



# Towards a Sociocultural Approach on Teachers' Professional Development in Bahrain

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews the concept of professional development and how it has been influenced by the major educational theories. Mainly, this paper argues for a call of a different perspective of the concept professional development in education and provides a critical rationale through certain actions and stands that were initiated by some parties in the domain. The paper also concludes with a proposed a new paradigm for viewing teacher continual professional development from a socio-cultural point of view.

**Keywords:** sociocultural theory, teacher professional development, teacher education, Education Reform in Bahrain

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding theories on learning and human development are important for educators because they provide systematic guidance for comprehending the complexity of teaching and learning processes in schools and other educational settings (Eun, 2010; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013; National Research Council, 2000). Learning theories can help in finding new ways for improving our educational practices and discovering about the unknowns of our minds. McDevitt and Ormrod (2013) define theories as “the organized systems of principles and explanations regarding a particular phenomenon” (p.11). There are many learning theories that are discussed in details in psychology textbooks for example: the biological theories, behaviourism, psychodynamic theories, cognitive-developmental theories, sociocultural theories and many others. Yet, *what is professional development? How is professional development perceived within these theories? And what implications could the sociocultural theory have on the current concepts and models of professional development in Bahrain?* The present paper begins with a brief description of two well-known learning theories that are widely used in the educational field, they are: behaviourism and cognitive constructivism. More in depth exploration is done next to the sociocultural theory, its perspectives, implications on teaching practices in

general, and on teachers professional development in Bahrain in particular.

## 2. BEHAVIOURISM AND COGNITIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM

To begin with, behaviourism was a dominant learning theory from the 1930s to the 1970s and it is still widely used in many classrooms today. The early work of behaviourist psychologists (e.g. Pavlov, Skinner and Thorndike) proposed a psychological approach which emphasised experimental methods in studying the observable behaviours of animals and humans. Their studies focused on experimenting stimulus-response patterns of conditioned behaviours, reinforcement, and behaviour shaping (Mergel, 1998; Smith, 1998). Behaviourists conceptualised learning as a process of creating connections between stimuli and responses. They assumed that motivation to learn is pushed by external environmental forces such as punishment and rewards. Rewards, for example, can increase the strength of connections between stimuli and responses, therefore, learning in this regard is understood to be the product of this process (National Research Council, 2000).

Further, Cognitive constructivism is one of the significant theoretical approaches which have challenged the



behaviouristic 'atomization' view of knowledge. This theory is originated from the work of Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Human cognition, according to this view, develops through two processes: (a) assimilation: which includes the process of assimilating external actions into thoughts and fitting new mental models into the existing mental structures; and, (b) accommodation: which includes the process of structuring the adopted mental material in the mind. The latter process develops through four major periods of human life: (1) the sensorimotor period; (2) the pre-operational period; (3) the concrete-operational period; and, (4) the formal-operational period (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). Learners, according to this perspective, are seen as actively making sense of the environment by constructing their understanding through the development of autonomous mental models as they are learning through expanding their mental models by incorporating the new learning situations into the previous constructed models (Tuomi-Grohn, 2005).

It is a fact that behaviourism and constructivism are still widely applied in the educational and psychological fields because of their influential insights. The first theory focuses on the development of the skill, while the second theory emphasises on conceptual understanding, problem solving and reasoning strategies (Sfard, 1998). However, both theories share a perspective of learning as a process which occurs internally within the individual learner. Although these theorists pointed out to some environment factors that influence learning, such as reinforcement and experiences in physical surroundings, they do not give explicit attention to the role of the social context as a powerful factor on learning. Kelly (2006) argues that these cognitive understandings of learning share a common view of learners who acquire knowledge or skills in one setting and then can automatically transfer this knowledge or skills elsewhere. The cognitive models seem to overlook the complexity of learning because they view the learning process and the knowledge acquisition as located mainly in the learners' minds. These models also overlook the knowledge distributed in the social context and learning acquired through participation of different individuals such as teachers and learners in shared goal tasks.

