

# COMPULSORY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY FOR ESL INSTRUCTORS

## A literature review and personal insight

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Even though there has been a growing interest in teacher professional development (TPD) on the part of educational researchers and practitioners in the last decade, research on English as Second Language (ESL) teachers' perceptions of mandatory professional development at private language centers (visa schools) remains fragmented and scarce. In the Canadian context, particularly in Ontario, initiatives for a sustainable, practical, and professional teacher development, whose target is to curtail teacher attrition and strengthen teachers' professional profiles, remain random and without a proper practical application. The Ontario Ministry of Education sets standards and creates policies that concern public schools; the district school boards stipulate sets of policies to be implemented in their schools, too. Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) is a government-funded program that employs teachers with a TESL Ontario certification, and thus requires LINC teachers to undergo a sector-specific, in-service professional development on portfolio-based language assessment (PBLA). All ESL private schools need to receive accreditation from Languages Canada under the same comprehensive scheme in order to provide ESL instruction and organize social programs to international students, who study English for a period of less than six months (Orion Accreditation Manual, 2017).

It becomes obvious that the landscape of language instruction in Ontario is varied, lacking unified standards and policies for all ESL teachers as well as uniform ways to maintain and improve their teacher competence. Such a situation suggests that when PD is undertaken, it might be fragmented and possibly ineffective, especially in the private sector of ESL. Therefore, exploring the perceptions of teachers of their own TPD in relation to the current in-service opportunities for knowledge enhancement and skills upgrade will fill a niche and may provide some insight for further research in the area. The overall aim of this paper is to outline the problem, explore some of the literature and inform prospective research.

## Outlining the Problem and Literature Review

Even though there has been an increased scholarly interest in the continuous professional development of teachers in the last decade or so, there is still a dearth of research on

ESL teachers' PD and their perceptions of how efficient the development opportunities at private ESL schools are in the Canadian context. Valeo and Faez (2013) claim "there has been less interest, however, in examining the career development and employment opportunities of accredited ESL teachers as they transition from TESL programs to ESL classrooms" (p.1). The authors examine the literature on teacher attrition in Canada to arrive at the conclusion that the lack of effective opportunities for teacher growth serves as one of the primary reasons that novice teachers leave the profession within several years in service. Furthermore, Valeo and Faez (2013) present an outline of previous studies on teacher attrition (Borman and Dowling, 2008; Sleptin, 2009; Swanson, 2010) in support of their claim that personal characteristics, in-service teacher education and professional isolation may be improved with proper development initiatives.

Published studies on language teacher education and practice abound in the literature, prescribing ways that pre-service teachers should be offered training and qualification initiatives to deepen their knowledge and polish their pedagogical and soft skills. In a similar vein, Abou Assali and Kushkiev (2016) state that "a number of research studies have addressed the effectiveness of teaching in relation to teacher inputs" (p.19), claiming that no consensus has been reached by researchers how to define teacher effectiveness. The majority of the studies conducted in the field praise teachers' personal traits and emotional intelligence skills as highly as their theoretical preparation and cognitive abilities they utilize to build a conducive and positive classroom environment, in which effective teaching and learning take place. In the same vein, several other studies (Muijs & Reynolds, 2010; Campbell, 2004; Griffin, 2013) have questioned the relationship between effective teaching and what factors contribute to it, such as being positive, forgiving and passionate (Walker, 2008), fewer student problems and students being more involved in learning (Walls, 1999). It is believed that novice ESL teachers at private centers are often compelled by the constraints of the ESL industry in Ontario to juggle several part-time positions, inadequate remuneration, while trying to remain in the field despite the fierce competition. In such a reality, it becomes obvious that the PD of in-service ESL teachers might not be their priority due to the lack of financial means, adequate opportunities or sufficient time to invest in self-development.

Similarly, Hardy (2009) claims "professional development (PD), an integral part of the life of schools and teachers, is an important mechanism to ensure educational reform and improvement in school settings" (p. 510). The dichotomy between broad and systemic PD and more localized PD for profession-oriented purposes the author outlines serves as a background for his investigation into the viewpoints of a group of senior educators in Ontario about their own PD. Hardy's (2009) study is informed by Bourdieu's approach to practice as socially constituted and contested. The author provides his interpretation of the theory- individuals and groups, who compete with each other, constitute the social practices with their own 'logics'. These contested practices occur within a social space called 'field'. Such fields are never static; they are the product of the constant dynamics

of the hierarchical order and interrelations within an organization and the 'habitus', or persuasion, of the occupants of the field.

Another component of this social fiber is the 'accumulation of varied resources, or 'capitals', that individuals and groups build up over time, and upon which they can derive advantages under particular circumstances in which those attributes are valued' (Hardy, 2009, p.511). Bourdieu's theory of society serves as a useful framework for analyzing the power relations and social change in a particular milieu. If reality is socially constructed and subject to change, teacher professional development can then be construed as a social arena where individuals compete over capitals they consider valuable. In such a multi-layered reality, teachers' perceptions of what constitutes their professional development 'is frequently limited to attendance at courses, conferences and whole-school INSET days, often to meet national requirements' (Rose & Reynolds, 2008, p. 219). It becomes evident that the contours of ESL teachers' advancement, both at personal and professional levels, are quite permeable and ill defined. Even though there has been a growing interest in empirical studies investigating ways to enhance educators' soft skills and emotional intelligence, research on in-service PD opportunities for ESL teachers and their perceptions of it at private ESL schools in Ontario remains limited.

