

Assessing the Worthiness of In Service Workshops at a University in Lebanon

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This paper aims to show how teacher trainees' perceptions and worthiness of these programs in trainee. . A questionnaire was distributed to 66 teachers. Teacher trainees were neutral about the worthiness of the training. Hence, workshop organizers be better informed of the teacher needs by conducting needs assessment. The study recommendations conduct follow-up sessions or visits with the teachers after the workshop to ensure appropriate application of methodology. Heads and coordinators are also to follow up on teachers' adoption of proper methodology.

Key Words: teacher training: workshop methodology, teacher training attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Service learning has become a vital component for professional teacher development in nations of developing economies. Many higher education institutions offer teacher training in the form of workshops, short sessions, and short non-credit courses. Peters, McHugh and Sendall (2006) interpret in-service workshops as a purposeful integration of thought into practice. In lay terms, in-service training is a non-traditional educational experience that trainees receive purposefully to practice through some formal/informal transaction (Lammel, 1951). Higher learning institutes or school systems usually develop in-service workshops to serve educational staff, teachers and administrators, generally mitigated by a specific need for trainees or communities (Lammel, 1951). Since colleges and universities have the human resources and needed artifacts as classrooms, technology, learning material, and research expertise, often cooperate in the design, management, and planning of workshops (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). In-service training also provides an attractive incentive for both university faculty members, who "connect" to their community and school teachers, revive their higher education skills to improve their professional image. Proponents of in-service learning suggest that trainees within these programs develop a wider perspective of the problems often seeing and understanding by stepping afar from the situation (Hollis, 2002). They develop a better understanding and appreciation through learning new strategies and techniques as well as conceptualize ways to ameliorate their teaching. In service programs merges the field of

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knowledge and professional activity. All professional trainers, experts and lay people join efforts to overcome problems related to teaching and classroom management (Boyer, 1990).

In-service teachers' attitude determines what and how much teachers learn (Borko et. al., 2000; Feiman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996). Attitudes often drive teacher trainees to merge new ideas into practice and to bridge the mind-practice dualism. Ducharme & Nash (1976) say that professional teaching methodologies are a logical outgrowth of beliefs and values. Knight (2002) argues that the transfer value of professional development programs are related to teachers' perceived needs in the field. The same concern about training expectancies, beliefs or professional needs is underlined by Hargreaves & Fullan's (1992). Beliefs and attitudes described by Putnam & Borko (1997) are the filters that trainees use to assimilate new ideas. When in-service programs are imposed by policy makers on teachers rather germinated from a specific educational need from within the school. Trainees are often alienated from any decisions of content and format of the workshops. Many trainees may feel that training was not worthwhile and it did not fulfill their professional needs.

Teacher training in Lebanon has received considerable support from foreign embassies, cultural centers as well as academics from the major Lebanese universities. Internationally, regular teacher-training has been reorganized around new curricular programs. For instance, professionally tailored workshops, special modules, and credit-bearing educational experience provide a sense of teacher development and improvement (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). The European Community, through the Bologna and Lisbon Declaration, has recommended new strategies in the teaching and learning process that integrated more real life approaches to learning and thus, called for a complete reformulation in the teaching approaches in schools and universities. According to Blackun and Morsan, there are more than 24 member states within the European union; thus, keeping a consistent standard of excellence among teachers is a prime concern. Similarly, in Australia, "modernizing the teaching profession has also become one of the main goals of contemporary educational system reform" (Larsen, 2005, p. 292). In the US, there is also much debate regarding best practices of teacher training and teacher performance. Reports such as "No Child Left Behind" underlined the public and the government are extremely concerned with teacher competence. In a recent report published in the US entitled, 'A Good Teacher in Every Classroom: Preparing the Highly Qualified Teachers Our Children Deserve', one of the main suggestions made was the need for more support for new teachers in their first five years of teaching (Magnusen, 2005). The report refutes common misconceptions among the public that content mastery is enough to ensure a teacher success in the classroom. Mentoring by more experienced teachers and common lesson planning are two means that may contribute to a better teaching corps. The 1996 National Commission on Teaching America's Future stated that teachers are at the center of educational improvement in schools and warned that 22% of the teachers leave the profession within the first three

years. The 2004 report of the Commission stated that teacher quality is an asset to implanting in student social values (Cochran-Smith, 2005). In Japan, for example, the 'lesson study' method has proven to be a very successful in-service training strategy. Teachers in the same school are divided into groups, observe each others' classes, often video-tape the lessons, study them together, and then present successful video taped lessons at teachers' conferences (Staples, 2005). Education specialists today may feel concerned not only with teacher training but also with the necessity to continue in-service teacher training to help teachers survive in their future teaching.

