

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN JOB SATISFACTION FOR KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS IN TEXAS: A QUALITATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Lisa Castaneda

Coastal Bend College

Daniella G. Varela

Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Don Jones

Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Abstract

A contributing factor to high teacher turnover rates is the contention that teachers are not well-supported in their professional roles. The purpose of this study was to study lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers about the role of professional development in job satisfaction. The qualitative inquiry revealed that *professional development positively impacts satisfaction, administration is generally accommodating, and there are barriers to fully realizing professional development*. In essence, professional development is found to impact the job satisfaction of teachers. The findings of this study advance knowledge pertinent to potential influencers of teacher turnover, and provide guidance for teacher education and professional development decisions for early education teachers.

Keywords: professional development, teacher education, job satisfaction

Introduction

Teacher shortage and teacher turnover are critical problems in the United States and school systems are facing great challenges of building and maintaining a high-quality teacher workforce (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Neale-McFall et al., 2018; Toropova et al., 2021). High teacher turnover produces a negative impact on the academic outcomes and overall school cohesion (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Toropova et al., 2021). Evidence suggests job satisfaction can positively reduce teacher turnover and increase teacher retention (Benevene et al., 2018; Calaguas, 2017; Gaias et al., 2018; Toropova et al., 2021). Professional development is found to impact the job satisfaction of teachers (Troesch & Bauer, 2017; Yuh & Choi, 2017; Neale-McFall et al., 2018; Gaias et al., 2018; Toropova et al., 2021).

Troesch and Bauer (2017) found secondary career teachers were more satisfied with their jobs than those early-career teachers. Toropova et al. (2021) revealed teachers that received more professional development had higher levels of job satisfaction. Gaias et al. (2018) implied the importance of teacher training and professional development for supporting their job satisfaction, especially for kindergarten teachers. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers about the role of professional development in job satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was the situated learning theory which explains the acquisition of professional skills of an individual (Clancey, 1995) and which has greatly influenced existing views of teaching and learning (Korthagen, 2010). Based on the situated learning theory, Korthagen (2010) developed a three-level model of learning to analyze the friction between teacher behavior in the context of teaching practices. Korthagen reconciled the situated learning perspective with traditional cognitive theory, and this led to concrete implications for the pedagogy of teacher education.

Literature Review

Dou et al. (2017) described job satisfaction as a positive or emotional state resulting from an individual's appreciation of their jobs or experiences, influenced by the job itself and workplace environment that employees find rewarding, satisfying, frustrating, or unfulfilling Viadero's (2018). Yuh and Choi (2017) noted that the evaluation of teacher satisfaction includes cognitive and judgmental processes. This interpretation implies that by singularly measuring teachers' affective state, one is likely to find it challenging to address job satisfaction in the teaching practice. Although teachers' influence in student outcomes is widely acknowledged, the question remains whether teachers are content with their working environment, an aspect often overlooked (Torres, 2019).

Makovec (2018) found that teacher job satisfaction significantly contributes to their well-being because satisfied instructors are less vulnerable to stress or burnout. Dou et al. (2017) who established that job satisfaction improves teachers' satisfaction with higher instructional quality, coupled with better learning support for students. The evidence revealed that job satisfaction influences teacher turnover and their commitment to their job (Sheridan et al., 2019), which directly affects their ability to offer quality instructional guidance and support to learners.

Reeves et al. (2017) found that teachers' job satisfaction within the school environment was predicted by the availability of required resources, manageable workplace, and cooperation among colleagues. Similar results were reported by Sheridan et al. (2019) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) who established that a school environment characterized by opportunities for professional career development, leadership support, and staff involvement in decision-making significantly and positively influenced job satisfaction. Blömeke et al. (2017) also found that leadership support for teachers, professional development through training and mentorship programs, and feedback positively influenced teachers' job satisfaction. Teachers feel satisfied with their job if they perceive that their work environment provides an opportunity for continuous knowledge acquisition to adapt to the classroom's dynamic needs (Toropova et al., 2021). Liang et al. (2017) cautioned that a lack of professional growth programs among kindergarten teachers was the lead factor for teacher turnover and attrition. Klæijsen et al. (2018) found that teachers' access to development programs influence their intentions to quit or remain in the teaching practice. In sum, research finds that environmental factors such as the availability of professional growth opportunities for teachers influence job satisfaction (Torres, 2019) retention, and attrition rates.

