Teacher Associations’ Roles in Sustainable Professional Development

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Padmani Mildred Thiyagarajah

School of Educational Studies
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Abstract

A key function of teacher associations is to advocate the importance of focused and sustained periods of personal-professional development which is sustainable. New as well as experienced teachers need to see themselves as the source of professional development. This is because personal-professional development begins with self-awareness and self-motivation and progresses with self-direction as teachers make choices and claim ownership for the decisions they make in their professional development. Unlike highly centralized and bureaucratic training programmes which are in the main prescriptive in orientation in that the emphasis is on what is important to know and do, what is current in theory and research and therefore what a participating teacher should do, teacher associations on the other hand could play a more significant role in fostering a personal point of view that can enable teachers to make sense of what is propagated and develop professionally on a sustainable basis. As a practitioner, this ownership of a point of view is best fostered by teacher associations which provide a sounding board for teachers’ ideas and a metric for their own thinking. When teachers band together for mutual support, they can collectively suggest courses of action and explain why these make sense to the authors. The individual teacher can in turn take from them what she/he will do and do with them what she/he can to help her/him make sense of what she/he does. This paper will therefore review the role and functions of some teacher associations in Malaysia from this perspective in their common cause of helping teachers make sense of how they can make a difference not only in how they impact the lives of individual children but also their own profession as they strive for sustainable professional development.

Keywords: sustainable professional development teachers associations

1.0 Introduction

Teacher associations’ roles in sustainable professional development will enhance graduate employment in the long term. This is especially so, if teacher associations like all other professional organizations align their internal structures to reinforce overarching values and goals which make full use of human resources and potential. A large body of literature provides evidence that when organizations broaden and elevate the interests of followers, generating awareness and acceptance among the followers of the purposes and missions of the organizations (Den Hartog, House, Hanges, & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1999), and lead out in new directions for achieving them, human potential is released for performance and productivity. Teacher associations can support and sustain the local context to create sustainable professional development amidst the changing nature of teachers’ work and environment which has become more and more complex. This is apparent when theories of learning keep changing, new instructional materials are being produced each year and online learning has been imposed on many teachers, who are often expected to juggle instruction with counseling, curriculum development and many more activities. Teacher associations can provide the proper setting for innovative learning by designing organizations in which participation and anticipation work together to extend horizons of decision making, broaden
perspectives, allow the sharing of assumptions and values, and facilitate the development and use of new approaches. (Bennis and Nanus:1997). However professional development ought not to just focus on learning new skills but on changing habits and attitudes. Hence teacher associations need to instill courage among teachers for articulating a realistic vision of the future and inspiring them to share that vision by stimulating teachers intellectually and caring for individual differences. The role of teacher associations is not to coerce but to inspire so that teachers are propelled by noble values and principles to do the right things with honesty and responsibility for the common good. It is the role of teachers’ associations to inspire in teachers these values.

2.0 Teacher associations and sustainable professional development

Sustainable professional development involves both individual and collective/collaborative participation. While professional development is on the one hand a personal choice made by the individual, yet individuals are essentially embedded in social groups who work collectively to uphold shared professional values and practices. This dual dimension frames teachers’ professional development which is defined by Dale Lange, “as a process of continual intellectual, experiential and attitudinal growth” (1990, 250).

2.1 Sustainable Individual Development

New as well as experienced teachers need to see themselves as the source of professional development. Individual professional development can be sustained as long as this source of personal potential is available to be exploited by the self. This is because personal-professional development begins with self-awareness and self-motivation and progresses with self-direction as teachers make choices and claim ownership for the decisions they make in their professional development. Because teaching and learning are human experiences with profound social consequences (Freire, 1970), teachers’ associations play a key role in facilitating teachers to be responsible beings towards themselves and society as they actively engage in critical reflection, decision making and independent action in trying to teach in a sustainable way within the context of daily reality. Teacher associations can promote and facilitate the development of self-awareness, self-motivation, self-determinism and self-agency which are crucial to sustaining personal professional development. To this end teacher associations ought to provide a platform where teachers have the opportunity to raise their self-awareness of their own beliefs, values and preferred practices in teaching through critical reflection and articulation and in so doing reconstruct their own personal practical knowledge in order to pave the way for professional development.

Empowerment and teacher autonomy

When teacher associations serve as a forum for individual teachers to tell their stories, teachers begin to become accountable for the choices they make in their classrooms. Teacher associations ought to recognize the power of stories in the development of teachers. When teachers tell their stories in recounting their experience, they become aware of the consequences of their instructional strategies especially when they make the connection between their personal practical knowledge and the consequences of their action. It is in the process of articulating their personal stories that teachers are enabled to view possibilities of developing alternative conceptions of how classroom practice should and can be. Teachers’ professional development is also captured in their articulation which reflects the transition of their discourse from local to professional language as they develop new understandings of teaching through renaming their experiences and reconstructing their practice. This is important as Donald Freeman has said “The process of articulation – making the tacit explicit – brings into play new discourse and with it, different ways of conceptualizing teaching” (1992, 7). Teachers are empowered when they can articulate and communicate meaningfully and effectively to put forward their points of view, especially when the positions they take are inspired by autonomous decision-making based on critical reflection. This autonomy empowers them to be critical thinkers and liberates them to overcome contextual
impediments through the realization of their full human and intellectual potential. They are also enabled to talk confidently with administrators, parents, students and other teachers. This in itself is an important part of being competent teachers and gaining respect as professionals.

