

Support Needed for Language Teachers' Professional Development in Malaysia: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

This paper aims at reviewing the existing practices and the support required for language teachers' professional development in Malaysia. Despite the fact that one of the main goals of the National Education Policy is to produce professional and holistic teachers who are knowledgeable and capable of contributing to society and the nation at large, there is little research examining and documenting the type of support required in the implementation of teacher professional development courses and teacher education in Malaysia. This research uses a narrative review approach, systematic searching strategies, and manual citation tracking techniques to gather and synthesise material from online databases. Fifteen articles were identified and thematically analysed using Atlas.ti 9.0. The findings revealed that any initiatives to implement professional training programmes in Malaysia must consider mentorship, administrative, technical, financial, resource, and welfare support. Finally, to establish a win-win situation for teachers and stakeholders, this article suggests that future training programmes should incorporate teachers' voices in implementing relevant training.

Keywords: Language Teachers, Narrative Review, Professional Development, Support, Teacher Education

Introduction

Teaching is an essential profession in fulfilling Malaysia's educational goals of improving education quality and developing the nation's human capital. In Malaysia, teacher professional development is necessary to improve the teaching profession. Professional development of teachers refers to the development of a teacher as a result of gaining experiences and reflecting on their teaching to continuously develop professionally (Hassan et al., 2018; Jamil et al., 2011). With this objective in mind, the government is working to construct teacher training centres where instructors can receive professional development

training through either pre-service or in-service under the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE). TED manages and handles on-going professional development programmes at the ministry and higher education levels. Their primary purpose is to establish Institutes of Teacher Education (ITE) as centres of excellence and regularly update and improve teachers' and lecturers' knowledge, competency, and efficiency in academic and professional domains.

In Malaysia, there are two main pathways and institutions that offer teacher training programmes. The first one is the Institute of Teacher Education (ITE) or *Institut Pendidikan Guru* (IPG), which is controlled by TED. The second one is a four-year Bachelor of Education programme offered by public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia. They are given the autonomy to structure their curriculum. From 1997 to 2004, teachers who underwent training at teacher training institutes could opt for a diploma or bachelor's degree in education. They will teach primary and lower secondary schools, whereas those graduating from universities will be assigned to teach secondary school students.

In 2005, the diploma programme was discontinued and upgraded. Those who applied for teacher training programmes at ITE would need to complete a one-year pre-preparation programme and a four-year Bachelor of Education programme (*Program Ijazah Sarjana Muda Perguruan*). Another option for the teacher candidates is the one-and-a-half-year Post-Graduate Teaching Course or *Kursus Perguruan Lulusan Ijazah* (KPLI) for those who graduated in non-education fields but wish to pursue a career in teaching. In 2006, an in-service teacher degree programme (*Program Pensiswazahan Guru*) was introduced in ITE for in-service teachers with diploma qualifications to pursue their first degree. The minimum academic requirement for entry into the Bachelor of Education programme in ITE is three distinctions and three credits (including Bahasa Malaysia and history subjects) in the upper secondary-level national examination, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM).

In line with the ITE's mission to produce professional and passionate teachers and provide world-class education, the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) provides a foundation for the curriculum's quality assurance. Pre-service training plays a crucial role in providing teachers with a solid foundation for effective teaching and learning, maintaining and enhancing their skills, and keeping abreast with the latest developments in pedagogy. The National Philosophy of Education (NPE), which was founded in 1988, has served as a guide for setting the direction of teacher education in Malaysia:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort toward further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysians who are knowledgeable and competent, possesses high moral standards and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being and being able to contribute to the betterment of the family, society and nation at large.

In 2013, when the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB) was introduced, the Malaysian government implemented many initiatives and efforts to increase the quality of education in Malaysia. In the first wave (2013-2015), measures and initiatives focused on

improving access to quality education and raising teachers' quality and standards through enhancement training and retraining courses. In the second wave (2016-2020), the MoE revised and rolled out the primary (KSSR) and secondary (KSSM) curriculum to raise content and learning standards to be aligned with international benchmarks as well as enhance career pathways for teachers (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2013). In the third wave (2021-2025), more reforms are expected to improve innovations to increase Malay and English language proficiency, producing more outstanding school-based management and fostering a peer-led culture of professional excellence.

