research (2010) found a relationship between school culture and teachers’ attitude toward school professional development planning. That relationship was weak, though. However, findings of a study by Kocatürk (2016) revealed that the school culture that teachers perceive predicts their attitudes toward professional development significantly. The study suggests that although a school culture might present a common aim to teachers, it does not necessarily motivate them to work collaboratively to achieve this aim and they instead follow an individual approach to their professional responsibilities as they develop their agency as teachers.

Professional Development and Teacher Agency

The issue of teacher agency as it relates to CPD or CPL needs to be examined because it concerns teachers’ “active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions – for the overall quality of education” and is an important part of teacher professionalism (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015, p. 624). Biesta et al. (2015) also advocate access to robust professional discourses about teaching and argue that such discourses should be an important dimension of teacher education and further professional development. What they found in their research was limited long-term thinking about the purposes of education on the part of teachers and suggest that it could be that this is indicative of the cultures of schooling rather than of structures. They linked this finding to Fullan’s (1993) assertion that for change to occur, both reculturing and restructuring are necessary. Biesta et al. (2015) raise the issue of whether teacher education programmes engage teachers in appropriate discourse or whether such programmes are more geared towards the instrumental side of teaching and preparing teachers to satisfy policy initiatives. We bear in mind that teacher agency via appropriate discourse can also be developed in the workplace within a continuous professional learning system.
We must consider that while individual approaches might reflect some type of teacher agency, so do teacher groups or communities who have some influence on decisions that impact what they do professionally. Their efforts are deliberate towards achieving an identified aim (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013). In their presentation of a model of teacher agency in professional development and school reform, Imants and Van der Wal (2020) point out that in work contexts, both power relations and individual characteristics and behaviour must be considered in the shaping of professional identity. Thus, we may conclude that there are scenarios where teachers have to use their individual drive and vision to navigate their professional growth.

Factors affecting Teachers’ Participation in CPD

Like one’s professional identity and agency, participation in continuous professional development has been found to be affected by varying factors. In a study of teachers in the Netherlands, Kwakman (2003) found that personal factors over work related factors seemed to predict teachers’ participation in such activities. However, as Wan and Lam (2010) note, factors affecting such participation may be context-specific. In their study of two primary schools in Hong Kong, they found that school factors, personal factors, financial factors, time, CPD provider, family factors, relationships with others and government factors were those that facilitated CPD. Within the same sample, time, financial factors, CPD provider, school factors and personal factors were also inhibiting factors, in addition to heavy workload.

A study of eighty-three (83) secondary school mathematics teachers from secondary schools in Zambia (Sinyangwe et al., 2016) produced findings that were similar to Wan and Lam’s (2010) to some extent. The factors that impacted those teachers in terms of their participation in CPD were skewed more heavily towards heavy workload, perception of CPD, relevance of CPD to needs, and lack of motivation. However, lack of awareness of CPD opportunities, lack of incentive for participation, attitude toward CPD, personal circumstances, school management, no suitable CPD programme, financial costs, timing and appraisal also featured highly. While this study suggests that teachers’ positive perception of CPD and their empowerment to take responsibility for their CPD would likely add to their willingness to participate in CPD that focuses on their professional deficiencies, it does not focus on the role of the school’s culture regarding teachers’ professional learning.

Professional Development Standards for Teaching

Notwithstanding teachers’ own agency, education systems worldwide have attempted to establish standards for teaching which incorporate professional development for teacher improvement. Internationally, there has been debate surrounding the necessity of standards for teaching as well as about their content and formats (Hudson, 2009; Tuinamuana, 2011), and there have been concerns about seeing them as the panacea for poor teaching performance or
Looking at two examples of countries that lead in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results, we see that both China and Finland place a high value on teacher professional development. It is observed that China places high importance on life-long learning and has instituted stages for teacher professional development (Zeng, 2008).

