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Article

Female English Teachers Perceptions and Experience of Continuing Professional Development in Qatar

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Abstract: The Qatari government views English language learning as crucial to the country's future success. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that English language teachers (ELTs) employed in Qatar may not necessarily have the appropriate training, qualifications, and experience to enable them to teach successfully. Despite growing research and interest in the continuing professional development (CPD) experiences and needs of ELTs in Western contexts, there remains a lack of research in Middle Eastern countries in general and in Qatar in particular. The aim of this study was to address this gap by exploring female ELTs' perceptions and experiences of CPD in Qatar in order to develop new practical and theoretical insights into our understanding of this area. The study draws on data from life history interviews undertaken with 16 female ELTs with at least 3 years of teaching experience in Qatari schools. The study found that the participants had very different experiences of CPD based on their personal and professional characteristics. This suggests that for it to be perceived as a positive experience, the current model of professional development for ELTs may need revising. We propose a paradigm shift from a traditional "one size fits all" CPD model towards a more dynamic and interactive style of teacher development that facilitates both personal reflection and professional discourse among teachers. It is argued that such a shift would prove a considerable step forward for English language teaching in this country.

Keywords: teachers' CPD; life history; professional development for language teachers; professional discourse



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1. Introduction

The use and learning of English has become a key issue in the international educational sector, especially in Middle Eastern countries [1,2]. This concern is especially relevant in Qatar, as in recent years, the government has focused on the use of the English language in education as a means of achieving greater future success for the country [3]. Developing English language skills within the country is viewed as crucial to allow for enhanced international communication and the associated commercial development in order to compete in an increasingly globalised and competitive marketplace [4,5]. This view led to the English language being introduced in 2004 as a key medium of instruction in Qatar as part of the government's reforms toward reaching world-class status in education for the country [1,3].

Although teaching English has become increasingly important at a national level in Qatar, English language teachers (ELTs) employed in the country may not necessarily have the appropriate training, qualifications and experience to enable them to teach successfully at the local level [6]. It appears that ELTs could face certain complications when teaching English to students due to the lack of their own expertise and training [7–9]. However, as there has been very little research carried out in this area, it is not especially clear exactly

what these difficulties might be and what might be done to overcome them to help improve English language teaching in this country.

Despite growing research interest in the continuing professional development (CPD) experiences and needs of ELTs in Western contexts, in-depth knowledge of female ELTs' CPD experiences and needs are almost non-existent, since any work that has been undertaken has focused on male participants [10]. The aim of this study, therefore, was to address this gap by exploring female ELTs' perceptions and experiences of CPD in Qatar in order to develop new practical and theoretical insights into our understanding of this area. The research presented here forms part of a larger study (see [11]) and the specific research questions that this paper addresses are as follows:

What are female ELTs working in Qatar experiences of CPD?

What are their on-going professional development needs that would allow them to teach English more successfully in the future?

This study is focused on investigating some of the key issues that face female ELTs in Qatar, as they experience rapid change within the profession. For example, previously, teaching practices in Qatar were more teacher-centred and now they have become more student-centred [12,13]. The increasing influence of technological development is also important as it leads to the development of new teaching methods [14–16]. In response to these developments, a teacher has to perform diverse roles, such as those of facilitator, mentor, and guide to the students [14]. This means that they have to continually update their teaching methods, a key aspect of their professional development [14,16]. As a consequence, teachers may feel that they need to keep re-imagining their sense of professional identity and subject mastery [17].

The issues surrounding female English teachers in Qatar are made more complex by the fact that most of them are from different countries with different backgrounds, training and experiences. The State of Qatar is an independent state, located in Western Asia, which occupies around 11,571 km² (a small fraction of the Arabian Peninsula). Compared to other countries, Qatar is considered to be a small country with a population of only 2.900 million, the majority of whom are foreigners, with Qatari citizens only making up approximately 12 percent of the inhabitants [18].

