Research Article

Vietnamese Primary School Teachers' Needs for Professional Development in Response to Curriculum Reform

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This qualitative study explored the needs for teacher professional development (PD) of Vietnamese primary school teachers. The participants of the study were ten teachers at ten different primary schools in a large city in Vietnam. The data included in-depth individual interviews with the participating teachers. Qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts revealed several interesting insights into the teachers' perspectives on PD, their regular PD activities, and their needs for PD. All the teachers considered PD essential for their demanding teaching job. They reported having attended various PD programs and activities provided by their schools, and the department of education and training at the province and district levels. They also participated in several teacher professional learning communities available on the Internet. However, the teachers expressed a need for more PD programs and activities, especially in the context of curriculum reforms. Notably, they preferred to attend PD courses which were more practical and relevant to their work. In addition, they highly appreciated the hands-on activities and opportunities to interact with teacher trainers and educators. These findings were interpreted and discussed in relation to the sociocultural contexts of Vietnamese primary education. The study also discussed implications for PD course designers and teacher educators in Vietnamese primary school contexts and beyond.

1. Introduction

Teachers are seen as a key to the success of educational reforms because there is a strong relationship between teachers' effectiveness and students' achievement [1–7]. Therefore, there has been extensive research investigating how teachers respond to and implement new curricula to ensure the success of educational reforms. This line of enquiry has reported many challenges in instructional practice faced by teachers [8–10]. Educational reforms and innovation have recently occurred in most countries across the world with a large amount of invested money and effort. As a consequence, many studies have looked at the effectiveness of the designs and approaches of educational reforms and innovation. However, many educational reforms, including large scale programs in developed countries, have reported failure

to achieve the expected outcomes [3, 11, 12]. This failure, to a large extent, results from the lack of an understanding of teachers' needs for professional development (PD) [13, 14]. Research has shown that teachers sometimes find PD irrelevant to their work, leading to a reluctance to learn and grow their profession to implement changes in educational and pedagogical practices [14–17].

In Vietnam, there are several studies investigating teachers' challenges in some aspects of education, such as teachers' challenges to STEM integration [18] and challenges to educational equity [8]. Some studies have also looked at teachers' implementation of curriculum reform [10, 19]. However, most of the existing research has been conducted in university or secondary school contexts. Little is known about teachers' PD needs in primary school education. Against this backdrop, the current study was designed to

examine the teachers' perspectives on and their needs for PD in response to delivering a new national curriculum in Vietnamese primary educational contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Effectiveness of Teacher Professional Development Programs. A large body of research has examined the effectiveness of various models and designs of teacher PD programs, revealing important findings [1, 3, 11, 15, 20–22]. For example, in a large survey study with 1,027 teachers (science and maths), Garet et al. [3] showed that the teachers considered three structural features, namely, reform-oriented teacher learning activities (e.g., study group and mentoring, collective participation, and extended study time) that helped facilitate professional development activities to occur. Garet et al. [3] found that three main features of activities of PD programs which could enhance the effectiveness of teacher learning and their subsequent classroom teaching were active learning opportunities, a focus on subject content knowledge, and the clear expectations of state and district standards. In a recent study investigating the impact of awareness-raising activities on the beliefs and practices of Vietnamese teachers of English regarding oral corrective feedback, Ha [23] proposed a conceptual framework for teacher knowledge to inform effective PD programs. This model categorises teachers' knowledge into two broad components: content knowledge and contextual knowledge. Ha argues that, apart from providing content knowledge (e.g., subject matter knowledge) and contextual knowledge (e.g., knowledge about contexts and knowledge about their own learners), PD programs should provide opportunities for teachers and encourage them to reflect on and challenge their existing knowledge, beliefs, and classroom practices. Ha [23] argued, "PD programs need to provide teachers with new knowledge, then help them appropriately activate that knowledge for their own learners, taking into account the possible mediating factors of their own teaching contexts." (p. 215).

2.2. Teachers' Needs for PD. Research on teachers' professional development programs has shown that teachers underwent limited acquisition of skills and knowledge. Darling-Hammond [24], for example, found that many PD providers and course designers failed to design PD programs that cater for the teachers' actual needs. The overlap between the PD providers and teachers' needs can lead to teachers' reluctance to uptake new knowledge and skills necessary for their work, especially for the cases of educational reforms. Such mismatch not only influences the effectiveness of PD, but it may also negatively influence teachers' professional performance, which is likely to result in teacher attrition [25–28].

