



Professional Development Obstacles in CERD Training Centers - Lebanon

Nadia AL SAHEB, Nemr FREIHA

PhD Student, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Saint Joseph University - Beirut, Lebanon

Professor, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Saint Joseph University - Beirut, Lebanon

ABSTRACT: This study seeks to investigate the obstacles that limit the effectiveness of the “Continuous Training Program” of the *Center for Educational Research and Development* (CERD) from the trainees’ perspectives in Lebanon. It further aims to propose suggestions to improve the continuous training program. Four focus group interviews were conducted with trainees from four respective training centers located in Beirut, Bekaa, South and North governates. Interpretational analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data using coding techniques. Findings revealed financial, administrative, logistical as well as educational obstacles and recommendations. This study fills the gap in the current literature regarding training programs in Lebanon and opens new horizons for improving professional development initiatives.

KEYWORDS: Professional Development, Obstacles, Recommendations, Trainees, CERD.

1. INTRODUCTION

The core to enhance the quality of teaching and learning lies in improving teachers’ competencies and skills through in-service training. Teachers’ professional development is key to developing school effectiveness through raising the standards of teachers’ instructional delivery as well as students’ achievement. International studies in this millennium have emphasized a new interest revolving around the importance of teachers’ professional development (Gemedda et al., 2013; Coffman, 2004). The absence of effective professional development that aligns with teachers’ learning and development is considered a fundamental concern of educational reform in the region (Karami-Akkary & Rizk, 2011a). More specifically in the Arab region, teachers’ professional development was investigated and found to be of little value delivered through one-size-fits-all with a lack of follow up, evaluation and connection to practice (Karami-Akkary, 2014; Mattar, 2012). Being abstract and irrelevant to classroom context and practices, professional development opportunities are considered worthless by many teachers who are demotivated to attend. Hence, Arab researchers and educators question the effectiveness of professional development initiative due to a mismatch between training content and real practical experiences within classroom contexts (Hammad, 2016).

Statement of Problem

Research revealed the ineffectiveness of professional development in enhancing teachers’ instructional practices (Desimone, 2011). Literature findings on teachers’ professional development programs suggest that there are numerous challenges and gaps (Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009; Nieto, 2009). It was reported that most professional development initiatives don’t meet the real needs and concerns of teachers (Borko, 2004). Mertler (2005) declared that most professional development sessions were “a gathering of teachers, usually after a long day of teaching or on a jam-packed workshop day, who sit and listen to an expert describe a new methodology, approach, or instructional material that they typically do not believe relates directly to their classroom situations or teaching styles” (p. 15). Recommendations from current literature call for more empirical studies examining teachers’ professional development programs (Hargreaves, 2000). Further studies have shown the existence of many obstacles and challenges facing the process of implementing training programs for teachers (Easton, 2008; Kelleher, 2003; Fullan, 2007).

More specifically, it was found that the obstacles faced by professional development in the Arab educational contexts include shallow content of training programs, lack of innovation in instructional delivery and methods, and a mismatch between the theoretical content and teachers’ practices (Al Jassar & Al Tamar, 2020; Nabhani & Bahous, 2010). Due to this urgent need for training programs and development initiatives to serve practitioners and educational policy makers, researchers in Arab societies call for more studies concerned with training and quality programs (Karami-Akkary & El Saheb, 2019). Hammad and Hallinger (2017) highlighted that research on teacher professional development in the Arab



region is minimal and emphasized the growing need to explore effective professional development and understand its characteristics and processes in the Arab region.

In Lebanon, studies have shown that professional training for teachers is weak in all public and private schools (El-Amine, 2005 ; Al Jammal & Ghamrawi, 2013; Zeitoun, 2014). The latter researchers found that most of the training programs are limited to training courses organized by a group of trainers from outside the institution. Further research confirmed that professional training for teachers in Lebanon is still a “standalone event” rather than a “sustainable process” (Farah, 2002; Annahar, 2004; El-Amine, 2005). Professional development in Lebanon includes random, short, boring workshops irrelevant to teachers’ needs with a lack of follow-up and assessment (Annahar, 2003; Hoyek, 2001). Such initiatives were found to be disconnected from teachers’ practices and classroom contexts rather than being connected to instructional delivery (Zeitoun, 2014). Consequently, Zeitoun (2014) highlighted the necessity of conducting empirical studies to measure the effectiveness of teacher training in Lebanon with the aim of guiding educational policies and improving practices. Further investigation is needed to lead policy makers to enhance teachers’ training programs. Recognizing professional development obstacles and challenges can guide stakeholders to improve training activities. Recommendations also provide insights into how to overcome such challenges paving the way for practical actions to enhance the quality of training.