Jensen et al. (2016) report that strategies such as the use of professional learning leaders, strong evaluation and accountability policies, time and resources for teachers to pursue effective professional learning proved effective in four high-performing systems, British Columbia (Canada), Hong Kong, Shanghai (China) and Singapore. They also hired mentors who received training, set up learning communities, and provided job descriptions of teacher leaders of professional learning. However, the 2009 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)/OECD survey found that across the OECD countries teachers’ self-efficacy and job satisfaction had a strong link with their personality, personal experiences, competencies and attitudes. As such, individualised interventions may be more effective than school or system level policies. This has implications for how nations interpret their teaching standards and consequently how their micro, meso and macro systems plan for teacher professional development.

Methodology

Context and Method

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do graduates of the postgraduate Diploma in Education perceive continuous professional development (CPD)?
2. What do they believe is the relationship between CPD and teacher effectiveness?
3. How do they experience CPD?
4. What do they perceive as factors which influence their participation in CPD?

This research employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis though there was use of some simple descriptive statistics. It is a case study bounded by two factors: time and academic programme enrolment. These factors determined the selection of participants. They had graduated from an in-service postgraduate Diploma in Education (Dip. Ed.) for secondary school teachers during the 2014/2015 academic year. This year was chosen because having graduated from the Dip. Ed. which was their initial teacher preparation, they would have had a period of five years in which to engage in any CPD. Perspectives and experiences of CPD were the focus of this study.
Participants

The population sample was purposive comprising 150 graduates of the programme whose email addresses were available out of a total of 174. All participants were secondary school teachers of varying subjects and ages who had five years of experience in the teaching sector after they had completed their initial one-year teacher preparation. The majority of teachers in the local education system are female, and is thus reflected in the programme enrolment. The eventual sample used relied on whomever responded to the online survey in the first instance. This amounted to 18 respondents to some questions and 19 to others. The sample for the interview was random but also relied on whom the researchers were able to contact via telephone or email. This resulted in no male teachers being part of the eventual interview sample which amounted to eleven.

Method

A pilot survey was administered to 25 teachers (10% of the intended sample) who graduated from the same programme but from the 2013/2014 cohort. We felt the pilot would be useful to determine whether there was a need to modify questions or other aspects of the questionnaire such as flow of questions that might have a negative impact on appropriate responses or prevent the generation of rich data (Gudmundsdottir & Brock-Utne, 2010; Kim, 2010). The response rate for the pilot was relatively low, with only seven respondents despite reminders. Some changes were made consequent to examining the pilot responses. A few questions were clarified and the order of questions was re-arranged to facilitate data analysis. An amended online survey comprising 20 closed-ended and 29 open-ended items was then sent to the 2014/2015 graduates from the population of 150 who had submitted their personal emails upon registration in the programme. It is more than likely that some of those addresses were no longer functional. It was felt that an online survey, in the first instance, would not encroach on respondents’ time in that they could respond as it was convenient to them and would also give them time to think about their responses. Reminders were sent along the way to try to solicit more responses. After two months the survey was closed.

The survey tool (Google Forms) automatically generated summaries and charts for responses to closed answers. Thematic analysis was used for the open-ended responses, generating emergent themes that were pertinent to answering the research questions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2016). The phases of thematic analysis were those as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), and the coding followed the process detailed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Responses were analysed manually.

Consequent to initial analysis of the survey data, interviews were conducted with 11 survey respondents, although the intention was to interview all 19 of them. Eight could not be contacted for the interview. The interview comprised 14 questions and was conducted via zoom and recorded with
permission from the interviewees. Questions were posed in order to expand on
data: Four for Research Question No. 2, seven for Research Question No. 3, and two for Research Question 4. Using the interview transcripts and the open-ended responses, all responses were placed under the relevant research questions in order to have some form of structure and control of the data. A thematic analysis approach guided the extraction of initial inductive codes which were then categorised under themes. Data which emerged from questions that had originally been clustered under particular research questions had to be re-examined to ensure that all instrument item responses were directed to the relevant research question. A constant comparative approach to the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) facilitated critical analysis of the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009), with the aim of producing findings that were useful and meaningful to the researchers and to the reader.

Pseudo initials all ending in ‘T’ have been used to identify interviewees where needed. Some examples are CT, XT and ChT. Because the survey responses were anonymous no specific identifiers have been used for data from the survey.

