# EFL teachers' beliefs about professionalism and professional development: A case study from Oman

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**Abstract**

*This study explores how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perspectives on professionalism and beliefs about the usefulness of professional development (PD) activities influence their teaching practices and acceptance of new approaches. The focus is on tertiary English-language teachers working in Oman, and an exploratory research methodology was employed in which qualitative data were obtained from two focus group interviews with two groups of six teachers. The first group, which was asked about the meaning of professionalism, indicated that while a variety of aspects were of concern, there was a shared belief that professionalism is mainly related to moral values, which should be context sensitive. The second group, which was asked about PD, indicated that teachers' engagement with PD activities is mainly related to context-specific skills improvement activities, and that the main obstacle to PD is a lack of institutional support. The research thus contributes to the study of English-language teachers' own perspectives on professionalism, a topic which has previously received only limited attention.*

# 1    Introduction

This study discusses English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' beliefs about the meaning of professionalism and the usefulness of professional development (PD) activities, using teachers based in Oman as a case study. Leung (2009: 49) points out that 'in general usage, a "professional" is a trained and qualified specialist who displays a high standard of competent conduct in their practice'; however, Evans (2008) notes that many interpretations of professionalism focus on how it is imposed or prescribed by external agencies, and teachers' own voices regarding the meaning of professionalism is still underrepresented in the literature (Swann *et al.* 2010; Eusafzai 2017). The concept of professionalism in teaching is closely related to professional development (PD), since teachers' professionalism is linked to and is enhanced by PD (Kirkwood and Christie 2006; Evans 2008).

Several factors have been identified as having an impact on teachers' PD: these primarily include teachers' willingness to be responsible for their own learning and take active part in it (Mann 2005; Borg 2015a), the extent to which PD is supported by the educational leaders and administrators in the local context (Harwell 2003) and teachers' particular beliefs about PD (Richards *et al.* 2001). The current study therefore also explores EFL teachers' beliefs about the usefulness of PD activities, their engagement in different PD activities and what might promote or hinder them from participating in these activities.

Teachers' beliefs about professionalism and professional development have so far received little attention (al-Lamki 2009; de Vries *et al.* 2013), although initiatives to fill this gap have recently been undertaken by Wyatt and Ager (2017) and al-Balushi (2017). The study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What do EFL teachers at a public college in Oman think about professionalism? (2) What are these teachers' beliefs about the usefulness of different PD activities?

(3) To what degree do teachers make use of opportunities for developing as professionals? (4) What might promote/hinder teachers from engaging themselves in PD activities?

The paper starts with a description of the nature of the problem in the Omani context. After a review of relevant conceptual constructs in the area of professionalism and teacher development, the research methods and analytical framework are then described, followed by major findings and discussion.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Teachers' beliefs

A growing body of research into teachers' beliefs has suggested that they play a major role in pedagogical practices (Pajares 1992; Johnson 1994; Borg 2006, 2015b) and acceptance of new approaches and techniques (Donaghue 2003; Li 2008). In this context, however, Pajares (1992: 307) observes that the term 'belief' is a 'messy construct', and he explains that 'the difficulty in studying teachers' beliefs has been caused by definitional problems, poor conceptualizations, and differing understandings of beliefs and belief structures' In addition, he points out that 'beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do' (Pajares 1992: 314).

For the purpose of this study, Borg's (2011: 371) definition of beliefs was adopted: 'propositions individuals consider to be true and which are often tacit, have a strong evaluative and affective component, provide a basis for action and are resistant to change.' Different terms have been used to refer to beliefs such as 'views', 'perceptions', 'conceptions' and 'attitudes', to name but few. In this study these terms will be used interchangeably as the nuances in meanings do not affect the nature of the investigation.

## *2.2    Teacher professionalism*

### *2.2.1    The meaning of professionalism*

Reviewing the literature on professionalism reveals a lack of consensus on the meaning of the term (Goodson and Hargreaves 1996; Evans 2008). Leung (2009: 4) notes that 'professionalism is regularly used in a constitutive sense to refer to practitioners' knowledge, skills, and conduct.' However, different historical, political and social contexts, and tensions between different stakeholders and their interests, have led to multiple meanings (Hilferty 2008; Leung 2009). Stronach *et al.* (2002) argue that a single concept of professionalism ignores the complex and shifting nature of professional identity.