One of the MoE's top priorities is to launch initiatives to support English language teachers across Malaysia to improve their language and teaching skills. From 2012 to 2015, the Professional Upskilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) programme was implemented by the Malaysian Ministry of Education and delivered by the British Council. The first cohort, which included 5000 teachers, ran from 2012 to 2013, whereas the second cohort involved the participation of 9000 teachers from 2014 to 2015. The project's goal is to improve English teaching and learning in Malaysian primary and secondary schools by boosting the English proficiency of the teachers. This effort is in tandem with adopting the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in 2013, a decision made by the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) established by MOE to address the declining standards of English in Malaysia. The council was made up of professionals nominated by the Malaysian Ministry of Education and the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC). The suggested use of CEFR in the development of Malaysia's English education system ensures that the level of English language proficiency of Malaysian students and teachers meets international standards. However, despite the government's initiated language programmes in promoting the use of English, the efforts seem to have shown no outstanding benefits thus far since the standard of English among teachers and pupils continues to decline (Gill, 2013; Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2013; Abd Aziz & Uri, 2017).

Problem Statement

Numerous studies on English teachers' professional development efforts, strategies, and initiatives have been conducted worldwide. However, previous studies have found that conflicts, issues and inadequate support hinder the implementation of the planned professional development programmes (Amin et al., 2019; Gill & Berezina, 2020; Goh & Wong, 2014; Hassan et al., 2015; Khan & Haseeb, 2017; Mansor et al., 2019; Omar et al., 2019; Ratnavadivel et al., 2014; Sathappan & Gurusamy, 2019). Thus, it is imperative to conduct a review study to successfully identify the essential support needed to foster teacher professional development in Malaysia. This review is vital as efforts in boosting the quality of teachers through professional development activities are continuously evolving in Malaysia.

A narrative review or non-systematic review is a type of literature review method of gathering, synthesising and presenting the current knowledge on a topic based on previously published research (Green et al., 2006). Narrative reviews strive to identify and summarise what has been previously published, eliminate duplications, and identify new study areas that have not yet been covered (Ferrari, 1997; Green et al., 2006). Green et al. (2006, p.103) claim that "Narrative reviews are useful educational articles since they pull many pieces of information together into a readable format. They help present a broad perspective on a topic and often describe the history or development of a problem...". In other words, it provides a

comprehensive overview of a particular topic or phenomenon. A narrative review is needed to understand and keep up to date on the broader and latest issue on a topic.

Research Question

The present study is significant because it provides a breadth of information to help future researchers identify research gaps and areas of interest that need scholarly attention. It is hoped that the study can help inform educational practitioners and researchers on the necessary support and efforts to produce efficient and skilful English language teachers in the future. The narrative overview of the related literature is directed by the following research question:

- What kind of support is needed in the professional development of language teachers in Malaysia?

Method

This narrative review paper adapted the published guidelines by Green et al. (2006). Although there are no rigid guidelines on a quality narrative overview, the aim is to produce a well-structured narrative review, clear and able to describe and synthesise relevant literature on the topic of support needed in language teachers' professional development in Malaysia. A typical structure of a narrative review includes (Ferrari, 1997; Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Green et al., 2006):

- a. title
- b. abstract
- c. introduction
- d. methods
- e. discussion
- f. conclusion

To improve the quality of a narrative review, systematic review approaches in selecting articles for the review and an effective bibliographic research strategy were adopted. Using these approaches in the earlier stage of the narrative review helps decrease bias in selecting the articles.

Sources of Information

Two databases were used to conduct the literature search: Scopus and Google Scholar. The authors used the phrase searching function and the Boolean Operator "OR" and "AND" to find related terms relevant to the research objective. Various terms were listed, such as "teacher education", "teacher training", "professional development", and "Malaysia". Manual searching using handpicking and citation tracking techniques were also employed to track authors or papers that had been cited in the text or to identify relevant articles by searching the journal content page-by-page. The search string focused on title, abstract and keywords in order to gather records with a clear focus on the support needed in the professional development of English language teachers in Malaysia. To give a reasonable breadth and depth on a topic, it is normally necessary to search at least two databases relevant to the area of study (Green et al., 2006). Even though the focus should be on the professional development of English language teachers, search term that involved English language context was limited. It was challenging to find relevant publications that only focus on this area. Therefore, the authors selected the social sciences category and later screened the content of articles to make sure they relate to language teaching and learning in general.

