Research paper

Self-directed professional development activities: An autoethnography☆

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article explores my participation in teacher professional development (PD) practices. In a form of an autoethnography, I present an account of my experiences in self-directed PD activities and institution-mandated ones, highlighting benefits of PD activities that were self-initiated. My self-directed PD activities seem to promote ongoing engagements. In this article, I also reflect on how financial costs affected my attitude towards institution-mandated PD. However, in self-directed PD, I invested my time and financial resources. This article also high-lights the way self-directed PD activities shaped my worldview, from questioning the legitimacy of qualitative research to celebrating the subjective human experience.

1. Introduction

Effective teacher professional development (PD) plays an important role in enhancing teachers' skills and knowledge, and the formation of teacher professional identity, with the aim to improve student learning and student achievement (Mockler, 2011). As such, it is necessary for PD programmes to be meaningful, ongoing, and sustainable (Mockler, 2013; Tournaki et al., 2009). To ensure that teachers participate in ongoing PD, some education standards agencies apply a compliance-approach to PD. However, this tick-the-box approach may result in an emphasis on meeting governance requirements rather than promoting professional learning (Tran & Pasura, 2021). This regulatory and measurement-oriented approach also tends to result in PD practices that favour activities that can be easily documented and presented as 'evidence' (e.g., attending seminars and workshops), and disfavour those that are not so easy to quantify (e.g., having informal conversations, reading professional literature) (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009; Mockler, 2013). This approach, Sachs and Mockler (2012) urge, has a detrimental effect on teachers' autonomy and professional identity. In comparison with institution-mandated PD, research shows that self-directed PD can encourage meaningful ongoing PD activities as they are likely to meet diverse needs and interests of individual teachers (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Lopez & Cunha, 2017).

Responding to the above PD issues, this article explores ideas to promote PD that is productive and meaningful by reflecting on my attitude towards institution-mandated and self-directed PD activities that I have participated in over the past 17 years. Understanding factors that encourage ongoing PD is important because it can have a direct impact on students' learning experience and learning outcomes. Also, this understanding can inform policy and decision making processes. From an accountability perspective, as a lot of money is spent on PD, it is important to make sure that PD programmes are effective and achieve its purpose (Van Eekelen et al., 2006, p. 409).

2. Self-directed professional development

Self-directed PD refers to teachers' learning that is initiated by teachers themselves (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009, p. 376). Drawing on Goh and Loh's (2013) idea of PD, self-directed PD may include formal and informal learning. Emphasising teacher agency, Mushayikwa (2013, p. 275) states that self-directed PD "deals with teachers' voluntary, deliberate efforts to develop themselves in areas that they perceive themselves to be limited or lacking." Mushayikwa's definition suggests that teachers' assessments of their skills may influence their decisions to participate in self-directed PD. Other factors that may influence such decisions include individuals' environment (e.g., work environment, family) and their beliefs related to learning, work, and autonomy (Bouchard, 1996). Perhaps more importantly, the prerequisite of self-directed PD, Van Eekelen et al. (2006) assert, is teachers' willing-ness to learn, an aspect that is likely to move teachers from being aware

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of their lack of skills to taking actions for improvement. This willingness can be described as "a psychological state that involves a desire to learn, experiment, and see or do something that has not been seen or done before" (Van Eekelen et al., 2006, p. 411). Considering the advantages of self-directed PD, understanding factors that promote it can inform school principals, heads of department, and policy makers to steer teachers in this direction.

3. The current study

This paper draws on my reflections on my participation in PD activities over an extended period in Malaysia, New Zealand, and now in Australia. My exploration is guided by the following questions.

(a) What attitudes do teachers hold towards self-directed and institution-mandated PD?
(b) What can encourage teachers to participate in ongoing PD?
(c) What effects do self-directed PD and institution-mandated PD have on teachers?

As my study uses the autoethnography method, the next section provides an overview of the method and justifies its relevance for my investigation. Then I provide the context of my study by narrating my experiences of attending PD sessions required by my school (when I was a secondary school teacher in Malaysia) and self-directed ones. In the following sections, I highlight four themes which emerged from my reflection: my attitude towards the two types of PD, the way financial considerations influence my participation in PD, how self-directed PD promote my ongoing PD, and the way ongoing PD shapes my worldview. In discussing the themes, I alternate between presenting narratives of my PD and connecting them to the literature. The article then presents some implications of the study for teachers, school managers and policy makers. It is my hope that insights from stories in this article will promote meaningful and purposeful ways of doing PD.