A traditional view of professionalism implies that professionals have a specialist knowledge base, commitment to clients' needs, strong collective identity and control over practice and professional standards (Day 1999). From this perspective, professionalism is related to the status of the profession, i.e. how an occupational group is viewed by the general public (Englund 1996). However, since teachers lack control over the setting of professional standards, teaching was in the past viewed only as a semi-profession (Etzioni 1969). Although this view has changed, because at least in most parts of the world teachers are now required to have specialist qualifications, Breshears (2004: 24) contends that EFL teaching is still a 'marginalized profession'. Thornbury (2001) explains that the 'lightness' of ELT teaching can be attributed to the entry requirements, which are quite often only based on knowledge of the English language. In Oman, Chirciu (2014) notes that in her own context in a private college, highly qualified teachers with PhDs and MAs teach alongside native speakers who do not necessarily have a degree related to the language education field.

A second view of professionalism implies a service-delivery mentality. Professionalism in EFL teaching is closely related to a client-oriented service approach (TESOL 2000). However, this is

usually seen as inadequate, mainly because many aspects of the service are difficult to tie to measurable performance standards (Farmer 2006). Moreover, Farmer (2006) explains that the danger of such an approach, which is the norm in EFL teaching, is that the client gets what the teacher has been trained to do rather than what the client needs. Therefore, he advocates an approach to professionalism in EFL teaching where the teacher is fully accountable to clients and responsible for assessing their needs and teaching accordingly. More generally, Hargreaves (2000) suggests that education has entered a stage of competition and marketization, in which there is an attempt to de-professionalize teachers by restricting their decision-making, prescribing centralised curricula and shifting them to temporary contracts.

Evans (2008) notes that many interpretations of professionalism focus on it as being imposed by external agencies, who establish professional standards. Although accountability within a quality assurance culture has become an integral part of many education systems (Biesta 2004), this extrinsic view of professionalism seems to be rather limited, as it ignores the individual who is also morally accountable to himself/herself (Campbell 2003, 2008). Campbell's argument is that professionalism in teaching cannot be represented by codes of practice in the form of extrinsic accountability, but should also include intrinsic accountability in the form of ethical understanding and conduct (see also Carr 2000; Campbell 2003). In this view of professionalism, teachers have to strike a balance between their moral purpose and their external accountability. Being responsible professionally is also seen as related to job satisfaction (Ifanti and Fotopoulopou 2011; Hoffman *et al.* 2016).


### 2.2.2 *Studies on EFL teachers' beliefs about professionalism*

Most research on teacher professionalism has been conducted in western countries and is mainly related to the school context. For example, Swann *et al.* (2010) report on a large-scale study conducted

in England in 2003 and 2006 that investigated 5700 primary and secondary English language school teachers' views on professionalism through a national survey. The findings reveal that teachers do not have a single integrated view of professionalism, but they share the core beliefs that classroom teaching is a complicated job that needs expertise, and that the teaching profession should be trusted by the government and the public. These beliefs are in line with the traditional view on professionalism.

In a Middle Eastern context, Chirciu (2014) has investigated tertiary EFL teachers' views about professionalism and professional identity in a private college in Oman. Although the participants did not share a single view of professionalism, the majority considered it to be 'a form of moral behaviour thus having an intrinsic nature where one is mainly accountable to oneself trying to abide by their own personal standards at the workplace' (Chirciu 2014: 56). Recently, Eusafzai (2017) explored 16 expatriate EFL teachers' perceptions of professionalism at a higher education institution in Saudi Arabia and found that teachers 'clearly regard themselves and their profession as a classic profession' and attached high prestige and social value to their service (Eusafzai 2017: 459). Eusafzai argues that the meaning of professionalism is rooted in individual perceptions rather than imposed by external forces.

