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Christian school educators' perceptions and perspectives of the value of postgraduate study

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Abstract:

This study involved five Christian schools in Queensland, Australia to explore teachers' perceptions and perspectives of the value of postgraduate study. This study used a purposive, representative sample of 15 teachers who were interviewed using semi-structured, open-ended questions. A Grounded Theory approach was employed to analyse the data. The results showed that Christian school educators valued postgraduate study as an in-depth form of study that provided enjoyment, mental challenge, increased their pedagogical skills, enabled them to develop their thinking and practice of Christian education and gave them a very credible qualification at the end of the study. However, school support was often lacking for teachers engaged in postgraduate study and the time pressures and financial cost involved often discouraged teachers from engaging in such study.

Introduction

Professional Development (PD) is an important influence on a teacher's professional growth as it seeks to develop teachers' knowledge and practice and improve school students' outcomes. The term, Professional Development, is used to describe the processes and activities carried out by teachers, schools, systems and tertiary bodies to promote professional knowledge, skills and attitudes so that school students' learning may improve. In addition, professional development should be an intentional process, consciously designed to bring about positive change and improvement. It should be guided by a clear vision of its purposes and planned goals (Guskey, 2000).

There is evidence from the research that high quality professional development programs can help teachers transform their teaching (Borko, 2004). As an ongoing and continuous process, professional development provides opportunities for educators to learn and reflect on new ideas, try out new practices in their classrooms and bring about positive changes and improvements in learning approaches and the learning environment.

Improved student performance should be an important outcome of professional development activities. Student achievement also appears to be linked to teacher qualifications. The more qualified a teacher is, the more likely students are to perform well (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

Postgraduate Study as Professional Development

Postgraduate study is study at a higher level than an undergraduate university program. It is sometimes called graduate education and involves studying for a further qualification. Normally, a Bachelor's degree or three year Diploma from a recognised tertiary institution in an appropriate discipline provides entry to a postgraduate program in Australia.

As part of a teacher's continuing professional development, postgraduate study can make an important contribution to that teacher's personal and professional growth (Robinson & Sebba, 2004). Teacher development research suggests that active and sustained exploration of larger ideas and concepts is more likely to bring about changes in teaching and learning (Hawley & Valli, 1999) and professional development is likely to be of higher quality if it is both sustained over time and involves a substantial number of hours (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Postgraduate courses normally provide in-depth study over a period of time in a particular area. Postgraduate study also provides the opportunity to challenge teachers' extant assumptions.

Despite the impact postgraduate study can have on a teacher's effectiveness and student outcomes, there has been a decline in the number of teachers in Australia interested in engaging in postgraduate study. Reasons given in the recent Australian government report, *Top of the Class*, for this decline included fees, increases in teachers' workload, lack of financial reward and the perception that further study was not related to career advancement. This report also recognised the need for universities to be more involved in the provision of professional learning (development), including workplace learning, and collaborating with teacher groups and professional associations in designing courses for specific groups of teachers (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training [HRSCEVT], 2007).

School Support for Professional Development

Employing authorities and schools have the primary responsibility to ensure that teachers have access to professional development. Research has shown that if employers support their staff by endorsing postgraduate study as a form of professional development then the staff will not only perform better in their studies but also in their jobs (Hung, 2006). Organisational support particularly in relation to time and funding can impact on the effectiveness of professional development (Guskey, 2000). Funding for professional development is often spread thinly and, as such, it is unlikely to produce significant change.

Mandating involvement in professional development and providing support and financial and other resources can provide extrinsic motivation for teachers. However, research has shown that the intrinsic motivation of a desire to become a better teacher and enhance the learning outcomes of students, rather than extrinsic rewards such as salary increases, payment of fees, merit increases or job promotions, is a primary motivation for engaging in professional development (Guskey, 2000).

Christian Schools and Professional Development

Within Australia there are many different types of Christian schools belonging to various religious affiliations such as the Seventh Day Adventists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Catholic. A relative newcomer to this sector is the Christian Schools movement with many

of its schools less than 30 years old. It includes schools mainly from a variety of non conformist affiliations such as Baptist, Assembly of God and Christian Brethren. These schools are affiliated to Christian Schools Australia (CSA) formerly known as Christian Community Schools (CCS). Schools belonging to the organisation Christian Parent Controlled Schools (CPCS), which has recently changed its name to Christian Education National (CEN), are governed by local parents' boards. Previously these schools had strong links to the Dutch Reformed Church but as the schools have grown these links have lessened.

Christian Schools Australia (CSA) has an affiliation of more than 150 Christian schools and 3,000 staff across Australia (Christian Schools Australia, 2007). Christian Education National (CEN) has an affiliation of more than 86 Christian schools with 2,300 teachers (Christian Parent Controlled Schools, 2007). Both Christian Schools Australia and Christian Education National have a commitment to professional development and regularly run state and national conferences.

