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## Tensions and dilemmas in teacher professional development

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### Abstract

This paper presents the reasons why teachers engage in professional development as well as the tensions and dilemmas that arise from professional development. The voices of 14 teachers are heard through individual semi-structured interviews. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using thematic coding to uncover the themes related to the tensions that teachers feel when they are faced with decisions pertaining to professional development matters. Three dilemmas surfaced from our analysis and in this paper, we present them in a dualistic manner to highlight the tensions that resulted from these dilemmas faced by the teachers. The first dilemma concerns the issue of needs that are served through engagement in professional development activities. Here we discuss whether professional development should serve the needs of individual teachers or whether it should serve organizational needs. We highlight the forms of professional development activities that teachers should engage in and how they often find themselves torn between the urge to attend professional development activities that they personally enjoy and those that their peers and school would like them to attend. The second dilemma is related to teachers' sense of responsibility to their pupils when they are engaged in professional development activities. The question that teachers commonly ask themselves before they decide on professional development activities is whether their students' learning will be affected in their absence. The last dilemma is related to the first and it deals with whether professional development activities should be made compulsory or whether it should be voluntary for teachers. Understanding the tensions and dilemmas of professional development as experienced by teachers allows the policy makers and professional developers to make better decisions so that the fidelity of professional development policies and programs can be enhanced.

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**Keywords:** Teacher Professional Development; Interview; Tensions

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching is nestled within a complex ecology of people, policies, systems, social practices and social norms. As part of the complex ecosystem of school and teaching, teachers have to grapple with expectations and demands that are made *of* them and *on* them by various stakeholders. Teachers are expected to teach the child, deliver the curriculum, understand the national policies, work with parents to help them understand their child as well as school, and design innovative practices to suit the ever changing social landscape. This list of demands that are made of a teacher is not exhaustive and often times, it is difficult to quantify what a teacher needs to do, or even just describing the range of tasks that a teacher needs to perform. These multiple and varied things that a teacher needs to be able to do suggests that teachers need to stay current in their practices and hence a need to constantly update and upgrade themselves. Teacher professional development (TPD) is thus an important aspect in the life of a teacher. As TPD is strongly coupled with the lives of teachers, it is inevitable that it is also entangled in the complexities of school, people, policies and practices. Research in the area of TPD has delved into areas in motivation of teachers to engage in professional development (Gorozidis & Papaioannou, 2013), ways to make professional development sustainable and meaningful (Tan, Lim, & Teng, 2012), teachers' satisfaction with professional development (Nir & Bogler, 2008), ways to design professional development in various domain areas (e.g., Hismanoglu, 2010; Loughran & Gunstone, 1997), and frameworks that support and enables us to understand teacher learning and professional development (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Wenger, 1998). To understand the various aspects and issues related to TPD, research studies commonly use methods such as large scale questionnaires (see Gorozidis & Papaioannou, 2013), documentary analysis (Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004), video analysis of behavior during professional learning (Tan & Towndrow, 2009), action research (O'Sullivan, 2002) and interviews (Lepage, Boudreau, Maier, Robinson, & Cox, 2001). These methods are commonly applied to study TPD as the construct of TPD is one that requires the teacher to connect between his/her practice in the classroom and their learning experiences. As such, it is largely reflective in nature and hence the common methods used deploy retrospective recall of teachers' experiences. Similarly, in this paper, we interview teachers on their personal experiences with professional development activities and using their interview replies to answer two research questions – “What are reasons for teachers to engage in TPD?” and “What are the tensions and dilemmas that are faced by teachers when they make decisions related to involvement in professional development activities?”

The notion of tension and dilemma can be understood better when they are mapped onto what TPD encompasses, the purposes of TPD as well as the teachers' lives and roles. As such, in the next three sections, we discuss the definition of professional development, the purposes of professional development and the lives of teachers in relation to the tensions and dilemmas in teaching.