### 2.3    Teachers' professional development

#### 2.3.1    The concept of PD

It has been emphasised that the nature of teaching requires teachers to engage in continuing professional development to keep pace with change and to renew their knowledge and skills (Day 1999; Vangrieken *et al.* 2017). Evans (2002, 2008), however, points out that the concept of teacher development is unclear and that the relevant literature lacks precise definitions of the term, while Craft

(2000) observes that the terms 'PD' and 'continuous professional development' (CPD) are used in a broad sense to refer to all forms of formal and informal learning undertaken by teachers throughout their careers. In this study, we will use 'PD' to refer to any process – formal or informal, self-directed or institutionalised, long or short term – that could enhance ongoing PD of teachers.

### 2.3.2   Approaches to PD

The most prominent form of top-down PD is in-service education and training (INSET) provided by institutions as courses, workshops or seminars, which focuses on institutional and organisational demands (Craft 2000; Richards and Farrell 2005). INSET sessions are usually imposed on teachers and presented by experts from outside the organisation as one-shot workshops. Even in longer INSET courses, teachers function largely as consumers of knowledge and are expected to apply that knowledge in their classrooms (Borg 2015a). This transmission model of teachers' learning ignores teachers' practical knowledge and experiences and reflects the view that teachers need to be trained and developed (Hargreaves and Fullan 1992). Teachers also feel that they are not treated as professionals when they are not actively involved in planning and designing PD sessions and workshops (Alsalahi 2015).

Another issue is that teachers might undervalue their own knowledge and experience, believing that knowledge received from external trainers is more valuable (Borg 2015a). In fact, al-Balushi (2017: 168) argues that the top-down centralized education system in Oman has 'moulded teachers' way of understanding PD to mean INSET courses and workshops that should be provided by the Ministry of Education and should be delivered by experts or people who have more experience than them.'

In contrast to this approach is a widespread view that teachers instead should be responsible for their own learning (Mann 2005; Borg 2015a), and that bottom-up approaches have more potential for transformative change in teaching and learning. Teachers can engage in a variety of individual formal and informal activities in order to enhance their PD: attending or presenting at conferences, conducting research and upgrading qualification are examples of formal activities. Reflective practice, self-observation, keeping a teaching journal, reading academic journals/books and researching information or checking teachers' resources on the internet are some examples of informal activities.

Self-initiated development does not mean that teachers have to develop in solitude (Vangriekien *et al.* 2017). Teachers can collaborate with colleagues, which has the advantage that teachers do not only understand better their own experiences but also enrich others with the same (Richards and Farrell 2005). Peer observation, peer coaching, mentoring, team teaching and teacher support groups are examples of collaborative activities. Peer observation can be either self-initiated by teachers or an institutional requirement. Currently, teachers tend to identify observation with evaluation and therefore regard it as a negative experience. However, if it is non-evaluative, it can be a positive experience for both novice and experienced teachers, since it provides an opportunity to interact and to share their experience, and it triggers self-reflection (Richards and Farrell 2005). This has been found to be the case in Oman (al-Balushi 2017), where peer observation is part of the annual PD plan for EFL teachers. It is seen by most teachers as useful despite feeling that they need more training (al-Habsi 2009).


### 2.3.3   *Key factors for the success of PD*

Teachers' motivation and willingness to engage in PD activities are seen as key factors for the success of PD (Pettis 2002; Mann 2005). The institution also plays a major role in the

enhancement of teachers' PD (Harwell 2003; Mann 2005) – as such, institutions should involve teachers in the planning and delivering of PD programmes so that the content matches teachers' needs. Richards and Farrell (2005) emphasize that successful PD activities need to be supported and rewarded (see also Day 1999; al-Balushi 2017). Most importantly, since teachers' beliefs and attitudes have a major impact on the extent to which teachers seek opportunities for PD, institutions need to consider these beliefs and attitudes for PD to be conducive (Borg 2015b).

