Teacher Professional Development Activities in a Higher Education Institution in Ha Tinh province, Vietnam in a time of educational reforms

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ABSTRACT

Teacher professional development (TPD) has been reconceptualized as a process that started from pre-service teacher training at tertiary education institutions and continues in the form of job-embedded and collaborative professional learning activities for teachers at their schools. Many researchers have provided a wide range of professional learning activities employed in several Western and Asian societies. This case study used a variety of qualitative data sources to identify typical activities used to promote TPD in one university in Central Vietnam in a time of current educational reforms. Nine activities of TPD are utilised in this study including both externally-offered and school-based ones. These activities are specifically described and also linked to the typical features of the socio-economic, cultural and political context of Vietnam.

Keywords: teacher professional development, typical activities

Introduction

For the last few decades, four important trends have emerged in the global literature on teacher professional development (TPD). First, the role of teachers' professional learning is as equally important as pre-service teacher training at colleges/universities of education (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008). Second, the traditional view of TPD including 'in-service workshops'and certificate/degree upgrading programs has moved to more school-based learning activities (Harris & Jones, 2019; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009). Third, TPD is taking place in learning communities (Little, 2012). Finally, TPD has a central place in sustainable educational reforms (Fullan, 2011; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008). The education system of Vietnam has currently been under several educational reforms for enhanced capacities of providing high quality human resources for the development of Vietnam.

The current study was conducted in these developments in Ha Tinh University in Vietnam where scholarly contributions to the world literature in teacher training or TPD have been very little. The research question is "***What are the activities of teacher professional development implemented in Ha Tinh University in Central Vietnam in a time of educational reforms***?" This paper presents a case study qualitative design. Qualitative data were collected from the University Rector using the interview with the Rector, open-ended questionnaires for teachers, direct observation and document analysis. The paper aims to enrich the literature on TPD and could recommend several solutions for educational policymakers, leaders, and teachers in Ha Tinh province in particular and in Higher Education of Vietnam in general.

Literature review

The emphasis in research and teacher education has shifted towards teacher professional development that is multi-faceted and job-embedded for the last few decades (Harris & Jones, 2019; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). Thus, today TPD is regarded as a continuos process that begins during pre-service teacher training at colleges/universities of education and continutes throughout the teachers' teaching job (Kwakman, 2003; Little, 2012). Research on TPD has concluded that it is an ongoing process by which teachers get new subject knowledge, responsibilities, and teaching method skills (Li et al., 2016; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Opfer and Pedder (2011) and others have tried to outline professional learning activities of teachers. Two common types of TPD have various activities that occur inside the school such as school-based workshops or observations of other teachers as well as those outside the school such as workshops or degree/certificate upgrading programs or conferences. Researchers have also mentioned individual basis type such as self-learning or online learning or in a group or community setting such as teacher research group or team observation. TPD can also be voluntary participation of teachers or by external forces such as the principal, district or provincial or MOET educational authorities whether it is mandatory or voluntary.

This different perspective towards TPD has led researchers or teachers to explore opportunities for their TPD at workplace (Hallinger & Liu, 2016; Timperley, 2011). The TPD can take place via formal ways such as professional development programs, teacher research groups, observations of other teachers, mentoring and coaching (Little, 2012; Timperley, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009). Teachers also learn through informal interactions in collaborative shared assessment and informal communications (Little, 2012; Somprach, Tang & Popoonsak, 2016). Workplace norms also shape teacher collaboration in schools (Rosenholtz, 1989; Tran, Hallinger & Truong, 2018). Researchers from several East Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore or Thailand have also mentioned socio-cultural aspects to understand teachers' attitudes towards collaboration and TPD. Confucian norms, which are evident in most East Asian nations, also make teachers believe in needs of learning. For example, in Vietnamese culture, a good or perfect person is not only professionally competent but also displays moral qualities that are in harmony with Confucian norms (Dalton et al., 2005; Qian & Walker, 2013; Wang, 2016). This creates the identity of the 'good teacher' which seeks continued learning and development both with respect to moral qualities (*Duc)* and subject knowledge and teaching skills (*Tai)* (Nguyen, 2003).