4. Method

My inquiry takes the shape of an autoethnography, concisely described as an "intersection of autobiography and ethnography" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 2). This qualitative research method draws on and interprets the lived experience of a researcher by means of self-reflection and storytelling, and connects researcher insights to broader cultural, political and social phenomena (Adams et al., 2015; Burford & Hook, 2019; Ellis, 2004; Maréchal, 2010; Poulos, 2021). An autoethnographic study is conducted and represented from a researcher's point of view (Canagarajah, 2012). As an autoethnographer, I am both "a member in the social world under study and a researcher of that world" (Anderson, 2006, p. 348). Unlike positivistic research approaches, autoethnography values subjectivity and considers an assessment of the self as a rich repository of experiences and perspectives (Bochner, 2000; Canagarajah, 2012; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Tracy, 2010).

An advantage of this method is that it allows researchers to explore a phenomenon from a longitudinal perspective without the risk of participant attrition, as an autoethnographer's own lived experience is regarded as the research data (Van Manen, 1990). This risk is a problem in both qualitative and quantitative longitudinal studies (Derrington, 2019). Particularly relevant to my study is the way the longitudinal element explores the trajectory of my PD experiences.

Taking a critical stance, autoethnography challenges the conventional format of research articles. From the post-modern perspective, the way research is presented in journals is a social construct (Canagarajah, 1996). It is an agreement among members of the academia (e.g., editors, reviewers, researchers). Like any socially constructed norms, they evolve due to an ongoing process of negotiating in a community of practice (CoP), as members operate between personal and group

identities and goals (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). Without intentionally contesting or conforming to the norms, my choice of method is motivated by my research goal, which is to understand teachers' participation in and attitude towards PD from a longitudinal perspective.

Two main types of autoethnography are *evocative* autoethnography and *analytic* autoethnography. The difference is the way they present their stories. As the goal of evocative autoethnographers is to help their readers experience the lived through experiences of the researchers, they present their stories in a form of rich detailed narratives. These narratives, Ellis and Bochner (2006) argue, are a form of knowledge that does not require an explicit analysis because storytelling, for them, is itself an analytic process. In other words, storytelling involves selecting relevant events and presenting them to achieve a particular goal (e.g., to report an observation, to promote a particular ideology, to encourage reflection). The following example is an excerpt from an evocative autoethnography. This example presents Ellis' (1999) conversation with a research student who encountered conflicting methodological views.

A week later, Sylvia catches me in the hall. "Okay, I read everything you sent me. Wow, those personal narratives just blew me away. Your theoretical piece was interesting but pretty hard to get through. It'll be more helpful later, I'm sure," she reassures, then continues quickly, "but now I'm very confused."

"What confuses you?"

"Well, in my methods classes I was taught that I had to protect against my own biases interfering with my observations and that my research should produce general knowledge and theory. But the articles you gave me emphasize concrete expressions over abstraction. So, I'm confused about what my goals would be if I do an autoethnography. (p. 673)

The excerpt demonstrates the way evocative autoethnographers present their research. Unlike conventional research articles, evocative autoethnography articles do not have recognisable sections, such as the literature review, methodology, and findings. Instead, they are presented with artistic elements and read like an autobiographical text.

For analytic autoethnographers, the analytic agenda is presented explicitly in storytelling by connecting their stories to theories and research findings (Anderson, 2006). Unlike evocative autoethnography, the way analytic autoethnography is presented is generally more similar to the format of conventional research articles. My study adopts this approach because my goal is to situate my study within the broader literature in teacher PD. Another reason for choosing this approach is my intention to share my findings with researchers and practitioners, rather than to evoke their emotions.

In the field of education, autoethnographic studies have explored areas such as the development of teacher professional identity (Canagarajah, 2012; Yazan, 2019), the way teaching identity is imagined and enacted (Miller, 2009), a teacher educator's encounter with the indigenous Māori culture (Legge, 2014), autoethnography as a PD tool for teacher educators (Park, 2014), a faculty member's engagement with local communities (Cutforth, 2013), teaching in outback Australia (Cadman & Brown, 2011; Ernst & Vallack, 2015), doctoral students' study experiences (Burford & Hook, 2019; Sondari, 2021), pedagogical changes in English education in China (Liu, 2020), struggles of female Muslim teachers in USA in higher education (Elbelazi & Alharbi, 2020), and experience of a researcher with deafness conducting qualitative research (Kersten-Parrish, 2022). A common characteristic of these studies is the way they draw on insider's knowledge and lived experiences to describe and critique cultural norms and practices.

Like any research method, autoethnography is not without its criticism. Some of the criticisms that have been identified include the lack of analytic rigour, distance from the research subject, fieldwork and systematic observation of research objects, as well as being emotional (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis, 2009; Mirhosseini, 2016; Sparkes, 2000). These concerns are possibly a result of a lack of appreciation or

understanding of the goals of autoethnography, which include offering "nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 21). See Bochner (2000, 2018) for an extensive discussion of the criticisms.