Selection Criteria and Appraisal

The initial search using the terms aforementioned resulted in 521 articles. However, after the initial screening stage using the refining tool on the databases, 439 articles were excluded based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria include journal articles (type), publications that are published between 2011 to 2021 (timeline publication), papers that are written in the English language (language), social sciences field (subject area) and studies that are conducted in Malaysia (country). The screening stage resulted in 82 remaining articles for the appraisal by two reviewers independently. The reviewers used the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Appraisal Tool 2018 to evaluate the quality of the articles. CASP is commonly used to assess the quality of qualitative research and randomised trials (Green et al., 2006). After the appraisal, 45 articles were excluded, which leaves 37 articles for a second round of screening. The remaining articles were further evaluated for relevancy, and after another screening, 22 articles were additionally excluded due to the exclusion criteria. This leaves 15 articles for the final thematic synthesis (See Figure 1).

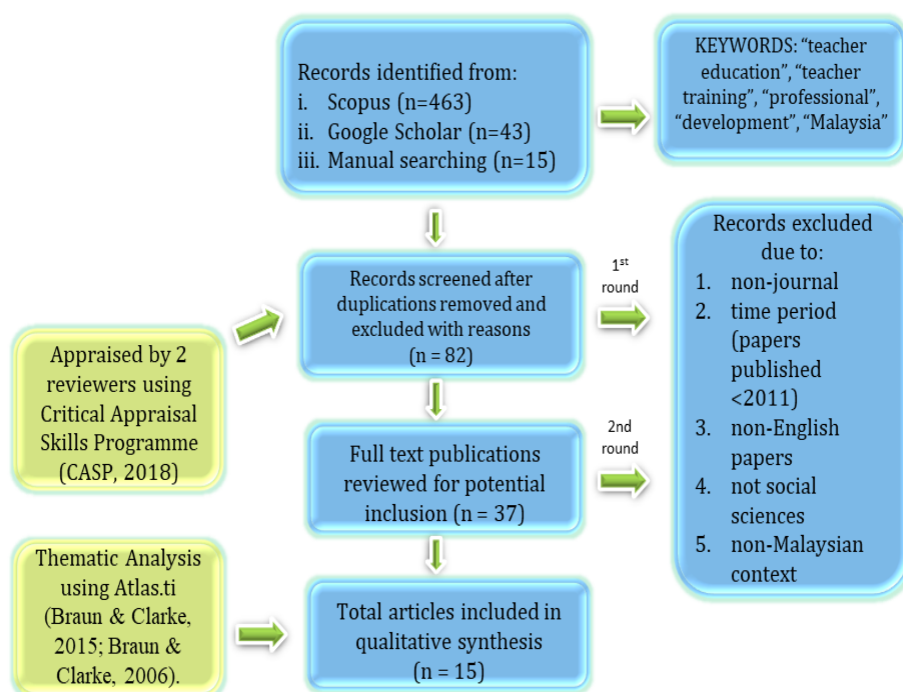


Figure 1: Flow chart of the literature selection process

Qualitative Data Synthesis

The data was analysed and synthesised thematically using Atlas.ti version 9.0. The reason for using Atlas.ti software is because it is easy to manage and organise the data and codes to identify common themes for the review. The thematic analysis procedure involves reading and rereading to get familiarised with the data, coding which involves generating labels for important data, identifying emergent themes related to the research question, reviewing the themes, defining the themes and writing up to draw the analytic narrative and data extracts together while contextualising it in light of current literature (Braun & Clarke, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of 15 articles has led to the emergence of four main themes: role of mentors, administrative and technical support, financial and resources support, and welfare support. Figure 2 summarises the main themes and sub-themes from the thematic analysis.