In particular, the “continuous training program” of CERD consists of workshops that include passive short duration sessions. These sessions lack focus, follow up, and are not applicable to teachers' practices and concerns (Gharib, 2007). Hence, there exist many concerns regarding the effectiveness of the continuous training program in Lebanon (Farah, 2002; El-Amine, 2005; Hoyek, 2001). All of the latter give a justification for conducting such a study that seeks to explore the obstacles that limit the effectiveness of the continuous training program in Lebanon, and recommend solutions to improve it. From this standpoint, this study is considered to be one of the very scarce studies exploring the continuous training program of CERD in Lebanon through investigating obstacles and recommendations.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the obstacles of the “Continuous Training Program” of the *Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD)* from the trainees’ perspectives in Lebanon.

In particular, this study aims to :

- 1) explore the obstacles that limit the effectiveness of the continuous training program from the trainees’ perspectives
- 2) suggest recommendations for improving the continuous training program from the trainees’ perspectives

Research Questions

1. What are the obstacles that limit the effectiveness of the continuous training program from the trainees’ perspectives?
2. What can be done to increase the effectiveness of the continuous training program from the trainees’ perspectives?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional development, as defined by the National Professional Development Council in USA in 2000, is: “a lifelong collaborative learning process that nourishes the growth of individuals, teams, and the school through a learner-centered approach” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 217). Other definitions from literature claimed that teacher professional development is a set of ongoing continuous activities embedded in practices within classroom contexts and shaped by teachers’ rich experiences (Caena, 2011; Avalos, 2011). OECD (2009) further defined professional development as the learning opportunities that enhance skills, knowledge, and professional experiences of teachers.

Different types of professional development activities include cohort groups, reciprocal visits, peer coaching and observation, research circles, conferences and seminars, courses and workshops, case studies, analysis of student data, action research, involvement in a school improvement project etc... (Caena, 2011; Villegas-Reimers, 2003; OECD, 2005). Hunzicker (2011) described various characteristics of effective professional development: i) supportive; ii) job-embedded; iii) instructionally focused; iv) collaborative; and v) ongoing. Furthermore, it was discovered that the most impactful type of professional development is characterized by the following: - based on collaboration, active learning and teaching; - has a clear theoretical rationale grounded in research and a strong knowledge base; - is presented to a group of teachers; - is coherent, practical, and focused on students' learning; - is focused on specific content knowledge and strategies, helping teachers develop their pedagogical skills to teach specific content, with strong positive connection to practice (Caena, 2011; Lucillo, 2009).



Several barriers surfaced in literature regarding the factors impeding successful professional development programs' implementation. These include repetitive training content, inadequate trainers, distant training locations, and limited sessions ((Bayrakçi, 2009). Further professional development barriers involve financial problems, stressful working conditions, and poor activities (Bayrakçi, 2009; İzci & Eroğlu, 2016; Özen, 2006; Özoğlu, 2011; Uysal, 2012). Add to the latter, strict working hours as well as the absence of administrative support and collaboration were reported as the main professional development barriers for teachers (Muyan, 2010). Moreover, David and Bwisa (2013) identified the lack of time, new learning opportunities, and teachers' motivation as core challenges to professional development initiatives. Additionally, in studies conducted by OECD (2009), lack of attendance incentives, high training costs, absence of administrative support, and family responsibilities surfaced as the most important barriers to professional development. Bayrakci (2009) further elaborated that teachers need to be well-paid provided with financial incentives to attend professional development activities, due to the distant training centers located in far cities. Add to what was mentioned, inconvenient training timing such as weekends or after school ones are highlighted by teachers as a main barrier (Eroğlu & Kaya, 2021).

More specifically in the Arab educational contexts, obstacles faced by professional development programs include shallow training content, traditional instructional delivery and methods, and the imbalances between the theoretical content and teachers' practices (Al Jassar & Al Tammar, 2020; Nabhani & Bahous, 2010).

Hence, the need for improving teacher professional development programs is evident and recognized by researchers. Exploring professional development obstacles and identifying recommendations become indispensable exercises aimed to program improvement, reform and renewal (Rovai, 2003), especially in Lebanon where professional development lacks coherence and structure.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the qualitative methodology design through conducting and analyzing focus group interviews.

Data Collection

Context and Sample. The study context involves four centers of the "continuous training program" which was established in Lebanon in 2000 and funded by the World Bank as well as the Lebanese and French governments. The "continuous training program" is directed by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) which is an independent public institution linked to the Ministry of Education and aims at formulating educational policies and improving the quality of education in Lebanon. The program allows public school teachers to benefit from mandatory in-service trainings on an ongoing basis, through a training program that includes 250 trainers training teachers in 33 centers all over Lebanon (Ghareeb, 2007). Participants of this study include a total of 40 trainees who were randomly selected from four different centers located respectively in Beirut, Bekaa, South and North governates.

