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RESEARCH ON IMPROVING SYSTEMS OF EDUCATION

INSIGHTS

Giving Schools and Teachers Autonomy in Teacher Professional Development Under a Medium-Capability Education System

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Key Points

- Long experience under a top-down system has caused schools and teachers in Jakarta to feel that teacher professional development is not their responsibility.
- Low-motivated teachers are at risk of not participating in any professional activities because Jakarta tried to improve its system by giving autonomy to teachers regarding their own professional development.
- For low-motivated teachers, school leadership plays a key role in directing teachers to use their autonomy for professional development.
- School leaders can develop a professional development-oriented school culture by creating professional development regulations.

The importance of teacher autonomy in building professional development culture

A mature teacher who continuously seeks improvement should be recognised as a professional who has autonomy in conducting their job and has the autonomy to engage in a professional community of practice (Hyslop-Margison and Sears, 2010). In other words, teachers' engagement in professional development activities should be driven by their own determination rather than extrinsic sources of motivation. In this context, teachers' self-determination can be defined as a feeling of connectedness with their own aspirations or personal values, confidence in their ability to master new skills, and a sense of autonomy in planning their own professional development path (Stupnisky et al., 2018; Eyal and Roth, 2011; Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Previous studies have shown the advantages of providing teachers with autonomy to determine personal and professional improvement. Bergmark (2020) found that giving teachers the opportunity to identify areas of improvement based on teaching experience expanded the ways they think and understand themselves as teachers and how they can improve their teaching. Teachers who plan their own improvement showed a higher level of curiosity in learning and trying out new things. Bergmark (2020) also shows that a continuous cycle of reflection and teaching improvement allows teachers to recognise that the perfect lesson does not exist. Hence, continuous reflection and improvement are needed to shape the lesson to meet various classroom contexts. Moreover, Cheon et al. (2018) found that increased teacher autonomy led to greater teaching efficacy and a greater tendency to adopt intrinsic (relative to extrinsic) instructional goals.

In developed countries, teacher autonomy is present and has become part of teachers' professional life and schools' development plans. In Finland, for example, the government is responsible for providing resources and services that schools request, while school development and teachers' professional learning are integrated into a day-to-day "experiment" performed collaboratively by teachers and principals (Niemi, 2015). This kind of experience gives teachers a sense of mastery and boosts their determination to continuously learn (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

In low-performing countries, distributing autonomy of education quality improvement to schools and teachers negatively correlates with the countries' education outcomes (Hanushek et al., 2011). This study also suggests that education outcome accountability and teacher capacity are necessary to ensure the provision of autonomy to improve education quality. However, to have teachers who can meet dynamic educational challenges through continuous learning, de Klerk and Barnett (2020) suggest that developing countries include programmes that could nurture teachers' agency to learn in addition to the regular content and pedagogical-focused teacher training materials.

Giving autonomy to teachers can be challenging in an environment where accountability or performance is measured by narrow considerations (teacher exam score, administrative completion, etc.). As is the case in Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, teachers tend to attend training to meet performance evaluation administrative criteria rather than to address specific professional development needs (Dymoke and Harrison, 2006). Generally, the focus of the training relies on what the government believes will benefit their teaching workforce. Teacher professional development (TPD) is merely an assignment for Jakarta teachers. Most teachers attend the training only to obtain attendance certificates that can be credited towards their additional performance allowance. Consequently, those teachers will only reproduce teaching practices that they have experienced or observed from their seniors. As in other similar professional development systems, improvement in teaching quality at schools is less likely to happen (Hargreaves, 2000). Most of the trainings were led by external experts or academics who did not interact with teachers on a day-to-day basis. This approach to professional development represents a top-down mechanism where teacher training was designed independently from teaching context and therefore appears to be overly abstract, unpractical, and not useful for teachers (Timperley, 2011). Moreover, the lack of relevancy between teacher training and teaching practice leads to teachers' low ownership of the professional development process (Bergmark, 2020).