Method

A case study research design (Yin, 2014) was used in this study as a means of finding out different activities of TPD in Ha Tinh University in Central Vietnam (hereinafter referred to as the University). In this section of the paper we are describing the sample selection, the methods of data collection, and data analysis for this study.

Sample

We employed purposeful sampling designed to yield "information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2015, p. 169). This University in Ha Tinh province was identified to be considered to be effective by the provincial authorities in terms of achievements and success. We selected the rector for the interview and delivered the questionnaires to lecturers.

Having collected many awards over a long period of time, Ha Tinh University has maintained a continuing focus on improving the quality of its teaching staff. It has 360 staff (210 teaching staff) and 8000 students.

According to the Rector, TPD is considered an integral part of the University's success. Rector Nguyen said that he and his lecturers have invested time and effort in the promotion of TPD, especially in this era of educational reforms.

Data Collection

Data for this paper came from semi-structured interviews with the Rector, open-ended questionnaires completed by lecturers, and our direct observation of professional development activities at the University. Semi-structured interview (Patton, 2015) was conducted aiming at gaining information about the rector's perspectives and his leadership practices, and professional learning activities for his lecturers.

Lecturers' perspectives were solicited through an open-ended questionnaire that focused on lecturers' needs and motivations as well as professional development practices used in their school. Two hundred questionnaires distributed to lecturers at faculty meetings which 165 were returned (82.5% response rate). In order to gain further details and check on what had been reported in the interview and questionnaires, we also observed TPD activities for three months. These observations offered multiple perspectives and improved triangulation as a means of checking the credibility of different perceptions (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

We employed 'within-case analysis' (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014) in this case study, which involved developing detailed write-ups for the University. Analytical procedures first involved coding data based on the different data sources. After completing the case record we reanalyzed the data focusing specifically on TPD activities employed in the University. We used open coding and axial coding in order to generate the list of activities ultilised there.

Results

We could identify nine professional development activities for TPD at the University which were divided into two groups: external and university-based activities.

External Professional Development Activities

Degree Upgrading was considered as an effective and important strategy by Thay Nguyen the Rector. Lecturers also wrote of the significance of having M.A or Ph.D degrees at the tertiary education level. According to the University report, 80 percent of teaching staff hold M.A and Ph.D degrees (102 Ph.D holders). Twenty-three lecturers are doing PhD courses (five at overseas universities) and 40 lecturers are doing M.A courses.

Many lecturers have spent two or three years full-time or part-time doing courses in universities in Ha Noi capital or Hue city. They faced many difficulties, especially financial matters, in order to gain M.A or Ph.D qualifications. One female teacher recalled her hard experiences in her questionnaire:

> *Being a Vietnamese woman studying and staying far from my husband and my one year old daughter for two years' time was quite hard. Beside the difficulty in finance, missing my husband and especially my little daughter was a very tough. I cried many nights because I missed them too much and I wanted to cancel my course. But my husband and family's encouragement,*

together with my self-responsibility, helped me have more strength. I remember once,… when I came back to our room in the staff's hostel from Ha Noi to visit my husband and daughter, standing at the window and looking through it, I saw my husband and my daughter sleeping on the floor with a lot of toys around. Tears started to come out on my face with a mixture of emotions. I knew that without a woman's hand in a family, everything seemed to be disordered and messy. I felt guilty for that. However, at last I completed my M.A course with a distinction grade. Im doing a PhD now and just only the time devoted to research and traveling to Hanoi and finance, not like the time when doing an MA. (T8)

Thay Nguyen the Rector explained that he has tried to encourage lecturers to upgrade their degrees and he has supported lecturers in spiritual and material ways. He said that lecturers who wanted to upgrade their degrees had to register, and those who were younger would have priority. Sometimes, too many lecturers wanted to study at the same time and there were not enough lecturers to replace them. Then, they had to take turns to study. Thay Nguyen the Rector elaborated:

> *Lecturers in departments with few PhD holders will have priority. We try to help those lecturers to have a chance to upgrade their degrees by meeting all policies stipulated by the State, MOET and the province leaders. They still maintain the same salaries and have travel costs and extra support from the province.*

Lecturers said that one of the most difficult problems they face when studying is finance. Despite receiving support from the University and the province, lecturers needed a great deal of money to complete an M.A or Ph.D course at a university in Vietnam. Many lecturers really wanted to upgrade their qualifications, but they could not overcome the obstacles of finance and family commitments. One lecturer wrote, "*I intended to do PhD course, but I have not saved enough money for the course. Beside support from the University and the province, in order to complete the course, I need an amount of 200 million VND*" (T14).

Lecturers said they appreciated the spiritual and financial support received from the Rector. Statements such as "*the Rector always encourages us to upgrade our degrees*" (T28), "*He appreciates lecturers' efforts in overcoming difficulties to study*" (T24), "*Our Rector tries to create mechanisms and conditions for us to take long-term courses*" (T125), can be found in lecturers' questionnaires. The own experience of the first author as a lecturer at the University confirmed these comments.

Conferences, workshops, and seminars. Thay Nguyen the Rector explained that this was a University, so professionalism-related issues were mainly and directly dependent on MOET. Thus, the University lecturers often participated in conferences, workshops, and seminars, organized by MOET or other universities. Workshops and conferences were regularly organized for lecturers of different subjects. Thay Nguyen the Rector said that in recent years, the topics for those workshops centred on the educational reform including changes in education objectives, textbook replacement, and teaching method reforms. Thus, he has paid more attention to these. At the moment, the General Education Reform Project is in charge of these issues and one teacher of each subject is invited to attend the workshops. The Rector explained that he paid attention to these workshops and assigned lecturers to attend. After the workshop, those lecturers are responsible for sharing the knowledge with other lecturers in their education departments in professional meetings or seminars. One lecturer of English wrote, "*Our Dean presented many new issues related to educational reform. These presentations have helped us learn more about the details of the reforms. We can use some of that knowledge to teach our students, especially the communicative methods*" (T19).

Visits to other universities. According to the Rector, because this University is a new one, there are not many leading and experienced lecturers at the University level, especially "*Professors/Associate professors or Ph.D holders with much experience in teaching and research*". Thus, many visits to other universities have been organized. Several lecturers wrote about such visits. They said they could learn many things from

their colleagues after their visits. Many lecturers included specific statements such as "*getting some textbooks or curriculum or research experience from those Universities as wonderful references for us*"(T32), "*…learn[ing] how to organize group-learning, research groups and clubs for students*" (T69), or "*…their department library management and use is very effective and we should learn*" (T57). Lecturers generally appreciated their Rector's support in the use of this strategy as it helped them learn more from their counterparts in other universities.

School-Based Professional Learning Activities

Classroom Observations of Other Lecturers were used in this University. Each lecturer was encouraged to observe other lecturers' teaching. Observation notes were written in a notebook. According to the Rector, observation was particularly promoted and encouraged on several special occasions such as 'International Women's Day', 'Vietnamese Lecturers' Day', and so on. After observation, discussions were encouraged to share experiences.

Nevertheless, according to lecturers, this was not very useful because there were too many specific subjects even in one department and many sub-subjects in one subject. Thus, observers could not discuss the content of observed lessons in detail. Instead, they often focussed on the teaching method. These reasons could partly explain why "*observation is not very popular or effective in this University*". Most questionnaires mentioned of the ineffectiveness of observation in this University. It appeared that observation was not paid enough attention by both the management board and lecturers. One female lecturer with 20 years of teaching wrote, "*In general, we can learn from one another after observations. However, because we often teach different subjects or even sub-subjects, so we could learn less about the subject knowledge, but more about teaching methodology*" (T10). Similar statements were found in other lecturers' questionnaires. We observed eight lessons from four departments (two from each department). Our field-notes confirmed lecturers' comments. "*Lecturers seemed to discuss a lot about teaching methodology including timing, teacher's behaviours toward his/her students, classroom management, and so on… Only lecturers of the same subject voiced opinions on the content of the lesson and the subject knowledge*" (Field-notes, 7 March, 2019).