### 3. THE SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

The sociocultural theory brings a different perspective to explain the learning process in the way it views learning as an action that occurs through the active participation of the individual in a wider social practices mediated by social interactions and cultural tools. Therefore, learning, according to this theory, is separated from its social context. The sociocultural theory was a product of Vygotsky's, a Russian psychologist, writings remained unpublished in the Western world until the 1970s.

Central set of principles for sociocultural theory and a growing body of empirical research were developed by Vygotsky and his colleagues and many other scholars around the world (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Moll et al., 1992; Rogoff, 1990; Tharp and Gallimore, 1998; Wood, 1998). The sociocultural school of thought has developed a new conceptualisation of how people think and act.

Humans according to this theory are genetically social, they cannot exist or develop normally in isolation of others. Humans interact with each other. They communicate using language, signs and symbols. They also use different tools to organise and control their behaviours. All these tools are created and developed in specific contexts of cultures and societies. In this respect, Vygotsky argued that certain types of higher mental functions such as deliberative attention, verbal and conceptual thinking cannot develop without the constructive assistance of such social and cultural mediation (Ivic, 2000).

The sociocultural theory defines knowledge as "situated in specific cultural contexts created and developed overtime to solve real life problems that occur within that culture and society" (Eun, 2010, p.405). Knowledge according to this view is co-created among expert (e.g. teacher, parent, mentor) and novices (e.g. students, children, adult learners) as they all engage in inquiry based activities that serve to solve authentic and meaningful problems. Knowledge is also seen as a human creation rather than a given fact and its located in the social and cultural context of learning not just in the mind of the learner (Eun, 2010).

Understanding human development, according to the sociocultural perspective requires understanding the extended social world. Vygotsky suggests that cognitive development cannot be understood by just studying the individual; the extended social world must also be examined because focusing mainly on studying the individual can separate human functioning into smaller elements that no longer work as does the larger living unit (Rogoff *et al.*, 2003; Rowe & Wertsch, 2002; Siegler & Alibali, 2005).

The basic unit of analysis in studying human development in the sociocultural theory is no longer the properties of the individual; it also includes processes of the sociocultural activity that involves the active participation of people in socially constituted practices (Rogoff, 1990). Human behaviour in this view is a triad of subject, object and mediating tools. The unit of analysis consists of an object oriented action mediated by cultural tools (Engestrom, 1987).



The Sociocultural theory argues that the basic mechanism for development is mediation. It is a process where all higher cognitive functions develop. Kozulin (2003) identified three types of mediation: mediation through social interactions, mediation through material tools, and mediation through symbolic systems. Social interactions are vital in the learning process. Vygotsky proposed that cognition develops through two processes. First, at the 'inter-mental' level (between people involved in social interactions), and later at the 'intra-mental' level (within the individual). Vygotsky introduced the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) to explain cognition development in the inter- and intra- mental levels. Vygotsky (1978) defined ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p. 86)". For example, when children are supported by social partners while doing cognitive tasks, these social interactions can help children to gradually internalise higher cognitive functions and this eventually allow them to perform the tasks on their own without external assistance (Rowe & Wertsch, 2002; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In other words, as students' thinking develops, they take more responsibility for increasingly difficult tasks. The role for a teacher according to this view is to find the developmental zone in which a student can approach a more difficult task with the appropriate amount and type of support. Over time the student begins to take more control over that kind of task (Cole, 1985).

The sociocultural theory also proposes that human cognitive development is influenced not just by social interactions but also by cultural tools. These tools include material tools (e.g. calculators, computers, or smart phones) and symbolic systems (e.g. spoken and written language, signs, symbols, number systems, rituals, models of behaviours, scientific concepts, and techniques that assist memory in thinking). These tools affect the way people organise, process, and remember information. Cultural tools are considered to be an extensions or amplifiers of human capacities. Language as a symbolic system, for example, can be used as a means of communication and can also be used as a means to control and regulate thinking. Language can be used to plan actions, remember information, solve problems and organise behaviour. These cultural and social tools are not static or rigid, they can be developed by different people in various cultural groups over time (Ivic, 2000).