### 2.3.4   Studies on teachers' beliefs about PD

Teachers in various contexts have a traditional view on PD and consider courses, conferences and workshops as critical PD activities (Hustler *et al.* 2003; Karaaslan 2003; al-Lamki 2009; Raza 2010; al-Balushi 2017). For example, al-Maskari (2015) noted that a practical INSET course called 'Research for Professional Development' that was offered to Omani EFL teachers was seen as valuable by the participants. It enhanced teachers' knowledge about research, which in turn increased their confidence in their abilities as researchers. It even had a positive impact on their teaching. Al-Busaidi and Tuzlukova (2014: 79) stated that 58% of the 38 participants who took part in PD courses reported that 'they have started to do many things differently since they attended professional development sessions.' In contrast, some teachers found that PD sessions that are designed and delivered in a top-down manner neglect teachers' professionalism and do not deal with teachers' needs (Alsalahi 2015). In the Omani context, the participants expressed their dissatisfaction that they were not involved in any decision about their PD (al-Lamki 2009; al-Balushi 2017). Teacher resistance to PD sessions was also reported by Yilmaz (2015), since teachers felt that they would not benefit from them.

In regard to bottom-up PD, Raza (2010) pointed out that activities such as reading professional literature or engaging in professional dialogue were rarely employed by the teachers, because they were seen by the institution as less formal. Collaborative activities such as sharing experiences and problems with colleagues and working on developing course material were found to be crucial for teachers' professional development (Karslaan 2003), but such activities were regarded as less important in the Omani context (al-Lamki 2009). Hustler *et al.* (2003) note that the activities which teachers spent time on were mostly related to improving teaching skills and that little time was spent on reflection. Activities such as supporting reflective teaching, exchanging ideas and experiences with colleagues and doing peer observation, among others, were also seen as beneficial by participants in Wyatt and Ager's (2017) study. Across these contexts, the most important factors seen to hinder growth and change in teachers were excessive workload, financial problems, a lack of motivation and a lack of institutional support.

## 3    Methodology

This study is informed by an interpretive approach which stems from the premise that the social world cannot be studied from outside a social context (Grix 2010). The adoption of an exploratory methodology reflects the agenda of the study, which seeks to gain comprehensive insights into EFL teachers' beliefs about professionalism and professional development through the employment of focus group interviews. This follows a strong tendency in the literature to investigate teacher cognition qualitatively, because this approach allows for in-depth contextualized understandings of cognition that are of local relevance (Borg 2015b).

### 3.1 The study context

This small-scale study was conducted in the post-foundation programme of the English Language Centre (ELC) in a public college in Oman where one of the authors was a faculty member. The courses are designed to enhance students' academic skills such as academic writing, presentation skills, public speaking and technical communication. All the teaching materials were prepared in-house to better meet the students' needs. Teachers have to follow a strict delivery plan to cover the material of the course book. The courses are credited and each course consists of four hours per week over a period of 14 weeks on average.

EFL teachers in Oman are recruited internationally and are mainly from India, Pakistan and the Philippines. Some are Arabic-speakers from Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt and Syria and a few teachers are Omani nationals. Therefore, teachers come from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. As a requirement to join the institution, teachers need to hold a Masters (MA) or Bachelors (BA) degree in an English major, although teachers who are specialised in educational management are also hired as long as they are competent in English. Omani nationals, however, need to have an MA degree in English education. Beside a teaching load of 18 hours per week, teachers have administrative duties such as recording students' attendance and grades and keeping a course file for each semester. They also have three office hours per week where students can meet them. Students are mostly Omani nationals but come from different parts of the country. Very few students come from Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Tunisia and Syria. Therefore, the majority of the students share a similar background in terms of first language, culture, religion and education.

### 3.2 Participants

Sampling followed the criteria of purposiveness and convenience (Dörnyei 2007). In regard to the former, the participants were chosen according to specific criteria and characteristics. These included choosing participants from the ELC department to represent the diversity of the ELC members such as background, religion, teaching experience and qualification. The participants consisted of 11 teachers (five male, six female) coming from eight different countries: India, Iraq, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, South Africa and Tunisia, as well as Oman. The majority are MA graduates, but one is a BA graduate and two are PhD holders of different English majors. Their teaching experience in their own countries and Oman varied between 15 and 35 years. Convenience of access to the participants also played a role in sampling. Ethical procedures were addressed and all participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The following pseudonyms were used: Tala, Nayla, Vanessa, Karim, Essam, Hassan, Anita, Adel, Thuraya, Shadi and Samira.