As mentioned above, there are many subjects and sub-subjects in a department. Take the education department as an example. There are the following main subjects: Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Informatics, and so on. Each subject is also divided into many sub-subjects. Sub-subjects of Maths can be advanced algebra, geometry, and many others. Each lecturer is in charge of one or two sub-subjects as their major specialization. Thus, it is difficult to contribute their ideas in the discussion phase (after observation) in terms of subject knowledge. Learning from observations seems to be better in the English department. Although each lecturer is assigned to teach several subjects such as phonetics, methodology, English or American literature and culture, grammar, and four skills, each teacher can have opinions on the subjects that are not his/her majors. This is because a lecturer of English is trained in those subjects at university. "*I am not very good at every sub-subject, like the ones who are specialized in it. However, I can have some ideas on observed lessons such as intonation, structures, methods, and so on*" (T43).

Weekly Professional Meetings. Regulations dictate that departmental professional meetings occur once every two weeks. "*This strategy is often associated with seminars at the department level*". According to Thay Nguyen the Rector, at the beginning of the academic year, lecturers of each department decided topics for seminars at the department level. Each lecturer could register to host a topic. A list of topics was then scheduled. A copy was sent to the management board and other departments in case anyone else wanted to participate. Each lecturer also got a copy to prepare ideas for the seminars. Many lecturers said they found this strategy useful because they could choose a topic, prepare and open their presentation for discussion, and get feedback from other colleagues.

During professional meetings, lecturers, who had recently learnt something new and interesting from workshops organized by MOET, other conferences or universities, or even from materials they have read, can host presentations. Several lecturers doubted the effectiveness of those meetings. One teacher wrote about these kinds of meetings, "*Overall, I find professional meetings useful and necessary for lecturers. However, some topics are not very realistic and interesting because they are not prepared well and some lecturers do not actively and enthusiastically participate in discussions. They are sometimes formal*" (T6).

A coaching-mentoring strategy was used in this University. When a novice lecturer started working at this University, s/he was assigned an experienced lecturer as a mentor. The novice could ask the experienced lecturer about lesson plans, academic and teaching issues, or about University and department procedures and practices. I observed that lecturers appeared ready and eager to exchange experiences and share their knowledge with one another when they had an opportunity.

Not only novice lecturers but also mentors expressed advantages of the mentoring process. Experienced and older lecturers' writings reflected this. One lecturer with 24 years' teaching noted, "*When guiding and supporting young lecturers, I can also improve. I have had to find more materials to read and I have learnt several good ideas from novice lecturers as well*" (T83). Coaching between lecturers was encouraged, according to Thay Nguyen the Rector. He said, "*Exchanging ideas on professional issues between lecturers of different teaching experience is always encouraged… Interactions occurring during professional meetings, observations, seminars indicate this view*". Most lecturers indicated the advantages of coaching. My observation revealed evidence of the exchanging of ideas between lecturers of this University.

Seminars at the University level and Speeches from Famous People. Seminars were organized every six weeks, according to Thay Nguyen. Based on the curriculum, the objectives of the academic year, requirements of MOET, representatives from the departments and the management board discussed and selected the topics for seminars. According to him, after topics are settled, a copy of the list of topics was sent to all staff to give feedback, and prepare their ideas or presentations for the seminars. "*We assign several experienced lecturers for presentations. Other lecturers are encouraged to have their presentations at the seminars. As usual, ten days before the seminar, lecturers have to send their proposals and estimated time for their presentations to the seminar organization board for approval*". Thay Nguyen also said that, in order to change the format of seminars, famous and prestigious scientists or professors from other universities are often invited to give speeches. Lecturers are encouraged to attend such speeches and to prepare questions to ask those speakers.