In summary, it appears that there is a lack of research regarding the development of ELTs in the Qatari context [19]. Moreover, there is lack of understanding and consideration of how female English language teachers experience CPD within their career [20–22]. Therefore, this study aimed to address this key gap in knowledge. The significance of this study is not limited to addressing a gap in the research literature; equally important are the practical implications of such research on policy design and implementation.

Following this introduction, the article is organised into four sections. First, we discuss the concept of continuing professional development and identify some of the underlying theories associated with it. Then, we outline the methodological choices that were taken in this study. Subsequently, we present and discuss our findings and finally conclude with the implications of our study and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study presented here is framed by two underlying theories related to the core concept of continuing professional development, namely reflective practice and professional knowledge.

2.1. Continuing Professional Development

There are a number of different definitions of CPD, which are related to different aspects of professional life and to the context and the purpose that it serves. In this study, in line with [23], CPD is viewed as holistic and includes all formal and informal learning experiences throughout a person's career. Concurring with this viewpoint, we found Day's definition especially helpful:

Professional development consists of all-natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school which contributes, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purpose of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning, and practice with children, young people and colleagues throughout each phase of their learning lives [24].

In the past, researchers and policymakers have worked to find out how to help students develop a profound knowledge of content, meaningful contexts, and communities' involvement. However, they have paid less attention to teachers' education or to how teachers learn [25]. More recently, however, it has been recognised that professional development programs are an important aspect of individual and institutional growth and that there is a need for more research into such programs in different national settings, especially developing countries, to explore emerging key issues and how these may be affected by cultural differences between countries [10]. For example, as most research has been undertaken in Western contexts, frameworks and issues arising from this work that may be used to design and implement development programs elsewhere may not be suitable or easily transferable. In other words, it is important to explore the cultural context within which teachers are working before attempting to adopt or implement frameworks and policies that have been developed from very different settings [26].

2.1.1. Reflective Practice

A key aspect of CPD is the notion of reflective practice which views practical knowledge as "experiential" and allows teachers to reflect on and change their performance to ensure they are adopting effective teaching strategies [27,28]. Reflective practice assists teachers to critique their performance and make decisions; however, this approach is not widely accepted in language teacher education contexts [29]. What reflective practice means in practice is also not always clear, partly because the term is connected with a wide variety of teacher-learning activities and partly because the nature of reflection, like other cognitive skills, remains somewhat elusive [29,30]. Additionally, reflection on practice may appear daunting for many teachers, especially in institutions or education systems that do not recognise such broad responsibilities for teachers [29].

2.1.2. Professional Knowledge

The impact of teacher knowledge is a measure of teacher effectiveness and student learning [31]. It is argued that the ideals and the skills of the teacher can help in determining the style with which they teach [32]. However, a definition of knowledge itself may be recognised differently by different people even within the same organisation [33]. Two types of knowledge were distinguished by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) [34]: explicit knowledge which can be precisely and formally articulated and shared, and tacit knowledge which is subconsciously understood and applied, and which is often difficult to articulate. This is because of how it is shared through conversation since tacit knowledge consists of intangible factors that are implicit in the individual's beliefs, values and experiences [35].

Thompson (2004) [36] suggests a link between knowledge and theory where he distinguishes between "formal" and "informal" theory: "informal learning" is emphasised in adult education because it recognises social significance between people and learners' freedom and flexibility. It also indicates a greater opportunity for individual activity than groups because it is seen as complementary to learning by involvement [37]. There would seem to be an inextricable link between knowledge and being a professional because most "professional" definitions refer to specialist knowledge in some way [33,38].

One of the processes that can help in improving the learning capacity of an organisation and the means of spreading and sharing new knowledge is through communities of practice [39]. However, Freeman (1996) [40] has argued that language teacher knowl-

edge has been disregarded from the discussion for a long time with notions of sharing knowledge through professional learning communities rarely explored. Nevertheless, more recently, studies have emerged that have begun to focus on language teachers' views about how their knowledge, expertise, skills are constituted [41].