### 3.3 Data collection method

Data were collected through the focus group method, which is well established in education and social research (Punch and Oancea 2014). While individual interviews provide an opportunity for detailed investigation of each person's perspective (Ritchie *et al.* 2014), focus group has the advantage that the interaction among the participants will generate a rich variety of data (Newby 2010). Interaction between the participants allows them to express their views, listen to others, reflect on what is said and thereby refine their viewpoints further. One of the criticisms of the focus group method is that data collection remains at the surface level if one or two participants dominate the research process or if the participants have the tendency to express socially acceptable opinions (Newby 2010). However, in this instance the topic is not of a sensitive

nature and every care was taken that all participants were provided with equal chances to participate in the discussion.

For practical reasons two focus group discussions were conducted with 6 teachers each; one on professionalism and the other on PD (Appendix). Nayla was the only teacher who attended both discussions. Each discussion lasted for about one hour and was recorded, which allowed for the transcription of the discussion. The interactions among the participants in both focus groups yielded a wide range of opinions and therefore served the purpose of the study.

## 3.4 *Analytical framework*

The focus group data were approached according to thematic analysis. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), this consists of familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes and reviewing them, defining and naming these themes and finally producing the results. First, the focus group transcripts were read carefully. Then, the words/phrases that are relevant to the aim of the study were coded and given an informative label (Punch and Oancea 2014; Ritchie *et al.* 2014). For example, the phrases 'the way you conduct yourself' and 'assessing your own performance' were coded and labelled 'behaviour' and 'extrinsic accountability' respectively. At this stage, the coding was rather at the level of description. At the interpretive level, the codes were collated to potential themes/categories and organised to answer the research questions.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 *Teachers' beliefs about professionalism*

Three major categories in relation to the meaning of professionalism emerged from the data: qualification and PD; external accountability versus intrinsic accountability; and attitude and behaviour (moral values).

Vanessa considered professionalism to be related to the qualification of the teacher, thus reflecting the traditional view on professionalism as shown here:

We teachers at this institution are all professionals because we have the qualification.

The other participants contested the view that qualification is a sufficient indicator of professionalism, as Essam notes:

We have professional people with unprofessional attitude so it's not only education. If someone has the qualification but comes late to class then he's not professional.

Here Essam emphasizes the notion that professionalism is inseparable from behaviour and attitude, an argument put forward by Evans (2003, 2008). All six participants acknowledged the importance of developing themselves professionally. As explained by Karim:

Professionalism means not to stop learning. You do not just say ok, now I have my job. Every day there has to be update of knowledge.

Three participants had an extrinsic view of professionalism. For example:

Professionalism has to do with accountability to society, students, parents and the surrounding (Hassan).

For these participants professionalism means abiding by the rules and regulations set by the institution even if they contradict teachers' own beliefs. Vanessa explains:

If an institution has the policy that teachers shouldn't be involved in preparing exams although they have the qualification, then we have to respect this policy. We shouldn't complain.

However, the importance of individual professionalism was also highlighted. For example, Karim states:

Professionalism means assessing your own performance. It has to come from the self. I am not waiting for X, Y, Z being my head or coordinator to tell me, oh, you're not performing well. No, I've my own indicator and I work according to that.

This reflects Campbell's (2003) view that professionals should not depend on others to define their professionalism. It seems that the teachers' practices in this context are informed by sponsored and individual professionalism as suggested by Leung (2009).

The participants related professionalism to the individual in the form of behaviour and attitude. Karim explains:

> Professionalism is the way the teacher behaves towards the students, the
>
> colleagues, the administration and the surroundings.

Essam adds that professionalism also means 'being social and culture sensitive'. Therefore, behaviour should be based on shared beliefs accepted in a particular context. He remarks:

> The shared beliefs are different from one society to another and being professional
>
> in one place doesn't mean being professional in another.