Lecturers generally acknowledged the significance of these seminars. A lecturer wrote,

> *At the University of education, I find these seminars necessary for my job. Seminars provide us with a good chance to exchange viewpoints and experiences. I appreciate the series of seminars closely connected to the changes of the educational reforms and research publications…It is interesting to have opportunities to hear famous scientists' speeches.* (T7)

According to Thay Nguyen, departments would invite scientists to give speeches to the department staff. The University was in charge of paying the costs of those visits. The Rector's support in this strategy was recognized by many lecturers.

Scientific studies or research paper publications or experience initiatives. Thay Nguyen the Rector and lecturers all considered these very important at the University level. According to the Rector, because the stipulated teaching hours for University lecturers are eight teaching hours per week, more time should be spent on research and self-learning. Thay Nguyen described the procedures followed for lecturers' scientific studies. First, at the beginning of the academic year (15 August), lecturers registered the topic of their research or registered level such as the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), the provincial or the university (PETS) or the department level. Then, a list of topics was set up and sent to the University's Education Council. After that, departmental lecturers presented their research proposals at a departmental meeting. Comments and questions around the studies were raised for teacher researchers to answer. Next, in April of the following year, a research presentation seminar is organized at each department. Other departments were noticed of these meetings and asked to attend. An invitation was also sent to the Education Council staff to come. Lecturers took turns to present their studies. Presenters had to answer other participants' questions and get feedback from them. At the end of that meeting, based on set criteria, the department staff graded others' studies by anonymous votes. The grades were named department, University, PETS, and MOET levels. Then, lecturers with suggested grades from the University level had to hand in their research to the University's Education Council for assessment and grading. Suggested grades at the PETS and MOET level were sent to PETS and MOET for assessment and grading. Thay Nguyen said that he wanted lecturers to pay more attention to this strategy. Monetary rewards were given to lecturers with high grades. Lecturers were encouraged to publish papers on ISI-Scopus – indexed journals or ISSN journals. Those lecturers who have their research papers published on ISI-Scopus indexed journals will be awarded about 15000 000 VND (equivalent to 700 USD), the same as the salary of 28 year service lecturer.

In the Rector's view, this activity was a "form of self-learning that stimulated the lecturers' continued interest in the job. Because all lecturers take on these projects annually and share their results with each other, and their research results can be publised on important journals, there is collective improvement for the school" (Thay Nguyen the Rector).

Self-learning. Beside the above shared professional development strategies, Thay Nguyen the Rector and lecturers acknowledged the importance of lecturers' self-learning. Thay Nguyen maintained he tried to make his lecturers more aware of the significance of self-learning and more responsible for that activity. He emphasized, "*Lecturers should be aware of the contributions of self-learning and life-long learning to their work in this University. They must set an example of life-long learning to their students who are future lecturers. I myself set a good example to my lecturers by taking part in professional development activities regularly including English language and other skills*".

According to him, in order to supervise and check the effectiveness of this activity, several solutions were applied. First was checking the lecturers' 'accumulative professional knowledge notebook' as in other schools. Another solution was to encourage lecturers to write articles for journals as a sign of self-learning. Thay Nguyen noted that lecturers were made aware that the number of their writings contributed to their final grades. He explained, "*These procedures are applied in order to make lecturers become more responsible for self-learning. They are a requirement and provide motivation for lecturers to continually read and learn… These are operating rather well and have brought certain results for lecturers' improvement*".

Although all lecturers were conscious of the importance of self-study, many lecturers found it difficult to find time. The female lecturers, in particular, were busy caring for their families. Thus, the extent of self-study among lecturers seemed highly variable.

Discussion

This study identified and explained different activities employed in Ha Tinh University to support TPD. More specifically, different activities were favoured by lecturers based on their gender, competency, age, experience, and family situations. Thus, Thay Nguyen the Rector was quite explicit about the need to utilise different activities to motivate different lecturers take part in TPD (Qian & Walker, 2013).