More broadly, in the Jakarta education system, especially the public school system, autonomy was never given to schools and teachers prior to establishing the new TPD system in 2021. The system employed a top-down relationship between the local education agency, teacher training centres, principals, and teachers. Professional development plans were usually motivated by a low teacher competency score or budgeted teacher professional development programme. Guided by the scores, the training centres organised training that could address knowledge areas that most of Jakarta's teachers lack. In many cases, to fulfil the quota as planned in the budget, the local education agency and the training centres would instruct principals to assign two teachers to certain training without knowing their needs.

Realising that the system was not functioning, Jakarta's local education agency decided to create a reform that gives more autonomy toward schools and teachers in determining teacher professional development plan. The new system has been piloted since November 2021.

To maintain the balance between administrative evaluation and addressing professional development needs, the new initiative highlights the key role played by head teachers or principals. This is based on assumption that principals who have the opportunity to observe teaching practice closely could help teachers reflect and develop their professionalism. (Dymoke and Harrison, 2006). As explained by the professional development case in Finland, leadership and collegial collaboration are also critical to shaping a school culture that could support the development of professional autonomy. The collective energies among teachers and the principal will also direct the teacher toward improving teaching, learning, and caring for students and parents (Hyslop-Margison and Sears, 2010; Hargreaves, 2000). Thus, the new TPD system in Jakarta adopts the feature of collegial collaboration. This is considered as imperative in Jakarta where teachers used to be controlled and joined a professional development activity due to external forces. Learning autonomy did not exist within themselves. Hence, teachers need a leader who can turn the "professional development regulation" into a culture at schools. The process will shape teachers to do professional development quite autonomously (Deci et al., 2001). In this case, a controlling leadership style will hinder teachers' autonomous motivation. Instead, principals should articulate a clear vision, consider teachers' individual needs and aspirations, inspire, and support professional development activities (Eyal and Roth, 2011). This can also be called creating a professional culture at schools (Fullan, 1996).

In this Note, we aim to understand how the schools and teachers respond to the new teacher professional development system. We compare experience and motivation of different characteristics of teachers.

Jakarta's teacher professional development system

In Jakarta, teacher professional development is organised by five training units. Previously, these units, working together, were responsible for planning training topics that would be delivered every year, recruiting trainers, sending an invitation letter to teachers, and organising training. Due to a lack of assessment of teachers' competency and needs, teachers reported that many pieces of training assigned to them were mismatched with their needs, expectations, or classroom context. Most training was also perceived to be unpractical for teachers' day-to-day teaching practice. Hence, Jakarta's teachers' competency and student learning outcome remain low (see: Pusat Analisis dan Sinkronisasi Kebijakan Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2019; Pusat Asesmen dan Pembelajaran, 2016).

In the new system, the Jakarta government has co-designed a teacher professional development system with teachers and principals to align teacher training with teaching-learning activity. They have created a task force team consisting of representatives from each training centre. There are four main features of the reform, which are:

1. The new system gives teachers autonomy to plan their own professional pathway based on their needs. The previous system only allowed teachers to join the training if they were assigned.

2. Principals are trained to be facilitators for teachers to reflect on their teaching practice, find out areas of improvement, learn new skills, and implement the skills in the classroom. All this activity is guided by a form or discussion prompt in a training platform developed by Jakarta's local education agency. The taskforce hope that involvement of principals in the system could make teacher professional development more connected with classroom context.

3. To improve the quality of the training, the government has also established collaboration with several teacher training institutions and education foundations.

4. On the platform, teachers and principals can also request certain topics that have not yet been available. The government training centres can monitor the request regularly and update the training modules accordingly.

Even though the new system gives full autonomy to the teachers in directing their own professional development journey, the Jakarta government recognised the teachers' low capability and motivation to perform such self-directed learning. Hence, they integrated several features in the system that aimed at supporting and guiding teachers to implement this new system. They hope the features can function as a scaffolding for teachers to shift from a top-down to bottom-up TPD system gradually.