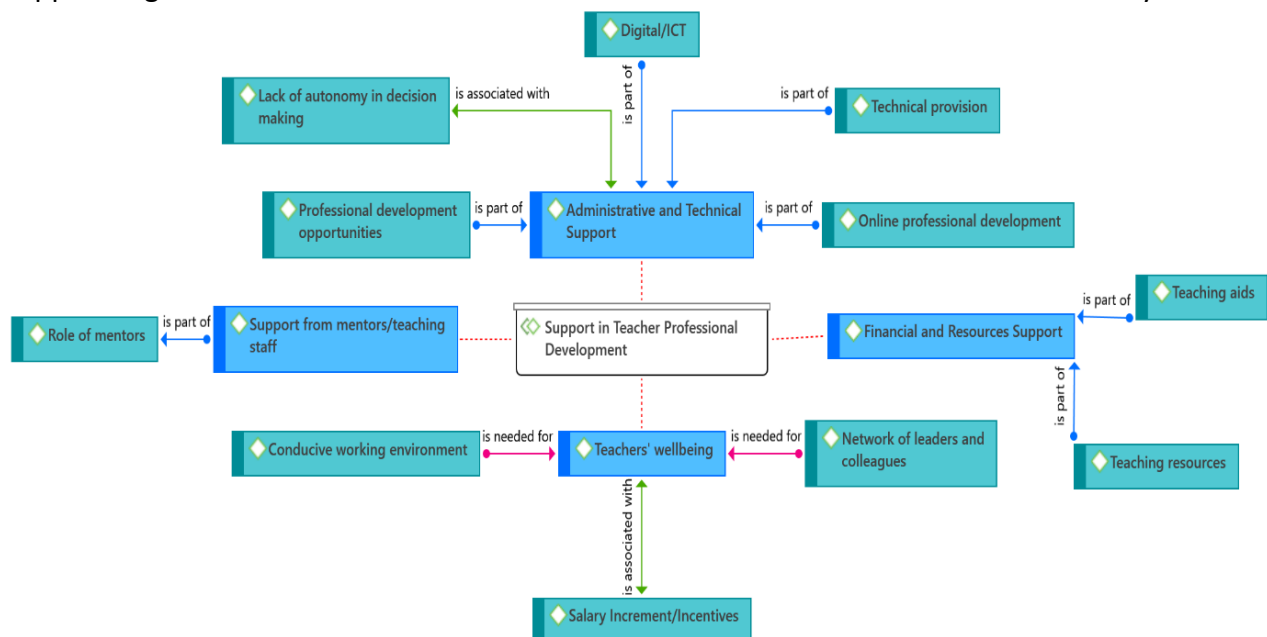


Figure 2: Themes and sub-themes

Role of Mentors

The role of mentors was discussed as the most crucial support for teacher professional development, especially among pre-service and beginning teachers. Mentors should act as facilitators and play their role in providing appropriate input and constructive feedback about the teachers' classes, as well as giving advice on teaching and classroom management skills (Goh et al., 2020; Sathappan & Gurusamy, 2019). Mentors should also be in charge of shaping the behaviour of student teachers and instilling the necessary skills (Hassan et al., 2015). They said that teacher trainers' role as facilitators entails advising and guiding their students through the teaching and learning process.

On the other hand, Sathappan and Gurusamy (2019) found that pre-service teachers had problems with their mentors during their teaching practicum period. Pre-service teachers claimed that they did not get sufficient constructive feedback regarding their lessons and academic projects. They also think that mentors need to do more observation and sharing sessions on how teachers could improve their teaching. Goh et al (2020) suggested that mentors or teacher educators could support pre-service teachers in their teacher training programme by modelling effective teaching practices to comprehend the link between theory and practice better. According to Chapel (2003 in Sathappan & Gurusamy, 2019), school mentors are responsible for assisting students in identifying professional developmental goals, providing advice on alternative teaching strategies, tracking the progress of students' portfolios, implementing interactive classroom activities, discussing students' lesson plans and assessments and adequately observing student behaviour.