To explore my participation in and attitude towards PD, I relied on my memories and related artifacts (Liu, 2020; Sondari, 2021; Wall, 2008; Yazan, 2019). I recalled memories of PD activities that I have attended from my first posting as a secondary school teacher in 2004 to the present. The duration of these activities ranges from one-hour in-house training sessions to three and a half years of doctoral education. The PD activities that I recalled do not constitute a comprehensive list, but they have particular significance and relevance in plotting my PD journey. The process of writing my lived experiences, which is a meaning-making process of 'data analysis' in autoethnography (Van Manen, 1990), involved reflecting on my recollections and reliving the experiences. In order to facilitate my recalling process, I considered certificates that I received for attending training sessions and completing academic degrees, and talked to three former colleagues (who are still teaching in Malaysia) using my mobile phone. To enrich this reliving process, I paid attention to emotions that surfaced and examined them. Then I reviewed literature that relates to my participation in and attitude towards PD activities. The review also enriched my recalling process because reading research findings can cause buried memories of some PD experiences to surface. As a result of the above process, various themes began to emerge. Only themes that I felt were strongest and representative of my PD experiences were included in this article.

5. Background

One Saturday morning in 2004 in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, in a secondary school I taught in, my fellow teachers and I had gathered for a compulsory PD activity, commonly known as *perkembangan staf* in the Malay language. I was a newly graduated Mathematics teacher then. Although Richter's (2013) study shows that early-career teachers are more enthusiastic about PD, I attended the *perkembangan staf* with much reluctance. Like some of the teacher participants in Gaines et al. (2019), I felt that attending the session was unproductive. At the time, I just wanted a stable-income job, which the teaching profession in Malaysia provided then. I was not particularly keen on improving my teaching skills. In addition, I doubted the quality of the instructor (Gaines et al., 2019). I remember talking to teachers who sat beside me in one of the PD sessions and getting the impression that they too were not enthusiastic about the session. Some of them were writing their lesson plans and some were marking their students' work. Other than the facilitators and teachers who sat in the front rows, most of the teachers seemed disengaged.

Reflecting on my experience, I was not fully aware or made aware of the purpose of such activities other than the fact that they were mandatory. At the time, all public schools in Malaysia were required by respective state education departments to organise a certain number of PD activities each year. As implementers of this policy, the school management team, consisting of the school principal and the deputy principal, was responsible for inviting speakers and facilitators, and ensuring that teachers in their schools attended the PD sessions. Perhaps this compliance-oriented approach encouraged a ticking-the-boxes attitude towards PD, which had a negative effect on teacher participation (Zhang et al., 2021).

Another institution-mandated PD that I was reluctant to attend happened when the Malaysian Ministry of Education implemented a major curriculum reform. The government decided to change the medium of instruction for science and mathematics subjects from Malay to English with the aim "for the country to keep up with rapid scientific and technological advances and remain competitive in a globalised world" (Chan & Tan, 2006, p. 306). As part of the transition, new textbooks and teaching aids in English were developed by the Ministry of Education.

Training programmes with the intention of equipping the teachers to teach in English were organised by the English Language Teaching Centre, an in-service teacher training institution set up by the Ministry of Education (Chan & Tan, 2006, p. 315). As a mathematics teacher, I received a letter from the education department instructing me to attend the training. I was reluctant to attend it because I was not fully convinced of its effectiveness or relevance. These reasons are identified in research (Van Eekelen et al., 2006). Due to my unwillingness to attend the training, I started thinking of strategies to avoid it. Studying a circular from the Ministry of Education, I discovered that teachers who could provide evidence of having a good command of English were exempted from attending the training. According to the circular, having a certain grade in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English Language paper was sufficient for the exemption. The SPM examination is a standardised public examination for fifth form students in Malaysia. With a distinction for the English Language paper, I submitted a photocopy of my SPM certificate to the school management team, and much to my relief, I was no longer required to attend the training. My experience can be described as "strategic compliance" (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2016, p. 364).

My story is about to take a different direction. A year later, at the same secondary school, the school principal had asked me to consider teaching English due to a lack of English teachers. I accepted the challenge and started teaching the language drawing on my knowledge of mathematics pedagogy and my experience in teaching mathematics. A typical lesson in my mathematics classes involved introducing a new concept, providing relevant examples on the board, giving my students some mathematics problems to work on, and supporting those who had difficulties solving them. I believed that understanding mathematical concepts and formulas was essential for solving the problems. Applying this belief, a significant part of my English classes involved presenting grammar 'rules' out of context and providing students with mechanical grammar exercises. Although this approach has been discouraged in the literature (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 1991; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011; Nunan, 1998), I was unaware of it.

Soon I discovered that my approach to language teaching and learning was not helping my students to develop their writing skills effectively. I decided to discuss the issue with a colleague who was the head of the English language department. She offered me two suggestions. One, she could send me to PD workshops and seminars that support English language teachers. Two, I could consider doing a formal training in English language teaching and learning. I was receptive to her suggestions. I was keen to find out more about the coming workshops, and eventually enrolled myself in a part-time Master of Education in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programme. Reflecting on my experiences attending the TESL workshops and lectures, I noted that my participations were voluntary and driven by my assessments of my lack of skills in teaching writing.

