

Teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in professional development programs in Afghanistan

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Abstract: This study explored school teachers' perceptions of their professional development programs and the programs' impact on teachers' attitudes, knowledge, and practices in Afghanistan. Semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires are conducted to collect data from ten different schools in Herat Province, Afghanistan. The Qualitative data were thematically analyzed and the quantitative data were analyzed via SPSS software. The result of the study shows that teachers had a positive attitude toward the professional development programs.

Keywords: professional development program, attitudes, knowledge, practices

Introduction

The professional development initiative prioritizes the enhancement of educators' instructional proficiency and their exposure to recent pedagogical advancements, encompassing technological integration within educational settings. Furthermore, it emphasizes the cultivation of students' essential soft skills, notably communication, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking, which are deemed essential in addressing contemporary societal demands and fostering 21st-century learning competencies (Chu et al., 2016).

In Afghanistan, the professional development program plays a crucial role in public schools, with a significant challenge being the limited qualifications of teachers. Only 48% of teachers meet the minimum 14th-grade qualifications (UNICEF, 2016). The scarcity of qualified teachers is evident, with just a quarter of grade 12 graduates entering higher education in 2008 (Ministry of Education, 2022). Enhancing teacher training is essential to improve student outcomes (Khan & Irshad Ullah, 2018).

On the other hand, there seem to be obstacles and problems in planning professional development programs in Afghanistan schools (UNICEF, 2016). For example, top-down decision-making, traditional planning by principals and advisors instead of teachers, disregard for teachers' right to express their opinions, prioritization of managerial needs, and, ultimately, lack of ownership of the process and outcomes of professional growth (Ahmadi et al., 2021).

Teacher professional growth should align with teachers' and students' needs, empowering teachers to enhance their teaching content and methods. Therefore, effective professional development programs must be tailored to meet teachers' requirements, emphasizing their active involvement in program design and implementation (Muir et al., 2021).

The research highlights the absence of systematic evaluations regarding the impact of education and teacher development programs implemented by Afghanistan's Ministry of Higher Education in the last two decades (Sahibzada, 2018). Furthermore, it addresses the scarcity of empirical research from teachers' perspectives on teacher professional development, particularly focusing on the Afghan context.

The central purpose of this is to explore public-school teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges about the Professional Development Program (professional development program) conducted by the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan.

Literature Review

The success of teachers' professional development is linked to organizational support, structure, and job attitude (Potolea & Toma, 2015; Aroon, 2008). Factors like desire, success, flexibility, coherence, and innovation in teachers' work are essential for effective programs (Zamora et al., 2022). Professional development can enhance teachers' grasp of research and boost classroom performance (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010).

Professional development programs play a crucial role in shaping teacher attitudes, beliefs, and practices, leading to improved classroom instruction (Harris et al., 2011; Girvan et al., 2016). Studies by Tran et al. (2020) and Hallinger and Liu (2016) emphasize that such programs positively impact teacher practices, knowledge, and student learning outcomes, highlighting their significance in boosting teacher effectiveness.

Teacher professional development programs encounter challenges like insufficient support, funding, incentives, program organization, and relevance to teachers' needs (Casallas, 2017; Wilde and Mielke, 2013; Monica and Kuswando, 2019; Antoniou and Kyriakides, 2013; Finefter-Rosenbluh; Perry-Hazan, 2018; Dempsey & Mestry, 2023). In Afghanistan, issues like political unrest, conflict, and top-down decision-making complicate effective program design and implementation, highlighting the necessity for tailored programs that cater to local contexts and teacher requirements (Wardak, 2022; Wilde and Mielke, 2013).

Continuous professional development is vital for teachers' growth and student success. Tailored and engaging programs are key, requiring sufficient funding, incentives, and support (Chu et al, 2017). These programs enhance teachers' inclusivity attitudes, confidence, and effectiveness with diverse learners. By understanding diverse

needs, creating inclusive environments, and adopting responsive practices, teachers support all students effectively. Collaborative and reflective approaches help challenge biases, promote inclusivity, and ensure students have access to diverse activities and core curriculum (Male, 2011; Royster et al, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research combined interviews and questionnaires for in-depth analysis, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of teachers' professional development. Purposive sampling selected 12 experienced teachers for interviews. Due to sample size concerns, 75 teachers were randomly chosen for questionnaires, with 62 responses received from diverse backgrounds.

Interview questions were adapted from Aminudin (2012) and validated by an education professor for credibility. A 36-item questionnaire from Williams (2014) focused on study objectives. Transcriptions underwent peer review for accuracy.

High-quality data collection was ensured through audio-recorded interviews and questionnaire distribution at schools. Data analysis involved transcription, coding, theme creation for qualitative insights, and descriptive analysis using SPSS for quantitative data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Tseng et al., 2007). This rigorous approach enhances the study's validity and provides a rich understanding of teachers' experiences.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Study participants were briefed on the research objectives, assured confidentiality (Erickson, 1985), and informed about the minimal risks of participation. Teacher responses were kept private and anonymous, with only researchers accessing voice recordings to create a more comfortable environment for sharing attitudes and experiences regarding professional development programs.

One potential limitation of the study is the low response rate from teachers who declined to participate in the questionnaire and interviews, affecting the sample representativeness and potentially skewing study conclusions. The reasons for their non-participation should be acknowledged to address potential biases. Despite this limitation, insights from participating teachers can still offer valuable perspectives for the study.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

To investigate teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges about the Professional Development (PD) Program, a 5-point Likert scale categorical questionnaire was administered to a sample of N=40 participants. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS software. The frequency distributions, measures of central tendency, and measures of variability were calculated for the responses.