Previous research has shown that PD programs that take the needs of the participating teachers into account could facilitate teachers' professional growth [3, 11, 28–33]. Specifically, PD programs which are designed in response to teachers' actual needs and interest can help the participating teachers enhance their professional knowledge, their self-

efficacy beliefs, and their willingness to develop their profession. These cognitive and affective developments can lead to more effective instructional practice [11, 31, 34, 35]. Penuel et al. [21], for example, argued that teachers' interpretations of the PD activities could exert a strong impact on the effectiveness of a PD program, which subsequently influences teachers' learning and professional development. Therefore, tailoring teachers' professional needs in PD programs can enhance teacher learning, which can result in an increase in students' learning outcomes [3, 36, 37].

Effective PD programs, therefore, focus on several core components, namely, the alignment between teachers' needs and training contents, the opportunities for active learning via inquiry-based and experiential learning [3, 4, 21, 38–41]. Garet et al. [3] claimed that a PD program is "more likely to be effective in improving teachers' knowledge and skills if it forms a coherent part of a wider set of opportunities for teacher learning and development" (p. 927). Ha and Murray [4], in a study with Vietnamese high school English teachers, found that well-designed PD programs with sufficient opportunities for experiential learning and reflective practice (e.g., reflections on their self-video lessons, observing peers' teaching, or keeping a reflective journal) could help experienced teachers change their deep-rooted beliefs about oral corrective feedback. Nevertheless, less is known about the needs for PD of primary school teachers. The current study was, therefore, designed to gain an understanding of Vietnamese primary teachers' needs for PD in the context of national curriculum reform. The study seeked to address the following two research questions:

(1) What are Vietnamese primary school teachers' perspectives on teacher PD activities?

(2) What are Vietnamese primary school teachers' needs for teacher PD activities in response to curriculum reform?

3. Methodology

The current study employs a qualitative research approach to explore in-depth the needs for PD of a group of in-service teachers in a large city in Vietnam. As argued by many research methodologists, qualitative studies with a limited number of participants do not allow the results to be generalizable to the wider population, but they enable the researchers to gain the most in-depth insights into the participants' experiences, beliefs, and knowledge [42, 43]. Therefore, a qualitative research design suits the purpose of the present study.

Ethical issues were considered carefully, and the teacher participants' written consent had been obtained before the data collection process started. The teachers were informed that the participation in the study was voluntary and the teachers' confidentiality ensured. Therefore, the participants' pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality.

3.1. Contexts and Participants. This study was conducted at ten primary schools which were located in one of the largest Vietnamese cities. In Vietnam, primary schools include

TABLE 1: The background information of the participants.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age (years)	Teaching experience (years)	Grade taught	Qualifications
Mrs. Dung	Female	31	9	1	Bachelor
Miss Han	Female	26	3	1	Bachelor
Mrs. Chan	Female	37	13	2	Bachelor
Mr. Van	Male	31	10	2	Bachelor
Mrs. Chinh	Female	43	22	3	Associate Degree
Mrs. Tra	Female	43	20	3	Bachelor
Mrs. Hang	Female	50	29	4	Associate Degree
Miss Tu	Female	25	3	4	Bachelor
Mr. Dan	Male	59	38	5	Bachelor
Mrs. Hoa	Female	42	20	5	Bachelor

Grade 1 through to Grade 5. The students are in between 6 and 11 years of age. The teaching and learning at primary schools are guided by a unified national curriculum and syllabus. There is a set of textbooks, workbooks, teachers' books, and supplementary books published by the national education publisher. The most updated curriculum was released in 2018, which has been implemented partially in many schools. All the participating schools in this current study were implementing the new curriculum at the time of the data collection for this current study.