6. Attitude towards institution-mandated and self-directed professional development

As mentioned earlier, my attitude towards mandatory PD in my first year of teaching was not positive. I attended the sessions because they were compulsory. Even though most of the sessions did not make sense to me, I complied with institution expectations to the best of my ability, as I was still under probation. Such was my attitude towards the *perkembangan staf*.

My institution-mandated PD experiences are not uncommon. In a study that explores teacher PD in the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia, interviews with VET teachers suggested that most of their "PD sessions were simplistically demanded for regulatory compliance purposes only" and did not prioritise "keeping teachers and staff abreast of developments in their own field of teaching" (Tran & Pasura, 2021, p. 23). Some teachers in the study also expressed that "they participated in PD sessions not for their professional benefit but for

compliance purposes" (Tran & Pasura, 2021, p. 23). As Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) assert, a compliance approach to PD tends to be driven by administrative goals rather than developmental needs.

In contrast, my attitude towards self-directed PD was quite the opposite. Without formal training in language education, I discovered that I needed a set of skills to teach language effectively. Fortunately, this realisation came soon after I had started teaching English. I realised that applying my understanding of mathematics pedagogy in my English classroom did not always make sense. When I taught mathematics, my primary goal was to ensure that my students could apply relevant formulas to solve mathematics problems. My role as a mathematics teacher, as I perceived, was to guide my students to a well-defined destination – the absolute correct answers or occasionally acceptable answers within a prescribed range. In comparison, as it seemed to me, language teaching was at the subjective end of the objective-subjective continuum. Perhaps the most nerve-wracking experience I had as a new English teacher was assessing my students' writing, which involves a considerable level of subjectivity. How could I teach a student to write an essay that was different from those written by other students but was considered equally good? This question marked the beginning of my road to Damascus.

Driven by an awareness of my lack of skills in the teaching of writing and need to improve, I decided to discuss my challenges with the head of the English department. Acting on her recommendations, I attended many English language teaching workshops and I enjoyed them. By attending the workshops, I felt that I was becoming a more informed English teacher. Such positive outcomes are possibly due to my head of department playing a supportive role rather than a coercive one (Zhang et al., 2021). She listened to my concerns and offered development suggestions. Similar to Mann and Tang's (2012) findings, my informal interactions with a more experienced teacher had a positive impact on my PD. In fact, such informal interactions are regarded as a form of teacher PD (Auletto, 2021) as they can be learning opportunities for teachers.

Motivated by my need to improve my language teaching skills, I read online open-access journal articles and blogs, and applied teaching ideas that I find interesting and relevant in my classrooms. In a similar strand, Macalister's (2018) survey of 465 English language teachers and teacher educators shows that the second most common reason for reading journal articles is for teaching purposes. Although reading journal articles was a challenging experience due to my unfamiliarity with the genre and related technical vocabulary, applying the ideas in my classes was a rewarding and enriching experience. For example, I used ideas from the literature to inform the way I provided feedback on my students' writing, and how I taught English grammar. Similar to Attard's (2017, p. 52) experience, I moved "from practice to theory to practice".

As mentioned earlier, eventually, I enrolled myself as a part-time student in a master's degree programme in TESL. During my two-year programme, the books and research articles that I read went beyond the course requirements because my reading was motivated by my interest in language education and my professional needs. Also, the selection of my master's research topic reflected this motivation. At the time, I was teaching English at a bridging class level known as *Peralihan*, which can be translated as transition. This level was designed to facilitate a transition from Mandarin and Tamil medium primary schools to the mainstream Malay medium secondary schools. Students who did not achieve above a certain grade for the Malay Language paper in their final year of primary education were required to attend the one-year *Peralihan* level. All my *Peralihan* students were ethnic Chinese or Indian. Reflecting on this teaching environment, I decided to investigate the relationship between learners' culture and reading comprehension activities.

The master's programme was a fulfilling experience and the choices I made during my study were driven by my teaching context and my need to improve. Research such as Canagarajah (2012) has illustrated how a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo can encourage self-directed

PD. Consider the following excerpt from Canagarajah's autoethnography:

> I didn't have access to such critical literature on the diverse teaching practices around the world when I was teaching in Jaffna. After my strategy of reading the methods literature in our resource room failed to produce results, I resolved to travel to what appeared to me then as the centre of TESOL [Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages] expertise – a U.S. university – to become professionalized. I decided that undergoing an institutionalized form of training, with a certificate to show at the end, would establish my credentials in my profession. After such training, I told myself, no TESOL expert would laugh at my methods and I wouldn't be lost for an answer the next time they challenged me to give an account of my teaching practice. (p. 266)

Rather than institutionally imposed, Canagarajah's participation in PD activities were driven by his quest for developing a professional identity as a TESOL expert. This quest to improve has also been identified as a major reason that encouraged secondary school teachers in Germany to participate in PD (Richter et al., 2019).