Results

How graduates of the postgraduate Diploma in Education perceive professional learning CPD and its significance

For the majority of the teachers who were interviewed, continuous professional development was seen as an integral part of teaching. They viewed teaching as a skill and therefore considered CPD as the means of honing acquired skills, learning new ones and overall increasing their competence as teachers. KT, for instance, stated:

“We are a profession of educators, a learning community, and we need to always improve because things are changing rapidly and if we continue doing things the same old way, then the outcomes would not be favourable”.

This belief was affirmed in the survey where it was expressed that CPD was a viable way “to develop new knowledge and skills and to enhance existing knowledge and skills to become more efficient in what one does…”. The survey information also revealed that most of the teachers considered CPD to be necessary as it keeps “teaching up to date with current trends and expectations of students” and ensures that teachers “… remain relevant … in light of the changes in the realm of education”.


The nature and scope of CPD

In the teachers’ view, CPD could be both formal and informal, online or onsite and could take a number of forms. In the survey, one teacher shared that forms should be included as they all address different needs. There should also be many points of focus, targeting content as well as the softer skills needed for effective teaching. ST, for instance, opined, “I think we need to focus on the human aspect of teaching. The soft skills, social and emotional learning. I think particularly it helps the teacher to relate to all students.” The majority of teachers determined the need for professional development largely based on their students’ performance - the “grades and quality of passes of students”. Some of them also counted feedback from teachers and students as valuable. A few engaged in self-reflection, examining their practice to determine a way forward. One teacher’s survey entry revealed that she indeed questioned her classroom behaviours “…how I am able to manage my classes, evaluation of my lesson plans, evaluation of the delivery of the curriculum. …I just know I am struggling”.

Individual teachers expressed the belief that professional development, in spite of the form that it takes, should “provide a great deal of hands-on experience and be very interactive”. It must also be continuous, focused and targeted. As opined by CT, CPD must be scheduled “like we schedule every other important thing; it has to be seen as important”. In addition, the sentiment was expressed that without teacher engagement and teacher involvement, the CPD may not have the desired effect, for teachers will not embrace what is offered. JT therefore suggested that an “…open-door culture makes it easier for staff to feel free to engage in programmes and go to the Administration, maybe even to …suggest areas in which development is needed …”. The teachers also strongly felt that CPD must be built on the principles of working together and learning from one another. According to one teacher, CT, it is important to “…understand the power that is collaboration …”. However, in spite of the stated intrinsic value of CPD, the majority of teachers believed that professional development should be incentivised. For many of them, monetary returns are the first option. They also embrace, though, “certification, some type of reward system such as points and recognition, commendations, promotion and flexible time to study”.

The relationship between professional development and effective classroom practice

The majority of the teachers acknowledged that continuous professional development was essential for effective teacher performance and they believed that one was intricately linked to the other. One teacher expressed in a survey entry, for instance, “My desire to lead with excellence supports my drive for professional development”. In their view, teachers needed to maintain their effectiveness in the classroom and continuous professional development helped them to accomplish this goal. In the survey, one teacher revealed: “Teaching is
a SKILL, one that needs to be developed and continue to be developed –
therefore continuous professional development is the only way to do so”. Another stated: “I have always sought professional development in recognition of the skills which I lacked”. In addition, in the interview session, MT stated “…I continued looking for more information on how to improve my practice …”. They also communicated that professional development is essential when there are critical changes in the educational environment. Teachers, therefore, sought opportunities to equip themselves with technological skills when the shift to online learning became mandatory.

Continuous professional development, personal growth and job satisfaction

Furthermore, the teachers communicated an understanding that their effectiveness involves more than content knowledge and pedagogy. For them, teacher effectiveness also encompassed knowledge of self, their students as well as the classroom and school environment. The teachers also recognised that in striving for greater effectiveness, there would result not only deepened teacher confidence but also an increased sense of professionalism, personal growth and job satisfaction. The teachers spoke of gaining “Greater professionalism”; “A sense of confidence to deliver the curriculum”; as well as “… personal growth, a sense of satisfaction from seeing the implementation of different strategies work within the classroom context”. Professional development therefore afforded teachers the chance to increase their competencies, learn the new skills and experience all round development, thereby contributing to their general efficacy in the classroom.