The knowledge that a teacher has can be influential in bringing about coherent change in the educational system [42]. Understanding what constitutes language teachers' knowledge helps to maximise students' learning and teachers' preparation [43]. Therefore, exploring teacher knowledge should be considered fundamental in language teacher research; however, such studies of English as a second language (ESL) have been limited in scope, largely confined to empirical work on pedagogical content knowledge [44,45]. Thus, the study reported here aims to contribute to this gap in the literature and explore key notions of CPD, reflection, and professional knowledge from the perspectives of female English language teachers in Qatar.

3. Research Methodology

In line with this study's research questions, this study was framed within the interpretive paradigm. Within this paradigm, this study adopted a narrative approach [46] and used life histories. By definition, "life history" refers to an autobiographical narrative, the purpose of which is to answer the questions such as who you are and what you believe. It explains the actions that are taken by individuals: life historians study the behaviour and attitude of individuals regarding the events they witness [47]. The life history approach uses semi-structured interviews to gather information. The questions formed and asked in such interviews are quite open ended so that the interviewee is not limited to give a specific answer [48,49].

3.1. Participants

The study participants were 16 English language teachers in schools who were involved in in-service training programs that were provided by the Supreme Educational Council (SEC), Qatar University, and their schools. The selected sample consisted of full-time teachers who had at least three years' teaching experience. Since a key aim of the larger study was to empower female teachers, all participants were females, although gender is not a key aspect of the arguments put forward in this article. Table 1 shows the participants along with their assigned pseudonyms and background.

Table 1. Study participants.

No.	Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Experience	Qualification
1	Najla	Egypt	4	BD in literature and Translation Studies
2	Noha	Egypt	8	BD in education and Art , E. department
3	Rania	Egypt	12	BD in teaching E. L., Education
4	Laila	Egypt	18	BD in teaching E. L., Education
5	Amal	Egypt	5	Bachelor's Degree in English literature
6	Manal	Egypt	9	Bachelor's Degree in English literature
7	Reham	Egypt	5	Bachelor's Degree in English literature
8	Areej	Egypt	10	Bachelor's Degree in English literature
9	Wasan	Lebanon	7	Bachelor's Degree in English literature
10	Huda	Lebanon	5	Bachelor's Degree in English literature
11	Lubna	USA	4	Bachelor's Degree in Medea
12	Nora	Palestine	5	BD in teaching E. L., Education
13	Sumia	India	15	General Eng. , Eng. Literature
14	Dina	Jordan	4	BD in teaching E. L., Education
15	Deema	Tunisia	12	BD in teaching E. L., Education
16	Hessa	Syria	9	BD in teaching E. L., Education

3.2. Data Collection

Before conducting the interviews, ethical approval was requested and granted by the Ethics Committee. A letter was sent to each school principal through the Ministry of Education about the study aims in order to invite the English language teachers in their schools to be part of the study. Having gained ethical approval, the researcher started contacting the school principals and directly communicating with the teachers to arrange the interviews.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed from a thorough literature review and piloted. It comprised of questions related to their experiences of continuing professional development, the school culture within which they worked and how this related to notions of cultural identity and explored the opportunities and challenges they experienced within this cultural milieu.

There were three stages of data collection: first, the participants were sent a detailed information sheet; second, face-to-face interviews were conducted in English with each one lasting between one and two hours; third, the interview transcript was sent to participants to check that it was an accurate representation of the conversation. The first stage was important because participants could have time to read the information sheets that included a brief description of the study and reflect on their career to date. After explaining what the study was about and what they could expect from the interviews, participants were asked to sign a consent form. This contained information regarding their rights and confidentiality. It also explained that the participants had the right to withdraw at any time.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed rigorous in-depth planning and paid careful attention to the issue under study. Hence, the data were filtered and organised using a five-step approach as suggested by experienced life history researchers: (a) indexing; (b) familiarisation; (c) mapping and interpretation; (d) identifying a thematic framework; and (e) charting [50]. After coding and organising data into specific sections, the results were classified in a systematic manner and then revisited in line with the study's theoretical framework and reviewed literature. Both researchers then discussed and reflected on the emerging themes. Maxqda software was used to help with the management of the data during the analysis process.