Both private and public universities in Lebanon have taken a lead role in establishing community service training in the form of courses, seminars, and modules. The American University of Beirut, Notre Dame University, Center of Educational Development and Research and the Lebanese University among others offer teacher training that extends to administrators, subject coordinators, trainers and teachers. The nature of training programs has been formatted along modules designed for teachers, staff, and/or administrators as credit-bearing educational experience. These interactive programs enable teachers to share their pertinent experience with other participants. The subjects covered during the modules delve deeper into issues concerning the practical aspects of classroom organization, homework assignments, textbook evaluation, assessment, leadership and administrative teamwork as well as conflict resolution.

Certified teachers in Lebanon, who have graduated, like new teachers worldwide, are qualified to teach, yet they may feel unprepared to meet the complexities of the classroom, especially those with thirty students or more. They realize that being responsible for a class differs completely from going to class as a practicum. Even those experienced teachers are not always at ease with the new curriculum and method; some still cling to a more conservative teacher-centered, rote learning mode of presenting material. Thus, these workshops often do give inexperienced as well as experienced teachers new insight into teaching methodology.

In Lebanon, there are many efforts to develop teacher-training programs at universities; thus, the need to study a large number of workshops, modules and general programs available for teachers has been under discussion for quite some time. During workshop evaluation sessions, participants often mention that it is doubtful that one or two-day workshops on classroom management is of benefit and would solve teachers' concerns. As Berle (2006) points out, the effectiveness of in-service programs is diminished as trainees' attitudes and beliefs hinder the full integration of in-service learning within the academic structure (Abes, Jackson, and Jones, 2002). Anecdotal evidence shows that teachers typically leave the workshops willing to implement some of the strategies they learned and practiced during the sessions. If these methods do not work the first time, and they may not, teachers have no one to consult and discuss modifications considering their particular group of students or class size. Teachers exploring new methods may feel

frustrated and consider the experience they gained at the workshop as unbeneficial or a waste of their time.

Thus, this study aims at understanding the worthiness of workshops, to trainees through the training modules. We attempt to answer the following two questions: 1) What makes a successful workshop from the teachers' point of view? 2) What factors in the planning of the workshops make them less beneficial than the organizers believe they will be?

METHOD

Sample

A sample of 66 in-service teachers were available for this study. Teachers and administrators generally attend all these sessions voluntarily and all came from private schools. The average age of these teachers was 32.48 years; 65.1 % taught English, math and science in the elementary classes (K-5) while the remaining 22.7% taught preschool classes and 12.1% taught general high school subjects. Respondents had from one year to over eleven years of teaching experience; fifty five percent of them had more than eleven years of experience. These teachers' average years of teaching experience was about 7.23 years. All the respondents had attended one or more workshops directly related to their field of teaching or related to other general educational disciplines, such as classroom management, assessment, methodology, and curriculum development. Eleven teachers had attended more than thirty workshops in the past five years. These teachers taught a range of subjects specifically math, English and life sciences.

Procedure

A questionnaire was distributed to 66 teachers who attended one or more workshop directly related to their field of teaching or related to other general educational disciplines, such as classroom management, assessment, methodology, mathematics assessment and curriculum development. The questionnaires were distributed to the teachers by the teachers' school principal after training had taken place. The questionnaire was made up of three sections; the first section included 9 questions, which measured the worthiness of the training. Two open-ended questions asked about the success and the last section included background information on each teacher. Answers were tallied and percentage was assigned to each response.