How teachers experience professional development and learning

Approximately half of the teachers reported that a formal CPD system does not exist in their school, while the others indicated that it either existed or existed to some extent, or if it existed, it was an ad hoc one.

Mechanisms and opportunities that lend to discussion of teaching and learning

In terms of what could lead to the recognition of the need for professional development in a particular area, teachers noted that there were both formal and informal opportunities to discuss teaching and learning. Departmental meetings and clinical supervision offered such formal opportunities. The annual MoE established performance appraisal system also guided CPD needs of some teachers. Formal mechanisms directed toward planning for CPD did not seem to be prevalent generally and discussions of teaching and learning were both planned and unplanned. These were facilitated with the Principal either through an “open door policy”, “drop-ins”, email, staff meetings or by appointment. There were also a few instances where such sharing did not occur often.
Half of the 19 respondents had the opportunity for input regarding decisions about their PD. Almost half of them felt that their PD plans were aligned with classroom observations as explained by one: “during clinical supervision and staff room practices, weaker areas are identified”. However, the others indicated that they did not have any school professional development plans.

When it came to determining their own PD needs, teachers used “student feedback and performance” to a large extent as well as “personal reflection” and “career goals”. Some of their PD needs were reflected in the following statements: “how I am able to manage my classes, evaluation of my lesson plans, evaluation of the delivery of the curriculum”, “my ability to meet the needs of my students”, “latest trends”, “advice from others”, and “ever changing requirements of the job”.

**CPD activities done on own initiative**

The extent to which teachers engaged in CPD on their own initiative varied, but self-directed CPD which we deem to be PL, seemed limited among teachers and not avidly sought after individually. Those who sought to access opportunities on their own initiative engaged in postgraduate professional development programmes, online research, foreign conferences, or used the school library for resources such as educational magazines. Also included were online options such as webinars and “reputable sites”. One person cited departmental teacher collaboration as a source of PL highlighting curriculum integration as the focus. Membership in a professional association was also reported as a source of PL. Other than by their own initiative, participation in PD was influenced or encouraged by information from the Ministry of Education, from colleagues, by their school administration or by their Head of Department. In some instances, in house opportunities were organised.

**Teachers’ CPD preferences**

Among the types of CPD these teachers were satisfied with were recorded webinars and online sessions which were seen to be “convenient”. “Practical experience using different tools” and being “well organized” were valued features. “In house training using professionals to present” was one type that worked well according to one teacher. Teaching observation, for one, “has allowed for constructive feedback in improving my practice”.

While one teacher’s view was that “all CPD is useful”, generally, teachers expressed little preference for CPD that was neither targeted, nor sought their input and which was not participatory. One view was that many teachers are reluctant to participate in “out of school training”. Theoretical approaches were not favoured, as according to one teacher, “I prefer to put into practice than always take notes”. Therefore “lecturers” were not seen as “practical” as opposed to “active engagement”. When CPD is the result of specific identified needs that apply only to certain individuals, there was a view that not all staff
should be involved. A “one day workshop arranged by administration” did not appeal to one teacher, nor did “workshops without … follow up support or monitoring of implementation”.

It was apparent that teachers generally preferred local and in-house providers who understand teaching in real contexts: “people who understand real issues in the classroom, not people who know what research says and have no idea how to implement in the local context.” One person was very specific about MoE officers or University lecturers not being well suited to provide CPD for teachers.

**Effective facilitators of CPD**

Once a need for CPD was established either by the individual teacher or by the administration, there were various routes for this engagement with CPD. Most teachers indicated that there were teachers on staff who might be able to facilitate CPD to the rest of the staff. There do exist in most schools staff members capable of facilitating CPD but as one teacher pointed out, though they might be able, they might not be willing.