Method

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of kindergarten teachers about the role of professional development in job satisfaction. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews which were audio and video recorded, then transcribed for analysis.

Research Questions

RQ. What is the role of professional development in the job satisfaction of teachers in Texas?

SQ1. What are the lived experiences of the teachers in Texas about the role of professional development in enhancing their job satisfaction?

SQ2. What are the perceptions of the teachers in Texas about the role of professional development in enhancing job satisfaction?

Population and Sample

The general population of interest is kindergarten teachers from early education institutions. Using a purposive sampling technique, a sample of 11 kindergarten who had a minimum of three years of experience in early education were studied. A minimum three years of experience in early education was required to be included in the sample so that collecting their responses or lived experiences and perceptions will provide useful information and insights for conclusions. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the sample group.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Name	Sex	Years of Experience	Education
P1	Female	28	Lifetime teaching certificate
P2	Female	3	B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies EC-6
P3	Female	18	Master's in Early Childhood
P4	Female	13	B.A in Reading
P5	Female	9	B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies EC-6
P6	Female	10	B.A.in English
P7	Female	5	B.S. in Math
P8	Female	7	Master's in Early Childhood
P9	Female	31	Master's in Early Childhood
P10	Female	8	Master's in Progress
P11	Female	12	Master's in Education

Results

Several themes arose that related to the research question and sub-research questions in this study. Table 2 below illustrates how the themes and subthemes relate to the research questions.

Table 2*Themes Relationships to Research Question and Sub-Research Questions*

Theme	RQ	SQ1	SQ2
Positively Impacts Satisfaction	X	X	
Motivational	X	X	
Improves Skills	X	X	
Administration is Generally Accommodating	X		X
Barriers to Fully Realizing Benefits of Professional Development	X		X
Budgetary Constraints	X		X
Lack of Training Specificity	X		X
Training Required on Personal Time	X		X

Overarching Research Question

The primary research question sought to discover the role of professional development has in the job satisfaction of kindergarten teachers. Participants indicated that *professional development positively impacts satisfaction* by providing motivation and skills training that allows them to feel more engaged and confident in their jobs. Despite the fact that *administration is generally accommodating* of professional development requests, participants noted that there are *barriers to fully realizing the benefit of professional development*. These barriers include budgetary constraints, lack of training specificity, and training being required on personal time.

Professional Development Positively Impacts Satisfaction

All but one participant (P9) indicated that professional development positively impacted them in some way, whether it be through generally positive experiences, because they found professional development motivational, or because it helped improve their skills and understanding. P6 said, “I think more professional development would be great and I know it will benefit my students also. Yes, I can see how more professional development would make my job satisfaction higher.” P5 said something similar when she reported,

I can see how [professional development] should make me more satisfied as a teacher. I wish I could learn more to help my students achieve academic excellence, there is nothing more satisfying as a teacher than seeing my past students succeed.

In reverse, P1, P2, and P9 specifically said that they did not believe professional development impacted their satisfaction. P2 said, “Professional development doesn’t have a role in my job satisfaction because of the lack of [professional development].” While P2 indicated that professional development was non-existent in her career, neither good nor bad, P9 believed that the professional development she was offered may actively decrease her job satisfaction. She described this experience in the following way, “I do get frustrated having to sit through some of these and I get the feeling that most teachers feel the same way.”