Learning in the sociocultural perspective is regarded not just as a separate activity undertaken for its own sake, but rather as a process which occurs in a larger context where

knowledge has a functional importance for the learner. This process of linking the individual understanding with the wider context can help the learner to achieve a personal goal that is also socially valued within the community (Wells, 1999). Vygotsky regarded education as closely connected with development. He viewed education as not just a process of acquisition of a body of information but instead as a source of development. Education have to promote learner's development by providing tools, internal techniques, intellectual operations, and rich settings of social interactions that are all conducive to knowledge construction (Ivic, 2000).

#### 4. THE SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AS AN EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Many researchers around the world utilised the sociocultural theory as insightful and practical framework for studying various educational, psychological and social phenomena. For example, based on the sociocultural concepts, Rogoff (1990) developed the concept of 'guided participation' to describe the relationship between the expert and the novice in the apprenticeship process of learning. Moll et al, (1992) proposed the concept of 'funds of knowledge' to describe the rich cultural and social resources available outside school formal learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept of 'situated learning' and learning through participation in the 'community of practice'. Trumbull & Pacheco (2002) used sociocultural theory as a framework for understating learning in multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic classrooms. Forman (2007) drew upon the sociocultural framework for mathematics reforms in the United States. Some of these studies will be discussed further in the next section which presents examples of how the sociocultural theory can be applied in the classroom.

As it is shown from the reviewed literature, that learning experience is complex and can be approached through different perspectives. Some scholars view learning as a mental stimulation and making connections between stimuli and responses strengthen by reinforcements. Others see learning as a process of building mental structures and constructing experiences to expand cognition. Recent views emphasise that learning is a social process that involves participation in learning communities through social interactions and cultural tools. In reality, learning is a comprehensive process that encompasses all the three previous views. Sfard (1998) identifies two metaphors that underlie learning theories: the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor. In the acquisition metaphor, learning is seen as a process of acquisition and accumulation of basic units of knowledge in the human mind which is seen as a



knowledge container. Sfard argues that terminology associated with the acquisition metaphor is embedded in the behaviourist, constructivist and sociocultural literature. This terminology involves some kind of ownership of self-sustained entity (e.g. construction, development, internalisation, transmission). Learning in this view is achieved through processes such as delivery, facilitation, or mediation. The Knowledge acquired in learning can then be applied in or transferred to different contexts. Sfard suggests that each of these three learning theories offers different mechanisms of learning (passive reception, constructing mental structures and concept transfer from the social to the individual plane respectively). However, they all appear to accept, implicitly or explicitly, the idea of knowledge acquisition (i.e. concepts are accumulated and gained by the learner).

The second metaphor proposed by Sfard is learning through participation. In this perspective, learning is seen as participation in on-going learning activities situated in social contexts. According to this metaphor, the learner is seen as an integral part of a community of practice. The focus is not just on the individual but on his or her dialectic relations with the community. Research terminology associated with this metaphor includes: learning in community, apprenticeship in thinking (Rogoff, 1990), and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). An important point raised by Sfard (1998) is that devotion to one metaphor and rejection of the other may lead to problematic consequences in the field of theory and practice. She argues that the two metaphors should be seen as complementing rather than competing with each other. She also highlights the difficulty of separating the two metaphors or finding a theoretical approach which is exclusively dominated by a single metaphor. In fact, it can be seen how the acquisition metaphor is fundamental in conceptualising learning mechanisms. However, heavy dependence on it may lead to a narrow view of learning (e.g. as information transmission and receiving). With regard to the participation metaphor, it can be argued that it has a potential for a new, democratic and broader view of learning, yet it seems insufficient for explaining the details of learning processes.

##### **5. IMPLICATION OF THE SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY ON TEACHING PRACTICES**

Education in the past can be characterized by a traditional style of teaching and learning. This style of teaching can be described as the 'factory model'. This style seemed to adopt an acquisition learning model which emphasized, for example, knowledge transmission from expert to learner, rote learning and memorization, and providing

basic skills for the majority of learners without much consideration of their diversity. In this approach learners learn small pieces of knowledge or skills and apply them with little creativity or critical thinking. Schools in this approach try to provide widespread and cost effective education to large numbers of learners. However, now we are living in the information age which requires different approach to learning. An approach which emphasizes knowledge construction, collaborative learning and creating knowledge based society that focuses on meaningful, authentic and problem based learning (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2002).