One example of how the mentors could assist in the professional development activities is the involvement of Excellent Teachers in providing training in workshops and school talks to

assist both students and teachers in improving teaching and learning at the district, state or national level (Tengku Ariffin et al., 2018). Excellent Teachers are exemplary teachers and academic leaders under the Excellent Teacher Scheme, which was rebranded in 2013. They aim to facilitate and share knowledge, skills and expertise with other teachers to improve teaching and learning practices. Excellent Teachers were often given the opportunity and responsibility to handle academic programmes, including Professional Learning Community programmes. They also act as subject experts and offer guidelines for other teachers' subject panels. The presence and contribution of Excellent Teachers would definitely help enhance the teachers' professional development as they are also involved in regular discussions with other teachers on how to improve weak students' performances through innovative teaching practices. This situation is similar to the findings by Goh and Matthews (2011), where pre-service teachers favoured the assistance that they get from their school-based mentors during their practicum, which helped boost their confidence. Following this, a programme known as School Improvement Specialist Coaches (SISC) was implemented to monitor and assist low-performing schools in identifying problems and providing interventions in collaboration with other teachers and administrators.

Administrative and Technical Support

Another factor contributing to the success of any teacher professional development initiative is administrative and technical support. Teachers need to get adequate support from the administrators and other teachers, especially in conducting appropriate workshops, academic programmes and disseminating positive outcomes of training workshops to the other teachers in the school (Hassan et al., 2018; Tengku Ariffin et al., 2018). Aside from administrative support, teachers also need technical provision and professional help from the state department and provincial officials, especially in making the decisions about the types of professional training required by the teachers, as well as sufficient professional development opportunities to improve teaching and learning practices (Gill & Berezina, 2020; Khan & Haseeb, 2017; Mansor et al., 2019). Gill and Berezina (2020) argue that district and state officials often interfere in the decision making about training which sometimes leads to the inappropriateness of the training provided. Unlike Singapore, where teachers themselves control the staff development training, Malaysian teachers had little autonomy in deciding on professional development training.

Despite these concerns, the MoE always tries to improve the professional development of teachers via teacher schemes and initiatives. An emerging trend is to adopt Professional Learning Community (PLC) which has the potential to enhance low-performing Malaysian schools. PLC is characterised as collaborative initiatives led by a group of instructors who are dedicated to working in teams to improve the teaching and learning quality (T&L), such as doing action research to develop a solution that will improve students' learning and academic performance (Hassan et al., 2018). In PLC, collaborative learning is an ongoing process that guides students' learning and helps them solve difficulties. The collective learning process assists instructors in strengthening their expertise in the subject they teach and their knowledge, abilities, and good teaching practices so that students' academic progress and school quality can be improved. Thus, introducing PLC across Malaysian schools could be one effective strategy to tackle skills gaps and swiftly disseminate pedagogical improvements in school clusters, if not throughout ASEAN nations (Hassan et al., 2018). Nevertheless, one issue that arises is that PLC is difficult to sustain over time because it lacks a network of instructors

and community members who can collaborate to improve teaching and learning (Hassan et al., 2018). In some cases, PLC members also face time constraints to collaborate in order for the PLC to be effective.

Another emerging trend is online professional development for teachers (Abdelhafez, 2021; Omar et al., 2019). As we are amid the Covid-19 pandemic and classrooms have moved to remote teaching and learning, distant education is the way forward in providing self-paced learning solutions which allow both teachers and students to meet their educational goals. In this context, online professional development is helpful for teachers who are furthering their studies as part of the career pathways offered by MoE and in-service teachers who need support in digital pedagogy. Some advantages of online professional development include flexibility and versatility and increased teacher retention by allowing teachers to become more directly involved in their own learning and professional development. Abdelhafez (2021) prove that remote teaching support can be given via virtual professional education or digital training, video conferencing, global webinars and safe texting (a collaboration between pre-service and in-service teachers). The digital training was found to be helpful in addressing some of the challenges that come concurrently with virtual classes.