## **My work context and a new PD initiative**

A work context I am familiar with is teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to international students, who generally remain in Canada for up to six months. The school in question is a UK-based institution, which provides programs at undergraduate and post-graduate level as well as some specialized professional development courses. The language department is the official provider for the school, which operates campuses in the UK, Germany, and Canada. Among the courses offered are General English, English for Business & Communication, IELTS & TOEFL preparation, University Pathway Program, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) including English for Finance, Tourism & Hospitality, Advertising & Marketing, Law, and Oil & Gas. The school adopts the Communicative Approach, a synergy between Task Based Learning, the Lexical Approach, and the Guided Discovery method. The core teaching staff's average length of service with the school is 2–3 years. With the summer months being more intensive, the need for supply teachers increases substantially.

Since I assumed teaching duties in May 2016, there have been some teacher development initiatives that aimed at raising awareness of new methods and approaches to teaching, teacher growth as well as honing teachers' intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. However, the teaching staff are generally preoccupied with classes and paperwork to be filed every other week during the term and do not manifest any special interest in attending PD days. Nevertheless, peer-observation and assigning courses of different levels and content on a rolling basis to teachers is seen as an opportunity to develop new skills and pedagogical competence. Instructors are invited to observe other classes and cooperate with peers

when deciding on teaching material, introducing realia, and taking students on field trips. The school partially reimburses conference fees and encourages staff to attend or present at such events.

In general, teaching staff are expected to be competent practitioners with a solid theoretical background in pedagogy and a good grasp of teaching methodologies and to be active and resourceful teachers who guide, correct and inspire students on their educational journey. However, without regular opportunities to reflect and diagnose lapses in their teacher profiles, educators may either leave the profession within the first several years of service or experience burnout, emotional depletion and feelings of demotivation. Therefore, investigating teacher stress and the various factors that lead to it has been “a subject of intense interest in recent years” (Antoniou et al, 2013, p. 349). One of these factors is the lack of professional support and recognition as well as inadequate development opportunities. Novice teachers are particularly vulnerable to stress due to the lack of active coping strategies, which leads to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Antoniou et al, 2013, p. 354).

During a meeting in August 2016, the school in question announced that a new policy for mandatory professional development would be in place before the end of the year. No justification about the reasons why the new policy would be compulsory was disclosed, neither were any details provided about the way the new initiative would be implemented. Questions arise whether this policy would meet the expectations and align with the perceptions of the targeted policy players. This unilateral policy implementation resonates with Sabri’s (2010) concerns about the absence of the academic when new policies are created and enacted. She summarizes the assumptive world of policymakers in relation to academics/practitioners in several inter-mingled elements (p.201):

1. Academics are generic “practitioners”.
2. They are an indistinct group as compared with other practitioners within the higher education and outside it.
3. Students are central to higher education policy making and improving “the student experience” and providing them, as paying customers with information to make choices, best serve their interests.
4. Academics as practitioners are not capable of or willing to meet students’ needs.
5. There is unease about “the subject” and the discipline as it draws attention away from the process of student learning.
6. Institutions, not individual practitioners, are accountable for professional standards and improvements in the student experience.

Even though her research and analysis pertain to the UK higher education context, my assumption is that similar conjectures permeate the *assumptive world* of teachers at private ESL schools in Ontario. Sabri (2010) defines *assumptive world* as “a cluster of

values, perceptions, evaluations and precepts for action...that are formed in a process of structuration... where agents are knowledgeable actors structured by and structuring the rules and resources in their environments” (p. 194). The change in terminology (academic to practitioner; discipline to subject) may be intentional with the aim to emphasize the practical nature of the programs in order to attract customers (students). Despite the possible similarities in the way policies are enacted in different institutions, each school represents a distinct case, and the policy in place along with the policy makers’ and players’ views should be interpreted, taking into consideration the microcosm and interrelations at play.

In the context of the school in question, policies are usually announced without first consulting teachers’ and admin staff’s perceptions and possible concerns or resistance. What is more, Appendix A of the Faculty Handbook stipulates that the teacher is expected to be proactive about their own development and the job among other essential personal and professional characteristics. It also states, “the teacher is at the heart of the student experience” and “you will be central to our student’s learning journey” (p.4). Moreover, it explicitly mentions professional development as a prerequisite for employment, remaining on the job and receiving an increment after a year of full-time service with the school. The same document of the key responsibilities and capabilities also states that teachers should “be conversant with the professional development goals and standards of the Teacher Profiling Grid and use it to self-evaluate and set goals. We will assist you to achieve these goals” (p.6). Instructors should take the initiative to be involved in peer-observation and engage in PD initiatives. Finally, attending staff and PD meeting and events are compensated at an admin rate, which is reflected in the teacher annual appraisal.

## Discussion and implications for future research

Some of the commonly used terms in the discourse concerning teaching and learning are teacher effectiveness, teacher development, and student satisfaction. Even though some policy makers’ predominant aim might be student satisfaction and positive feedback on their overall academic experience, creating a learning environment with professional educators who value and constantly improve their teaching expertise as well as supportive admin staff who can harmonize policy makers’ expectations with the educational reality in the institution, is often a daunting task. It is assumed that those who construct policies do not always consider the input on the part of the policy players and other stakeholders. In a similar vein, those, who are expected to implement the new policy, may experience feelings of absenteeism and a lack of consideration for their voice in the decision-making process. In order to bridge this ideological gap, a study investing the perceptions of ESL teachers of compulsory professional development policies may shed light and inform future decisions on prospective policy creation and implementation in their professional context.

Note: the author no longer teaches at the school in question.

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## Author Bio

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