The participants of the current study were ten primary school teachers (Table 1). They had between three and 29 years of teaching experience at primary schools. Eight of the ten teachers were identified as females, which reflects the distribution of gender in the teaching resources in Vietnamese general education [44]. Eight teachers held Bachelor's Degrees, and the remaining two teachers held Associate Degrees. In relation to professional development, the teachers followed the activities, programs, and short courses provided by either their schools or the District Department of Education and Training (DoET). Also, they conducted self-directing learning to improve their professional knowledge and experience.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis. Before the interviews were conducted, the teachers were explained clearly the purpose of the interviews in that the interviews were for research purposes only. It was emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers, and the teachers were encouraged to share as much about their views as possible. The privacy of the participants was ensured, and pseudonyms were used for all the teachers. The data were collected using in-depth semistructured interviews. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were individually conducted online using zoom meetings. Each interview lasted around 40 minutes. All the interviews were video-recorded for the subsequent transcription and analysis of the data.

The interviews were semistructured in nature, which means that they were guided by a set of guiding questions (see Appendix), but they also allowed the interviewer (in this case, the first author) to follow the direction of the participants' stories. In this way, the authors can make sure that the interviews went in the right direction, but they were flexible enough to explore further the insights that the researchers might not have been aware of. The interview questions were designed carefully based on an extensive literature review regarding teachers' needs for PD (e.g., [3, 11]). There were ten broad questions that guided the interviews.

The qualitative data were rigorously analyzed following thematic analysis guidelines [45]. Firstly, the interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. To have an overall understanding of the data, the researchers listened to the recordings and read the manuscript repeatedly before the coding and analysis began. Next, the codes were then generated by grouping sentences and phrases with similar meanings. Once the coding of the first set of data (interview of one of the participants) was completed, the researchers revised and refined the codes to eliminate any overlap and redundancy. This set of data was then analyzed by a research assistant who was carefully trained to do the cross-coding. The consistency rate was 90%, and the discrepancy was resolved by negotiation. After that, the researchers continued coding the remaining data set. The final set of codes was then revised and refined to form broader themes for report and discussion.

4. Results

4.1. Teachers' Perspectives on Professional Development. Most of the participating teachers considered that PD was essential for enhancing their teaching outcomes. The teachers stated that teacher PD could help them improve the updated content knowledge, pedagogical competence, and teachers' professional development. They believed that teachers were the key factor for the success of the curriculum reform. They said that without continuing teacher learning and professional development, teachers were not able to carry out the new curriculum successfully. Interestingly, the teachers also considered that other human resources such as school leaders, students' parents, and other social organizations that were involved in educational reform also needed professional development to change their beliefs about pedagogy, education, and the reformed curriculum.

The teachers reported that they participated in all the workshops, seminars, and various training courses as

required by the schools and the DoET. Apart from those activities, the teachers conducted self-learning or participated in different teacher learning communities to share and exchange their knowledge and skills. The teachers also reported that they took the initiative to exert an influence on the change in the beliefs of students' parents and social organizations, and individuals regarding the importance of curriculum reform. Mr. Dan, for example, said,

Positive perceptions of curriculum reform are the most important factor because changes in perceptions and beliefs can lead to success in implementing the new curriculum. In order to successfully implement the new curriculum, teachers need to understand the overall curriculum, the methods and strategies, procedures and activities to deliver specific lessons of the curriculum.

The teachers' understanding of the new curriculum was mixed. Some teachers did not seem to be ready to respond to the question asking about their readiness for the new curriculum. They seemed not to understand well the new requirements for the teachers. However, other teachers showed good understanding of the new requirements for the teachers according to the new policy of Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). They said that having a clear understanding of such requirements helped them self-assess their own knowledge and teaching skills so that they knew what they needed to learn and improve. The following are some typical examples:

I think, firstly, as a teacher, I must understand the new curriculum thoroughly. Then, I need to know how to implement the curriculum, such as planning and delivering the teaching. I also need to enhance the positive beliefs and understanding of the curriculum of colleagues and students' parents to make sure everyone is contributing to the success of the new curriculum. (Mrs. Han).

4.2. The Teachers' Professional Development Activities. The teachers reported that they had participated in a number of teacher learning and professional development activities. They all had opportunities to participate in the program called "ETE" organized by the MOET and the top eight universities of education in Vietnam. They participated in short courses on how to use the new textbook series. They regularly joined the seminars held by the subject-specific teacher group. Also, they sometimes followed professional learning communities via social networking sites such as Facebook. These are shown in the following extracts.

I myself look for useful books and subscribe to some YouTube channels and Facebook pages, such as the page of Ms Khanh Ngoc, the page about ICT in education by Mr Hoang Thuong. These pages help me deal with online teaching. I also make some useful templates to share with the online communities. (Mrs. Chan).