The sociocultural theory can be seen as resource which provides more alternatives on how to improve teaching and learning in our classrooms by moving away from the 'factory model' of learning that normally occurs inside the classroom. This theory has many useful applications that can be applied in today's classrooms. For example, the issue of diversity in learning is more emphasised from this perspective. Educators, according to the sociocultural theory, focus more on understanding the social influences and the cultural world of the individual and do not limit themselves to accepting the 'proclaim' that all learners are similar in their values, motivation, culture, and language. As a consequent, teachers within this paradigm will value the knowledge, culture, values and perspectives of the learners and do their best to incorporate them in the learning process. The students too will get prepared on making connections between what they learn in school and what they see and do in their everyday life, cultures and communities. Schools and classrooms should be organized to provide learning experiences that meet the learners' needs especially for those who came from different cultural, social and linguistic backgrounds. The cultural minds of diverse learners need to be engaged in meaningful learning experiences (Kozulin, 2003; Trumbull & Pacheco, 2002).

Another application of the sociocultural theory is related to the concept of learning itself. Learning according to the sociocultural perspective is not just an individual effort and fixed inherited intelligence. Learning is rather a social process that involves dialogue across the stakeholders e.g. learners, teachers, parents and others. Schools are just one context of learning. People learn many other social and cultural contexts such as in the family settings, playground, museums, work place, through the media and ICT and simply everywhere. Therefore, teachers need to give more opportunities to the learners to observe, talk, explain, interact and learn from each other. Improving dialogue and problem solving skills in the classroom can help the learners to develop their knowledge, understandings and skills according to their interest and needs (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2002).



In addition, Vygotsky's idea of learning through mediation contributed to the development of a new approach which conceptualised learning as a process of participation in social activities (Kozulin, 2003). This approach challenged the acquisition model of learning which viewed learners as containers to be filled with knowledge and skills through teachers' instruction (Sfard, 1998). Children's knowledge should be assessed in terms of their ability to learn from social interactions, rather than solely on their unaided level of performance. Certain types of social interactions such as 'guided participation' or 'scaffolding' within the ZPD, can be beneficial for students' learning. Therefore, it may be valuable to design classroom lessons and other types of educational activities which facilitate these types of social interactions (Siegler & Alibali, 2005)

Furthermore, the sociocultural theory emphasises that values, perceptions, motivation, emotions and interpersonal behaviour can have big influence on human development and learning. Teachers need to become more conscious about the values held by their students and their families and how they differ or assimilate the cultural values of school (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2002). Teachers also need to make explicit integration between the different subjects and similarly between what is learned in school and the learners' out-of-school lives. It is important for the learners to learn how connect between the subject materials and their own social and cultural experiences and to discover the deep meanings of their learning and how learning reflects on their personal lives (Trumbull & Pacheco, 2002). Teachers should also try to learn more about the different cultural tools being used by the learners in out-of-school contexts and they should try to integrate these tools in their lessons (Siegler & Alibali, 2005)

In a recent paper, Eun (2010) tried to connect various sociocultural ideas and concepts provided by different researchers to develop a set of sociocultural instructional principles interrelated to form an integrated model of instruction. This model of instruction is characterised by being: mediated, discursive, collaborative, responsive, contextualized, activity oriented, developmental and integrated. According to Eun (2010), the sociocultural theory conceptualise the mediation process as the main mechanism for learning. This process can occur through material resources such as using ICT learning tools, visual aids, or graphs. Mediation also happens through using symbolic systems e.g. through language and communication, dialogue, argumentation, discussion, and discourse. Mediation through social interaction is also important. It happens through the students' interactions with each other and their interactions with the teacher.