### 1.1. Defining teacher professional development

The notion of TPD is diffused since it is a multifaceted construct with multiple definitions of what constitutes TPD. To add to the complexity, the scope of TPD is also wide. Generally, TPD falls under the overarching umbrella of in-service teacher education (Tan, 2014) and refers to the process of improving teachers' skills and competencies for producing stellar educational outcomes for students (Hassel, 1999). More specifically, TPD also includes the various aspects related to the practices of teachers – beliefs of teachers, identity of teachers, teachers' epistemologies (Hewson, 2007) and other aspects that pertain to the professional practice of teachers and teaching.

Theoretically, some argue that TPD should be a process (Loucks-Horsely, Love, Stiles, Mundry, & Hewson, 2003) while others view TPD from a product perspective and focus on what teachers can do as a result of attending TPD activities. These different perspectives of TPD have resulted in debates about what the end goal of TPD ought to be. As a result of these debates, tensions surrounding design and evaluation of TPD arise. How does one evaluate the effectiveness of TPD? Is teacher change the most significant measure or gains in students' scores? Amidst the diversity of views, most scholars agree that TPD needs to result in some form of improvement in the practice of teaching and ultimately advancement of students' learning. We argue here that the debates and tensions related to TPD do not merely occur at a theoretical level but have also cascaded to the level of teachers' experiences. As such, these theoretical debates and the resultant tensions form the motivations behind this paper as we examine the teachers' reflection of their TPD experiences.

### *1.2. Purposes of teacher professional development*

Education is a public enterprise in which the voices of many parties need to be heard. As tax dollars are often used to fund education, there is often pressure for accountability. Consequently, the resources channeled to TPD are also under close scrutiny by policy makers, parents, and schools. The purposes and impact of TPD hence need to be visible for the general population. A review by Desimone (2009) highlighted the components of meaningful and impactful TPD which ultimately result in improvement in students' performance. These five critical components are (1) the need for focus on content; (2) the opportunities presented for active learning; (3) coherence of the professional development program; (4) duration (minimum of 30 hours) of the program; and (5) opportunities for collective participation. Besides these five critical factors, research evidence also points to the need to incorporate structured, sustained follow-up activities to enhance the effectiveness of any professional development program.

The next important issue for any teacher professional learning program to address is the effect of the professional development program on students' learning. In other words, what is the evidence of change as a result of teacher professional development? Osborne, Simon, Christodoulou, and Howell-Richardson (2013) argued that currently, in educational research, the evidence of change is scant. Few studies to date are able to show causal, direct and convincing evidence of teacher professional development impacting and improving students' learning. This difficulty of obtaining direct evidence of change in students' learning is understandably so since learning in schools and teacher learning are two domains that are influenced and shaped by a multitude of interacting factors. While it may be possible to link the success of TPD to improvement in students' learning, it is nevertheless difficult to establish a causal relationship. As such, this presents a potential area where tensions might arise since teachers might be torn between their own development and the measurable change in students' learning.

### *1.3. Teachers' lives and roles in teaching*

Beliefs are deep seated ideas that result from one's experiences within a specific cultural and societal context. As such, it is difficult to change and often influences one's actions and decision. Pajares (1992) argued that teachers' beliefs are intrinsically rooted within their own experiences and cultural resources and hence are different from knowledge in terms of their potent affective nature. As such, teachers' beliefs have a powerful influence on their interpretation of things happening around them, on the decisions they make and on the eventual actions to be taken. Consequently, teachers' beliefs about their roles and responsibilities in their practice have impact on their participation in TPD activities. In light of the complexities of teachers' beliefs and practice, attention needs to be given to inspect the dialectical relationship between teachers' beliefs and assumption based on the context that they live in, their decision making and practices. As such, listening to teachers' lived experiences with TPD to understand the intricacies of their beliefs about their roles and how these perceptions shape and influence their decision making with regard to their professional practice is illuminating.

Similar to many economies, Singapore values teachers and the role they play in developing the workforce and the society for the future. Teachers are valued for their role to "Lead, Care, Inspire" students (Academy of Singapore Teachers [AST], n.d.). Teachers are expected to play a key role in nurturing the children and to inspire the next generation of Singaporeans. They are also expected to maintain the trust and respect of parents and the community. Finally, as professionals, teachers in Singapore are "responsible for reflecting on our own conduct, developing our practice, and ensuring that we meet the standards of the profession." (AST, n.d.). The value proposition with respect to TPD for a teacher in Singapore is therefore one that empowers individual teachers to develop themselves and to take ownership for the teaching profession. The interaction between societal expectation and personal beliefs potentially presents grounds for differing ideas and hence tensions. This paper will also explore how personal beliefs and societal expectations interact in TPD.