Focus Group Interviews. To answer the research questions exploring the obstacles that limit the effectiveness of the training and collect suggestions for improvement from the perspectives of the trainees, four focus group interviews were conducted with the trainees selected sample in the four centers. Participants in each focus group answered open-ended questions related to the obstacles and suggestions to improve the training program. Furthermore, the researcher assigned codes for focus groups as follows: TG1, TG2, TG3, TG4 referring respectively to trainees' focus groups in Beirut, Bekaa, South and North.

Data Analysis

Data analysis includes qualitative analysis through which the researcher used Interpretational Analysis, adopting the Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) as an approach to analyze the focus group interviews of trainees. The researcher analyzes the obstacles that limit the effectiveness of the training and recommendations for its improvement, and then synthesizes the results and writes the conclusion. Data from the focus group interviews is analyzed through coding, through which codes are generated from the collected responses then categorized. Analysis begins with open coding which is the process of selecting and naming categories to identify, label and relate different themes (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

IV. RESULTS

Obstacles

Under obstacles, subcategories including financial, logistical, administrative and educational challenges emerged (Table 1).



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Financial Obstacles. According to trainees, the bad economic conditions in the country have posed significant obstacles to the budgeting process of the program. The challenging economic situation has impeded the allocation and distribution of financial resources essential for the successful implementation of the program.

Logistical Obstacles. Lack of internet connectivity, absence of technology and interactive boards, as well as limited access to photocopying facilities and resources within schools are all logistical barriers that hinder successful implementation of the training. Another issue that trainees raised is the uncomfortable setting within the training centers including aging infrastructure, old buildings as well as lack of cleanliness and water shortage. On the other hand, trainees raised the concern that training sessions are held on weekends through which the sessions last for the entire day. They also highlighted the challenge of distant training centers from their residences.

Administrative Obstacles. Trainees claimed that they are caught off guard by their administrative short notice regarding the timing of the training sessions, which adds to the challenges already posed by weekend timing concerns.

Educational Obstacles. Educational obstacles include challenges related to content, school and classroom context, resources, as well as to coordination.

Content. Trainees affirmed that they are challenged to transfer the acquired knowledge due to rigid school curricula, restrictions of time, and frequent strikes. Moreover, they added that sometimes the training content is repetitive, boring, abstract and not suitable to the curricula and the textbooks they are using. They claimed that most of the time the training topics are randomly selected irrelevant to their needs, very theoretical and not always applicable with useless activities. A trainee from TG4 indicated “honestly, nothing new here!! Topics are old and repetitive; I feel bored most of the time, not engaged, and disconnected from practice. To me, training is a waste of time!” Another trainee from TG3 declared “they focus on theories and abstract concepts. Real examples and authentic scenarios are needed. Theories are words in air!!!”

School and Classroom Contexts. As for the school and classroom contexts, it was reported that there exists a mismatch between reality and the training received. The high number of students within the same class represents a challenge as it hampers individualized attention and tailored instruction to meet students' diverse academic needs. Moreover, the academic levels of students vary widely, further complicating the teaching process. Additionally, the absence of parental follow-up exacerbates these issues, as it reduces the support system crucial for reinforcing learning outside the classroom. A trainee from TG4 indicated “there are plenty of discrepancies between the training and the practical realities and challenges we face in our classes. Our classes are crowded. Our students are academically weak. Their parents aren't as serious as expected. Amidst these circumstances, incorporating new methodologies isn't always feasible.”

Resources. Trainees expressed a variation in trainers' qualifications. One trainee from TG4 claimed “from my perspective, I noticed that trainers' qualifications vary considerably, with some being notably more competent than others. This diversity in qualifications influences the delivery and effectiveness of training sessions, as trainers may have different strengths, areas of expertise, and approaches to teaching. Trainers who possess greater competence demonstrate deeper subject knowledge, more effective instructional methods, and better ability to engage participants in the learning process.”

Coordination. At the coordination level, the interviewed trainees confirmed that school principals and coordinators may disagree with the content along with its relevant activities. A trainee from TG2 claimed “Every time I complete a training, I approach my subject coordinator enthusiastically willing to transfer ideas and activities to my classroom. However, she always refuses these ideas sticking to our old practices.”

Table 1: Trainees’ obstacles that limit the effectiveness of the continuous training program

Trainees’ Obstacles						
Financial Obstacles	Logistical Obstacles	Administrative Obstacles	Educational Obstacles			
			Content	Resources	School and classroom contexts	Coordination
Bad economic circumstances	Lack of internet connectivity in schools	Short notice of trainings’ timings	Rigid school curricula	Varied qualifications of trainers	Mismatch between reality and received trainings	Inadequate support from school principals and subject coordinators to transfer the acquired skills
Poor financial resources	Absence of technology in classes		Repetitive content		High number of students within the same class	
	Limited access to photocopying facilities		Boring content		Low students’ academic levels	
	Uncomfortable setting within training centers		Abstract knowledge		Absence of parental follow up	
	Aging infrastructure and old buildings		Inconsistent content with the school curricula and textbook			
	Cleanliness and water shortages in training centers		Random topics irrelevant to needs			
			Mismatch between theory and practice			
			Useless inapplicable activities			

Recommendations

Categories that developed from trainees’ recommendations include financial, logistical, administrative as well as educational ones (Table 2).