A study that resonates with the way I responded to my lack of language teaching skills is Attard's (2017) 10-year reflective self-study. A theme that emerged from his analysis of his 428 journal entries was that teacher-directed learning allowed him to address problems that he encountered in his teaching context. Attard also found that questioning his own practice and challenging his assumptions which formed the basis of his practice resulted in his ongoing engagement in PD.

A study which highlights the importance of self-directed PD is Colbert et al.'s (2008) investigation of two groups of teachers attending the same PD activity. Teachers from the first group were sent by their district to attend a college writing workshop for teachers. Those from the second group attended the same workshop as part of a project that they had designed to help them teach students nonfiction writing. Besides the workshop, teachers from the second group had also planned to work with local journalists as one of their PD activities. Colbert et al.'s (2008, p. 144) study shows that "teachers who were sent by their district were dispirited that they had to attend regardless of their professional needs", and those who had planned to attend the workshop reported that they were eager to learn new things and open to new ideas. Their eagerness to learn is probably driven by their perception of their own ability. This perception, Zhang et al. (2021) conclude, can encourage autonomous motivation to participate in PD. Like the experience of teachers from the second group in Colbert et al.'s (2008) research, I too was enthusiastic about learning new ideas when I participated in PD activities that were motivated by my awareness of my lack of skills in teaching writing.

7. The costs of professional development

For PD activities that were self-initiated, not only did I not seek compensation for time spent on those activities, but I was also prepared to fund them myself. To supplement my salary as a secondary school teacher in a public school, I tutored small groups of students privately. At the time, the additional income was important for supporting both my mother and late grandmother. These weekly private classes were taught after school hours, which allowed enough time for a late lunch-break. As a result of this arrangement, attending *perkembangan staff* sessions after school hours would mean cancellation or postponing of my private classes. This had an undesirable impact on my income. Although the sessions were not frequent, they were enough to frustrate me. When I unpack this frustration, it was a sense of not having control over how I use my time to increase my income after school hours.

In discussing the cost of teacher PD, research tends to focus on the management of funds. For example, some studies have investigated cost-effective strategies for implementing teacher development programmes (Gregory & Salmon, 2013; Hayes, 2000; San Antonio et al., 2011), while others have looked at various costs (e.g., salaries for trainers, facility

rentals, costs of travel, registration fees) involved in PD (Odden et al., 2002). Particularly relevant to my experience is Odden et al.'s (2002) discussion on uncompensated teachers' time. When I had to cancel my private classes to attend PD activities that I valued little, I felt that my time should be compensated financially.

However, when I reflect further on the theme of financial cost, I realise that the financial impact was not always the source of my frustration. In order to attend two to three lectures a week over the two-year master's programme, I had to reduce my private classes. My income was reduced and I had a tuition fee to pay. I discussed the situation with my mother, and she convinced me that creating a budget may be helpful. As a strong believer of financial management and as a single parent, she reminded me that she was able to raise two children with the salary of a factory production operator. She added that if a project was worth pursuing, it was worth the sacrifice. Taking her advice onboard, I planned my monthly budgets and calculated my overheads. As a result, I was able to self-fund my studies, as well as financially supporting my family. In my last semester, my late grandmother passed away and she left me RM2000 (about USD450) in her will. Considering my grandmother's financial situation, this was a generous gift, which I used to pay the balance of my last tuition fee in memory of her. My experience is similar to McMillan et al.'s (2014) findings, in which financial support from school boards, for example, is not a strong predictor of PD participation. In my situation, a lack of immediate financial incentive did not prevent me from enrolling in my postgraduate studies.

When considering the theme of financial cost, my resignation as a secondary school teacher is a relevant event. Financial security was one of the reasons I decided to become a teacher in the Malaysian public education system. Salaries of public-school teachers in Malaysia were paid by the Ministry of Education, in my view, an institution that was unlikely to go bankrupt. However, I believed that if one resigned, reapplying for the same position in the public system was almost impossible. This belief was widely held among my colleagues, and I had witnessed this happening to a teacher whom I knew personally. Given the risk, resigning from the position was not a path that I considered.

However, after having completed my master's degree, the positive learning experiences prompted me to pursue a doctoral degree. In 2011, I submitted my application to Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and two months later, I received an offer letter which came with a full scholarship. Rather than feeling anxious about foregoing my financial security, I gladly resigned and started packing for the next chapter of my life. Now that I revisit my doctoral journey, I discover that the move was voluntary and motivated by self-improvement. For PD activities that were initiated by myself, I was not interested in seeking conpensation for time spent on the activities, and I was prepared to fund them.