Since the research sample were English teachers, the interviews were conducted in English. The interviewees' exact words were used in the coding and analysis. However, for the selected quotes used to demonstrate the findings of this research, contextual rephrasing was used to provide optimal understanding of the analysis. In order to ensure accuracy and reduce the researchers' bias, this rephrasing was validated by two other bilingual researchers working in the field. Additionally, the final transcripts were confirmed with the interviewees to ensure they were a true representation of the interviewees' ideas and answers.

4. Findings and Discussion

As discussed above, participants' perceptions of CPD were analysed thematically in order to provide a framework for discussion. From this analysis, the following themes emerged: passion and commitment for the profession; ability to dedicate time to training; attitudes towards CPD providers; interest in peer education; experience and practical knowledge; independent learning skills; and professional ambition. The following discussion is organised around these themes.

4.1. Passion and Commitment to the Profession

Thirteen of the sixteen teachers who were interviewed were unanimous in their opinion that CPD was important. Learning new things and lifelong learning were found to be among the most important motivators for English Language teachers to pursue CPD opportunities:

you know, back home we have a saying that we should never stop learning until we die. Professional development is a way of learning new things. (Deema) Each workshop, each development meeting, even if you get just one idea, it is a good thing. (Amal)

Teachers who had a strong a strong passion for their profession did not wait for official CPD courses, rather, they took the initiative and accessed online professional development resources to address their weaknesses.

after becoming a teacher I constantly worked on improving myself, because my job requires continuous development so that I can give my students my best. I often research teaching methods and strategies online, and even used videos that I found on the Internet in my classroom. (Amal)

Another example was Laila who explained that she believed CPD had a positive impact on her professional growth by addressing her weaknesses and hence, in her eyes, CPD made her a better teacher, a fact that she is proud of. This suggests that a teacher's personal commitment to the profession could be understood as her need for professional improvement. The concept of need was researched by [51], who argued that teachers' personal needs can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. As such, teachers who concluded that they do not have such specific needs to address, were less inclined to participate in CPD or appreciate its value. On the other hand, others who were more aware of their needs sought CPD opportunities and welcomed them as these two examples show:

I don't believe that I have any specific needs for further improvement. If I must, I will attend but I don't perceive these training's as special or useful. (Wasan)

I know I need help in grammar, writing, and speaking because with the students we just use simple words and I would like to enrich my English-speaking abilities. (Noha)

4.2. Time Constraints

Interview data indicated that there were three different authorities providing CPD courses to teachers; however, these authorities did not always work together, hence causing repetition and stress for the teachers and unnecessarily wasting time in their busy schedules. These time constraints were highlighted as one of the factors contributing to the some of the teachers' negative perceptions of CPD. For example, Najla said:

Although I finish giving my lessons by 2PM, the work never ends and in most days I continue working until 10PM in preparation and related work. When they [management] demand I attend a CPD course it stresses me further and I feel it is a waste of time. I have other things to do. (Najla)

Dina agreed, stating that unless the training workshop has something significant to offer, she considers it a waste of time as she has more important tasks to accomplish.

Time management skills were mentioned in several interviews. For example, to Neima, time management was a problem because there were large numbers of students in her class and this did not allow her to access CPD as much as she wanted.

Time management is an issue...my classes are big which means I often have to spend all my time supporting the students rather than engaging in CPD opportunities (Huda)

4.3. Attitude towards CPD Providers

The findings showed that the way a teacher values CPD is dependent on how she perceives the CPD providers' ability to understand her needs as a teacher and to enable her to gain more professional knowledge. The provider's attitude was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews as a factor contributing to shaping teacher's CPD experience. For example, Sumia argued that a professional development activity is always valuable, but it usually depends on the teacher.