Instrument

A 9-item questionnaire was developed to assess the teacher-training program. These items tapped into teacher perceptions of the worthiness of the in-service training, the items were constructed and validated by a panel of trainers through assessing the compatibility, applicability and appropriateness of the items following Kerlinger's (1986)

method of congruence where a panel reflected or defined a number of items based on specifications and operationalization of a construct. The 9-item questionnaire had trainees rate these items on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree”. The panel agreed on the items as well as the open-ended questions.

RESULTS

The first results report trainee perceptions of the worthiness of the program. The 9-items tapped in trainee perceptions and assessment of the worthiness of the training program. The trainees were generally neutral to attending on voluntary basis; 54% of those who responded to the questionnaire felt that money invested in teacher training was not a prudent use of it. Trainees felt positively that in-service training has not helped, and enriched their professional development. Finally, a large percentage of the respondents felt that it had an impact on their teaching. In order to get an overall perspective of the worthiness of the training, a mean score was calculated for the nine items. The negative items had the responses reversed where the strongly disagree was recoded into strongly agree and the disagree into agree. A mean score was calculated for the whole sample and then a z-test performed to determine if the mean on the nine items was significantly different than the “ideal” mean of “3” i.e., neutral point. A $z = 1.13$, $p > 0.0001$ showed no significant difference between the grand mean of the 9-items and the middle point. Then in general, the worthiness of the training program among Lebanese teachers of the program did not provide the benefits foreseen in teacher development.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of the worthiness of the training program

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. If I did not have to attend in-service workshops, I would not	2(9%)	7(31.8%)	3(13.6%)	9(40.9%)	
2. I make time to read about techniques and strategies that will enhance classroom instruction		1(4.5%)	2(9.1%)	12(54.5%)	6(27.3%)
3. Teacher training programs are typically not a prudent use of money	2(9.1%)	3(13.6%)	5(22.7%)	11(50%)	1(4.5%)
4. Professional development programs are as necessary for teachers as they are for other professionals			1(4.5%)	8(36.4%)	13(59.1%)
5. Staff development programs are as necessary for teachers as they are for other professionals			1(4.5%)	10(45.5%)	11(50%)
6. Professionals development workshops often help teachers to develop new-teaching techniques			1(4.5%)	16(72.7%)	4(18.2%)

7. I have been enriched by the teacher training events I have attended			5(22.7%)	11(50%)	5(22.7%)
8. Since I started teaching, books and journals have not helped me improve my teaching very much			3(13.6%)	12(54.5%)	3(13.6%)
9. Staff development initiatives have not had much impact on my teaching	2(9.1%)	8(36.4%)	8(36.4%)	3(13.6%)	1(4.5%)

With the open ended questions, eighty percent of the respondents approved trainer's personality, personal interest in the subject, relevance of the topic of the workshop, problems teachers face at school, and general but practical issues. Thus, it may be inferred that a subject that is interesting, practical and relevant presented in a pleasant manner would encourage teachers to participate in workshops. Some of the responses to the open ended questions are listed below:

'I prefer workshops related to the subject that I teach.' (math teacher)

'A workshop should have a purpose; however, most of them have served the purpose of presenting idealistic solutions.' (English teacher).

'Theoretical workshops are useless.' (English teacher).

'Workshops tend to be too theoretical in general. I would enjoy a practical workshop with live cases.' (math teacher).

'They didn't give practical solutions for specific cases.' (English teachers).

'The more the workshops deal with the daily experiences or skills of the teachers, the more useful and efficient the workshop.' (English teacher).

Some teachers felt the training was beneficial because it helped them see their work in light of students' and parents' needs. Generally, there was a positive attitude reflected in teachers' belief that parents would support and encourage their training. Teachers in our study did not feel insecure or inhibited because they were undergoing training. Eighty percent of the teachers believed that parents would welcome the idea that their children's schoolteachers were undergoing training.

In response to how much trainees benefited from the workshops, we found that 80% claimed that workshops did improve their teaching and 72% of the 64 who responded reported that the training has improved students' and teachers' performance. Teachers did differentiate between their own performance on one hand and the students' performance on the other. Training was beneficial to the extent that it helped their students deal with the new curriculum. As Greenwald, Hedges & Laine (1996) reported

in 1996 (cited in Cooter 2003), teacher-capacity building has been found to be the most productive investment for schools that may far exceed the effects of teacher experience.