However, there was the view (3/11 persons), that the HoD was not necessarily qualified, nor well positioned to conduct CPD in terms of oversight of content for the specific subject area. Among those who agreed to the suitability of the HoD in terms of the post, some were particular about the disposition of the HoD who would carry out this function: “but staff must have confidence in the HoD”; “must be passionate about PD”; “needs to have rapport with other teachers”; “must be open to constructive criticism”; “must lead in building the culture of PD”.

Apart from the suitability of the HoD per se, there surfaced the notions that any teacher tasked with providing CPD for colleagues in the school should have qualifications higher than an undergraduate content degree and must have postgraduate professional preparation in education, “formal training re how to teach teachers”, “specific knowledge re teaching” and must be “a well-developed teacher” and have “knowledge, not years of experience”.

While one teacher emphasised that a facilitator of CPD who is a staff member should not be selected based on qualifications only, another suggested that this person “needs exposure (like conferences)”. Interestingly, many qualities or dispositions were suggested by the teachers interviewed:

- o communication skills
- o someone the staff can relate to
- o exhibit values
- o trust
- o can hold attention
- o be open and positive to recipients
- o be organised
- o have the will and interest
- o be a lifelong learner
When asked whether CPD should be the responsibility of a specific member of staff or if a new post should be created, there were varying views, one being that no new post needed to be created, but that there should be “additional qualifications for middle management”. The feeling was that an existing staff member would better understand internal issues since outsiders, as AT says: “are not in the classroom, do they really understand what we go through or what we need?”. ChT suggested that a teacher other than the HoD should have that portfolio but should work in tandem with the HOD who would should identify the PD needs. XT’s view was that there should be a collaborative effort within the department to develop a culture of PD. Opposing views to the above were that a person external to the school would have “greater impact, neutrality” (DT) and that PD needs are too varied for one person to facilitate (JT), whether by a regular teacher or someone in position specifically created. An argument against a regular teacher being the constant facilitator was the workload burden placed on that teacher (JT).

When teachers spoke about a CPD facilitator, personal qualities or dispositions factored in as necessary. The need for an affective approach to encouraging a culture of PD in a school was evident when teachers suggested that the relationship between teacher and HoD must be more cordial than it is in some cases. An open culture for discussion was also seen to be an important characteristic of an effective culture of PD. Additionally, DT emphasised the role of administration in terms of staff trust and a positive relationship: “You have, first of all, to create that relationship where you are not seen as somebody separate from us… If the people do not trust you, they are not going to hear what you say”. Middle management also has a role in developing this culture as explained by DT: “I would start from the middle management and have them … trained in imparting knowledge in terms of how do we improve teaching or that they can come into a classroom without any fear from the teacher and make it more of a cordial relationship between the HOD and their department members”.

What teachers perceive as factors which influence their participation in continuous professional development

This section explores the extent to which teachers participate in CPD or how they perceive it may be influenced by certain factors.
Schools’ culture of professional development

Strong culture

Survey responses indicated that most teachers (14/18) were of the view that there was definitely or to some extent a culture of professional development in their school. This culture was manifested in the school administrations’ encouragement to participate in initiatives offered by the MoE and to access tertiary professional development programmes especially the in-service initial teacher preparation diploma. Some schools arranged a standard time allocated to professional development. Regular clinical supervision, professional development workshops, collaboration and provision of information on workshops and encouragement to attend were indications of a strong culture of PD.

Weak culture

In a few schools, however, a weaker PD culture was reflected in insufficient workshops and lack of encouragement to participate. According to CT, it is left up to Ts’ initiative unless it is deemed compulsory by the MoE: “If they not interested, if they don’t have the interest it’s left like that”. Another shared that “it has been years since we’ve had any sort of professional development.” Where there were insufficient formal opportunities, teachers seemed to depend a lot on informal learning communities (PL). One teacher’s perceptions of colleagues was revealing:

“At my school many teachers are comfortable with just covering a syllabus using traditional ‘chalk and talk’ methods. Most of the time teachers only participate in Professional Development courses that are mandated by the MOE. Few teachers actually seek out courses and ways to improve their skills.”