What is acceptable behaviour, then, is not based only on an individual view. Behaviour has to be adjusted in order to fit the norms of a certain context. The participants also stressed that professionalism is related to relationships with colleagues who come from different backgrounds:

> Respecting their views, listening to their concerns and sharing experiences with
>
> them is part of professionalism (Nayla).

The ethical responsibility of serving students to foster learning was also seen as related to professionalism. Adel explains that teachers should detach themselves from feelings and emotions and just focus on students' needs. In this regard Essam notes the following:

I believe that teaching is a very complicated job. It's different from any other job.
We may feel bitter, we may feel upset with something but when we step in the
classroom and face the students it's a different event. We cannot just cheat them
because we're not well. This is part of being a teacher.

The discussion reveals that teachers associated professionalism with different aspects. However,
they share the core belief that professionalism is mainly a form of moral behaviour and attitude
that is socially and culturally sensitive.

## 4.2 External factors affecting professionalism

All the participants acknowledged that external factors that are outside the control of the
individual could affect professionalism. Job security was seen as the main factor here, as Essam
states:

There is no real job security. Teachers are not sure if they're going to continue in
the same place in the following year. This can have a very bad effect on their
behaviour and on their stability as teachers. For teachers to do well they need to
feel safe and when people don't feel safe they behave in a strange way.

Essam further explains that most teachers in this context have a one-year contract and the
renewal of their contract depends on certain criteria. The teachers, therefore, might adapt their
behaviour or practice to ensure contact renewal, a view that was supported by all the

participants. In addition, Nayla mentions that feedback based on classroom observation at this institution is mostly negative:

> If you always listen to the negative aspects of your teaching this can pull you down no matter how good you are.

All the teachers thought that a reward system is needed to enhance professionalism. This could be in the form of money or just a 'thank you'. But 'this is missing in this environment', Nayla remarks. The responsibility of the management is also highlighted by Tala:

> If the top management insists their teachers to grow professionally they would by all means facilitate things that help teachers to grow professionally.

Since professionalism is linked to continuous learning, the management is also seen as responsible for the enhancement of PD. However, Vanessa notes that in this institution 'we do not have many PD courses.' She adds:

> I think we should have this kind of discussion more often in this institution. I feel this is lacking.

The findings reveal the teachers' awareness that professionalism is not only the responsibility of the individual but that the institution also plays an important role in enhancing professionalism

by providing job security, fair treatment, recognition and equal opportunities for all teachers to grow.

### *4.3 The importance of PD*

The participants believe that PD is necessary for all teachers, as Samira states: 'Everybody needs it. We can do our job in a better way.' Most teachers related PD to training courses and workshops provided at the workplace in addition to attending conferences, seminars and workshops outside the institution. Nevertheless, the teachers acknowledged that only some workshops are useful. Thuraya explains:

> It depends on how it is related to your work area. Since the topics for workshops at the college are usually chosen by the administration, it might be that they don't meet all teachers' needs.

She suggests:

> A questionnaire could be sent to the teachers to identify the areas which are needed for development and the workshops can be designed accordingly.

Studying for a higher degree, research and publishing were seen as part of PD by a few participants, although as Nayla added 'it is not necessarily needed at the workplace.'

Sharing teaching experiences with colleagues and supporting each other was seen as most useful to enhance PD by all the participants. For example, as Tala admits:

Sometimes I find that there are certain teaching methods that I could learn from my colleague.

All, except one, thought that peer observation could enhance their PD. Shadi asserts that peer observation helped him at the beginning of his career, while Samira adds that for peer-observation to be useful it is 'better to have people who are sincere and fair and polite. Someone you trust.' The classroom and the learners were also identified as useful sources of PD.

The findings indicate the participants' awareness that PD involves formal and informal activities that could be pursued individually or collectively. However, the activities that were seen as most useful were those that could help them acquire skills to operate effectively in their own teaching context to overcome some problems related to the classroom.

### 4.4    Responsibility of PD

Most participants acknowledged that PD is the responsibility of the individual. For example, Nayla asserted:

You are responsible for your PD. If you have no desire, you're not motivated then you're not going to change.