The most important role for teachers according to this view is to mediate the learning process by creating a social classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Teachers are not just transmitters of knowledge but rather they must engaged in the construction, scaffolding and guiding their students' learning. Teachers need to continually assess their students' learning and foster them to achieve their potential to learn. They also have to challenge their students' beliefs and knowledge and let them explore and generate new knowledge by themselves. Students in the classroom should be engaged in collaborative work to solve problems in collaborative culture. Knowledge is not an established piece of fact that are transmitted from the teacher to the students, knowledge is reconstructed and recreated in the process of problems solving and reflection on the learning process itself. Teachers also have to respect their students' and acknowledge their values, beliefs, behaviours, language, culture and social background.

In sum, teachers according to the sociocultural theory have new roles. They are not just transmitters of knowledge. Teachers can be facilitators of learning, mentors, researchers, reflectors and more importantly learners too. Teachers need to be trained to understand and perform these new roles. The next section shows some of the useful implications of the sociocultural theory on teachers' professional development.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is an important educational issue that has been given increasing importance in many countries around the world because it is an essential element for improving the quality of teaching practices which are key for improving the learning of all students in the classrooms. There are many researchers (e.g. Eun, 2008; 2011; Fraser et al., 2007; Guskey, 2000; 2002; Kelly, 2006; van Huizen et al., 2006) who studied the field of professional development. They generally tried to build a cohesive structured framework that help in finding ways for connecting teachers' professional development experiences with their actual teaching practices.

Kelly (2006) linked teachers professional development with the learning theories discussed at the beginning of the present paper. He argued that much research on professional development is set within a cognitive model that shares a common view of individuals who acquire skills and knowledge in one settings and subsequently is expected to be able to use these skills and knowledge elsewhere. The concept of automatic transfer of



knowledge - knowledge acquired in one settings and directly being used by learners in other settings – has been challenged by the sociocultural research because it does not take into account the complexity of the social context of learning. Kelly argued that the socio-cultural model on teacher training should take into account the complex view of teacher learning and student learning as outcomes of a dynamic relationship between teachers' and students' conceptual resources, the physical resources, and the affordances and constrains of their classroom. In sum, he emphasized that the following ideas must be considered in teachers professional development:

- Expert teachers have an active and productive relationship with their knowledge and knowledge of practices.
- The process of knowing-in-practice is not an individual process, rather it is distributed across teachers, students, and conceptual artefacts e.g. models and theories; and physical artefacts e.g. books and computers
- Teacher expertise is closely linked with the working practices and the associated ways of thinking which define school circumstances
- Teacher learning is a movement of teachers from the peripheral (novice) to the full (expert) participation in the specific working practices and the associated ways of thinking which define school circumstances
- Teachers identities, values, motivation and culture are significant for their learning

Kelly (2006) concluded that teacher learning is a process by which teachers move towards expertise. Teacher should be introduced to a range of both theoretical, professional/practice perspectives on issues and methodological approaches. Teachers need to opportunity for creating, reflecting on and sharing their own teacher knowledge with others. Knowing-in-practice is one of the significant factors that influence teacher learning. Its the ways in which teachers' engagement in the working practices of schools encourages them to think through reflection, discourse, and collaboration. Trainers and teachers need to learn from each other. More understanding of teachers' knowledge-in-practice is needed e.g. investigating how teachers and students learn together and learn from each other in the classroom.

Eun (2008; 2011) also tried to use the sociocultural theory as a framework for professional development practices. He argued that professional development needs more coherent and structured theoretical framework. Lack of structure in professional development can make the process of assessing the impact of professional development and linking professional development with

classroom practices a difficult task. Eun outlined a number of principles of implementing sociocultural theory professional development. For example, he suggested that professional development programs should equip teachers with cultural tools that help them in their teaching tasks. Teaching methods, instructional materials, forms of assessment and other pedagogical tools are all unique cultural tools that have been developed in the school culture and influenced by the surrounding social contexts. Teachers role is to mediate students' learning through using school instruction and also to utilise students' cultural resources and connect everyday learning in out-of-school context with formal instruction in school. It is important for professional development programs to establish collaborative environment and provide communication opportunities for the teachers to share their experiences and work together in problem solving activities. Teachers can work together in creating or improving their instructional models. Follow up support for teachers to sustain the effect of the professional development is very important because it allows for reinforcing sustained mentoring and modelling with immediate feedback. The goal of professional development is development. In this sense, professional development programs have to provide knowledge and skills for teachers that are not distant from the realities of their classrooms. These knowledge and skills must be related to the teachers' values, needs, expectations, school cultural and social contexts. Integrating research, theory and practice in designing and implementing professional development is important. Integrating all aspects of teacher development in a unified system through providing content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, personal development, social interactions and better communication. It also important to take into account the feelings, values, beliefs, motivation of the teachers in the professional development planning and implementation.

