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Classroom Applications: Understanding the Impact of Professional Development on Teacher Instructional Practices

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores teachers' experiences with two distinct professional development (PD) approaches: experimental learning and traditional PD programs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations, the study investigates how each approach impacts teachers' professional growth, engagement, and instructional practices. Twenty teachers from two private schools in the Philippines participated, with ten attending an experimental learning-based PD program and ten attending a traditional PD program. Thematic analysis revealed that teachers in the experimental learning group reported higher engagement, hands-on participation, and opportunities for reflection, which translated into more confident and practical application of new teaching strategies. In contrast, participants in the traditional PD group described their experiences as passive and found it challenging to apply the content to their classroom practices. The findings suggest that experimental learning, with its focus on active engagement and reflection, is more effective in promoting meaningful professional development and classroom impact. Traditional PD, while informative, would benefit from integrating more interactive elements to enhance its relevance and applicability. This study highlights the importance of experiential learning in teacher PD and calls for further research into its long-term effects on teacher performance and student outcomes.

Keywords: Professional development, experimental learning, traditional professional development, teacher engagement

Introduction:

Professional development (PD) is a cornerstone of educational progress, enabling teachers to update their practices, integrate new methodologies, and keep pace with evolving teaching technologies. Traditionally, PD programs have been conducted through lectures, workshops, and seminars, which are often criticized for their lack of interactivity and limited engagement with participants (Abid et al., 2021). These conventional formats, while informative, do not always foster deep reflection or active learning among teachers.

In contrast, experimental learning approaches, grounded in experiential education theory, have emerged as innovative alternatives. These approaches involve hands-on, reflective, and real-world experiences, encouraging teachers to actively engage in their own professional growth (Jesionkowska, et al., 2020). Despite the growing interest in experimental learning for teacher development, few

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studies have qualitatively explored how this method compares to traditional approaches in shaping teacher experiences, perceptions, and learning outcomes.

This study aims to fill this gap by using qualitative methods to compare experimental learning and traditional PD approaches. Through interviews, focus groups, and observations, we seek to uncover the lived experiences of teachers in both models and explore how each approach influences their professional growth, motivation, and instructional practices.

Literature Review:

The importance of professional development (PD) in education is well-documented, as it plays a critical role in enhancing teaching effectiveness and improving student learning outcomes. Traditional PD programs, such as lectures, seminars, and workshops, have been the predominant model for decades (Ajibade et al., 2022). These methods offer a structured transfer of knowledge but often fall short in fostering active engagement and critical reflection, two essential components for deep and transformative learning (Sasan & Rabillas, 2022). As educational demands shift, the limitations of traditional PD highlight the need for more dynamic and interactive approaches that go beyond passive knowledge acquisition.

Experiential learning, based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, presents an alternative approach to traditional PD. Unlike conventional methods, experiential learning emphasizes active participation, where teachers engage in real-world, hands-on experiences and reflect on these to foster deeper understanding and skill application (Sasan & Baritua, 2020). This model follows a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, which collectively enhance teachers' professional growth and development (Kilag et al., 2022). Through this approach, teachers move from being passive recipients of information to active learners, gaining practical skills they can directly apply in their classrooms.

Research from other fields, including business and medical education, has demonstrated the effectiveness of experiential learning in improving knowledge retention, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Calma & Davies, 2021). These studies suggest that experiential learning can offer similar benefits in the context of teacher PD, though research specifically focused on its application in education is still emerging. Studies like those by Jenson and Kasten (2018) indicate that teachers participating in experiential PD programs report greater confidence and competence in implementing new teaching strategies. Additionally, research by Landry et al. (2011) highlights how experiential learning can boost job satisfaction and self-efficacy, suggesting that these benefits extend beyond the acquisition of new knowledge to overall professional well-being.

While existing studies show promising results, there remains a gap in qualitative research exploring teachers' personal experiences with both traditional and experiential PD methods. Many studies have primarily focused on quantitative outcomes, such as knowledge gains and satisfaction scores, but fewer have delved into how teachers perceive and internalize these learning experiences. Qualitative insights can reveal the nuances of how different PD models shape teachers' attitudes, teaching practices, and long-term professional growth, offering valuable information for designing more effective PD programs.