## **2. Research Method**

This research is qualitative and interpretative in nature. We believe that the realities of social life are collectively formed by members in the community (fellow teachers, administrators, teacher educators, students, parents etc) and the artifacts from these interactions (ideas, knowledge and even physical artifacts) are products

(Vygotsky, 1986) from these interactions. This stance is adopted because we believe that to understand how and why teachers make decisions related to their professional lives, we need to hear what they have to say. Teachers' personal ideas about their professional development are developed through their lived experiences (popular media, home life, religious beliefs, exposure to different ideologies, interaction with peers etc) and as such are diverse and likely to differ. What teachers believe to be important for them to develop professionally may not be aligned with what researchers or policy makers think as important. So the important question to consider here is where teachers obtain their ideas from and what their beliefs and ideas are important to them. This sociocultural perspective shape and guide our decision on the means of data collection and analysis.

### 2.1. Research context

This research is carried out in Singapore where education is a highly prized and valued enterprise as can be seen by strong government support and generous funding for education. In Singapore, TPD is not a compulsory requirement for teachers. TPD is also not considered work duty and there are usually no monetary rewards in the form of salary increment for participating in TPD. Rather, teachers are encouraged to be reflective and are given autonomy for their own practices and professional development. Teachers in Singapore have an entitlement to professional development that is sponsored by the Ministry of Education and the area of professional development is largely aligned to one of the three career tracks of teachers. The three tracks are teaching track, specialist track and leadership track. There is a special unit set up by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to take care of TPD and this unit is the AST. The AST has experienced officers and master teachers who work closely with schools and teachers to take care of teachers' growth through professional development. Such an autonomous culture for professional development of teachers can potentially be a test-bed for ideas as well as diversity for practices in TPD. It is in this culture of support for TPD that the research participants are selected.

The 14 participants in our research are full-time trained teachers teaching in Singapore schools. The participants consented to the interview after they were being approached by the research team upon recommendations by peers. Out of the 14 participants, there were six males and eight females. The participants are teachers from primary schools to junior colleges and they have teaching experiences ranging two years to 29 years. The wide range of grade levels and teaching experiences allows for a diversity of views to be heard. Table 1 summarises the profile of the participant teachers.

Table 1. Profile of teachers (all names used are pseudonyms)

Teacher	Gender	Years of Teaching	Subjects Taught	Grade level Taught
Mr H	M	5	Geography	Junior College
Mr AH	M	10	General Paper	Junior College
Ms AY	F	11	General Paper	Junior College
Mr XR	M	3.5	Geography	Secondary
Ms FE	F	26	Geography	Secondary
Mr N	M	8	Biology	Secondary
Ms KN	F	10.5	Biology	Secondary
Ms KK	F	29	English	Secondary
Mr JS	M	7.5	Physical Education	Primary
Ms F	F	1.5	Mathematics, Science and Music	Primary
Ms N	F	8	English and Mathematics	Primary
Ms P	F	7	English, Mathematics and Science	Primary
Ms V	F	1	English, Mathematics and Science	Primary
Mr K	M	12.5	Physical Education	Primary

## 2.2. Data collection and analysis

Interview data was transcribed and analyzed using the process of open coding and axial coding as originally suggested by Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Flick, 2006). Although the original intention of this coding was to generate grounded theory, our purpose here is to search for integrated themes among the research data so that we can understand (1) the concerns of teachers as they plan for TPD, and (2) the dilemmas that they faced when they are engaged in TPD.

For open coding, we will go through the entire data corpus to surface frequent ideas and stories that emerged in participants' responses. For axial coding, we looked into relationships among the frequent ideas and stories and later developed possible themes of how they make sense of evidence based on their stories. During this step, we will attempt to note integrated, coherent themes by categorizing and regrouping the themes and ideas several times. In this way, we attempted to re-examine the themes that we categorized in the previous coding to enhance the credibility of data thematisation.