It was also acknowledged that PD is 'an ongoing process' (Anita). Nevertheless, four participants emphasised that the institution plays an important role in the professional development of their staff. Samira, for instance, believes the following:

When the staff management team finds some weaknesses, they should have

workshops to deal with that, so we can meet the expectations they set.

Thuraya, who had the assignment as the e-learning coordinator, expects to receive training on

how to operate Moodle. Adel stresses that PD that is initiated by the institution is more effective

because 'they know exactly what is needed – what is required.' Overall, it seems that teachers

acknowledge their responsibility regarding PD, but at the same time they feel that the institution

they work for is responsible for their PD. Their beliefs could have an impact on their choice of

PD activities.

### 4.5    *Teachers' engagement in PD activities*

Although the teachers are aware of several useful PD activities, their engagement in PD is

mostly restricted to compulsory top-down PD activities. Self-initiated PD activities consisted

mainly of attending off-site workshops and regional conferences and collaborating with

colleagues. Thuraya is the only participant who keeps a teaching journal to reflect on her

practice. The internet is mostly used for browsing teachers' resources or information related to

ELT. For example, Thuraya said that she used the internet to prepare for a workshop on how to

teach vocabulary.

Peer observation is not practised by any of the participants in this context, although some

participants find it useful from their previous teaching experience in other institutions. Likewise,

conducting research, publishing, reading academic literature and using the college library were

not reported to be practised. This shows that the teachers' engagement in self-initiated PD activities is rather limited.

### *4.6    Factors affecting teachers' PD*

The teachers' choice to participate in PD activities was influenced by several factors which can be classified into beliefs, contextual factors and personal factors.

In general, the participants believed that PD activities that could enhance their context and problem-solving skills were the most useful activities. This might be why the teachers mostly engaged themselves with activities such as attending pedagogically relevant workshops or collaborating with colleagues, but did not engage in activities such as upgrading their qualification or reading academic literature. The teachers also valued the top-down approach to PD because they believed that it would help them satisfy the college's needs. This belief could also explain the teachers' low engagement in self-initiated PD activities. More specifically, the findings provided some evidence that individual beliefs about the effectiveness of a certain activity could encourage/discourage the teachers to engage in a particular activity.

Contextual factors that had an influence on the participants' engagement in PD included activities such as workload, release time, lack of encouragement, lack of recognition and lack of financial support. For example, Samira points out that the teachers are not allowed to cancel classes in order to attend an ELT conference unless they find somebody who can cover their classes. Such lack of release time and a lack of financial support were considered to be major obstacles for attending conferences. All the teachers complained about the heavy workload, which also included many other academic and administrative duties. Adel's comment illustrates this point:

But in our case how can we devote our time for this [PD] if we are involved in so

many things which are peripheral to the teaching field? For example, the quality

assurance asks us to spend so many hours on the attendance. Is this important - as

important as the teaching process? Why? Why do I have to spend so many hours

on this instead of developing myself?

The participants also felt that the institution did not have a reward system for those teachers who

present at a conference, publish a paper or assist in preparing a textbook. Lack of

acknowledgement can discourage teachers from making an effort to grow professionally. In

addition, the teachers found that the physical conditions of the classrooms were not up to date.

Nayla complains:

The classrooms do not even have proper boards not to mention projectors. We do

not have the minimum basic requirements.

If the institution does not update itself in terms of equipment and resources the teachers might

not feel encouraged to develop professionally.

Personal factors can also affect teachers' PD. For example, Samira notes that some

conferences are held on weekends and 'on weekends many of us have family commitments. I

mean we cannot obviously go on a weekend.'

## 5        Discussion and conclusion

Biesta (2004) argues that the teaching profession has undergone a paradigm shift of accountability – from professional accountability in which teachers were morally accountable to themselves to technical-managerial accountability in which teachers are accountable to external demands through the quality assurance culture. The findings from the current study indicate that different aspects of professionalism concerned the participants. While one participant related professionalism mainly to having a qualification, the other participants found that ongoing PD, extrinsic and intrinsic accountability and a student service-oriented approach are the main aspects of professionalism. Teaching was seen as a difficult job, since it requires commitment and dedication to students' needs (Eusafzai 2017). Most importantly, contrary to Biesta's (2004) argument, the participants found that professionalism demands striking a balance between one's standards of moral values and incorporating standards and codes of ethics which are sensitive in institutional, cultural and social terms (Campbell 2008; Chircui 2014). In this sense, professionalism is not a fixed construct and teachers need to reconstruct their professionalism according to the context.