8. Self-directed professional development leads to ongoing participation

My self-directed PD was ongoing and continues to the present. After I obtained my PhD, I published a book *Persuasion in self-improvement books* (Koay, 2019) in the Palgrave Pivot series and a research article *Values that stories in self-improvement books promote* (Koay, 2021) with Narrative Inquiry. As publishing was not part of my job description as an education consultant at that time, I spent about an hour every night after dinner to write.

Although I was keen to present at conferences, I was reluctant to pay a few hundred dollars for registration fees, not to mention the cost of accommodation and transport. I reasoned that buying books that interested me was more worthwhile. However, in 2019, I submitted an abstract to the 14th University of Sydney TESOL Research Colloquium because there was no registration fee. At the conference, I presented a paper on how a holistic understanding of writing can improve the quality of students' writing.

Another PD activity that I continue to participate in is writing book review articles. It keeps me informed about current developments in TESOL, English for Academic Purposes, and Discourse Analysis. I value the experience of writing the review articles because it gives me an opportunity to reflect on what I have read, and encourages me to read beyond familiar topics and to continue reading areas of research that interest me. In fact, I consider writing this autoethnography as a form of self-directed PD for two reasons: I believe that reflecting on my PD experience is a learning opportunity and producing research output is not required by my current role as a language teacher and a sessional lecturer. Similar to the findings of an online survey of 74 qualified teachers in Ireland, teachers' personal choice of interest in a topic is the strongest personal motivation factor in determining ongoing participation in PD (McMillan et al., 2014).

Perhaps my ongoing engagement with teacher development can be understood as a phenomenon known as the *Matthew effect*. This phenomenon can be summarised as the rich gets richer and the poor gets poorer, wherein "an initial advantage leads to cumulative advantage over time, forming a virtuous cycle of continuous gain" (Huang et al., 2014, p. 95). For example, unpleasant PD experiences may demotivate teachers from engaging in future PD (Gaines et al., 2019). The Matthew effect was first adopted in education research in the 1980s. In Stanovich's (1986) pioneering reading research, he explains that:

> The very children who are reading well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more word meanings, and hence read even better. Children with inadequate vocabularies— who read slowly and without enjoyment—read less, and as a result have slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability. (p. 381).

To break this vicious cycle, Stanovich suggests that teachers can help students develop phonological and word-identification skills.

Similarly, my unpleasant encounters with PD activities in my early years of teaching had negative effects on my attitude towards PD, which discouraged me from future participation. The intervention in my situation was a complex combination of my critical reflection on my classroom problems, and my interaction with my head of department. The intervention was not planned, but instead, it happened organically and unexpectedly. I believe that an intervention was possible in my situation because I had a healthy professional relationship with my head of department, and I trusted her. She was extremely supportive of my plan to enrol in the master's programme and had offered to write a referee's report as part of the application requirements. Research shows that effective leadership, as demonstrated by my head of department, is likely to promote autonomous teacher development (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2021). The involvement of my head of department, among other factors, broke the vicious cycle of my negative attitude towards PD. In fact, one positive PD encounter has led to another and many.

9. Self-directed professional development shapes my worldview

The way my self-directed PD shapes my worldview can be understood using Perry's (2009) scheme of cognitive and ethical development, which aims to conceptualise students' journey of thinking development. In essence, Perry's (2009, pp. 79–80) scheme maps student development from the initial *dualism* position transitioning to *multiplicity*, and then to *relativism*. At the *dualism* position, students believe that "right answers exist somewhere for every problem, and authorities know them" (Perry, 2009, p. 79). At the *multiplicity* position, students value diversity of opinion in domains "where right answers are not yet known" (Perry, 2009, p. 79). When students arrive at the *relativism* position, they generally believe that diversity of opinion "is derived from coherent sources, evidence, logics, and patterns allowing for analysis and comparison" and that "there will remain matters about which reasonable people will reasonably disagree" (Perry, 2009, p. 80). At this position, knowledge, as Perry (2009, p. 80) explains, is perceived as "qualitative"

and "dependent on contexts".

Using Perry's scheme to make sense of my PD journey, the early years of my self-directed PD can be characterised as having a *dualism* position. Searching for the 'correct' way to teach English, I enrolled on the master's programme. As my training at undergraduate level was in mathematics and mathematics education, attending lectures and reading research articles in language education involved new ways of thinking. Perhaps an event which marked a transitioning phase to the *multiplicity* position was a research methodology discussion which I had with my master's thesis supervisor.