I have been participating in some teacher professional learning communities. We have a group of 34 primary school teachers. We share our difficulties and challenges, and we exchange useful tips in teaching. I also participate in an online community called "connecting knowledge and life" with 9,000 members. (Mrs. Hang).

4.3. Teachers' Needs for Professional Development. The teachers shared their needs for, thoughts, and beliefs about learning, professional, and personal development. Regarding the content of the PD, the teachers stated that they wanted to participate in practical training courses about methods and techniques to organize and deliver specific teaching activities for each topic, theme, and subject. It seems that they did not want to take courses with theoretical contents. They wanted the solutions and answers to the implementation of the new curriculum which was more open and integrated than the old ones. They also would like to receive training regarding testing and assessment.

When it comes to the timing and duration of PD programs, the teachers wanted courses to be organised during the summer vacation or weekends. They preferred short courses so that they could carry out their personal plans at the same time. For example, Mrs. Dung said, "I want to attend the training face to face during the summer vacation, and the training I want is about more effective assessment techniques."

Regarding the model of training, the teachers were divided into two different groups. Some teachers did not consider the importance of the model of training or how they should be trained. Instead, they considered the content of the PD more important; therefore, it did not matter if the training was online or face-to-face. The following are some typical examples.

It does not matter if the training is face-to-face or online. The important thing is that there is a good plan for teacher learning, and there should be sufficient opportunities for teachers to exchange their teaching methods and problem-solving skills with one another. (Mr. Dan).

I think either online [teacher] learning or face-to-face learning is effective. Online teacher training helps us learn how to deal with online classrooms in our own teaching. (Mrs. Tra).

By contrast, some teachers preferred to participate in face-to-face training courses to have more interaction with trainers and other teachers. They considered that online training was not far from teacher learning communities which were free for everyone on the Internet. Mrs. Tu, for instance, said that "I want to take face-to-face teacher training opportunities so that I can interact with the trainers and with colleagues. For online training, I could follow groups on the Internet".

There are some common objectives among all the participating teachers. They all preferred to have more practice and more experiential learning. Also, they all wanted the training activities to be at the times when they did not have to teach (e.g., summer vacations) so that they could highly focus on their learning. They wanted PD programs to be focused; for example, teachers of Grade 2 should be in one group rather than mixing with teachers of different grades. In terms of the preference for types of teacher trainers, the teachers wanted to be trained by teacher educators from well-established and reputable universities of education. In addition, they said that outstanding and experienced teachers should be invited to do some demo-teaching or to deliver hands-on activities for them to follow.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study investigated the perspectives of and the needs for teacher professional development activities of Vietnamese primary school teachers. Qualitative analysis of the semistructured interviews showed several interesting insights, contributing to the body of knowledge about teachers' needs for personal and professional development in response to the curriculum reforms.

The first finding is concerning the teachers' perspectives on professional development programs. In line with previous research [3, 14, 36, 44, 46–49], all the participating teachers highly appreciated the importance of PD activities. This may be due to the fact that these participants had positive experiences with previous PD activities because teachers' beliefs are highly influenced by their sociocultural contexts and prior experiences [44, 46, 49, 50]. In Vietnam, teachers were required to take part in PD activities regularly, especially when there were updates about the curriculum or textbooks [8, 10]. What is more interesting in the findings of this current study is that the teachers considered that PD opportunities were important for school leaders, students' parents and other social organizations, and individuals that might be involved in the curriculum innovation. This belief may be influenced by the sociocultural context of Vietnamese education where there had been a number of large scale curriculum reforms without much success [51]. This belief suggests that the participating teachers in the current study were highly responsible as they would want to go beyond their duties in order to reach a successful curriculum reform.

The second major finding is related to the teachers' PD activities. Most of the teachers commented that they had participated in various PD activities with different forms. The PD activities were of different levels, such as the subject-specific teacher groups, the schools, or the provincial DoET. The teachers appeared to be happy with the PD activities in terms of the quantity. More importantly, the teachers reported that they participated in many different teacher professional learning communities online which were initiated and managed by individuals. Most of these activities were run via social networking sites such as Facebook or YouTube, and most of these activities were free of charge. To some extent, the teachers' individual and self-initiated participation in free PD activities online suggests that the teachers were responsible for their professional and personal development [52]. Also, this kind of PD activities may be more relevant to the teachers' needs, which has been found to be more effective for teachers' learning [3, 11, 15, 29, 30].

