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# ANALYSING THE IMPACT OF AN ACTION RESEARCH DRIVEN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL ON THE ENGAGEMENT AND FREQUENCY OF COMPLETED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY PRIMARY TEACHERS

**ROB MCCALL**

Victory Heights Primary School  
rmccall@vhprimary.com



**VICTORY HEIGHTS  
PRIMARY SCHOOL**  
NURTURE • CHALLENGE • EXCEL

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of short-term action research projects as a potential driver in instilling a learning and development culture through internal Professional Development (PD) sessions. Underpinned by the suggestions of study 'Beyond PD' (Jensen et al., 2016), this study will analyse the impact of a PD programme structure that is built from six 'pathways' (action research projects) and utilises middle leaders as the drivers of session engagement and post-session impact and continuity.

## Research Objectives

Professional development is a 'wicked' problem in education that is almost impossible to solve (Francis, 2016). For many, this point will 'ring true' and represents the perception of teachers and leaders in schools worldwide (Badri et al., 2016). If this sounds familiar, consider the following: Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore and British Columbia are recognised as the four highest attaining institutes worldwide. What do they have in common? Professional development is placed as the number one focus area for school improvement plans and all school improvement is built from PD. Governing bodies, policy makers and leaders send a clear message to these schools: student learning is what matters most, effective professional learning is the best way to improve student learning, and evaluation and accountability will help embed the professional learning in schools and ensure its quality (Jensen et al., 2016).

Branded as 'CPD Pathways', six action research areas have been identified by the school leadership team based on feedback from the Dubai School Inspection Board (DSIB) inspection in 2024 and emerging themes that have been identified throughout the school year. A combination of middle and senior leaders have been selected to plan, implement and lead these six action research projects. All teaching staff will be part of this project, where each participant will make their own choice for the 'pathway' they would like to contribute towards and will actively participate in research that will present tested suggestions that contribute towards the school development plan.

## Method

Action research and PD are naturally entwined, as effective PD is powered through prior research and the findings and suggestions of others (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015). Research group leaders will have 4 x 90-minute internal PD sessions to guide the group members through the project. Each session has been planned to supplement specific stages of the research project. The launch session will explore pre-existing literature and narrow down the specific research question, and later sessions will consider the method, data collection, result analysis and concluding points, along with future suggestions. Each internal PD session will be supplemented by the group members using time throughout the school day to action next steps in the research project and collect data.

This model generates smaller group sizes, which in-turn create a university 'seminar style'; increase accountability, are driven by middle leaders; and allow staff choice. It is predicted that this will create a PD structure with high staff engagement during the internal PD sessions as well as increasing the contribution of staff completing PD taking place throughout the school day.

## Participants

71 primary classroom and specialist teachers will participate in the study. Group sizes range from 10-15 participants, based on the choices that the

participants made for the action research pathway which was of most interest to them.

### Data collection

Whilst each of the six action research studies will collect data in a variety of methods, this study, focussing on the use of action research to support engagement in whole school PD, will use survey results collected before and after the action research projects and post study one-to-one appraisal meetings to review the perception, engagement and impact of this approach to PD.

## Results

### Survey responses

Prior to the action research project, a staff CPD survey was completed by 71 primary classroom and specialist teachers.

**Figure 1** demonstrates that prior to the action research (AR) project 81% of teaching staff found the current model for internal PD to often provide engaging sessions. This number remained the same after the AR project, however the percentage of teachers who acknowledged internal PD to 'always' be engaging rose by 8%, to reflect 25% of all staff responses. Of the 13 responses which reflected 'sometimes' or 'rarely', 11 of these responses came from Arabic or Islamic teachers and remained the same both prior to and following the AR project.

**Figure 1**

Staff responses when asked: 'Do you feel engaged during internal PD sessions?'

% of Responses	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
% of staff responses prior to AR	0%	3%	16%	64%	17%
% of staff responses after AR	0%	3%	16%	56%	25%

**Figure 2** highlights that PD was recognised as having an impact by 86% of staff prior to the AR and by 88% of staff after the AR project. A larger percentage increase can be observed between the number of staff who perceived PD as 'always' having an impact on their teaching, which rose from 15% to 27%.

Figure 3 demonstrates that a small minority of staff (14%) 'often' completed PD throughout the working day prior to the AR project. This number increased to 28% following the AR project. Additionally, there was a reduction in the number of staff who 'rarely' completed PD (25% prior to AR, 14% post AR).

**Figure 2**

Staff responses when asked: 'Do you feel that internal PD has an impact on your teaching practice?'

% of Responses	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
% of staff responses prior to AR	0%	1%	14%	71%	15%
% of staff responses after AR	0%	1%	11%	61%	27%

**Figure 3** demonstrates that a small minority of staff (14%) 'often' completed PD throughout the working day prior to the AR project. This number increased to 28% following the AR project. Additionally, there was a reduction in the number of staff who 'rarely' completed PD (25% prior to AR, 14% post AR).

**Figure 3**

**Staff responses when asked 'How often do you complete PD outside of the internal PD allocated slot?'**

% of Responses	Never	Rarely (half-termly)	Sometimes (weekly)	Often (2-3 days)	Always (daily)
% of staff responses prior to AR	0%	25%	61%	11%	3%
% of staff responses after AR	0%	14%	58%	22%	6%

### **Feedback from one-to-one appraisal**

In preparation for the end of year one-to-one appraisal meetings staff completed a self-performance review. Within this they were asked to reflect on their PD. A significant number of staff identified that the AR project had impacted on their teaching practice and reflected on this as “one of the highlights of the academic year”, as well as “bringing energy and passion to post-inspection, term 3”. Furthermore, responses indicated that staff “enjoyed the opportunity to be part of a project with a whole school impact” and others reflected that they preferred the smaller group size PD, as opposed to whole school, as it helped to “increase their active engagement” and “prevented them relying on others to answer questions”.

### **Results**

It is evident from the results that this model of PD has had a positive effect on staff engagement in PD; the impact of PD on staff teaching; and encouraged staff to complete PD outside of the allocated weekly timeslot.

A significant contributing factor in this seems to be the preference of staff to complete smaller group PD sessions, as opposed to whole school PD (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). The results also support the work of (Jensen et al., 2016)) who suggests that middle leaders should be utilised as they are key drivers for internal PD, becoming the link between the aims of the leadership team and the realities of the classroom teachers. This is most notable in the increased percentage of staff who ‘often’ completed PD throughout the school day and not only in the weekly allocated PD slot.

The opportunity for staff to contribute directly towards whole school initiatives has also supported an increase, particularly with reference to the frequency of PD taking place throughout the school day. Recognising that the AR they are completing is having an effect on themselves and colleagues helped to engage staff to consider, in depth, the different steps and suggestions they would make about their specific action research projects.

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