Overall, university-based strategies were considered as not significant as external learning activities for lecturers of the University. Lecturers engaged in these activities to achieve qualifications and improve their professional identity and the self. 'Vietnamese thinking' cultural aspect equates a higher qualification, or 'title' with visible evidence of its holder's capacities and reputation. Thus, the qualification becomes a tangible source of prestige in the eyes of the school, community, and teaching job. Fullan (2011) mentioned the benefits of 'positive pressure' as a positive sign of motivation for TPD and change towards improvements. Lecturers felt stressed but eager to upgrade their degrees for their better future as a compulsory requirement for their teaching job at the University level.

University-based activities appeared to focus more squarely on shaping realistic knowledge, teaching skills and research skills for lecturers. Whether mandatory or voluntary, the Rector/Department leaders or lecturers initiated, activities such as Classroom Observations, Coaching-Mentoring, Weekly Professional Meetings, Seminars, Yearly scientific studies research paper publications or experienced initiatives and Self-learning offered chances for TPD activities. From the Rector's perspective, these things ensured that all lecturers would take part in continued TPD that benefitted both the University and the lecturers themselves. Thus, all lecturers participated in university-based activities. However, within the university-wide expectations, lecturers had the choice of where to focus their professional learning. For example, during their early years, lecturers might spend their learning time to Degree Upgrading, Classroom Observation, and Coaching-Mentoring activities. Conversely, more experienced lecturers might spend more time to leading staff Seminars, Mentoring new lecturers, Yearly scientific studies/research paper publications or experienced initiatives, and Self-learning. This different way to adult learning reflects a mature and effective approach to adult professional learning and improvements.

There were 'indigenous' aspects that characterized TPD in this University. For example, researchers have identified 'teacher research groups' as a common feature of TPD in Chinese schools (Paine & Fang, 2006), We would conclude that Weekly Professional Meetings, and Yearly scientific studies/research paper publications or experienced initiatives are 'indigenous practices' there. These TPD activities are 'indigenous' in the manner that they seem to reflect the cultural-social-political context of Vietnamese society. For example, as noted earlier, the honour that Vietnamese culture clearly motivates lecturers to try for higher qualifications and 'titles'. In addition, we also argue the manner in which Classroom Observations, university-Based Seminars, and Self-learning are utilised in this University are speacial.

The collective and group-focussed Vietnamese culture with interdependence between members, personal caring is more significant than independence (Vasavakul, 2019). These include the mandatory Workshops, University-Based Seminars, and Weekly Professional Meetings. These activities as well as Coaching-Mentoring and Classroom Observations, provided opportunities for those lecturers to share and learn values and norms of the school professional community to improve their knowledge, attitudes, responsibilities and skills.

It is of course true that these 'indigenous practices' emerge from the socio-cultural-political context of the Vietnamese society is not to suggest that everything works in perfect harmony. As noted in the presentation of results, lecturers who were willingly to choose to register for Degree Upgrading reported feeling considerably stressed and in some cases, fear of failure for losing face. Even while lecturers acknowledged the significance of Classroom Observations, some also reported feeling fearful and anxious. Thus, our characterization of these activities as 'indigenous' does not mean to suggest that they are all necessarily 'effective'. Moreover, not all activities identified in this study will necessarily transfer to other countries whose socio-cultural values and norms are different.

Conclusion

This study was conducted both to fill the gap in knowledge of TPD of a Higher Education institution in the Vietnamese context and add to a growing world literature. The study confirms earlier descriptive efforts to outline TPD in Western (e.g., Vescio et al., 2008) and East Asian (Paine & Fang, 2006; Qian & Walker, 2013) countries.

The need for lecturers to grow, adapt and develop new knowledge, research skills and teaching method skills over their job period has reinforced the importance of TPD as a University achievement strategy. This study tried to provide typical teacher learning activities in higher education institution in Vietnam.

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this paper comes from its design as a single site case study. While this allowed the authors to study one particular case in depth, the results cannot be generalized to other higher education institutions in Vietnam. Future research will need to affirm the extent to which Ha Tinh University is typical within the Vietnamese higher education system, by examining the extent to which the scope and intensity of lecturer participation in TPD found in this University describes other institutions more generally. In addition, future research should examine a larger sample for better generalization.

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