

Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Development: Views and Experiences

VIV HAMPTON

Wellington Region Free Kindergarten Assn

ABSTRACT: *A research project undertaken in 1999 sought to explore kindergarten teachers' views and experiences of professional development (Hampton, 1999). Legislative requirements of the 1990's and a market-driven attitude towards the care and education of under five's in New Zealand has led to a different climate for teachers with regard to the expectations and demands placed on them. The provision of professional development is one aspect that has altered in recent years and teachers have to rethink both attitude and practice in order to keep abreast of changes in the wider early childhood education industry. A summary of the research project, findings and recommendations are presented.*

Literature Review

Topics relevant to the literature review of this study included the conceptualisation of professional development, the interplay between private and professional lives, previous experiences of professional development in New Zealand and the links between quality and professional development.

Duff, Brown, and Van Scoy (1995) explored some characteristics they believed to be critical to the process of professional development. In particular these authors stressed the need for teachers to assume personal responsibility for participation in professional development opportunities. The acquisition of reflective practice and the ability for self-assessment were identified as key features for teachers to develop with regard to their professional development.

Rodd (1997) explored the notion of collaborative learners within social settings. Peer support and feedback were identified as vital ingredients. Factors such as age and family commitment were found to effect teachers' views and participation in professional development (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hawthorne, 1994). Changes over time in work conditions and educational practices were also found to have effected teachers' commitment and level of satisfaction in their jobs. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) identified four stages of career development. These included initiation into teaching, stability of role, advancement/intense focus or boredom and finally attainment of a professional plateau or cynicism.

In response to New Zealand's rapidly diversifying early education sector, the Ministry of Education contracted several organisations to undertake the delivery of professional development to teachers including Early Childhood Development, Colleges of Education and private providers. A range of delivery methods was noted as important in suiting the great variation of needs amongst teachers. A particularly successful method has been the "whole centre" approach in which all teachers within the centre are required to participate in the professional development programme and workshops.

The literature reviewed in this study revealed an international trend towards consistent, high quality provision of professional development programmes for teachers in early childhood services (Duff, Brown and Van Scoy, 1995). The emphasis on quality education and the increasingly competitive nature of early childhood education has resulted in greater demands of kindergarten teachers to develop their knowledge base and up-skill their daily practice. The literature identified a number of documents that guide best practice in New Zealand.

Methodology

The main aim of the study was to discover, explore and describe the views and experiences of teachers in relation to professional development. The case study approach was undertaken because it enabled the documentation of aspects of teachers' life experiences and the exploration of their values, beliefs and practices. The use of case study is limited because whilst the results of the case study may be generalisable to other groups, this isn't necessarily so (Reinharz, 1992). However a case study approach can give important insights into a specific issue which is why I chose this method.

Two methods were used for data collection - questionnaires, and focus group interviews. The questionnaires were used to gather demographic information about the sample, details about teachers' personal characteristics (such as age and sex) and involvement in professional development.

My initial intention to survey a sample of teachers was rejected in favour of focus group interviews. Focus group interviews allowed me to retain an holistic approach; group participation allowed me to seek understanding and explanation in a social context rather than attempting comparisons of individual participants through individual data gathering methods. Focus group interviews were selected in order to promote wide ranging discussion and debate and to encourage a sharing of experiences and understanding. The exchange of ideas and thoughts was critical to developing and uncovering teachers' perceptions and experiences in relation to their job satisfaction and work experiences (Morgan, 1993).

Time was a crucial factor as both my participants and myself were engaged in full-time work and fitting interviews into busy schedules was problematic for all concerned.

My intention was to explore two specific groups identifiable by break characteristics that distinguish one group from another (Knodel, 1993). Whilst I wanted to seek diversity of experience I decided to keep the criteria simple and selected time of training as the only break characteristic. The ideal number of participants for group interviews is between six and ten people (Morgan, 1997). The main hurdle I encountered was finding enough participants to conduct the focus group interviews. I found that teachers were very busy in their kindergartens and many felt their involvement would add stress to demanding workloads and pressures.