Our objectives for generating insights from the data is to ensure that our interpretation is not perceived as a univocal truth of the data to be revealed or as a definitive conclusion to be reached, but rather as possible understandings to reopen new and generative instances of thinking about TPD under different contexts in different spaces. In other words, we aim at interpreting other possible discourses of TPD than simply describing their difficulties.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Teachers' ideas about TPD

In this section, we present teachers' ideas about TPD and the reasons why they engaged in TPD. These two aspects are important to help us understand where the tensions and dilemmas (which will be presented in the next section) arise. While all the participants serve in the Singapore school system, they differ slightly in what they think TPD should focus on. The participant teachers' ideas of TPD are generally visible and closely coupled with their school practices. When asked for their idea of TPD, all of them made some reference to improving themselves. The areas that they identified for improvement include (1) content knowledge in the discipline that they teach, (2) pedagogical skills, (3) teaching skills to enable them to better engage and motivate their pupils, and less commonly (4) different ways of doing things. It was interesting to note that they hardly made reference to notion such as developing teacher identity or notions such as increasing the professional image of teachers as part of TPD. One teacher (Mr H) sums up the diversity of perspective very well – *“Professional development is very broad, all encapsulating sort of idea.”*

Despite having diverse ideas about what TPD is, all the 14 teachers recognized the importance of TPD in their practices. Reasons cited for engaging in TPD include:

1. keeping their discipline knowledge current

*“Gaining new knowledge, skills, competencies, that is obviously the fundamental reason why teachers want to develop themselves.” (Mr H)*

*“skills obviously pedagogical skills, knowledge because the subject that I am teaching is a very dynamic so the information becomes obsolete, knowledge becomes obsolete very quickly, and hence really a lot of time is spent on, development in terms of the knowledge.” (Ms AY)*

2. staying abreast of the latest changes in educational landscape through networking

*“In schools, I really feel that we are in a a tortoise shell. If I, if I can quote like that. I wouldn't know what's going on if I don't upgrade myself. I need to go out and talk to at least the other heads in my subject to know what's going on.” (Mr K)*

*“By going for professional development, you get to see and interact with people of the same interest, of the same, uh, of the same capability or the same industry and you get to learn from*

*them and network and ultimately reflect where you stand in this area, where does the school stand where does the company stand in this competitive world.”(Mr J)*

*“The other is networking that I think. Finding out about how different institutions do different things, or do the same, do the same things differently and how you can actually apply that to your new learning and apply it to your school and do things differently”(Mr XR)*

3. role modelling life-long learning

*“to recognise that learning is a life-long thing, and as much as you are a role model for your students.”(Ms F)*

*“role model this thing as a, this thing, I mean this idea of a life-long learner. Because if we teachers stop learning, then, it seems hypocritical to go to tell our students that they need to learn, because we ourselves have stopped to learn.”(Mr N)*

4. motivating themselves to stay passionate in teaching

*“Because I want to stay motivated. I want to make sure that when I leave this career I want to feel, I want to feel fulfilled, I want to feel my journey counts for something.”(Ms N)*

5. fulfilling their responsibility of being professional

*“so I feel it is a responsibility as a professional teacher to participate in professionalizing activities. Whether it is training, whether it is studying, whether it is workshop, whether it is conferences, I think it is a responsibility.”(Ms KK)*

*“my students will be shortchanged, and I don’t think I’ve done enough for myself for the students and the school.”(Mr K)*

### 3.2. Tensions and dilemmas

During the interviews with the participant teachers, it was evident that the teachers’ experiences with TPD were not free from difficulty decision making. During the dialogue, teachers showed that they were cognizant of expectations by administrators, peers and students for them to develop professionally. Yet, they were also aware of what their personal capacity and interests are with regard to their professional practices and growth. We surfaced the notion of tensions and dilemmas as we noticed the high frequency (average of 38 times per interview with the highest frequency of 80 times usage) of use of speech tags such as “but”. We argue here that the usage of “but” is indicative of the participants’ attempts to justify their decisions/ideas with the knowledge that there are alternative views or expectations that they are unable to fulfil. We present the tensions and dilemmas that surfaced using a dualistic format to illustrate how dichotomous perspectives, when present can potentially be problematic.