Not all strategies we are offered by outside trainers are beneficial in every setting, and some are just a waste of time, because students get bored, lose focus and get distracted. (Hessa)

In this regard, a teacher's own knowledge of her students was also seen to influence her confidence in her professional expertise. Durmaz [52]. indicated that in addition to subject knowledge, knowledge could be understood as what teachers know about their classroom and practice. Along similar lines, Drexler [15] explained that knowledge of learners and learner characteristics include the assumptions and beliefs of teachers about how students learn. For example, Nora explained:

Sometimes what the CPD instructors tell us is convincing and I use it. But many times, I feel it is not applicable to me and my students so I don't waste my time in doing something that will not be beneficial for my students. (Nora)

Many of the teachers believed they were better able to judge the competence level of students for a particular activity or learning outcome than some of the external evaluators who influenced CPD policy. For example, Areej argued that teachers understand their students better than the external observers who usually judge based on what they see in a specific context and a short period:

Each time a new observer has a new comment about my teaching and they expect me to adopt their input automatically... As the teacher of this group I knew very well how much time they would need for this activity because I am more aware of my students' capacities than this external observer. So sometimes I think they [external observers] might have experience but they do not know my students. (Areej)

4.4. Interest in Peer Education

An important factor that emerged from the data was related to peer education and using collaboration as a tool for continued professional development. Most of the interviewees expressed their trust in their peers and their desire to collaborate to improve their individual and collective skills. Teachers who worked well with other teachers were more inclined to participate in official CPD events as they considered them a source of knowledge, which they can later share and discuss with their colleagues and even students as the following examples show:

You are never too old to learn. Even if you are experienced, you still have things to learn from other people. You know, maybe I am much experienced now, yet fresh graduates may bring more ideas for me. (Reham)

My colleagues and I treat each other in a very good way. We share our expertise and if they feel I am holding back they won't let me enter their group again. (Najla)

This finding was aligned with the study of Martin-Beltran and Percy [53], who observed that English teachers are more effective when they learn from each other. This aspect could also be considered the other way around, i.e., good CPD encourages professional collaboration and sharing. Moreover, findings suggest that the interest in the professional community itself could represent a motivation for teachers to engage in CPD because it becomes an opportunity for sharing and professional networking. Therefore, teachers who thrive in peer relationships, such as Huda, are seen to value CPD more than others who prefer to work alone:

When I first came to work in this school, I felt alienated because I did not know how the school operated and the nature of the programs implemented. In order to break the barriers, I was respectful and engaged the other teachers professionally and shared best practices and skills I learned through CPD. (Huda)

Successful communities of practice, according to Hanks (2017) [54], take full account of the group's individual development needs and members learn from each other, seeking external support and help as appropriate. Such learning communities are successfully formed when teachers learn from one another through collaborative activities such as

discussion, observation, collaborative teaching, and collaborative planning [55]. In this study, the female teachers shared their learning either informally via friendly sessions or formally through organised workshops:

We have regular meetings wherein we share new ideas or educational strategies. (Manal)

Our findings showed that teachers who frequently share their learning with others both formally and informally have a more serious approach towards improving their professional skills. They consider CPD an important element of enhancing their expertise and as a tool they use peer education to improve themselves as individuals and their team as a collective.