By exploring how each approach impacts their engagement, skill development, and instructional practices, this research aims to provide a richer understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with different PD models. This deeper insight could inform future PD programs and contribute to more effective strategies for teacher education.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations to explore teachers' experiences and perspectives on experimental

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learning and traditional PD programs. This approach is well-suited to capturing the nuanced, subjective experiences of participants and providing a rich understanding of the contexts in which these professional development approaches are implemented.

Participants:

The participants of this study were 20 teachers from two private schools in the Philippines. Ten teachers participated in a PD program utilizing experimental learning approaches, while another ten teachers attended a traditional PD program. The selection of participants was purposive, based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. Participants were from diverse teaching backgrounds, including both novice and experienced educators, to capture a range of perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to explore their experiences and perceptions of the professional development (PD) programs. These interviews focused on their reflections regarding the effectiveness of the PD approach, its relevance to their teaching practices, and any challenges or benefits they encountered. In addition to individual interviews, two focus group discussions were organized: one with the experimental learning group and the other with the traditional PD group. These discussions provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their shared experiences and offered further insights into how each PD model impacted their professional growth. Furthermore, classroom observations were carried out after participants completed their PD training to assess how they applied their newly acquired skills and knowledge in their teaching. The observations focused on documenting teaching strategies, classroom management, and student engagement.

Data Analysis:

The data collected from interviews, focus groups, and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights from the qualitative data. Codes were developed to categorize the data, and themes were refined to highlight key findings related to the teachers' experiences with both PD approaches.

Findings:

Themes Identified from Interviews and Focus Groups:

Through the analysis, several key themes emerged from the data, reflecting the participants' experiences with both experimental learning and traditional PD programs:

Active Engagement and Hands-On Learning (Experimental Learning Group):

Participants in the experimental learning group consistently described their professional development (PD) experience as highly engaging and transformative. Many emphasized the significance of active participation in the learning process. One teacher expressed this sentiment vividly, stating, "I felt more involved in this training than in any other PD I've attended. I wasn't just sitting and listening—I was doing, reflecting, and learning from real situations." This engagement not only fostered a deeper understanding of the material but also cultivated a sense of ownership over their professional growth.

Teachers elaborated on how hands-on activities, such as simulations and role-playing exercises, bridged the gap between theory and practice. As one participant noted, "The simulations were eye-opening. They allowed me to step into my students' shoes and understand the challenges they face." This immersive approach enabled teachers to experience scenarios firsthand, leading to richer insights and more effective instructional strategies. Participants reported feeling better equipped to handle real classroom situations, which significantly impacted their confidence in applying new methods.

Moreover, the collaborative nature of the experimental learning sessions enhanced peer interactions and learning. One teacher remarked, "Working with my colleagues during role-playing exercises was invaluable. We shared our ideas and strategies, which made me feel like part of a supportive

community." This sense of camaraderie not only made the learning experience more enjoyable but also reinforced the collective goal of improving student outcomes. The exchange of ideas fostered an environment where teachers felt comfortable experimenting with new approaches in their classrooms.

The immediate applicability of the strategies learned during these hands-on activities was a recurring theme among participants. One teacher highlighted, "I went back to my classroom the very next day and implemented what I learned. The students responded positively, and I felt a renewed sense of purpose." This direct connection between training and classroom practice not only motivated teachers but also contributed to their sense of professional efficacy. The ability to see the impact of their learning in real time reinforced the value of the experiential learning approach.

The experimental learning group participants found their PD experience to be a highly engaging journey marked by active participation and hands-on learning. Their testimonials reveal a profound connection between theory and practice, enhanced collaboration with peers, and immediate applicability of new strategies. This feedback underscores the effectiveness of experiential learning in fostering teacher growth and improving instructional practices, setting a compelling case for the adoption of such approaches in future professional development programs.