There are other models of professional development that are not explicitly adapting the sociocultural approach. However their ideas and concepts are helpful to expand our understanding of the sociocultural approach in professional development mentioned earlier. For example, Guskey (2000; 2002), noted that professional development programs generally try to bring about changes in three areas: classrooms practices of teachers, teachers' attitudes and beliefs, and in the learning outcomes of the students. He presented six major models of teachers' professional development, they are briefly presented as follow:

- Training: is the most common type of professional development. Usually a presenter or more would share their ideas with a group of participants through different group based activities including discussions, workshops, role



playing, skill modelling, and coaching. This type of professional development is favoured by many people because it is efficient, cost effective and it can serve a large number of participants.

- Observation / assessment: The process of observing others or being observed by them is an important type of professional development as it allows for getting feedback, reflection and analysing the information received after the observation. Observation can be useful for the observer and the person being observed as it encourages cooperation. It requires commitment and good planning.
- Involvement in development / improvement: Teachers can work together on shared projects such as the development of curriculum, designing new programs, planning strategies for improving instruction, or solving a particular problem. This work needs preparation, reading and research, discussion and observation. Involving teachers in such projects can increase their knowledge and skills and encourage them to work collaboratively and make wise decisions.
- Study groups: this type of professional development involves the entire school staff to work together – as a learning community - in small groups to find solutions for a common problem in school. Each group would select part of this problem and then work together to find the solutions. This type of work needs careful structure, reflection and decision making skills.
- Inquiry / action research: this type of professional development gives opportunities for teachers to engage in research activities by which they formulate their research questions linked to their own teaching practices, collect and analyse data, find results and reach conclusions. Inquiry based professional development can help teachers to become more reflective and more capable of making connections between theory and practice.
- Individually guided activities: This professional development activity is based on self-directed and self-initiated learning. Teachers here determine their own individual goals and work systematically to achieve them. They keep track of their progress by journal writing, reflections, video and audio self-assessment and portfolios.
- Mentoring: this process involves pairing of an experienced and highly competent teacher with a less experienced colleague. They both work together in shared activities that allow the less

competent to learn from the mentor through different actions e.g. problem solving, constructive criticism and discussions.

Fraser and her colleagues (2007) examined three models of professional development authored by Bell and Gilbert's (1996), Kennedy (2005), and McKinney et al. (2005). They can be summarised as follows:

Bell and Gilbert's (1996) proposed three aspects of professional learning: personal, social and occupational:

- a) Personal aspects that can influence the professional development process are related to the identities, attitudes, beliefs, and values of teachers. For examples their prior experiences motivation, interests, choices towards professional development.
- b) Social aspects that support the personal aspects of professional development. Context and relationships are two key aspects in professional development. They include the communities of practice where teacher for example mutually engaged in a collaborative social context to achieve a common goal using a shared resources
- c) Occupational aspects of professional development where teachers are allowed to construct their practices based on their knowledge, skills and experiences. They are allowed to engage in professional experiments. A link between theory and practice must be established.

Kennedy's (2005) framework for analysing models of professional development consisted of three types of professional development: Transmissive, transitional and transformative:

- a) Transmissive models usually rely on professional development through externally delivered expert tuition, they focus on technical aspects of teaching rather than issues relating to values, beliefs, and attitudes. These models usually do not support professional autonomy.
- b) Transitional models focus more on social interactions through coaching, mentoring and communities of practice.
- c) Transformative models emphasize building links between theory and practice, they encourage teachers to internalize the concepts, reflect, construct new knowledge and apply it in different situations. These models take into account the social and political context and try to promote the professional autonomy of the teachers.