The most important finding of the current study is pertaining to the teachers' needs for PD activities in order to successfully implement the new curriculum. The teachers stated that they preferred to take part in PD programs and activities which were more practical, more relevant to their everyday work, and manageable. They considered that PD activities which involved many hands-on activities could help them to carry out new teaching techniques and organize more effective teaching activities, thus being more facilitative for their professional learning professional development. This finding suggests that future PD course designers should con-duct a survey on teachers' needs for PD before preparing contents and methods of delivery to ensure that the PD programs are effective. For this particular Vietnamese context, and probably other similar contexts in Vietnam and other countries, PD courses should provide hands-on activities and experiential learning opportunities for the teachers to try to solve some of the problems they face at the training courses so that they can apply what they learn in a more practical way. This finding is aligned with suggestions of previous research [4, 15, 21, 23, 38, 48, 53] that an effective model of PD programs should comprise of experiential learning activities which offer teachers opportunities to experiment the new knowledge and skills, reflect on their applications, and then figure out what works for them and their students.

Notably, the finding that the teachers would like to attend training courses in summer vacations or at the weekend suggest that the timing of PD is very sensitive to teachers. Teachers did not want to participate in PD programs while they were teaching, which is not surprising. However, what PD designers and teacher educators should focus on is targeting PD programs that are not costly in terms of time for teachers, and probably for educators and trainers. For example, as proposed by Ha [23] and Ha and Murray [4], a PD activity should focus on a specific aspect of classroom practice, so that teachers can integrate teacher learning into their everyday teaching. In this case, teachers can save summer vacations for their holidays, and they can participate in PD activities, experiment them, and reflect on their own experiences while doing their everyday teaching job.

The teachers' comment that either online or face-to-face training, they wanted to have more interaction with teacher trainers. This finding is encouraging because, in the time of COVID-19 pandemic, online training may be more feasible and behavioural intension of using online training may be positively correlated with effectiveness of training [54]. This suggests that the PD programs they had attended might contain more theoretical aspects and the teachers did not have sufficient opportunities to interact with the trainers. This might also be the reason why all the teachers expressed their desire for practical, experiential PD programs with hands-on activities and trainers' modelling.

In spite of the important contributions discussed above, the current study has some limitations which warrant further studies on teachers' needs for PD activities. Firstly, the qualitative nature of the study only allowed us to conduct the research on a small number of participants. Although the study yielded some in-depth insights into the teachers' PD needs, the results might not be able to be transferred to the wider contexts. Readers need to take this caveat into consideration in the interpretation of the current study's findings. Future studies could employ a mixed-method approach in order to achieve the depth as well as the generalizability of the results. Secondly, within the scope of the study, the teachers' actual classroom teaching was not observed. Future researchers could observe teachers' classroom practices to identify what teachers might struggle with. In this way, follow-up interviews or stimulated recalls could be designed to elaborate on the teachers' challenges and their

needs for PD to overcome such difficulties. Furthermore, future researchers could consider employing a quantitative or mixed methods approach to collect large data sets to compare the needs for PD of teachers of different age groups and teaching experience.

Appendix

A. Guiding Interview Questions

(1) What do you think about the new curriculum? Can you explain more?

(2) What are the innovative features of the new curriculum? What (if any) makes you interested? What (if any) makes you concerned? Why?

(3) What have you prepared to implement the new curriculum? What courses, programs, and activities have you attended? Are they useful to your teaching? Why (not)?

(4) Do you face any challenges in carrying out the new curriculum? What and why?

(5) What do you need to do to successfully implement the new curriculum? Why?

(6) What do you think you will need to be able to carry out the new curriculum more successfully? What, how, for how long, by whom do you think PD activities should be done to help you be more successful in teaching the new curriculum? Why?

(7) What kind of knowledge do you think you need to improve in response to teaching the new curriculum? Why?

(8) What kind of skills do you need for the new curriculum teaching?

(9) Who can contribute to the success of the implementation of the new curriculum?

(10) Do you have any suggestions for change or for successful implementation of the new curriculum?

Data Availability

The (semistructured interviews) data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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