Reflection as a Tool for Growth (Experimental Learning Group):

Reflective observation emerged as a crucial theme among participants in the experimental learning group, highlighting its significance in their professional development journey. Teachers consistently expressed appreciation for the structured opportunities to reflect on their teaching experiences both during and after the PD program. One participant articulated this sentiment, stating, "The reflection sessions allowed me to think critically about my teaching style and how I can improve. It's something we don't usually get in traditional workshops." This emphasis on reflection not only facilitated personal insight but also encouraged a deeper engagement with the content.

Participants noted that these reflective practices provided a space to connect their learning with real classroom challenges. As another teacher shared, "I was able to link what I learned to my own experiences, which made it more relevant and meaningful. Reflecting on those connections helped me identify specific areas I wanted to change." This process of linking theory to practice reinforced the value of experiential learning, enabling teachers to critically analyze their methods and consider how they could adapt new strategies to better meet their students' needs.

The act of reflection also fostered a supportive environment where teachers felt safe to share vulnerabilities and seek feedback. One participant remarked, "In our reflection groups, we were honest about our struggles. It felt good to know I wasn't alone, and my colleagues had similar challenges." This camaraderie created a culture of openness, where teachers could discuss their fears and uncertainties without judgment. Such discussions not only normalized the experience of professional growth but also built a community focused on collaborative improvement.

Additionally, teachers highlighted the role of guided reflection in shaping their professional identities. A participant noted, "Through reflective exercises, I began to see myself not just as a teacher but as a lifelong learner. It shifted my perspective on my role in the classroom." This transformation allowed educators to embrace continuous growth, recognizing that reflection is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. By cultivating a mindset of lifelong learning, participants felt empowered to seek out new opportunities for development beyond the PD program.

The immediate application of insights gained from reflection was another notable outcome of this process. One teacher explained, "After reflecting on a specific lesson, I made changes the very next day. It was exciting to see how my students responded positively to the adjustments." This ability to translate reflection into actionable changes not only enhanced teachers' confidence but also led to tangible improvements in their classroom practices. The feedback loop created by reflection allowed for a responsive approach to teaching, where adjustments could be made in real time based on student needs.

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Reflection served as a powerful tool for growth among participants in the experimental learning group. Their experiences underscored the importance of reflective observation in enhancing their teaching practices, fostering a sense of community, and promoting a mindset of continuous improvement. The testimonials from these educators reveal that integrating reflective practices into professional development can significantly enrich the learning experience, leading to deeper understanding and more effective teaching strategies. As they move forward, these teachers are likely to carry the value of reflection into their future professional journeys, benefiting both themselves and their students.

Passive Learning and Information Overload (Traditional PD Group):

In stark contrast to their experimental learning counterparts, participants in the traditional PD group expressed feelings of disengagement during their professional development sessions. Many described the experience as passive, with one teacher candidly remarking, "It was like going back to school, where we just sit and listen for hours. There wasn't much interaction, and I didn't feel motivated." This lack of engagement contributed to a sense of frustration, as teachers found it challenging to connect with the material presented in a one-way format.

Although the content delivered in the traditional PD program was deemed informative, participants highlighted the difficulties they faced in retaining and applying the information effectively. One teacher noted, "There was too much information, and I couldn't see how it directly related to my classroom needs." This overload of information created a barrier to meaningful learning, as teachers struggled to filter and prioritize the content relevant to their specific contexts. The absence of practical applications left many feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about how to implement new strategies in their classrooms.

Participants also reported a lack of opportunities for discussion and collaboration, which further diminished their engagement. A teacher shared, "I missed the chance to talk things over with my peers. We could have learned so much from each other if there had been more group activities." The traditional format's emphasis on lectures over interactive discussions meant that teachers missed out on valuable peer insights and experiences. This isolation made it difficult for them to envision how to adapt the information to their own teaching practices.

In summary, the traditional PD group participants faced significant challenges due to the passive learning environment and information overload. Their feedback highlights the need for a more interactive and relevant approach to professional development. By emphasizing engagement and practical application, future PD programs can better meet the needs of educators and enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. The experiences shared by these teachers serve as a reminder of the importance of designing PD opportunities that foster collaboration, reflection, and meaningful connections to practice.