The first support comes from principals who are assigned to be a facilitator for teachers. These principals received a four-day training on how to be a leader who could nurture professional culture at school and facilitate teachers to reflect on their competence. Teachers are also equipped with an online platform that gives them a step-by-step guide to (1) understand the expected teaching behaviors, (2) reflect on their practice against the expected behaviors, (3) find the area of improvement, (4) and how to pick training programmes that can help them to improve. To hold the teacher accountable for their professional development activity, the government records teachers' performance during training and teacher activity in implementing the training materials in the classroom. These TPD activity data contribute to teacher annual performance evaluation.

The system has been piloted to 76 schools, from primary schools to high schools and vocational high schools. For the first time, public-school teachers have autonomy to choose their professional development pathway based on their needs or teaching challenges. Private schools also have the opportunity to match government-organised training to the schools' professional development agenda. Our study only focuses on the implementation of the system at primary school level.

Methods

To understand how teachers and principals with different contexts of capability respond to the new TPD system, we employ a qualitative method in this study. The qualitative method will allow us to trace the processes and causal mechanism linking the existing leadership style, teacher motivation, principals' and teachers' capabilities, as well as school culture with their ability to exercise their autonomy under the new TPD system. The method is helpful to investigating and comparing in depth several schools and teachers that are purposively selected based on certain criteria that meet the goal of the proposed study.

School and teacher selection

During the first phase of the TPD reform pilot, DKI Jakarta planned to have a close observation of how the system was implemented in several types of schools and note the revision suggested from it. Hence, they selected a small number of primary schools (21) that represent a variety of geographical areas and school characteristics. Since the available administrative data failed to reflect the variation of school quality, the local education agency judged school quality based on their achievement in various competitions, exit exam scores, principals' performance, and school size (for private schools, school size is highly correlated with school quality).

Data used for this paper were obtained from two schools who has the opposite characteristic from one to another. The school selection was based on in-depth interviews conducted with all 21 principals. In each school, we asked all teachers to fill out a scale measuring their motivation to continuously learn, adapted from the work of Gagné et al. (2010). From the original questionnaire that asks about motivation at work, we changed the topic into the motivation to learn and improve teaching skills. We also asked them to self-report their growth mindset level using a 10-item questionnaire adapted from Levy and Dweck (1999).

From the principal interview, one school was identified to have a principal with high leadership skills, and the other schools were identified to have principals with poor leadership quality. Moreover, in both schools we found teachers with low and high motivation level. By selecting respondents according to these variations, we expect to compare the response of low and highly motivated teachers under a high quality of leadership as well as low quality of leadership.

Data collection

To understand how the schools responded to the new teacher professional development system, we conducted in-depth interviews with teachers and principals, observation of the principal and teacher trainings, observation of principals and teachers' WhatsApp group, as well as focus group discussion with teachers and principals after they have experienced the new system.

How does the new system work?

Placing teachers in charge of their professional development was a welcome change to a number of schools and teachers in Jakarta. These teachers are characterised by their high intrinsic motivation and initiatives. Teachers feel that such an approach to professional development gives them the necessary freedom, flexibility, and sense of control over the path of their professional development. The sense of being trusted gives them additional confidence and a heightened sense of responsibility to excel and be more engaged in their training.

The autonomy began with the process of self-reflection. A set of questions was developed by the Jakarta education agency to guide teachers in reflecting on their past teaching practices. The purpose of reflection prior to the training selection was to ensure an alignment between their needs and the training. While it was advised that teachers perform the reflection in collaboration with the principal, we found that teachers preferred to conduct their reflection with their peers of the same age or position as them, meaning that they did not discuss the reflection with teachers more senior or junior of them. One school specifically asked their teachers to exchange reflection forms to get input from fellow teachers. Subsequently, the teachers would revise their forms based on their peers' notes. Given that reflection is not

a common activity among teachers, self-reflection even among highly motivated and capable teachers was initially an uneasy and burdensome activity. To ease the process, they begun the process as a group activity. Aside from exchanging forms, teachers also conducted the self-reflection process in a form of group discussions where they discussed and confirmed their initial assessment of themselves with fellow teachers, including their teaching practices, short-comings, and advantages.