Written invitations were followed with personal phone calls. Two groups - of five and seven teachers respectively - were formed from two associations. The smaller group comprised of teachers who had graduated from their diploma course prior to 1994; the second and larger group comprised of teachers who had graduated from 1994. The age range and teaching experience was not surprisingly, significantly greater for the teachers trained prior to 1994.

Each group was interviewed once and the interviews lasted around two and a half-hours. In each interview all participants contributed to discussion. The interview questions were structured around seven topics. Although the same questions were presented in each interview, there was some flexibility as to the order and flow of discussion. The analysis of the interviews revealed some main themes that helped to structure the findings.

Ethical principles complied with the Massey University code of conduct. The employing authorities and individual teachers gave written permission for their participation in the research. Interview guidelines were established with each group and permission sought for the taping of the interviews.

Because of the nature of my position as a senior teacher in the Wellington Kindergarten Association, I conducted the research outside of my association. I felt participants were likely to be more open, honest and comfortable sharing experiences and perspectives if I was unknown and unconnected in a professional capacity.

Findings

The most significant difference between the two groups was the attitude expressed towards involvement in, and commitment to professional development. The teachers who graduated prior to 1994 generally had wider

life and teaching experiences to draw on. They expressed sympathy for the difficulties they felt many teachers faced in accessing or pursuing professional development opportunities. In contrast, many of the teachers who graduated since 1994 held strong views about their expectations for all teachers to be actively involved in professional development, as a component of their teaching role.

The main categories of findings identified were:

- Definitions, formats and features of professional development
- Personal experience and needs
- New regulations and requirements
- Teachers' views of professional development provision
- Problems and problem solving

Consistent threads that ran through teachers' definitions of professional development were the importance of building on knowledge and developing skills as educational theory and practice advanced. There was an emphasis on gaining knowledge to enhance practice and linking professional development to teaching. Both groups of teachers identified a need for greater reflection of practice.

Common features that were regarded as important ranged from the personal to professional and included physical and educational aspects. Often it was the combination of features that made professional development most memorable and effective. A friendly and relaxed environment that catered for adult needs was regarded as very important. Professional development that was free was well regarded and teachers felt this particularly so, as low salaries and minimal time in which to attend professional development impinged on the desirability of course attendance for many of the teachers.

Facilitator skill and presentation style in professional development workshops was important if participants were to stay focused and motivated. The match between content, level and the teachers' needs was a recurring issue. The opportunity for an ongoing professional relationship between the facilitator and the teachers, and the chance for the programme to continue over time was seen as beneficial to teachers. A lack of opportunity for practice, reflection, discussion and feedback as the teachers developed their skill and practice was raised.

Intrinsic motivation to become involved in programmes of professional development was highlighted by both groups. Some teachers had attended workshops/sessions with less motivated teachers whose attendance was an employer requirement. Negative attitudes of teachers affected the level of motivation and inspiration for all workshop participants.

Many of the teachers felt some isolation within their kindergartens and appreciated the opportunity to undergo professional development with their team members and other kindergarten colleagues. The sharing of knowledge and experiences were considered important for several of the teachers interviewed.

Personal lives of teachers impacted on their attitude towards and involvement in professional development. Family commitments, sport and hobby interests and the need to spend time away from work related activity were the main reasons cited for teachers not wanting to be involved in professional development that occurred outside of work hours.

The processes for identifying teachers' professional development needs and for planning professional development programmes was discussed. Views ranged from teachers who wanted outside support to identify and plan for their needs, to teachers who felt there was considerable personal responsibility for such planning.

The impact of the new curriculum, and new regulations and documents to guide better practice have all impacted on teachers' work loads. Professional development opportunities have been important to help teachers learn about changes - both legislative and educational. The Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices for Chartered Early Childhood Services (Ministry of Education, 1996) has in particular required teachers to address a range of new issues related to their practice.

Discussion

The issues and implications derived from the findings included:

- Needs analysis and the effectiveness of professional development.
- Individual and team development.
- Employer support.
- Professionalism.