Teachers can become autonomous only to the extent they are willing and able to embark on a continual process of self-development. (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Hence teachers associations need to instill courage among teachers for articulating a realistic vision of the future and inspire them to share that vision by stimulating teachers intellectually and caring for individual differences.

2.2 Sustaining collective/collaborative professional development

Though sustainable professional development is inherently personal in nature and starts out as private or solitary endeavours, yet self-development cannot be done in isolation. Julian Edge (1992, 3-4) posits that it is through cooperation and collaboration that teachers have a chance to escape from simple, egocentric subjectivity, without chasing after a non-existent objectivity. He calls this Cooperative Development and says that, I need someone to work with, but I don’t need someone who wants to change me more like the way they think I ought to be. I need someone who will help me see myself more clearly. To make this possible, we need a distinct style of working together so that each person’s development remains in that person’s own hands. This type of interaction will involve new some rules for speaking, for listening, and for responding in order to cooperate in a disciplined way. This mixture of awareness-raising and disciplined cooperation is what I call Cooperative Development (1992, 4).

Teacher associations can support sustainable cooperative development based on the principles of trust, respect, empathy and honesty by providing a venue where teachers are free of the bureaucracy of the work place to be self aware and in control of their powers to think, feel, speak and act as they share their personal practical knowledge and learn from one another in a supportive environment. A teacher cannot function adequately “for long without an informed shoulder to lean on, without an on-the-spot human wailing wall at which to gripe, to rage, to express fears and to confess mistakes, to ask questions and wonder aloud. Where the human wailing- wall is carefully conceived and consistently offered, where the people provided are Informed, sensitive, sympathetic and understanding (Long and Newman, 1961, 5-26, as cited in Maslach, 1982, 111).

Teacher associations can help drive the highest possibilities of human nature, by providing organized feedback in order that teachers can have the ability to step back and adapt and change themselves if necessary so that they are at their most effective for realizing their vision and accomplishing their goals. As they constantly seek feedback through cooperative professional development teachers can stay relevant to the needs and demands of the world around us. Teacher associations can organize collective professional activities such as conducting action research, facilitating conferences and workshops for teachers to try out new teaching ideas and co-develop instructional materials. Collaborative professional development can also be sustained through on-line activities such as teacher chat groups, electronic bulletins, newsletters, journals and blogging. By participating in such professional development activities teachers stay abreast and cope with changes. They not only develop their own professional discourse, ideas and skills but also gain confirmation or re-affirmation that what they do is worthwhile. This is essential for sustaining motivation, empowerment and inspiration to stay on track for sustainable professional development.

3.0 Teacher associations and professional development in Malaysia

A survey of stated objectives and activities of teacher associations in Malaysia show that they share the common aspirations of providing a forum for teachers and educators to confer and debate issues central to teaching and learning, and at the same time promote opportunities for creating a network of relationships which can sustain professional development on a continual basis.
One example of such a teacher association is the Association of Science and Mathematics Educators of Penang (ASMEP) which was established in 1978 by a group of enthusiastic science and mathematics educators from schools, colleges and universities in Penang. ASMEP provides a platform for all members who are science and mathematics teachers to come together to share ideas about professional development and issues and activities that can enhance the teaching and learning of the subjects. The activities organized by ASMEP include new interactive technologies for e-learning, workshops on problem-based learning for teachers, projects in bringing scientists, teachers and students together, and science and technology competitions and exhibitions. Its website also includes the E-bulletin ASMEP which provides the latest update on the association’s activities.

Another such teacher association is the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association. More popularly known as MELTA, it is a voluntary, non-profit organization which was officially formed in 1982. Its stated constitutional aim is to promote English language teaching in Malaysia by pooling together all expertise and resources for English Language Teaching (ELT) in Malaysia and make them available for teachers all over the country and to liaise with major ELT organizations in the ESL/ EFL world.

The Teachers’ Club run by the British Council also subscribes to the mission of providing professional development opportunities for English language teachers all over Malaysia. The British Council through the Teachers’ Club works with teachers from all sectors of the education system and its projects range from instructional materials design, teacher training workshops and organizing competitions for teachers.

4.0 Conclusion

Sustainable professional development paradoxically hinges as much on self-determinism as collegial support. As such, teacher associations play the crucial role of creating space for individual context-sensitive exploration of pedagogic knowledge as well as providing meaningful collaboration and co-operation among teachers and educators. Teacher associations and can provide the structure for the follow-up training that is essential for acquiring new teaching knowledge, skills and strategies to members of the teaching community as they continuously engage in the study of their craft. Professional development can only be sustained if teachers and teacher educators are committed to be totally engaged in their work and explore the possibilities of reaching their full potential through the process of self-awareness in the reconstruction of personal meanings of teaching and learning. Though the journey of professional development begins with the self awakening to the need for self-actualization and reaching for our full potential, yet teachers and educators can achieve far more by collaborating and enriching colleagues professionally along the way. And it is teacher associations which can bring this about by leading the way for partnership collaboration, innovation and creativity among the teaching community.

References