The demographic profile of the participants shows that a majority of participants were female (74%). More than half of the sample consisted of teachers with more than a decade of teaching experience, of which 67% had over 10 years of teaching experience. The participants had diverse educational backgrounds, with 57% of them having experience in teaching the Persian language literature and Theology. In terms of subject specialties, the participants mostly taught English and Theology, constituting 62% of the sample.

Table 1.1.

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.735	36

According to Table 4.1, the internal consistency of the 36-item questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was found to be 0.735. This indicates high internal consistency among the items in the questionnaire. The number of items included in the questionnaire reflects the broad range of constructs that were being assessed.

Quantitative analysis

Table 4.2.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall_mean	40	3.69	4.83	4.2083	0.27
Valid N (listwise)	40				

The descriptive statistics from Table 2.4 illustrate that teachers held a positive perception of the Professional Development (PD) Program. The mean satisfaction score of 4.20 indicates high overall satisfaction among participants. However, there were varying levels of satisfaction, evident from the standard deviation of 0.27 for this metric. This suggests that while some teachers were highly satisfied, others had moderate or low satisfaction levels with the program.

The analysis reveals an overall positive perception among teachers towards the professional development program, with a mean score of 4.1417 and a standard deviation of 0.43780. The balanced distribution is supported by a median score of 4.1667. Teachers exhibited a positive learning attitude with a mean score of 4.2333 and some variance indicated by a standard deviation of 0.92203. Positive changes in attitudes and beliefs were reported, supported by a mean score of 4.4550 and a low standard deviation of 0.36158, indicating consistency. The results indicate mutual benefits for teachers and students, showcasing positive perceptions, enhanced learning utilization, attitude shifts, and improved learning outcomes through the program.

However, considering my own experience as an in-service teacher supervisor in Herat City, as well as my involvement in the teacher practicum programs, the researchers observed several challenges and issues during the teachers' instruction. The

quantitative data alone did not provide a comprehensive understanding of these complexities. Therefore, to gain deeper insights into specific aspects of the programs, it became necessary for the researchers to supplement the quantitative data with qualitative research methods.

The researchers used qualitative data analysis to explore teachers' experiences, attitudes, and challenges in professional development programs in-depth. This method aimed to uncover the complexities and intricacies of the programs, focusing specifically on the challenges teachers encounter.

Teachers found the professional development program effective and valued the inclusion of soft skills. They credited the program for enhancing their teaching methods, updating materials, and improving student-centered learning. The program also equipped them with discussion skills, empowering students to express themselves confidently and become responsible members of society.

Teachers valued the inclusion of updated teaching techniques in the professional development program, finding it a new and enjoyable experience. They appreciated the mix of theoretical and practical activities, with many enjoying the game-like lessons that enhanced learning effectiveness and enjoyment.

Teachers highlighted the need for changes in trainer/participant selection, methodology, and timing of the program. They suggested incorporating more practical activities, interactive approaches, and age-appropriate teaching techniques tailored to individual student learning styles and abilities.

The study identified challenges faced by teachers in the professional development program, along with potential solutions. Teachers noted the short duration as a major challenge, suggesting an extension for thorough practice. They also highlighted limited time for interactive activities and older teachers' reluctance to embrace modern teaching methods like student-centered learning as areas needing attention and improvement.

Quantitative analysis reveals positive teacher perceptions through mean scores and standard deviations. Qualitative data highlights teachers' experiences, attitudes, and challenges, emphasizing the program's effectiveness, soft skills, and effective teaching methods. This combined approach provides a comprehensive view of teacher experiences and program impact.

Discussion

Organizational support and environmental factors impact PD success (Potolea & Toma, 2015; Aroon, 2008). Teachers' motivation, flexibility, and innovation influence program effectiveness (Zamora et al., 2022). Buczynski and Hansen (2010) showed that PD can boost teachers' grasp of research and classroom performance, highlighting the complexity of effective teacher development.

PD programs boost teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and classroom practices (Harris et al., 2011; Girvan et al., 2016). Research by Tran et al. (2020) and Hallinger and Liu (2016) highlights the positive impact of PD on classroom practices, student outcomes, and teacher effectiveness through enhanced knowledge, skills, and confidence.

Addressing challenges like lack of support and funding, poorly organized programs, lack of relevance to teachers' needs, and limited time is crucial for effective PD supporting teacher development (Casallas, 2017; Wilde and Mielke, 2013; Monica & Kuswando, 2019; Antoniou and Kyriakides, 2013; Finefter-Rosenbluh & Perry-Hazan, 2018). Prioritizing solutions to these obstacles can significantly improve the impact and significance of PD initiatives in shaping teachers' professional growth.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study concludes that the professional development program has a significantly positive impact on teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and teaching methods. While teachers appreciate the program, they suggest enhancements like longer duration, interactive teaching methods, and customized techniques. Recommendations include extending program duration, focusing on interactive methods, tailoring techniques to diverse learning styles, refining trainer and participant selection and training, addressing challenges in adopting modern teaching methods, implementing a feedback system for improvement, and considering a longitudinal study for long-term impact assessment. These enhancements aim to improve the program's effectiveness in positively influencing teachers' practices and student outcomes.

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