One teacher felt that “where teachers need development they are instead seen as incompetent and unwilling. I must admit though in some cases, this too might be true.” Another perception about colleagues was that “some think that any form of development is a responsibility that takes away from their personal time, family life, so they may not pursue”. Others might not be intrinsically motivated but “some believe it is the only way for upward mobility and pursue it just to be certified but does not take it with them throughout their lives.”

Opportunities outside of the school

Although a few teachers were unaware of what CPD opportunities were available in the larger education system, most were able to identify sources such as MoE sessions. Workshops and conferences were mentioned as well as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS). There was the view that “opportunities exist but the system seems to be challenging to manage”. Financial support was suggested for CPD offerings that had a cost attached:
“Teachers would welcome it if it is funded”; “All teachers should be assisted financially to do [a] masters degree”. Several teachers could cite available PL sources such as “Periodicals…reading materials”, “Training through professional bodies”, “You Tube”, “online training from educational groups”, “Online webinars whenever they pop up”. PLNs (Professional Learning Networks), PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) and online subscriptions were also identified as providing “access to a variety of material and training videos”.

**Motivation to engage in CPD**

All teachers except one seemed motivated to access CPD. For almost half of them, their CPD was linked to professional opportunities such as promotion. And for all 17 of the 19 teachers surveyed, even if to some extent, participation in CPD was feasible. Three said that it was not. While there were several factors that facilitated teachers’ access to CPD such as support from others at school and at home; personal motivation; convenience (“classes near to home or online classes”); and acquiring of skills to meet the needs of their job, there were some challenges, the most common of which seemed to be time. The lack of time may be related to family commitments and personal responsibility which were mentioned. Affordability was another challenge experienced, and one teacher noted that “many teachers do not recognize the importance” of CPD.

**How could their school culture enhance their participation in CPD?**

Teachers’ views on improving their school culture in the context of professional development fell within four categories:

- Structural/logistics/Systems
- Motivation
- Attitudes
- Communication with external stakeholders

**Structural/logistics/Systems**

That school leaders have an overarching responsibility to establish a culture of professional development in their schools is evident in some of the remarks and suggestions offered by the participating teachers. ChT’s declaration was: “you see, set the tone at the top, the tone at the top, the tone at the top helps to make or break this issue”.

Teachers suggested instituting “PD on a regular basis” (NT), as a “formal system” (XT) and committing to it as a scheduled activity at least one a term. In order to integrate a PD system into existing practice, some suggestions were using data to inform CPD, making clinical supervision more structured and a
norm, using staff’s strengths to facilitate CPD, and giving a greater PD role to the HoD at the departmental level. One opined that administration should “access more stuff [resources]” for staff because individual teachers might not have the wherewithal to seek their own resources. On a logistical level, arranging time for teachers to attend PD sessions was mentioned by five teachers.

**Motivation**

Extrinsic motivation to engage in CPD was raised: “they need recognition for doing stuff” (NT). An example of such motivation was where a principal gave extra free time to teachers who were consistently regular in attendance. NT felt “you can’t expect people to just give and not get something in return”.

Moral suasion was suggested as a way of encouraging teachers to engage in CPD. KT explained it in this way: “try moral suasion to encourage them, let them know well, this is a profession, just like the medical field or the legal field is a profession. We are a profession of educators, a learning community, and we need to always improve because things are changing rapidly…”

There was also the view that teachers needed to be prepared for holistic student development and not just academic. CT saw that schools need to enable teachers “to create a culture of students achieving more …not only achievement academically but socially, culturally”.

Contrary to the need for extrinsic motivation, XT focused on encouraging teachers to want to develop themselves without reward:

“Unfortunately we live in a society where you do things only because you’re going to get a reward for it and there is no reward that we get for attending a workshop. There is no financial remuneration, there is no…other kind of accolade that you get from it, so it’s really about the individual and their value of learning and of education and their own development”.

This point was also tied to moral suasion since this teacher had felt that encouragement from the administration was necessary.

**Discussion**

In this research study, 19 practising teachers expressed their experiences of and views on continuous professional development in their contexts.