In order to ensure the success of the professional development courses, the authors argue that there needs to be constant evaluation of the programmes. The Kirkpatrick's evaluation model (see figure 3) was characterised by Ahmad Sukri and Md Yunus (2020) as a model that has been referred to frequently in evaluating the effectiveness of training programmes and has proven particularly successful in evaluating training programmes. They further highlighted the importance of programme evaluation as it is deemed necessary to prescribe changes and enhance a programme. The model consists of four stages: reaction, learning, behaviour and result. We believe that at the reaction level (level 1), it is important for needs analysis to be conducted first before the start of the programme to get insights from teachers regarding the training. This step is crucial in making sure the training is necessary before getting the participants' reaction on the content relevance and overall training which is frequently conducted through surveys at the end of the programme (Kirkpatrick, 1998).

The focus of learning (level 2) is on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, which may be tested via pre and post-tests. To put it in another way, it is intended to show how much the participants learnt before and after the session. The third level involves an assessment of how well the participants have applied their newly acquired skills in the workplace. The final stage is to demonstrate how much the programme has affected the entire system, which is often influenced by other contextual factors.

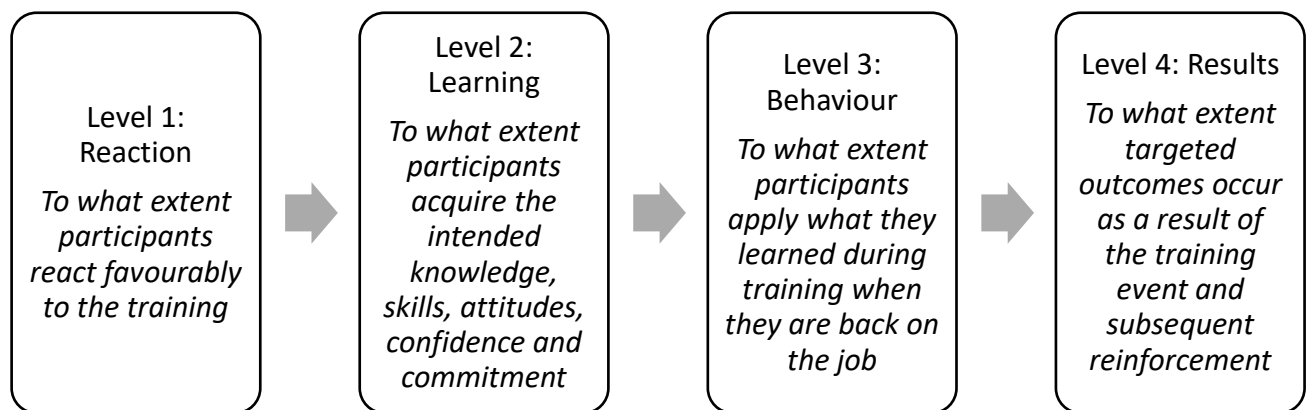


Figure 3: Kirkpatrick Four-Level Training Evaluation Model

(Source: Kirkpatrick, 1998; Aryadoust, 2016; Ahmad Sukri & Md Yunus, 2020)

Financial and Resources Support

As with any professional or staff development initiative, financial and material support are essential in supporting training activities. As evident in previous literature, pre-service and in-service instructors have to deal with insufficient teaching aids and materials, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient financial support to sustain their educational activities (Goh & Matthews, 2011; Ismail & Awang, 2017; Khan & Haseeb, 2017). Khan and Haseeb (2017) discussed an imbalance of content academic of the school syllabus, teaching exercises, teaching techniques in teacher training institutions, and economic and financial difficulty. They further claim that the textbooks for teacher education are in poor shape, and there is no teacher's handbook or supplemental information available to teachers during their initial training. Due to the lack of school teachers and teaching resources, teachers are reported to be overworked with additional periods to teach and clerical work of documenting students' data in various fragmented software applications (Goh & Wong, 2014). This problem has led them to neglect the development of professional skills as they are overwhelmed with increasing workloads along with constant policy changes. Therefore, it is critical for governing agencies to pay more attention to the funding and distribution of resources for teacher development, strengthening educators' abilities, facilities improvement, and improving the school learning environment at the provincial level in order to establish a conducive teacher professional development.