Financial Recommendations. Trainees recommended a raise in the transportation compensations. A trainee from TG3 asserted “the transportation compensation they pay me isn’t sufficient. I need more than that, since I come from a distant place and have to pay extra money to arrive here.”

Logistical Recommendations. Trainees recommended providing schools with educational and photocopying resources. They also emphasized the need for logistical facilities to conduct trainings during the school day and within the school

setting. A trainee from TG1 indicated “it is easier for us to attend trainings inside our schools. If this is not feasible, at least, let us attend training during the school day rather than on weekends.” Another trainee from the same focus group agreed adding “to me, the weekend is family time. I don’t know why they keep scheduling trainings on Saturdays.”

Administrative Recommendations. An administrative recommendation that trainees raised is issuing certificates for participants who complete a training session. One teacher from TG4 claimed “certificates are not given to us. Earning a certificate is important as a tangible proof that we are investing in our professional development.”

Educational Recommendations. Trainees’ recommendations include issues related to content, resources and coordination.

Content. Many trainees recommended revising and updating the current school curricula to align it with new methodologies and strategies. They also suggested psychological awareness sessions for teachers tapping on stress relief and management skills. Some also proposed to plan and design trainings based on needs and innovative topics.

Resources. Some trainees asked for the distribution of educational resources and relevant training booklets.

Coordination. Most trainees affirmed that continuing to follow up with the trainer is essential for fruitful implementation of the acquired skills. Moreover, many recommended looping school principals and subject coordinators in the trainings that trainees are receiving. A trainee from TG3 mentioned “our subject coordinators should be trained on the topics we are learning about. Being aware of the training content and involved in the process is fundamental to expose the relevant stakeholders to new methodologies and to convince them of the need to transferring the acquired knowledge to our classes.”

Table 2: Trainees’ recommendations to increase the effectiveness of the continuous training program

Trainees’ Recommendations					
Financial Recommendations	Logistical Recommendations	Administrative Recommendations	Educational Recommendations		
			Content	Resources	Coordination
Increasing the transportation compensations	In school trainings	Issuing certificates for training attendance	Revising and updating the school curricula	Providing educational resources	Looping school principals and subject coordinators in trainings
	Providing schools with photocopying resources		Incorporating psychological awareness sessions	Providing training booklets	Conducting needs assessment
	Maximizing educational resources				Continuous follow up with the trainer
	Weekday trainings rather than weekend ones				

V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study revealed several obstacles which align with literature. For instance, the reported financial obstacles resonate with literature findings through which financial budgeting surfaced as the main obstacle that limit professional development initiatives (Bayrakci, 2009; İzci & Eroğlu, 2016; Özoğlu, 2011; Uysal, 2012). Moreover, the obstacles of repetitive content and rigid school curricula resonate with research findings which showed that most trainings are fragmented, limited to one day only, and seldom providing new learning experiences to teachers (Yoon et al., 2007; Al Jammal & Ghamrawi, 2013; Zeitoun, 2014). On the other hand, a major obstacle surfaced in the study regarding the absence of needs’ assessment which correlates with research findings on needs’ assessment gaps as main professional development challenges (Viadero, 2007). Furthermore, the lack of collaboration from school principals and coordinators matches up with Maddah (2021) findings revealing the absence of administrative support to teachers’ trials to transfer new technological advances and instructional methodologies into classrooms.

Maximizing the ministry’s budget for in-service teachers’ trainings aligns with Mustafa’s (2008) recommendation to provide financial and moral incentives for trainees. Hanushek and Rivkindraw (2007) further elaborated that enhancing



the pay structures and financial working conditions positively impacts teaching performances and thereby the quality of education delivered. Add to this, designing relevant and practical training content is essential through incorporating active learning activities, and using practical examples to ensure relevance and practicality (Darling Hammond et al., 2017; Allison, 2013). Latham and Gross (2013) stressed that addressing relevant content is a major factor in a learner's motivation. Aligned with the collected recommendations from this study, teacher trainees from international studies assert that professional development should be focused on needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Hobbs, 2017). Trainers should guarantee professional development meets teachers' needs through providing targeted pedagogical instructional guidance to teachers' specific subject matters (Allison, 2013; Latham & Gross, 2013). Finally, follow up mechanisms and evaluations are core recommendations which resonate with research findings of providing coaching, expert support, feedback and reflection towards improving the effectiveness of professional development initiatives (Darling Hammond et al., 2017).

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