In addition, Christian Schools Australia and Christian Education National have recognised the importance and impact of postgraduate study as a form of professional development for their teachers. They have been proactive in establishing tertiary institutions that provide postgraduate courses from a Christian worldview perspective. Southland College, formerly, the Institute of Christian Tertiary Education, and the National Institute for Christian Education (NICE) have offered courses since 1988. In 1995 they became partners in the College of Christian Higher Education (CCHE) through which their postgraduate courses were accredited. Both Institutes have encouraged teachers to undertake postgraduate study as a form of professional development by enrolling in a postgraduate course or by enrolling in professional development short courses which can be credited towards postgraduate courses such as a Graduate Diploma of Education and Master of Education (Southland College, 2009; National Institute for Christian Education, 2008).

Edlin (1998) and Frisken (1995) maintain there is a critical need for teachers in Christian schools to engage in professional courses that integrate the beliefs and values of the Bible within all areas of education. Collegial study groups and collaborative action research approaches to professional development are also encouraged as community is seen as central to a flourishing Christian school (Stronks & Blomberg, 1993). Justins, (2004) a deputy principal in a large Christian school in Australia, has recommended that professional programs be developed for teachers in Christian schools on the use of the Bible in the school curriculum. Edlin (2004) has encouraged school boards to provide time and money for PD opportunities for teachers "to think deeply and critically from a biblical perspective about all aspects of the educational task" (p.10). Although these authors advocate the importance of professional development in enabling teachers in Christian schools to integrate their Christian faith with their teaching practice, they make no explicit reference to the advantages of engaging in postgraduate study as a form of professional development to further teachers' understanding of a Christian approach to education.

Methodology

Qualitative methods generate rich, detailed data that allow a participant to supply answers in their own words (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Taking a qualitative approach for this study

was preferred to a quantitative study as it provided a more in-depth consideration of school educators' perceptions and perspectives of postgraduate study. Face-to-face interviews were chosen as the most useful method of data collection for this study.

A purposive and representative sample of 15 school teachers (five Principals or Head Teachers and 10 teachers) from five Christian schools in Queensland, Australia were chosen. These schools were given the following pseudonyms, Dog rose, Mountain Ash, Nutgrass, Ghost Gum and Coolabah which were based on the names of Australian trees and plants. Five of the teachers had engaged in or were currently engaged in postgraduate study and the other five had never engaged in postgraduate study. In addition, each of the principals (head teachers) had undertaken postgraduate study. Thus ten of the participants had or were engaged in postgraduate study and five participants had never engaged in postgraduate study. A summary of the background demographics of the interview sample is provided in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Semi-structured questions were chosen as the best type of questions for the interviews in this study as they provided freedom for participants to talk about what was most meaningful to them. To reduce interviewer bias the same wording and sequence of questions was used in all interviews. This process increased the possibilities for comparability of responses. It also facilitated the organisation and analysis of data. The questions at the beginning of the interview were general and non-threatening, requesting information about the person themselves.

The interview was designed in two parts. Background information was sought on each participant in Part A including the school in which they taught, position in school, the level of the students taught (primary/elementary or secondary), and also whether they had engaged in postgraduate study or not. The second part of the interview, Part B, comprised 15 semi-structured questions. These questions included the reasons for engaging in postgraduate study, its importance and benefits, the incentives and disincentives for undertaking postgraduate study, and rating postgraduate study with other forms of professional development. In addition, a question relating to the influence of the school and school support was included and the final question invited any further comments to allow the participant the opportunity of including other aspects related to postgraduate study that they considered relevant. The majority of interviews took place during Terms 1 and 2 in 2005.

A Grounded Theory approach was considered the most suitable approach to take in analysing the answers to the interview questions because of the large amount of unstructured data collected (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996). In addition, as the theory is grounded in data collected from the real world it serves as a research foundation in its own right (Hayes, 2000). Grounded theory is an iterative process or a cyclical process, in which theoretical insights emerge or are discovered in the data and tested to see if they then produce their own theoretical insights (Hayes, 2000). A number of main categories and sub-categories eventually emerged as a result of the coding.

Results and Discussion

A participant identification tag was developed to link the comments to the school, and type of educator for example a teacher (T) or principal (P); and in the case of a teacher, whether the participant had or was engaged in postgraduate study (PG). For example, MTPG(2) refers to Mountain Ash school (M), a teacher (T) who is or has engaged in postgraduate study (PG) and is the second teacher (2) from that school to be interviewed. DP refers to Dog Rose school, and the principal (P) of that school.

Many participants, in particular those who had already engaged in postgraduate study commented on the intrinsic value of postgraduate study which included enjoyment of study, professional interaction, and the stimulation of such study as the following comments demonstrate:

I feel the need for intellectual, professional stimulation or otherwise I would go stale.
(GP)

I like to have a challenge and learn new things all the time. (GTPG2)

In addition, participants commented on the utility value or usefulness of postgraduate study to increase educators' subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, to be updated with educational trends and changes and to be better equipped to assist students' in attaining learning outcomes.

Pedagogy is changing and I think that we have got to keep up with the times (MP)

I'd been out of teaching for eight years or so and I certainly wasn't ready just to plunge straight back in ... I really felt I needed to find out what the current trends were and how things have changed. (MTPG1)

Further many teachers wanted to develop their knowledge and understanding of the philosophy and practice of Christian education through postgraduate study in a Christian Institution as the following comment illustrates:

I did start doing some postgraduate study to give me a better understanding of Christian education. (GP)

Although some participants commented on the value of postgraduate study to enhance their career opportunities especially in leadership roles most participants stated that the credibility of a postgraduate qualification gave them enhanced status within the school and parent community.