**Individual needs versus organisational needs.** The question that demands an answer here is whether TPD should serve individual needs or the needs of the organisation. Theoretically, these two need not be antagonistic but a balance can be achieved. However, in reality, when these are not in sync, tensions or dilemmas arise. For example, if the school culture is to strongly encourage teachers to engage in TPD, and if a teacher is not willing to do so, then there will be a clash between individual needs and that of the organisation. Alternatively, if a teacher does not identify with a particular way of teaching and the school is embarking on a new curricular innovation using the specific framework, then a potential tension arises when TPD is set up. Another issue that is raised showed that teachers think about personal benefits when attending TPD and these personal benefits may or may not be aligned to the goals of the organisation.

*“...ton of bricks falling on my head because sometimes you are forced to go to a course which you think is ridiculous and useless but you have to go because your head or your principal or MOE says you must go. (Ms FE)”*

*“prevents teachers from attending TPD, could be.. there’s a lack, probably be a lack of culture, lack of encouragement from the middle management for such teachers to attend TPD. Firstly, because middle*



*management may not believe in these pedagogies. Secondly, there- there could be, high stake assessments involved, so in terms of the short term priorities is really to ensure that students are equipped with the skills and relevant contents to handle national examinations.”(Mr XR)*

*“because we are very pragmatic, we have a value to things that we do. At this stage of your life, is it worth it to go for this, what value would it add to your promotion?”(Ms KK)*

*“whatever professional development that they are interested in may not benefit them. Some do look at promotions. So as long as it doesn’t not help them in their promotions then they may not want to be engaged in that area of professional development. They rather spend time doing something that brings them gains in that way.” (Ms P)*

Some teachers like to be empowered to decide *when* and *what* types professional development to attend. As such, administrators may need to consider taking into consideration teachers’ preferences into account when designing TPD opportunities. What are some platforms that can be made available for teachers’ needs and preferences to be made visible? Is there a comprehensive range of TPD activities that teachers can choose from? AST emphasises the concept of teacher ownership of learning as well as the responsibility to lead others in learning. Teachers may have interests that are unique and does not match all the TPD opportunities that are presented to them. As such, these teachers have to decide if they should engage in TPD simply to fulfil their TPD requirement or if they should wait until the right opportunities come along. Ownership of learning comes with responsibility on the part of the teacher to also take organisational needs and students’ interest into consideration. These interacting factors need to be aligned to ensure that tensions do not arise.

*“I only choose course that give me additional value, and differentiates me from other teachers. Something that is not so conventional.” (Mr XR)*

***Responsibility to stay current versus being there for students’ learning.*** This dilemma is the most obvious one mentioned by all the teachers. They seemed to be constantly torn between developing (or not developing) themselves for the students. Their main concern is that being away from the classroom will have a negative impact on students’ learning. Hence, the question raised here is whether a teacher should be taken out of classroom so that they can attend to their professional development. What is the balance to achieve between disruption to students’ learning and teachers’ professional development? Research is also not able to offer any solutions to this issue since it is difficult to establish the cause-and-effect relationship between the inputs of TPD and the resultant change in teachers (Nicol & Turner-Bisset, 2006). As such, it is often difficult to justify taking teachers away from classes to attend TPD since the evidence for effectiveness is often weak. The discussion of this dilemma ultimately points to the timing of TPD activities. However, the teachers in the interview also were not able to agree on when TPD will be ideal. Teachers cited tiredness after school hours or need to spend time with family members during school vacations as reasons for not having TPD activities during these times.