I had planned to conduct an experimental study to objectively test whether reading materials related to learners' culture would improve their reading comprehension compared to reading culturally distant ones. My reason for conducting an experimental study was influenced by my then dualistic worldview. At the research proposal development stage, my supervisor challenged my intended methodology, and he proposed a qualitative approach for the investigation. He questioned the quality of my proposed experiment. He reasoned that the timeframe allowed for data collection was limited and argued that my proposed sample size would not allow the results of the experiment to be statistically convincing. For practical reasons (i.e., limited timeframe and accessibility to research participants), he suggested that a realistic plan was necessary. I considered his proposal with a healthy dose of scepticism. I assumed that the qualitative approach was wishy-washy, due to my unfamiliarity with the approach. With some persistence from my supervisor along with subsequent reading on qualitative research methods, I was convinced that a qualitative approach was sensible for the purpose of completing the thesis. Eventually, my research investigated the role of learners' culture in reading comprehension activities by observing a small book club and analysing the participants' reflective journals. I discovered that the ways my participants engaged with reading materials were diverse. Rather than concluding that a particular category of reading materials was more effective, the research brought me to a richer understanding of reading engagement and reading comprehension. From this research experience, I realised that the choice of methodology depends on the purpose of a study. Gradually moving away from the *dualism* position, I came to understand that not all research involves finding an objective answer.

My worldview continued to evolve during my doctoral candidature. One of the "aha" moments, which characterised my transition from the *dualistic* position to the *relativism* position, was a conversation I had with one of my PhD supervisors. I can no longer remember the question that I asked her, but her response was *it depends on the context*. The more I reflected on her comment, the more I appreciated contextual information. This appreciation is demonstrated in the way I collected data for my doctoral research. The research examines linguistic features of self-improvement books as a genre, as well as studying their social context. I investigated how writers of this genre persuade their readers to subscribe to their advice and how they construct themselves as credible advice givers. I discovered that the ways writers *sought* to persuade their readers were influenced by a set of shared beliefs. My study has led me to understand that these strategies are not universal and that they are influenced by ideologies and worldviews. The extent to which I value contextual information was revealed in my research methodology. In most genre studies, researchers would draw on insider's perspective by interviewing members of a particular community. In my research, this meant interviewing readers and writers of self-improvement books. To take a step further, I recruited people who did not read these books as my interviewees. My thesis argues that insights from readers and writers, as well as non-readers of the genre can provide a 360-degree view of the context.

The shift to the *relativism* position is also apparent in my choice of research methodology in the present article. In 2019, I presented my first autoethnography at the 14th University of Sydney TESOL Research Colloquium. Due to inaccessibility to research participants, I used autoethnography as an excuse to legitimise the presentation of my reflection as a writing teacher. Three years later, with an intention to understand autoethnography deeper and to use it meaningfully, I contacted a friend who used this method for her doctoral research. She directed me to the works of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Buchner. Thanks to technology and YouTube, I found a collaborative plenary address video by Professor Ellis and Professor Buchner at the Fourth Israeli Interdisciplinary Conference of Qualitative Research. Feeling both inspired and informed by their insights, I started reviewing the autoethnography literature. When I reflect on my exploration of this qualitative research method, I consider it to be a form of informal ongoing self-directed PD which has enriched my philosophical understanding of autoethnography and my appreciation for subjectivity. In fact, writing the present autoethnography also demonstrates a shift from insisting an objective view of the world to celebrating subjective human experiences.

Although my reflection of my PD journey suggests that PD can shape teachers' worldview, findings in the PD literature are mixed to some degree. In the Vietnamese English language teaching context, for example, after attending a 4.5-hour workshop on the topic of corrective feedback followed by eight weeks of experiential and reflective activities, data from interviews and participant reflection shows that overall, the participants' (teachers) views on corrective feedback are more aligned with the literature (Ha & Murray, 2021). More specifically, the participants claimed to use more "output-prompting" feedback and less "input-providing" feedback after the programme (Ha & Murray, 2021, p. 9).

On the contrary, a longitudinal study exploring the changes in Norwegian teachers' beliefs and practices as a result of participating in a PD programme about multilingualism and multilingual pedagogies shows that some change in teachers' beliefs was observed but their classroom practices appear to remain unchanged (Lorenz et al., 2021). In terms of teachers' beliefs, the participants (three English teachers) showed an increased "sensitivity towards their multilingual students" and "expressed an openness to include multilingual teaching approaches" in their classroom (Lorenz et al., 2021, p. 12). In this study, the teachers participated in 11 monthly workshops (1.5 hour each), and their participation was obligatory because the workshops were conducted during their scheduled staff meeting time (Lorenz et al., 2021).

The two examples focus on the effects that one PD programme has on teachers' beliefs on a particular topic (e.g., corrective feedback, multilingualism). My reflection also demonstrates the role of self-directed PD not only in influencing teachers' belief in certain topics, but also in shaping teachers' worldview more broadly. The contribution of my study is the way it considers the effects that multiple PD activities over the span of 17 years have on a teacher's worldview.