It can be argued that the participants' practices are informed by sponsored and independent professionalism (Leung 2009). Although the teachers lack autonomy in certain areas such as testing or teaching content they are still autonomous in their ethical judgments in relation to students, colleagues and the administration. However, they are aware that these judgments should not be based on individual perceptions but should also be context sensitive. Therefore, we would argue that external accountability has not led to the de-professionalisation of teachers. Moreover, the participants found that a lack of job security, temporary contracts, negative feedback, unfair treatment and a lack of recognition could all have a negative impact on

professionalism – all of which support the literature in this regard. These are the issues that senior management needs to address

Regarding PD, all the participants agreed that this is essential for all teachers. The participants related PD mainly to activities such as attending conferences, workshops, training sessions and seminars, a view that seems to be common in the Omani context (al-Lamki 2009; al-Balushi 2017). The participants also showed awareness that bottom-up approaches could enhance PD, in particular collaborative activities with colleagues. However, their views regarding PD could be described as rather limited, similar to the findings in Alsalahi's (2015) study. Although the participants believed that the individual was responsible for PD, the majority felt that PD was also the responsibility of the institution, which could help them satisfy its needs. It seems that PD was seen as an opportunity to solve context-related issues regarding teaching and learning rather than a life-long learning process, supporting similar arguments made by Raza (2010), and al-Balushi (2017).

Although PD is seen as an integral part of professionalism, the teachers do not engage themselves actively in their own PD, an issue that has been addressed by al-Balushi (2017). This could be related to their beliefs, their work context and their personal circumstances. For PD to be more effective, teachers need to expand their views about PD from being context-focused to a focus on professional growth and lifelong learning. However, change in teachers' beliefs requires change in the approach of the institution to teachers' PD. First, the institution should provide teachers with a proper platform to grow by encouraging and rewarding them to conduct action research, presenting papers at conferences and conducting workshops. Reduced workload, release time, financial support and recognition would encourage teachers to participate in these activities, which would not only be beneficial for the individual's professional growth but would

inevitably uplift the professionalism of the institution itself. The institution should also incorporate free time in teachers' schedule for them to participate more in informal PD activities such as collaborating with colleagues and discussing problems and concerns. Most importantly, the institution should listen to teachers' suggestions for the improvement of the curriculum and PD that could in turn enhance the quality of teaching.

This study has shed some light on the meaning of professionalism from teachers' perspectives and has highlighted the role of the institution in enhancing professionalism and PD. It has also provided some insights into the relationship between teachers' beliefs about PD and their participation in PD activities, thereby acknowledging the significance of including teachers' beliefs into research on PD.

Nevertheless, this study is confronted with several limitations. The small-scale nature of the qualitative study does not allow the obtained findings to be generalizable to other contexts. Also, data for the current study were collected through one data-collection method (focus groups). The employment of multiple data collection methods could have yielded more in-depth results. Therefore, further qualitative studies are needed to see if teachers in other institutions share similar beliefs about professionalism and PD. Moreover, beliefs could be explored in relation to gender and/or teachers' experience, which might provide a more detailed picture about teachers' beliefs in regard to these issues.

**Appendix: Focus Group interview guide on professionalism and professional development**

| Professionalism |
| --- |
| 1.      As an English language teacher, what does professionalism mean to you? |

2.        What factors could enhance professionalism?

3.        What factors could have a negative impact on professionalism?

**Professional development**

1.        What do you understand by the term professional development?

2.        Who do you think should be responsible for the professional development of a teacher? Explain why?

3.        There are different kinds of professional development activities. Which one(s) do you find useful? Why?

4.        What professional development activities do you usually engage yourself with/are you engaged in? Why?

5.        Are there any factors that might hinder you from participating/engaging yourself with professional development activities?

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