Professional Development Helps Improve Skills and Understanding

Seven participants (P2, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9, and P10) indicated that the professional development they received improved their skills and understanding as teachers. Participants reported that professional

development made them more aware of vulnerable student populations, improved their confidence in the classroom, and engaged them in learning. P2 said, “The professional development that I’ve requested and had approved has helped tremendously. All the skills learned, and ideas given changes the way I teach, and the students learn.” P4 said, “Professional development is extremely important because it improves and facilitates my job. It has made me a better learner and I’ve learned new approaches.” P6 believed that professional development improved her ability to instruct her students and said, “I am grateful for any professional development given to me and I find that when I can connect to the subject then I am able to apply the training to my every day.”

Professional Development is Motivational

Three participants (P1, P3, and P11) indicated that they found professional development sessions to be motivational or refreshing, but not always positive. For P3, the professional development sessions she participated in improved her outlook and her job satisfaction. P3 indicated this by saying, “Each time I attend a professional development that I chose, it is like a pick-me-up and encouraging to start the next day or even the next year.” For P1 and P3, experiences with professional development were more mixed. P3 reported that professional development was motivating her to want to be a principal, but only because she believed she could manage the trainings better. She said,

I think this is why I would like to be a principal. I think that professional development should encompass more updates on teaching and learning and not district wants. As a principal I can help teachers get the training needed. It has led me to want to do more and make changes in my district.

Administration is Generally Accommodating

Seven participants (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, and P10) reported that their administration was generally receptive to teacher requests for professional development, and that they would fulfill those requests when possible. P7 said, “We are given the opportunity to request professional development and our administration is great at trying to meet our requests but with budget restraints it’s not always possible.” P8 said, “I have not been with my school long enough to make this request, but I don’t see my principal reacting in a negative way. She is pretty good at accommodating other requests.” P3 described the support from her administration in the following way,

We do get support from our administration. If they see that Professional Development is needed in a certain subject, such as technology, implementing differentiation, or classroom management, they will try and get the training for us at the campus level. Our district has offered surveys to teachers to ask about the professional development that is needed. The district will then set up professional developments throughout the summer for teachers to sign up for.

There are Barriers to Fully Realizing Benefits of Professional Development

While most participants indicated that professional development either positively influenced their job satisfaction, their motivation, or their skills and understanding, all participants also said there were barriers to fully realizing the benefits of their professional development. These barriers included budgetary constraints, time constraints, lack of training specificity, or that the training was required to be taken on their own, personal time. Table 3 below captures how many teachers reported experiencing each barrier.

Table 3*Participant Reporting on Barriers*

Theme	Number of Participants
Lack of Training Specificity	9
Budget Constraints	6
Training on Personal Time	4

Lack of Training Specificity

Nine participants (P1, P2, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, and P11) reported that the professional development they received was not specific enough for their teaching situation. In almost all cases, this was because the training was not related to early childhood education. Participants felt like training on school politics or education geared towards older students was not beneficial to them and their student population. P9 described this issue by saying, “I think there is too much professional development district wide that does not pertain to my job. A lot of it has nothing to do with early childhood. It’s boring and mandatory... much of it is not relevant.” Pointing to a concern about access to training that is relevant, she continued, “I do attend summer training that the service center provides which are excellent. But I and the other teachers pay out of our pockets to attend these trainings.” Like P9, P7 and P8 wished for more training that was geared toward early childhood education. P8 said, “I would like to see more opportunities of topics that can help me in the classroom. So far the professional development offered are district updates and not much that will help me with my students.” Similarly, P7 said,

I would like to see my district to have professional development for only kindergarten teachers. I don’t like being grouped with other grade levels because kinder is so different and our students have needs that the higher grades do not.