10. Implications

Considering the advantages of self-directed PD presented in this article, this study suggests that teachers, management staff, and policy makers can play an important role in promoting ongoing sustainable teacher PD. The following ideas are drawn from this autoethnography and the literature.

To make PD experiences more meaningful for teachers, they can reflect on their professional needs and propose them to the school leadership. These needs (or areas of interest) can be proposed by individual teachers or a group of teachers with similar needs (or interests). If these needs are not able to be met within the school context, I would encourage teachers to take charge of their PD direction and move beyond what the school can offer. For example, teachers could enrol themselves in formal education if their circumstances allow them to commit. Otherwise, teachers could collaborate with university researchers in short-term projects (Worrall, 2004).

For those in management positions (e.g., senior teachers, heads of department, school principals), encouraging trust and establishing healthy professional relationships can lead to teacher development opportunities. Masuda (2010, p. 472) asserts that creating "a safe and

risk-free space" allows teachers to discuss curriculum and pedagogy related issues freely, particularly issues that appear to challenge established systems. School leaders could initiate informal conversations with teachers to inform the planning of PD activities. An advantage of considering teachers' input (e.g., content, venue, time, group makeup) when implementing PD is that it can enhance teachers' willingness to engage in PD (Hargreaves et al., 2013, p. 29). In my case, having a positive relationship with my head of department allowed me to discuss issues without the fear of being judged.

To promote research-based teaching practices and teachers' participation in research, teachers can be encouraged to participate in conferences. In terms of support from the school management, funds can be allocated to sponsor or subsidise conference fees for teachers who are interested to present at or attend relevant conferences. While financial support may not necessarily encourage teachers to attend conferences (McMillan et al., 2014), it can reduce financial burdens for those who wish to attend. After attending the conferences, teachers can also be encouraged to share what they have learned with their colleagues in formal or informal settings. Besides encouraging teachers to attend conferences, schools can subscribe to local journals and provide a platform for teachers to share articles that they find interesting and relevant.

As teachers' awareness of their professional gaps is likely to lead to self-directed PD, school managers can foster reflective practices in their schools (see Farrell (2018) for an extensive discussion of reflective practices). School managers can encourage teachers to keep a teacher journal, collaboratively contribute to blogs, participate in peer-coaching, and conduct action research (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017). In a study of early childhood educators, Bleach (2014) demonstrates that PD activities with elements of reflective practices can help teachers to develop professionally and improve the quality of their practice.

Finally, as policy makers determine the parameters of what counts as PD to a large extent, their decisions play a crucial role in promoting or discouraging ongoing meaningful teacher PD. Policy makers can (and should) recognise PD activities that are not organised by 'authorised' PD bodies. For example, pursuing relevant postgraduate studies delivered by a university can be recognised as a form of PD. Other informal PD activities such as reading research articles and books, and presenting their reflection of the materials either in a written or oral form should be recognised (Sawatzki et al., 2022). An advantage of this approach is that it can accommodate a diversity of areas of interest among teachers (Sandholtz, 2002). Another advantage of having teachers select their books is that it promotes teacher autonomy, which can encourage ongoing PD.

11. Conclusion

In this article, I have recounted some of my experiences participating in self-directed PD and highlighted its advantages. My reflection suggests that unpleasant PD experiences can have detrimental effects on teachers' attitude towards PD, which can discourage teacher participation in PD. In order to break this cycle, teachers' awareness and assessment of their skills, and effective leadership and management styles are necessary. Although financial costs and financial security were initially thought to have discouraged teacher participation in PD, my reflection suggests that they may not. In fact, teachers may be willing to fund their own PD. Rather than being imposed by school managers and other compliance enforcement entities, teachers should be empowered to decide their PD activities based on their needs and interests, as self-directed PD can promote ongoing PD. My reflection also suggests that ongoing PD can encourage teachers' worldview to transition from the *dualism* position to the *relativism* position. The implications presented in my study can be summarised by the need to promote teacher autonomy in PD. Choice, Sandholtz (2002, p. 823) asserts, reinforces teachers' professional status, and increases the chances of PD activities corresponding with individual teachers' learning needs and professional interests.

Findings in this study are based on my personal experiences, reflection, and interpretation. Although the findings lack generalisability, they resonate with the literature (and hopefully with the experience of my readers), and extend current understanding of self-directed teacher education. Future research can draw on the themes highlighted in this study to investigate a larger sample. Future research may consider employing quantitative methods to explore teachers' experience from a particular region, or school levels (e.g., primary school, university).

This autoethnography reflects on my lived experience of participating in teacher PD activities, comparing self-directed and institution-mandated ones. It is my hope that the stories in this article will make their way into PD stories of teachers, school management teams, district education departments, and policy makers. While institution-mandated PD ends when a teacher is no longer employed by an institution, self-directed PD may continue for a lifetime.

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