DISCUSSION

The point to be taken here by workshop organizers is quite simple. Even though workshop organizers believe they are offering practical sessions, oftentimes these sessions are not beneficial to the in-service teachers. Workshop content may have to be based on needs assessment of the teachers who are to attend. A well-developed questionnaire that assesses teachers' needs prior to the initiation of a workshop series is highly recommended. Workshop organizers could focus on teachers who have been directly consulted in the workshop planning stage can develop a positive attitude and leave with some perceptible gains. The trainer may need to interview the trainees and learn more about their backgrounds, school situations and classroom issues before the workshop takes place. It is recommended that trainers familiarize themselves not only with the school environment but also with the individual teachers that may sometimes be quite difficult in practice. In that way, authentic problems could be tackled during the sessions and teachers would feel their needs were being addressed.

Trainers are generally not provided with sufficient data or background information concerning individual teachers. The results indicate that trainers quite frequently address needs of the group rather than the needs of individuals. Thus, it is not surprising on the open ended question that 70% of the respondents stated that trainers failed to focus on one specific problem area that trainees were concerned with. We may infer that the teachers feel that their problem area is not always the center of focus. Moreover, trainers often adopt a global overview during a workshop to appeal to the largest number of teachers in attendance. However, trainers may only address the concerns of a minority of those in attendance or simply superficially touch upon issues that teachers may feel are important. It is often the case in Lebanon that teacher-training programs are imposed based on change within the curriculum through a national educational policy. Thus, this approach to teacher training can be described as transmissive and ignores in-service teachers' beliefs, experience, and expectations (Claderhead, 1991).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In organizing successful training sessions for Lebanese schools and their teachers, it seems that the following points should be taken into consideration. A serious, detailed, needs assessment tool should be developed prior to calling for any workshops. Ideally, trainers would also visit the schools and observe class sessions. Observations would help clarify issues that are crucial in particular schools. Secondly, teachers should be oriented towards the purposes of a workshop and informed of the expectations that they may reasonably have before they attend the session. A reading list designed to review the literature on the subject should be made available so that teachers come to the sessions

already having refreshed their memories. In this way, teachers would be able to participate fully. Perhaps the school administration should be involved in post-workshop and training session evaluation. If school principals and subject coordinators discuss feasibility of implementing the suggestions made during the workshops and carry out their own pilot studies to test applicability to their particular school, the teachers may feel that the sessions have more practical applications to their classroom and match their expectations of what teachers' professional development should incorporate. Heritage and Chen (2005, p.2 of 9) reported that use of data in school improvement plans is more effective than simple discussion.

Another important issue is to consider the theory-practice divide; trainers may explore new methods and techniques but in no way do these trainers come over the dualist complexity between the theory-practice divide (Hedgcock, 2002). Often the case of the transmitted knowledge is isolated, decontextualized, and unrealistic in the real world (Tillema & Knoll, 1997). Many trainers expose, discuss, act out or even simulate situations; rarely do trainers follow through the trainee development in the classroom after training. Thus, it may be unique to explore other avenues in teacher training programs by having trainers and trainees involved in the classroom. In fact, technology can serve to record, playback, and synchronize teaching practice in the classroom.

In addition, teachers be offered the opportunity to contact the trainers after the sessions. If a second recap session were not possible, perhaps e-mail communication with queries would be one possible solution to provide the opportunity to participants to give their feedback. If the above were to take place systematically, perhaps there would no longer be the need to attend multiple workshops all touching on the same themes. Particularly, it would be more appropriate to create a hybrid type of training merging real-time teaching with training and getting students involved in the process. Such a model would certainly be a shift in the training paradigm and classroom teaching. Thus, trainers can see how beneficial their material really was once the teachers apply it and thus, they can replicate all the successful activities.

The Lebanese teachers who participated in this study are still very enthusiastic; we would hope that further workshops carried out in the Lebanese school context would build on this enthusiasm and help the participants become more reflective practitioners who are able to go back to their schools, and adopt the "best practices" approach to help train other teachers.

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