Application to Classroom Practice (Both Groups):

Teachers from both the experimental learning and traditional professional development (PD) groups reflected on how their respective experiences influenced their classroom practices, albeit in contrasting ways. Participants in the experimental learning group enthusiastically reported the successful implementation of hands-on teaching strategies and interactive techniques. One teacher shared, "Using simulations and role-plays in my lessons made my classroom feel much more dynamic. The students were engaged and actively participating in their learning." This shift toward more student-centered learning environments allowed teachers to foster greater involvement and enthusiasm among their students.

In addition to the implementation of interactive strategies, teachers from the experimental group noted the positive impact of experiential learning on their overall teaching approach. A participant explained, "I now approach my lessons with a mindset that prioritizes student engagement. It's not just about delivering content; it's about creating an experience for my students." This focus on experiential learning not only transformed their teaching styles but also empowered students to take ownership of their learning, leading to more meaningful educational outcomes.

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Conversely, teachers in the traditional PD group reported challenges in translating the insights gained from their training into effective classroom practices. One teacher commented, "I learned a few new things, but it wasn't clear how to make those changes in my classroom." This sentiment was echoed by others who felt overwhelmed by the amount of information presented during the sessions, which left them unsure about how to integrate it into their daily routines. The lack of practical application left many educators feeling disconnected from the material.

Moreover, several participants in the traditional group expressed a desire for more concrete strategies and examples that could easily fit into their existing lesson plans. A teacher articulated, "I wish there had been more specific guidance on how to implement the new ideas. It felt like we were given a lot of theory but not enough practical steps to follow." This gap highlighted the importance of ensuring that PD programs not only provide valuable insights but also equip teachers with actionable strategies that align with their teaching contexts.

The experiences of both groups underscore the critical role that professional development plays in shaping classroom practices. While the experimental learning group reported transformative changes in their teaching methods and student engagement, the traditional PD group faced significant hurdles in applying new insights effectively. These findings highlight the need for future PD initiatives to prioritize practical application and relevance to educators' daily experiences, ensuring that all teachers can confidently implement new strategies in their classrooms. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, professional development can have a lasting and meaningful impact on teaching and learning.

Discussion:

The findings from this study provide a nuanced understanding of how experimental learning and traditional PD approaches influence teacher experiences, professional growth, and classroom practices.

Teachers who participated in the experimental learning PD program reported a more engaging and practical experience, largely due to the hands-on, interactive nature of the training. This aligns with the core principles of experiential learning theory, which emphasize active participation and reflection as critical components of meaningful learning (Kolb, 1984). The opportunities for reflection provided during the experimental PD sessions allowed teachers to critically evaluate their practices and develop actionable strategies for improvement.

In contrast, the traditional PD group experienced the training as more passive and less applicable to their teaching contexts. While the traditional PD sessions conveyed valuable content, the lack of interaction and practical application made it difficult for teachers to translate this knowledge into their daily classroom routines. These findings corroborate existing research that highlights the limitations of lecture-based PD programs in fostering deep professional growth (Ajibade et al., 2022).

However, it is essential to note that both groups of teachers recognized the importance of professional development in improving their teaching. The challenge, particularly for traditional PD programs, lies in finding ways to make the learning experience more engaging and directly applicable to classroom practice.

Conclusion:

This study offers important insights into the comparative experiences of teachers engaged in experimental learning versus traditional PD programs. The findings suggest that experimental learning approaches, with their emphasis on active engagement and reflection, provide more meaningful professional development experiences for teachers. These experiences, in turn, appear to lead to more confident and effective teaching practices.

Traditional PD programs, while informative, may benefit from incorporating more interactive and reflective elements to enhance their effectiveness. As educational demands continue to evolve, it is crucial to rethink PD models to ensure they meet the needs of teachers and foster sustained professional growth.

Future research should expand on these findings by exploring how different types of experimental learning approaches can be adapted to various educational contexts and investigating their long-term impact on teacher performance and student outcomes.

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