Ried's (McKinney et al., 2005) quadrants of teacher learning comprised two dimensions: (formal-informal) and (planned-incidental):



- a) Formal professional development opportunities are those explicitly provided by other agents e.g. trainers, professors in taught courses
  - b) Informal professional development sought and established by the teacher through e.g. networking with other teachers
  - c) Planned professional development opportunities is characteristically pre-arranged, they can be formal or informal such as collaborative learning
  - d) Incidental professional development are spontaneous and unpredictable e.g. teacher exchanges over coffee
- Full time Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) (specialized subjects teachers for intermediate and secondary schools)
  - Professional Development courses for in-service teachers (Cadre PD Modules)
  - Educational Leadership Program for senior teachers and school principals (ELP)

So far the present paper gave an overview of the sociocultural theory as one of the influential learning theories that has many applications in teaching practices and on teacher professional development. The next section will offer possible implications of the previous literature on teacher professional development programs in Bahrain.

## 7. REFLECTION ON CURRENT BAHRAINI CONTEXT

The Kingdom of Bahrain is situated between Saudi Arabia's east coast and the Qatar peninsula with an area size of 757,50 Sq. Km. and a population of around 1,195,020. Bahrain is among the highest countries in the region in adult literacy rate with about 87% percentage. Almost 11% of all government expenditure in Bahrain is directed towards education with 206 governmental schools, 128000 students and 12000 teachers. The Ministry of Education (MoE) is implementing many projects for improving the quality of teaching and learning for all Bahraini students. Teacher pre- and in-service training is seen as key for achieving this goal. In 2008, Bahrain Teachers' College (BTC) was established in line with the Kingdom's Education Reform initiatives as outlined in Vision 2030 proposed by the Economic Development Board. The MoE and the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore worked on designing and developing various teachers' education programs in BTC in accordance to the needs of the Kingdom. The college offers the following programs with the support and funding of the MoE:

- Bachelor (B.Ed) programs for Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 primary school teachers)

Since 2008, 312 B.Ed students had graduated from BTC. Currently there are 1627 candidate teachers enrolling in the four years B.Ed program. In addition, 2803 teachers and school principals have graduated from the in-service programs: PGDE, Cadre PD, and ELP. Each year hundreds of candidate and in-service teachers enrol in the PD programs. BTC are considered as the main provider for teachers professional development programs outside the MoE. In 2013 the BTC issued a new strategic plan that emphasises the importance of conducting research that would contribute to the educational policy and practices. The MoE has also introduced new reform agenda for teachers professional development that includes encouraging senior teacher to take coaching roles, establishing a PD performance management system, and implementing Action Research Policy. Most of these initiatives are still in progress and open for more development.

The previous literature indicates that teacher trainers, like other teachers, have their own personal beliefs and understandings that would influence their practices and performance in the classroom. Some teacher trainers may rely on the acquisition view of learning and the transmissive model of professional development. They would view themselves consciously or unconsciously as transmitters of knowledge and see the trainees as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, experiences and skills. Those teacher trainers may rely on direct knowledge transmission, systematic control and directions of each step of the learning process, and excessive reliance on memorisation, drill and rote practice (Woodward, 2004). Those educators may also tend to teach knowledge in abstract way, separated from the social context and relatively expected to be transferred with little complexity across contexts. The focus here is on the technical aspects of teaching rather than issues relating to values, beliefs, and attitudes.



Other teacher trainers may use a constructivist approach to learning and a transformative approach to professional development. This approach is characterised by viewing trainees as actively making sense of their learning by constructing their understanding through the development of autonomous mental models. Learning occurs through expanding these mental models by incorporating the new learning situations into the previous constructed models. Teacher trainers in this perspective have 'different' knowledge rather than 'more' knowledge. Their responsibility, therefore, is to encourage the trainees to explore, enquire, and solve problems in order to develop and integrate their mental models. Trainees are encouraged to internalize the concepts, reflect, construct new knowledge and apply it in different situations.