Budgetary Constraints

Six participants (P1, P2, P4, P6, P8, P10) indicated that budgetary issues prevented them from accessing professional development opportunities. P6 said, “I would like to see more money in the budget for us to attend professional development.” P2 said, “Finances are a big issue with our district when it comes to requesting specific professional development. So maybe have an account that is dedicated strictly to professional development.” Like P2 and P6, P1 also felt like her ability to access professional development was limited by budgetary issues. She said, “Administration support for professional development has to be in finding the funds to allow us to attend those classes that would help us help kids.”

Training Required on Personal Time

Four teachers (P3 P4 P6 and P9) indicated that they had to attend required professional development trainings during time that was not within their regular work hours, or for which they were not paid, which in their view influenced their satisfaction with the training and was a negative aspect of their jobs. P9 said, “I would like the district to pay for our development that the service center offers, even if it’s in the summer. Gas and mileage would be nice also and give more time in the school year for relevant training.” P4 described her situation by saying,

Education has taking so many turns lately, therefore the district is constantly changing and/or introducing new programs and software to meet these changes. This past year, we were introduced and expected to master Canvas and Zoom. Among other applications that we had to learn and

incorporate in our instruction are Nearpod, Classkick, recording apps, Google apps and many other. Not all, but a lot of these professional development hours took place at our own time. It usually took place after hours, or as prerecorded tutorials.

Teachers are expected to take many hours of professional development throughout the year. Like P4, P3 believed that professional development training should happen during work hours. P3 said,

Every kinder teacher is required to have 30 hours of Gifted/Talented initial training with a 6-hour refresher each year. In the past, this was offered face-2-face at the beginning of the year during our professional development days. Now, this is a required training offered online only on our own time. I feel that if it is a required training, it should be offered during our district professional days.

The essence of participant responses was that professional training that is not done during working hours leads to decreases in job satisfaction as some teachers may resent working without pay on days off. It is important to note that it's not the professional development they object to – it is the need to complete it during personal time.

Discussion

Overall, teachers were in alignment with what factors constitute the basic components of valid and purposeful professional development opportunities. Generally, teachers would like professional development that identify goals and practices that can be applied in their classrooms. However, it is clear that certain practices are getting in the way of both good professional development and thus job satisfaction. Given their testimonies, teachers would like professional development to be relevant to their specific needs and the needs of their students, timely as in during paid working time or compensated, and accessible.

Professional development programs increase job satisfaction because it helps to create a satisfying environment for educators to acquire skills and resources to address challenges within their work environment (Spratt, 2019; Merchie et al., 2018; Dou et al., 2017). In this study, several participants said that they perceived professional development sessions to be refreshing and motivational. Some participants agreed that professional development improved their outlook and job satisfaction. A majority of the participants also indicated that the professional development they received improved their skills and understanding as teachers. Participants reported that professional development made them more aware of vulnerable student populations, improved their confidence in the classroom, and engaged them in learning.

Still, the most important aspect to conceptualize is that professional development directly affects teacher motivation and its impact on students' outcomes. The research connected in the open-ended interviews led to data that directly spoke on the connection between professional development, job satisfaction, and motivation. The findings of this study led to confirmation of prior research that the knowledge professional development can impact job satisfaction negatively and positively, depending on multiple factors such as relevance to their teaching. The findings justify that professional development for teachers in learning environment is a significant tool for improving teachers' motivation, which can positively influence the academic outcomes of students. Again, these findings must be taken cautiously. The data argue that not all types of professional development increase teacher motivation and job satisfaction especially given criticisms about mandatory professional development.

A majority of the participants indicated that their administration was generally receptive to teachers' requests for professional development and that they would fulfill those requests when possible. In that view, a school administrator must prudently invest in developing teachers to instigate change and enhance learning and education quality. The study findings confirm that professional development programs which focus on providing administrative support, collegial support, and availing the required resources to teachers increase teachers' job satisfaction.