Welfare Support

The Malaysian government set a goal in 2013 to improve teacher education quality by focusing on human capital development. Under this policy rule, all teachers must have a Bachelor's degree as a minimum qualification (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2013). Many teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Education programme (PISMP) in response to this new policy. This PISMP is the pioneer degree program carried out in twenty-seven ITE in Malaysia. Teacher quality in terms of performance, on the other hand, is likely to be higher when professionals are compensated adequately (Ismail & Awang, 2017). However, previous research discovered that both pre-service and in-service teachers struggle with professional development due to increased workload, mental and physical exhaustion, time management issue as well as the adverse working environment (Amin et al., 2019; Gill & Berezina, 2020;

Goh et al., 2020; Goh & Canrinus, 2019; Hassan et al., 2018; Ismail & Awang, 2017; Omar et al., 2019). Thus, Ismail and Awang (2017) urged that the profession should offer a greater wage and more flexible working hours, better working conditions, and greater teacher welfare to recruit quality teachers. Providing less rigid and less stressful working conditions would motivate the teachers to focus on upskilling their professional skills rather than being tied to a hectic schedule at school.

Furthermore, previous studies have found that teachers who are doing their professional development or up-skilling programme part-time have problems with their time management. For instance, teachers who are completing their PISMP on a part-time basis had to go for their weekend classes and consequently had to juggle between work responsibilities at school, family commitment and their role as a student. This group of teachers suffers from health and emotional issues due to their hectic lifestyles. They suffer from depression and a problematic predicament due to not getting enough rest and the pressure to tackle deadlines on a busy schedule (Omar et al., 2019). These findings suggest that teachers need support from all school community members, including leaders and colleagues, to be more devoted to their teaching and professional development. The existence of efficient teacher networks, collaboration among colleagues, and the growth of teacher professionalism are among the necessary supports.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Teacher professional development is ongoing and tedious but imperative in producing effective teachers who are determined to improve their knowledge and skills required for professional growth continuously. The main goal of this review was to determine the kind of necessary assistance required by language teachers in Malaysia in terms of their professional development based on published research in the past decade. To date, this is the first review of substantial duration which contributes to the understanding of teachers' professional development by determining four crucial considerations, including the role of mentors, support from administrators and technical provision, financial and material support, and support for the teachers' welfare. Adopting Kirkpatrick's model in evaluating the results of professional development training and learning programmes, we proposed the importance of having an evaluation mechanism to ensure that the time and resources spent on training are justified. Furthermore, the analysis also directs us to the need to give autonomy to Malaysian teachers to decide on relevant training and to consider factors such as time constraints, financial, administrative, and technical support.

The findings of this research would assist educational stakeholders, researchers and practitioners to better focus their efforts and resources on relevant training. There is, therefore, a need for the Minister of Education of Malaysia, policymakers, curriculum developers and teacher training institutions to deliberately discuss and collaborate in policy reforms and professional development plans to ensure that they benefit teachers not just financially but also professionally by developing their skills and knowledge, pedagogical abilities, and ICT expertise in the classroom. It is crucial that future training programmes should consider teachers' voices on the kind of training that they need to develop a more symbiotic relationship between teachers and the stakeholders. It is also evident that critical challenges such as working conditions, classroom conditions, insufficient facilities, increased and unnecessary workloads, and the availability of teaching assistance must all be addressed

first to make teaching a vocation of choice for professionals and to prevent burnout among teachers.

Since this is a narrative review, it was not possible to empirically prove the association of the four areas of concern mentioned beforehand to positive teachers' professional development in Malaysia. Nevertheless, this narrative review has synthesised essential issues in the field and helps identify new avenues of research that have yet to be explored. Furthermore, sources included in this review were limited to two primary databases that may significantly affect the final number of articles analysed. Future reviewers can consider other databases like Web of Science, Springer, Taylor & Francis, Emerald, and Sage that could result in more reliable articles. In addition, the predetermined parameter of the professional needs required by language teachers in Malaysia could have contributed to the low number of adaptable sources in this review. Future reviews could adopt broader criteria that could provide a more significant number of articles. In addition, further empirical studies on teachers' voices and views on specific training would also be beneficial to identify problems and evaluate factors that directly or indirectly influence language teachers' professional development in Malaysia for continuous improvement.

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