Teachers generally wanted to retain input into the decisions made about their professional development programmes. They felt that where they had ownership over the process they were more likely to be receptive to the programme and benefits to their kindergarten work and ultimately the children would be enhanced. Most teachers thought there was an important role for an independent supervisor/mentor of this process. The role of the senior teacher is a valid and important component of the support services provided to teachers by their employers.

There is some concern arising from this study and previous reports about the impact that professional development has on teachers' practice. Questions persist about how new knowledge and skills are absorbed into teachers' repertoire of teaching (Wolfe, 1993). More research is needed into this area.

The desire for a balance between individual needs and teaching team needs to grow and develop as collaborative learners, was evident in the report findings. This tension is not surprising when one considers the very different developmental stages of teachers described by Katz (1995).

Jorde Bloom (1994) discusses the importance of valuing the work of early childhood educators. A recurring message from the interviews was teachers want to be recognised for their efforts. Participation in professional development was to take the task of teaching a step further and in order for teachers to undertake this commitment they need to hear that their work is value and applauded by their employers.

Teachers in both interview groups recognised a problem with articulation of theory and practice amongst their kindergarten colleagues and in the wider professional field of early childhood educators. Professional development was recognised as one important avenue for developing articulation skills, keeping abreast of current and new theory, and advertising the importance of a quality early education for all children.

Recommendations

Several recommendations came out of the study. They concern the professional development providers, in this case the kindergarten associations; the facilitators/presenters - those employed to carry out professional development programmes; and the teachers who it is recognised must take some responsibility for their involvement in professional development programmes.

Teachers' involvement in professional development needs to be supported and encouraged by employers. Teachers should be given opportunities to be active participants in identifying and planning their professional development. Programmes need to be monitored and appropriate support given especially when new legislation and initiatives are introduced.

Facilitators should be skilled, dynamic presenters who can pitch the content and style to the appropriate audience. Professional development should allow opportunities for ongoing contact with the facilitator and time for reflection and feedback. Content should be balanced between the professional and personal needs of teachers.

Teachers should utilise opportunities for professional development. In particular they should develop skills of self-assessment, and take some responsibility for their professional development. Kindergarten teachers must undertake greater articulation of the value of early childhood education in educational and political arenas.

References

- Duff, R., Brown, M. & Van Scoy, I. (1995). Reflection and self-evaluation: Keys to professional development. *Young Children*, 50(4), 81 - 88.
- Fullan, M. & Hargreaves, A. (1992). *Teacher development and educational change*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Hampton, V. (1999). *Professional development: Views and experiences of kindergarten teachers*. M.Ed. project. Massey University.
- Hawthorne, W. (1994). What's life got to do with it? The interface of professional and personal development. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 19(3), 45 - 48.
- Jorde Bloom, P. (1994). *A great place to work: Improving conditions for staff in young children's programmes*. Washington: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Katz, L. (1995). *Talks with teachers of young children*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Co.
- Knodel, J. (1993). The design and analysis of focus group studies: A practical approach. In D.L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art*. California: Sage Publications.
- Ministry of Education (1996) *Revised statement of desirable objectives and practices for chartered early childhood services*. Wellington: Education Gazette.
- Morgan, D.L. (1993). *Focus group interview information: Successful focus groups*. London: Sage Publications.
- Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus group as qualitative research*. California: Sage Publications.
- Reinharz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rodd, J. (1997). Learning to develop as early childhood professionals. *Australian Journal of Education*, 22(1), 1 - 5.

Wolfe, B. (1993). Effective practices in staff development. In J. Johnson and J. McCracken (Eds.), *The early childhood lattice: Perspectives on professional development* (pp.111 - 114). Washington: National Institute for early childhood professional development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viv Hampton's initial interest in this project came about through her previous experiences as a kindergarten teacher. In her current role as a senior teacher she shares responsibility for the organisation, facilitation and development of professional development opportunities as well as support and guidance to kindergarten teachers.