Participants were pointedly asked to describe their job satisfaction during the interview. In response, all teacher participants reported a good degree of professional satisfaction, especially as a result of the opportunities to interact with and teach their students. Teachers reported some grievances about their work experiences, but those did not color the love they had for their jobs. Participants were also asked to describe their perceptions of the role of professional development in job satisfaction. Most responded that professional development is good and necessary, but really only contributes to their professional satisfaction if the professional development was relevant to their students and gave them classroom tools they could actually use. To that end, the conclusion is that professional development must be deliberate, intentional, and relevant in order to positively impact teachers' job satisfaction.

While a majority of the participants indicated that professional development positively impacted their motivation, job satisfaction, skills, and job understanding, all the participants mentioned that there were barriers to fully realizing the benefits of their professional development. These barriers included time constraints, budgetary constraints, lack of training specificity, and the inability to conduct training during their contracted time. All the participants reported that the professional development they received was not specific to their teaching situation, and believed that training on school politics or topics geared towards older students was not beneficial to them or their student populations. A majority of the participants said that budgetary issues prevented them from accessing better opportunities for professional development or being as effective in the classroom as they were expected to become. Participants also reported that they had to attend the required professional development training during times that were not within regular work hours, or for which they were not paid, which they regarded as a negative element of their job. Lander et al. (2020) and Manduca (2017) echoed that effective professional development must happen when there is mutual participation, content is centered on curriculum needs and research-based practices, extended over a while to allow for active learning and practice, connected to the system and school-wide goals, follow-up activities including coaching with feedback opportunities, and additional development activities.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this research are imperative for individuals, teachers and students, schools, and policymaking levels. At the individual level, the outcomes of this research are significant in improving the knowledge and skills of teachers which will be reflected on the academic outcomes of students due to an improvement in job satisfaction and teacher motivation in the learning environment. The findings of this study confirm that that professional development, characterized by career growth opportunities, increases teachers' motivation and job satisfaction. Good professional development is found to increase job satisfaction and reduce employee turnover in school. At the policymaking level, the findings of this research should compel administrators to provide teachers with relevant, timely, and appropriate professional development programs more frequently.

Recommendations

Professional development in the school environment can increase teachers' skills, knowledge, and practice through skill sharing and transfer (Chai, 2019). To improve the outcomes of professional development for teachers, there should be a clear emphasis on the groups that will be attending the programs and their long-term goals (Sprott, 2019). There should be a robust platform for reflection and feedback.

Application-based and research-based practices often serve as models for educators to learn and enhance their teaching strategies and personal learning. When the best model and effective practices are implemented, learners are more likely to reap the most benefits. The most suitable practices must be modeled for teachers so that their learning process can be optimized during the professional development programs.

To improve the nature of professional development for educators, goal setting must be integrated as an imperative aspect of the process (Manduca, 2017). When professional development programs are being facilitated, the goal should be specific to the audience. Most importantly, whether the goal is for a specific group of teachers or a school-wide initiative, the goal should be measurable, specific, achievable, timely, and realistic. To that end, data collected in this study revealed that one of the primary reasons teachers are frustrated with professional development is lack of relevance. In some instances, professional development programs are a significant financial investment by the providing school district. The findings of this study highlight the need for more strategic and intentional decisions about what professional development programs will have the most direct and relevant impact on teachers. This also supports the need for feedback and evaluation. Rather than to spend limited school district dollars on undesirable trainings, administrators must carefully consider the specific needs of their teachers and students in order to bring professional development that will have the most direct and relevant impact.

Conclusion

A contributing factor to high teacher turnover rates is the contention that teachers are not well-supported in their professional roles. The findings of this study advance knowledge and contribute to the scholarship of teacher turnover, teacher education, and professional development for early education teachers. In essence, professional development is found to impact the job satisfaction of teachers. To improve professional development sessions and reap its benefits, schools must understand what teachers need. Job satisfaction is also related to the overall well-being of teachers and their students as well as school cohesion (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Toropova et al., 2021). As such, the findings of this study benefit teachers, particularly kindergarten or early education teachers, as the increased professional development opportunities could improve their overall well-being and persistence in the field.

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