It gives [you] credibility in the eyes of families, parents, and staff. If well chosen it gives you some added strings to the bow. I don't want to have the shortest academic line in the year book as principal. It carries weight and looks good. (NP)

If the school has a few teachers that have postgraduate qualifications it does elevate the standards in the eyes of the community. (CT1)

However, the time required to undertake postgraduate study and the financial cost involved often overrode the value of such study. Teachers commented on the demands of the teaching profession, and family and church responsibilities appeared to take up most of the other time that people had at their disposal. Typical comments included:

Time is the killer. There are times in the calendar of the school when you are flat out and trying to study and to pace it well is not easy. (DP)

Teachers are dog tired at the end of the day. There are many demands and they can't burn the candle at both ends. (NTPG1)

Those who had engaged in postgraduate study talked of how they had to be disciplined in their time management as the following comment indicates:

I had to set aside every weekday evening to doing my study and I just had to be disciplined about it. (GTPG2).

School support in terms of allocation of study leave and financial assistance for postgraduate study appeared to be lacking in most cases. One principal indicated that he was willing to give a few hours study leave to teachers to complete an assignment but this was more on an ad hoc basis. However, at another school the board refused to allocate professional development days for postgraduate study. If teachers at that school wanted to engage in postgraduate study then it had to be in their own time. However, school support for principals was more forthcoming with some schools providing study leave for engaging in postgraduate study. However, financial assistance appeared to be totally lacking and as many of the teachers interviewed had already reached the top of the pay scale they commented that they would not receive an extra salary for a postgraduate qualification. Typical comments included:

Teachers are not the best paid people in the world and some of the courses are probably a little bit expensive. (GTPG1)

I think teachers in my school have very little incentive. There is no monetary incentive. We don't have any. ...Whoever takes on postgraduate studies knows that there is a time commitment and mostly you have to do it in your own time. Most people in Christian schools I've found who are taking on the postgraduate studies are people who are also very busy in their own churches, so they're trying to balance church and family and school and probably other activities as well. (MP)

Differences were noted between educators' perceptions of professional development and postgraduate study. Most of the educators commented on the positive benefits of the in-depth

and more focussed approach to postgraduate study in contrast to the one or two day professional development courses that most educators, schools and school systems appear to favour, as the following comment indicates:

Postgraduate study gives something to get your teeth into. Other forms of study like short courses give some opportunity, but it is hard to follow through on because once the course is finished the good things get left behind. (DP)

Over half of those interviewed commented that postgraduate study enabled educators to keep up-to-date with educational trends and changes. One principal, in particular, was concerned about teachers who had been teaching 20 to 30 years without engaging in any postgraduate study. He commented:

If a teacher was to stay as a professional teacher all their lives, they could actually be there for 30 or 40 years. If they don't ever do any postgraduate study I think that they would become very monotonous, boring teachers who are doing the same thing today as they did ten or twenty years ago. I think they need to be refreshed and challenged and they need to be updated. (MP)

Over 75% of the participants including all the principals commented that postgraduate courses gave more opportunity for improving and changing their professional practice than other forms of Professional Development, as the courses were in-depth and conducted over a longer period of time. Comments included:

In a one day course not much is changed, but study in-depth can make a change. (NP)

Postgraduate study is a little bit like dieting, in that the slower and the longer you take to do it the rewards are more likely to be long lasting, and it is more likely to change your habit as a teacher. (GTPG2)

Conclusion

In summary, the school educators in this study recognised the intrinsic value of postgraduate study in terms of enjoyment, mental stimulation and challenge and collegiality or sharing with other school professionals. They identified the usefulness of such study in terms of gaining increased pedagogical knowledge and skills, being updated in educational trends and changes, and improving their professional practice. As Christian educators they also recognised the importance of being able to develop their thinking and practice of Christian education through taking postgraduate study in a Christian Institution. The credibility of a postgraduate qualification was identified as an important outcome of postgraduate study which could lead to future career opportunities particularly in school leadership. However, the pressures of time and the financial cost of postgraduate study had the potential to override the positive values of such study. In addition, school support was lacking for teachers engaged in postgraduate study but

schools were very supportive of teachers engaging in “one off” professional development days and would provide the time and money for these seminars and workshops.

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Table 1 Background demographics of interview sample

	No of educators	Engaged in postgraduate study	Never engaged in postgraduate study
Gender			
Male	10	7	3
Female	5	3	2
Educators^a			
Primary/elementary	6	4	2
Secondary	9	6	3
Position of Educators			
Teachers	10	5	5
Principals	5	5	0
Schools			
Dog Rose	3	1	2
Mountain Ash	3	3	0
Nutgrass	3	2	1
Ghost Gum	3	2	1
Coolabah	3	2	1

a Educators included one principal whose main teaching area was primary/elementary and four principals whose main teaching area was secondary.