Concurring with this conclusion, Landt [56] asserted that CPD is only functional when teachers learn in an active and authentic environment, characterised by sharing, participation, engagement and collaboration. Jones, Swafford, and Thornton [57] believed that teachers can only practise their learning when they are able to negotiate, share, and reflect their learning tasks and achievements with each other. This point is further supported by Kaagan [58] and [59] who contended that learning skills, gaining knowledge, and sharing are major tools for positive change and improvement. Peer education is not limited to the ELTs' local community in their workplace. For example, some teachers reported that they enjoyed reaching out to peers from all around the world. For example, Hessa described her experiences thus:

I communicate with English teachers from around the world. I have a lot of friends. I searched for them on my own using social media. However, because of time limitations I don't get to spend as much time as I would have liked to learn from online communities. Nevertheless, I try as much as I can just to improve my expertise. (Hessa)

4.5. Experience and Practical Knowledge

Craig et al. [60] maintained that not all professional development, even if the impact is positive, is relevant and applicable in the contexts of all teachers. In relation to CPD, the teachers in this study were more inclined towards the situative perspective of professional development [39]. The majority of participants expressed that they preferred workshops that were applicable to their methods of teaching and day-to-day experiences, which highlights the importance of context-specific practical knowledge to the teachers [61].

In other words, teachers see the relevance of professional development if it enables them to gain practical knowledge within their specific contexts as compared to theoretical knowledge which is not context bound. Johri, Olds, and O'Connor [62] explained that a situative perspective tends to be more appealing to people, especially teachers, because it involves information that is easily reliable and easier to apply in a real-life setting, such as the classroom. In this research, teachers who were able to use the information and ideas derived from professional development activities in their daily work were more positive about their experience of CPD. These teachers said that they preferred practical knowledge and skills (situation-based) to be included in a professional development program as compared to theoretical knowledge that was perceived as too abstract. For example, Dina said:

We took the first standard course and I did not get the idea why we are taking this. It was very theoretical. The second one was more practical. It included lessons from every teacher from every school. I enjoyed it a lot and got many ideas that I can use in my own teaching. (Dina)

Whilst Manal commented:

Many development courses provided by the University are very useful. They focus on specific skills in language teaching, how to teach the vocab, how to teach listening, how to teach reading, how to manage your classroom. They gave us new methods which we can use. (Manal)

Consequently, when teachers were unable to relate the training they received to their professional work, they considered it less useful.

4.6. Reflective Practice

As discussed earlier in this article, a relating element to professional knowledge is a teacher's ability to reflect on her work and identify ways of improvement. This is known as reflective teaching or practice, which refers to the process whereby teachers evaluate their everyday actions and practices in order to come up with better ideas and strategies and to incorporate them into their future lessons. Moon [63] explained it as the reprocessing of ideas that helps to compile unstructured thoughts, sometimes also incorporated with emotions, in order to formulate a better strategy for the next time. In the education field, Biggs and Tang [64] explained that reflective practice was the systematic change in teaching skills carried out by the practices an individual makes in their past, guiding them to the correct path, and thus enhancing students' learning.

This study found that almost every teacher acknowledged the importance of reflective practice as part of their CPD and most teachers in the research sample conveyed an element of reflection in their teaching. For example, Sumia described this practice as follows:

I feel that I keep on trying new things in the class. I even write down my reflections after the class, you know. I love to keep a diary. I write whatever happened in the class [and] if I anything really helped me. Once you have a look at the diary at the end of the year you feel like, yes, these things happened, and you are more conscious next time. You will not repeat something that was bad, and you will repeat something that was good. (Sumia)

This reflective practice was also engaged with in discussion with others. For example, some of the participants, such as Wasan, explained that sometimes they discussed their work with other teachers and the coordinators and then devise solutions based on the emerging new strategies:

Sometimes I discuss with my coordinator what I did in a certain class, showing that I think it will not work well with another class. We agree that some changes have to be made and I always write notes. Sometimes, you must change a little part because you know students differ. (Wasan)

4.7. Independent Learning Skills

The findings indicated that the teachers who engaged in professional development on their own, such as keeping up to date with the latest technology in education and learning about new practices, were more likely to appreciate the value of official CPD events. For example, Areej explained that she felt that she was in a continuous race against herself to catch up with the latest trends and practices:

I feel it is a big field, it is a wide area, and I am missing many things. Sometimes my school carries out a professional development course to share something new. When the trainer surprises me with something interesting, I think to myself, my goodness, how did he get this idea, where am I? (Areej)

Similar findings were reported by Alibakhshi and Dehviri [65], who claimed that comparable to teachers from other fields, English language teaching experts also believe that taking individual responsibility for continuing professional development is very important, especially in today's constantly and rapidly changing world. Likewise, Jafri [66] claimed that reflecting on an individual's professional development needs enables teachers to improve their teaching practice and remain updated with the current developments, practices and research in the field. Mizell [67] also asserted that reflecting on continuing professional development helps teachers identify the best instructional methodologies for the improvement of students' learning processes. Findings from this research concur:

in every career you must develop yourself. You must take courses. . . . everything is changing, and you need to keep up with this. (Dina)

Each time our life is changing. Each time there is a new lesson and a new development.
(Huda)

Furthermore, the data showed that since the research population is that of English language teachers, they are more likely to benefit from the vast online resources, mostly available in English, for self-development, than other teachers who may not necessarily know English. Tarone and Allwright and Alibakhshi and Dehviri [68] argued that English Language teachers are more likely to adopt the latest innovations in educational technology and language teaching theories, which allow them to adapt to the technological changes taking place around them and mould their teaching methods accordingly. This conclusion was reflected in the findings from this study. Teachers in the researched sample who took this personal initiative to develop themselves were more successful in doing so by accessing resources via the internet:

My sister, who lives in the USA, keeps sending me links to websites that include online courses to help me improve my skills independent of my school or official CPD courses.
(Noha)

Online resources also provide an alternative community for English language teachers and immediate answers for their questions, as Wasan explained:

You can meet others online and they can answer your questions and be very helpful.
(Wasan)

4.8. Professional Ambition

Teachers who seemed ambitious and were interested in professional career growth viewed CPD events more positively than others, and in fact, considered them as a tool for climbing up the professional ladder. For example, Laila displayed huge enthusiasm for becoming a better leader in her educational institution and recognised that a way to achieve this would be through CPD training, even though she was unable to access it due to an institutional error:

I want to learn how to motivate the teachers I am supervising... I have excellent teachers but some of them need further training to better utilise their expertise. Maybe they are shy, maybe they worry about what I would say [as their supervisor] if they tried something different. I have to check lesson delivery of other teachers through observation sessions. . . I had requested my school to nominate me for a Training of Trainers course but unfortunately the administration made a mistake and I did not receive this training.
(Laila)

Moreover, some teachers believed that they were merited according to the number of CPD training events they attended and could disseminate to others, which added to their professional value:

If I attend a CPD training I try to carry it forward to my friends; I discuss it with them either formally or informally. It is important to document that you attended this training because you will be evaluated accordingly. And I prefer to convey what I learned in a professional setting to other teachers, so I share what I learned by conducting my own Professional Development session. (Wasan)

In general, the findings indicated that CPD attendance was perceived as an added value to their resume and would offer an advantage for future promotion in their teaching careers.

5. Conclusions

This research explored female English language teachers' perceptions and experiences of CPD in Qatar. A better understanding of these experiences is hoped to provide insights for policy makers and educators to increase the appeal and effectiveness of CPD activity in Qatar among female ELTs. The first main research question was:

- What are female ELTs working in Qatar experiences of CPD?

Seven thematic characteristics emerged from the life histories as the ELTs explained their experiences of CDP. These themes were: passion and commitment for the profession; ability to dedicate time for training; attitudes towards CPD providers; interest in peer education; experience and practical knowledge; independent learning skills; and professional ambition.

The teachers' personal passion and commitment to the profession was found to be a driving force behind their eagerness to pursue professional development and hence the importance they attached to CDP efforts provided to them by the educational authorities. From the life histories it was obvious that those teachers who had more passion for teaching were more positive about CDP compared to those who were less committed to the profession.