*“I’ll look at time, as well as whether it fits into my schedule. There are many many courses and workshops which I am interested in but unfortunately it doesn’t fit into my schedule, alright, because you know, you can’t be away for too long and I don’t want to miss too many classes otherwise, you know, you have problems with catching up with students.”(Mr XR)*

*“Let’s face it, a teacher cannot teach well if he or she is away from class.”(Mr J)*

*“...but if you attend too many hours of training at the expense of your students, I think a teacher needs to draw the line somewhere.”(Mr XR)*



**Compulsory professional development versus voluntary on need basis.** As presented earlier, TPD is non mandatory in Singapore although it is encouraged. There are views that TPD should be made compulsory so that teachers stay current and relevant to their profession. Others think that compulsory professional development enables teachers to have a greater awareness of the other fields of knowledge that might be helpful for teaching. Yet others think that the notion of licensing as a requirement for teaching re-certification would increase the competencies of teachers. The idea of compulsory professional development has far reaching implications of funding and time for TPD to take place. While some teachers impose on themselves to engage in TPD to ensure that they are current in their knowledge, others engage in TPD only if they can find time to do so. This results in a highly heterogeneous state where some teachers are excessively engaged in TPD while some never attempted to participate in any TPD actively.

*“So I feel it's a responsibility to professionalize. At different points of your career. It's not something where, should I do it, should I not do it, etc. I feel that I wouldn't be surprised a few years down the road where it is something where, this is your 3<sup>rd</sup> year, okay off you go. This is your 5<sup>th</sup> year, off you go. Because, information content knowledge, is already shifting and so fluid. We need to keep on engaging with it at different points to keep ourselves current. To keep ourselves credible.” (Ms KK)*

*“But in Singapore, a 19 year old can go into a school and do relief teaching, which is an insult to our profession. Which means what? What is the message that they are sending? That anybody can come to a class to, to keep a class quiet, as long as we allow relief teachers to enter a classroom, to teach with no experience at all – just fresh from high school, we are not considered professional.” (Ms FE)*

*“all the courses I go through, I realise that teaching is a very complex process, and you really need to have a lot of skills. And these skills cannot be acquired in one day. Like a one, two day course, you know.” (Ms FE)*

#### 4. Implications of Study

Teaching is nestled within a complex ecology of people, policies, systems, social practices and social norms. As such, as teachers progress in their teaching profession, they need to be cognisant of the various factors that influence their actions and decisions in the classroom. Consequently, the complexities of teaching are mapped onto teacher education and TPD. The noble task for developing a teacher professionally is also faced with tensions and dilemmas. In this paper, we presented five reasons for teachers engaging in TPD – (1) keeping discipline knowledge current, (2) staying abreast of the latest changes in educational landscape through networking with other like-minded teachers, (3) role modeling life-long learning, (4) motivating themselves to stay passionate in teaching, and (5) fulfilling the responsibility of being a professional. These reasons cited for engaging in professional development are both cognitive as well as affective. Teachers are well aware of areas that they need to develop and grow and at the same time are also aware that improvements in cognitive domain can potentially enhance their motivation and passion in their jobs. This is aligned to what Avalos (2011) defined in her review of professional development research in 10 years from 2000 to 2010 that professional development is a complex process that engages both cognitive as well as the emotional domain of teachers, both individually as well as collectively. Knowing that teachers can possibly be motivated through enhancing their practices through TPD, perhaps there ought to be more concerted effort in TPD activities to connect the learning to improving and applications in the classrooms. This way, teachers will not feel that the time and resources spent on TPD is wasted.

With reference to the second research question, we presented tensions and dilemmas in three inter-related areas of – (1) individual needs versus organizational needs, (2) responsibility to attend TPB versus being in school for students' learning, and (3) compulsory professional development versus voluntary professional development. These areas are flagged because of the “embedded or situated nature of TPD and development” (Avalos, 2011). Factors that affect TPD can occur within the school environment and culture and this is further mapped on to how

educational systems and policies work. The dialectical toggle between individual growth and organization development, between the quest for individual uniqueness and being moulded to be “like a teacher”, between being an informed and absent teacher and a less informed and present teacher are all struggles that teachers face and experience as they make the seemingly simple decision of being engaged in officially planned TPD activities. Administrators and policy makers need to be aware of the struggles faced by teachers in TPD and be able to provide a platform for teachers to articulate their concerns and struggles without the fears of being judged.

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