After teachers were done completing the forms with the assistance of their peers, they discussed with the principals regarding the insight of the reflection on their choice of training. The role of principals is critical in driving teachers to participate in the training as they could encourage teachers with low motivation as well. The key hurdle for low-motivated teachers to exercise their autonomy and agency in professional development was inadequate information. As told by one teacher, “I did not receive any information. The principal never gave us any information about the training. [It’s] either that or the principal shared them only to certain teachers.” Principals play a key role in relaying necessary information so teachers can direct their autonomy and agency to pursue the necessary professional development. An enabling environment which could successfully push teachers to exercise their autonomy and agency towards professional development consists not only of their peers but also principals. A common characteristic of a high-performing enabling environment was a principal which serves as a bridge between existing professional development and teachers. As principals actively seek information on teacher training and other programmes related to professional development, these principals are the ones that are able to fulfil their role in supporting teachers’ professional development. Some principals also shape the environment to encourage competition over training participation followed by sharing of knowledge about the training.

Cultivating teachers’ autonomy and agency to benefit their professional development requires support particularly from the principal, especially when teachers have long been passive agents of their professional development. As the authority figure, a principal is in a critical position to direct their teachers to participate in the training. If the principal is believed to be incapable of handling the reflection session, then a supervisory teacher is assigned to perform the duty before the principal approves the training of choice.

In the process, the principal and/or the supervisory teacher will review the reflection form and the training of choice. Given the thorough reflection process, in most cases the principal and supervisory teacher tend to agree with the teachers’ training of choice.

How schools and teachers respond to the new system

Awareness of the importance of professional development was evident amongst all teachers and principals, regardless of their motivation and principals’ leadership. Nevertheless, teachers and principals of the two schools responded differently to the new TPD system. Due to the long tradition of top-down professional development, the teachers’ mindset has been to associate the urgency of professional development with “letters of appointment”. Without such a letter, professional development is optional and demotivates teachers from being engaged throughout the training.

A school with a positive case of school leadership was shown to respond more positively to the new TPD system. Among the highly-intrinsic-motivated teachers, the new system is a welcome change as it gives them the freedom to choose the subject of their professional development as well as the flexibility in their participation. Highly motivated and capable teachers in a school with high leadership are encouraged and directed to participate in TPD. This is evident in how principals create a system to ensure the reflective system does not become a mere administrative process. The principal runs this system by actively engaging during the process or assigning a senior teacher to accompany and direct teachers in need. Another differentiating characteristic of the high-capability leadership of this school is the principal’s active communication with teachers regarding the new TPD system. Such communication ultimately drove the low-motivated teachers to also participate in the system even though they perceived the whole process as burdensome compared to the previous TPD culture, which was based solely on appointments.

Meanwhile, implementing the new TPD system was more challenging in schools with the typical passive principal. Principals with low leadership skills tend to withhold information regarding the new system from their teachers.

Consequently, initially, both types of teachers could not participate in the TPD. Even after principals provided a comprehensive briefing about the training, which included materials and infographics, the teachers still questioned the basics of the training, including the purpose of the reflection process. The sporadic information about the training further added to teachers' reluctance as it suddenly became too much for typically passive teachers to handle. Despite being an authoritative figure in the school setting, the principals could not create an enabling environment for teachers to foster their autonomy and agency to benefit their professional development.While the highly motivated teachers would sometime seek information on TPD on their own, a minor constraint would be to ensure they could receive principal approval. The TPD system aims to engage both teachers and principals in an attempt to ensure that principals are aware of their teachers' condition; however, in settings with low leadership, the reflective session become another administrative process. Low motivated teachers viewed the reflection session as another task they have to burdened with instead of an opportunity to evaluate their teaching practice. For high-motivated teachers, as they are unable to engage with their principal to discuss on their teaching practice, they would engage with their fellow peers. Notably, engaging with fellow peers were found to be the preferred approach even in the other school.