In terms of time constraints, the findings revealed a strong link between management skills such as time and class management and the teachers' ability to successfully handle their professional workload. Additionally, the fact that there are three differing authorities providing CDP training for the teachers created a sense of disorganisation that negatively affected their perception of CDP.

Building on the above point, the interviewees explained that, in general, they did not appreciate the lack of engagement by the CDP providers in terms of the training design. Although they appreciated their need for professional development, they emphasised that this need varies from one teacher to another and the lack of interactive engagement prior to imposing the various CDP requirements affected the participant's benefit. It was also highlighted that the perceptions of CDP differed based on the authority providing it and whether they were perceived to understand the context within which the teachers were working.

Another key finding was related to communities of practice. It was found that teachers who engaged more in the community of practice and had a good professional relationship with their peers were more appreciative of the CDP and had a better perception of it. Teachers' experiences and their practical knowledge also emerged as a strong theme in the findings; the more experienced the teachers were, the more they were able to utilise the CDP trainings to their professional advantage. Moreover, it was clear that practical training sessions were more popular than theoretical ones, as many of the participants were not able to relate the theoretical knowledge to their everyday working life.

Our findings suggest that a teachers' ability to reflect as a practice on their performance improved not only their abilities as a teacher, but also their perception of CDP. In terms of independent learning skills, findings indicated that the majority of participants understood the value of self-development. This point is related to their personal commitment to the profession and their passion for teaching, and hence, their desire to push themselves to become better teachers. In this regard, the ability to connect with teachers from other countries and cultures and to learn from their experiences was more visible for teachers who were more appreciative of CDP in general.

Finally, the local context of education in Qatar indicated that there are CPD-related procedural requirements before teachers can receive promotion or are recognised by their management. Thus, it can become a motivation tool for those teachers who are professionally ambitious and understand that the more they engage with CPD, the more chances for career development they have. Hence, they welcome CPD activities and engage in them enthusiastically.

All these findings inform the second key research question that this study sought to address, which was:

- What are their on-going professional development needs that would allow them to teach English more successfully in the future?

The study found that participants had very different experiences of CPD based on their personal and professional characteristics. This suggests that for it to be perceived as a positive experience, the current model of professional development for ELTs may need revising. Thus, we propose a paradigm shift from a traditional "one size fits all" CPD

model towards a more dynamic and interactive style of teacher development that facilitates both personal reflection and professional discourse among teachers. It is argued that such a shift would prove a considerable step forward for English language teaching in this country.

The main conclusion of this research is that for female ELTs' experience of CPD to be positive, it needs to cater to factors relevant to their individualised abilities and needs. This represents a significant move from current policy, which does not appear to utilise sufficient practices to allow for female ELTs to develop personally, at their own pace, and in line with their previous experiences and future development needs, with professional reflection and shared practice at its heart.

It is important that government reforms and education policies take into account the needs and voices of teachers in order to improve education while providing support for the teachers. This research suggests that teachers are able to better judge the worth of new educational strategies and teaching methodologies because they know their students better than external evaluators do. Therefore, this research recommends engaging teachers in the design of CDP efforts as well as giving them the autonomy to apply educational strategies at their own discretion and understanding.

Our findings suggest that policy makers should take into account teachers' motivations, their individual needs, aspects of peer education and communities of practice, promotion regulations, the time and class management skills of teachers, and access to the larger educational community beyond Qatar. Any CPD activities should also include and develop aspects of professional reflection as a core activity.

In terms of scope for future research, it would be interesting to use these themes in broader research and confirm whether these findings find resonance in the wider education community, such as a larger group of ELTs, teachers of other subjects, or English teachers of higher levels. Additionally, new research could build on this study by identifying whether male teachers have similar experiences of CPD. In terms of policy, it would be reasonable to research how CPD efforts are originally designed and how they differ according to the providing authority. Such investigation coupled with this research would provide guidance for education policy makers as to what works and what does not work in practice.

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