The study underscored the fact that, to teachers at the secondary level, CPD, as expressed by Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017), is essential to the effective functioning of classroom teachers. In addition, echoing Al Asmari’s (2016) sentiments, CPD is considered to be all-encompassing and indeed, can take many forms. It was also made evident that, in many ways, CPD is circumscribed by the educational environment in which it is enacted and teachers’ response to CPD is therefore influenced by the school environment they find themselves in (Kocatürk, 2016). The study further revealed that CPD at the secondary level involves more than
development of content and pedagogical skills; it also encompasses the softer skills which support teachers in their classroom practice, a belief purported by Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017) and Desimone and Garet (2015) among other researchers. The teachers also viewed CPD as a shared responsibility – that of the employer and the teachers and in their opinion, value must be attached to it. They, therefore, believed that CPD should be made more available and accessible by the Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, to a large extent, they took responsibility for their professional development, no matter how minimal and sometimes at their own cost.

In the teachers’ view, CPD is strongly linked to teacher effectiveness. It hones acquired skills, facilitates the acquisition of new skills, deepens professionalism, and serves to bring about job satisfaction and a deeper sense of teacher efficacy. However, as Borko (2004) suggests, to be truly effective, CPD must be targeted and sustained. This is not necessarily the experience of the teachers at the secondary level in the context of this study, as for many of them, the experience of CPD was incidental and sporadic and largely determined by the culture of the school where they practice. CPD is professed to be most impactful when viewed as a team activity (Little, 2002; Ingvarson et al., 2005) involving a community of learners or a professional learning community. The study found, however, that this was not a common practice and was largely reflected in the institutionalised Head of Department system and the occasional CPD workshops. The teachers were therefore denied rich opportunities to learn and grow together, in spite of the fact that many acknowledged that collaboration in CPD was essential. Teachers also recognised the importance of understanding their environment and their students because, in their view, it added to their effectiveness in the classroom.

As a result, teachers did make individual attempts to increase their knowledge and skills in those areas, making use of CPD and CPL opportunities where they existed.

This research found that internal school cultures and systems were either a debilitating or facilitating factor in how teachers experienced PD or PL. In many instances, these systems were facilitative and thus supportive of teacher agency in terms of their professional learning and growth (Rauf et al. 2018). Teacher agency may be developed through opportunities for discussion about their work as evidenced in this study (Biesta et al., 2015), but also through systematic enablers for professional learning which were not largely apparent. Based on the findings of this research, motivation by the school’s middle and senior administration is a factor that may contribute to teachers’ willingness to participate in professional development activities. However, as also seen here, weaker school cultures can be demotivating and insufficiently facilitating when they do not consider the peculiar needs of dissatisfied teachers (Day, 1997). When school systems are ad hoc and a culture of teacher development cannot be identified, as in some instances in this research context, those schools cannot be deemed to be efficient or effective according to the Department of Education and Training in Melbourne (2005).
Teachers’ experience of professional development and learning includes how decisions are made regarding the opportunities they access. The dichotomy in the extent to which the teachers in this study had input in the content of their learning calls to attention the need for more teacher-administration collaboration regarding teachers’ perceptions of their needs as well as CPD decisions based on their teaching performance. It is worth noting that teachers’ perceptions of how decisions are made about their professional practice contributes to their response to the opportunities provided for them by a school system. The institutional systems in place to plan for CPD can be complex as noted by Opher and Pedder (2011) and can determine teachers’ response to CPD.

A significant factor in the determination of teachers’ experience of professional learning is their professional agency. Their individual efforts are to be applauded when they source, on their own initiative, opportunities which they feel would help them develop skills, knowledge peculiar to their own professional needs. This was not largely evident in this research, thus highlighting the need for teachers to have the will and capacity to navigate their professional growth which might involve negotiating power relations and understanding their individual personality in order to make sound decisions about their professional growth path (Van der Wal, 2020; TALIS/OECD, 2009). However, this does not negate the responsibility of a schools’ administration to carry out their full responsibility which includes catering for teacher professional development as delineated in the local job description for school principals (GORTT, MoE, 2019). It would be in the interest of all school leaders and practitioners to be guided by the place of CPD in professional practice as noted by the CARICOM secretariat (2020). Despite the challenges highlighted by teachers and in the literature with regard to the use of CPD or CPL for teachers, this research also points to how teachers’ professional development and learning experience may be enhanced.