Discussion

Our observation clearly shows that under an education system with a history of a top-down and hierarchical culture, obtaining and exercising autonomy to continuously learn and improve their practice is not for every principal and teacher. The long-standing system has manufactured teachers' mindset to attribute all successes and failures in their teaching practice to government (Fink, 2003). The system diminished the role of schools to establish the goal of improving learning and agency to control the improvement (Fink, 2003).

However, our findings found several factors that could nurture teachers' and principals' agency to use their autonomy in teacher professional development. As suggested by Hargreaves (2000) as well as Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010), collegial collaboration can help teachers reflect on their teaching practice and boost their awareness and autonomy to develop areas that they think they lack. Furthermore, our data found that the collaboration circle must be a safe space for all teachers to be open about their challenges and flaws in their teaching. Teachers tend to be in a circle where other teachers are at the same age or seniority level with them so that none of them would feel insecure during the collaborative reflection process. The designed system expects principals to play their role as facilitators and learning partners in the collaborative reflection process. However, long experience under the top-down system made teachers struggling to shift their perception of principals' roles from instructors and evaluators to facilitators and learning partners.

Especially for low-motivated teachers, whether or not they have the drive to engage in professional development depends on the school principal. We found that principals can motivate these teachers by clearly communicating the importance of engaging with professional development and demonstrating its gains for the teachers and the school. Creating a competitive culture at schools to encourage teachers to improve their teaching practice has proven to be a successful strategy to increase teachers' motivation to learn. Distributive leadership is also the critical success of nurturing teachers' autonomy. A success story came from principals who assigned supervisor teachers to bridge the hierarchical gap between principals and teachers, especially those who felt insecure about their teaching performance.

As mentioned before, not all schools could successfully implement the new teacher professional development system. Many factors hinder the internalisation of teachers' autonomy to learn. First, some principals have a low capability to communicate the goals and details of the professional development system. The unclear message makes teachers struggle to follow the new system. Second, despite receiving training on how to be the agent of school professional culture improvement, principals still adopt their old role as the messenger of administrative tasks instructed by the local education agency to the teachers. In line with Fullan's (1994) argument, the long-standing presence of assignment-based professional development has shaped principals' and teachers' mindset that professional development is not connected to their needs. Instead, they perceive professional development activities to be administrative tasks.

Learning from the system pilot experience, Jakarta's Local Education Agency will make some adjustments to the professional development system. First, the government will implement the new TPD system to be optional. Only those who express their readiness will be included in the new top-down system. Instead of forcing the incapable principals

to run the system in their schools, the government will give a series of principals training to prepare them to be teacher professional development agents before implementing the new system. The government will also create a campaign to benefit from implementing the new system using testimonies from principals and teachers who were highly engaged and improved through the new system. To attract more principals to join the reform, the government will recognise the participating schools by giving them a title.

In a condition where a mentality crisis has been shaped by the old top-down system, believing the superiority of education frontliners initiatives is primarily theoretical. Fullan (1994) suggested that the top-down system co-exist with the newly introduced bottom-up system during the reform phase. Some rules, control, and extrinsic reward should not be completely taken out from the system. To make the introduction of the new professional development system appear smoothly for the low-autonomy principals and teachers, the Jakarta government decided to tie teachers' engagement in the new system to their performance allowance calculation. The government will also issue an official letter of invitation to the training based on the teachers' choice. The new adjustment to the reform is expected to bring a bridge for the low-capability schools to slowly nurture their autonomy in teacher professional development.

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