Whether accessed on their own or organised by their school, teachers do value certain features of CPD. This research supports the view of Desimone and Garet (2015) in that there is evidence that teachers prefer a focus on content that is useful to them (content focus), active participation (active learning), continuity versus ‘one-shot’ sessions (coherence) (Wan & Lam, 2010), follow up support (sustained duration), and participatory (collective participation). Convenience via online opportunities was also valued. This reminds us that practising teachers may benefit from a variety of avenues through which they can hone their professional skills (Al Asmari, 2016). In an age where technology dominates learning and functioning, and in light of the challenges to accessing CPD that some participants noted, online options might be best suited in terms of convenience, cost and choice of content. Such options may be a motivating factor to engage in CPD especially when combined with incentives such as time allocation for CPD. Teachers’ feedback also leads one to conclude that a strategic approach to CPD would motivate them to perceive it as worthwhile. Such an approach would see teachers themselves as active partners with the school’s leadership in the identification
of needs, planning, and engaging in joint decisions on incentives related to CPD. This approach promises to avoid the low participation in CPD activities as seen in the findings of Sinyangwe et al. (2016) and to some extent, in this research. However, as Feimer-Nemser (2001) notes, the absence of collegial and collaborative approaches in schools can be a challenge to meaningful discourse on what matters in teaching and learning. Perhaps, strategy goes well beyond policies and must take into account the sociocultural and micropolitical realities of practitioners and their contexts.

Though mentoring emerged as a successful strategy in the work of Al Asmari (2016) and Jensen et al. (2016), it remains to be seen how teachers in this research context will respond to mentoring. The findings reveal that while there was some positiveness regarding an HoD being a facilitator of CPD in that they would understand teachers’ working context and issues, there was some insistence that the disposition of the facilitator should be suited to facilitating. The non-judgmental and risk-free environment mentioned by Little (2002), Putman and Borko (2000), and Ingvarson et al. (2005) is one factor crucial to motivating teachers to engage and benefit from CPD. This underlines the importance of training mentors if they are to have a role in the professional learning of teachers.

**Conclusion**

Although it is clear from the teachers’ perspective that continuous professional development and learning are critical to their effectiveness, all is not well in the education system. In fact, their sharing revealed that much is still to be done in terms of creation of policy to inform the introduction and sustained practice of CPD.

In addition to recommendations already made within the findings, several others are highlighted here for easy recognition and perhaps for the consideration of adoption by the GORTT’s MoE. We recommend that a system of professional development be instituted throughout the nation’s schools. The MoE’s Teaching and Teacher Development Division can be granted a greater mandate to manage teacher professional development. The Division can be more effectively staffed and current staff upskilled. The essential role of CPD and CPL must be clearly communicated to teachers prior to entry to the system and a means of monitoring and tracking teachers’ professional development should be introduced or strengthened so as to signal and underscore its importance. There can also be a thrust towards placing greater emphasis on CPL, granting teachers more ownership of their professional growth. A technological system can be introduced so that teacher can document and track their own professional development progress. This record can be used as part of a fairer and more equitable teacher review system which is in keeping with teachers’ current status. In the absence of teacher standards, however, any managed system may prove problematic. Therefore, it is recommended that
teacher standards be institutionalised into the education system as a matter of urgency.

A holistic review of teachers’ roles, functions and promotion policies needs to be conducted. For example, the initial in-service teacher preparation of secondary teachers cannot be the sole basis for promotion to middle or senior management positions as is the case currently. The concepts of CPD and CPL are germane to this recommendation. Furthermore, the voice of teachers should be a part of policy formation whether at the MoE or at the school level.

Finally, any policy decision concerning the professional development of teachers must take into account the teacher-as-person. Awareness of their personal contexts and realities including personality and dispositions must play a role in the CPD and CPL planning process.

References