Other teacher trainers may adopt a sociocultural view of learning and a transitional model of professional development. They try to learn more about the different cultural tools being used by the trainees, emphasises the role of social mediation and pay attention to important issues such as power, identity and values. The teacher trainers try to establish collaborative environment and provide communication opportunities for the teachers to share their experiences and work together in problem solving activities. They would give more time for social interactions through coaching, mentoring and communities of practice.

The literature shows that teacher professional development is a multifaceted and complex process. It is key to create a balance between the different types and approaches of teacher professional development and not to rely heavily on just one type. At some levels trainees need to acquire a set of basic concepts and ideas (e.g. behavioural approach). Then they can investigate and explore and build their own understandings (e.g. cognitive constructive approach). At the same time they can share and exchange their understandings with others while participating in collaborative work (e.g. sociocultural approach). The teacher trainer need to use the three learning approaches depending on the learning circumstances and the trainees experience, needs and level. The teacher trainee need to acquire basic concepts for some specific content. They also need to represent their prior learning experiences, discover their misconceptions, link the new learning experiences with

the prior and future learning. In addition they need to work together on solving real problems emerging from their needs and interests.

Using a differentiation approach (Broad & Evans, 2006) can be helpful in this regard. This approach would encourage the development of all aspects of teachers' professional development. personal aspects (e.g. identities, attitudes, beliefs, and values) social aspects (e.g. engaged in a collaborative social learning activities) and occupational aspects (e.g. specific knowledge, skills and experiences required for teaching content and pedagogy). Professional development programs also need to take into account teachers' needs (e.g. professional skills), school needs (e.g. school improvement projects), and national educational system needs (e.g. national initiatives). Training teachers as groups through modules and workshops is one type of professional development that needs to be supported and enriched with other types such as peer observation, curriculum development, lesson studies, decision making, mentoring, action research and reflection. professional development should not be based just in classrooms or MoE training department. professional development must be part of the everyday practise in schools. Collaborative learning in school community is key to achieve this goal. One-size-fits-all approach in professional development is probably not the best way for improving the quality of teaching. Teacher trainees are naturally diverse they teach different subjects, have different years of experience, they have different social and family circumstances and they have different needs and interests. It is important for professional development programs to help teachers to overcome the challenges facing professional development. First by providing diverse learning opportunities that can accommodate teachers as diverse learners: providing professional development in the following areas Knowledge of Subject Matter (e.g. Maths), Pedagogical Content Knowledge (e.g. Maths teaching methods), Knowledge of Teaching and Learning (e.g. learning theories, motivation, classroom management).

As resulted from the above discussion, teacher continual professional development (CPD) programmes can be more effective and meaningful if they relate more to the teachers' actual challenges in their own context where their practices are influenced and shaped by the values



and beliefs the teachers develop within their contextual practices. This will enable them more to conceptualize their professional needs and improvement required to develop their teaching practices because changes in participation in socially organized activities is viewed as an aspect of social practices (e.g., Greeno, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Several scholars argue that learning has both individual and sociocultural features, and have characterized the learning process as one of enculturation *and* construction (e.g., Cobb, 1994; Driver et al., 1994). If professional development is considered a learning process that teachers have to carry out, then their attempts to fulfill their professional needs through improving their performances can be considered as a 'learning process'. Cobb explains that "learning should be viewed as both a process of active individual construction and a process of enculturation into the . . . practices of wider society" (p. 13). Therefore, 'situating teacher professional development programmes' will allow for multiple conceptual perspectives and multiple units of analysis. These multiple perspectives provide powerful tools for understanding teachers' needs and areas for improvement in classroom settings. As Borco (2009) suggests that 'using psychological conceptual frameworks and the teacher as an individual as the unit of analysis, researchers can study students' activities as individuals and their evolving knowledge and understanding. They can use sociocultural conceptual frameworks and the group as the unit of analysis to examine the social context of the classroom and patterns of participation in learning activities. Both perspectives are essential to understanding how students learn through participation in classroom practices. The appropriate unit of analysis in any particular situation depends on one's research purposes and questions (Bowers, Cobb, & McClain, 1999; Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Greeno, 2003). From this perspective, professional development programmes will be perceived by the teachers as a process of increasing participation in the practice of teaching, and through this participation, their attempt to improve their professional practices will become a process of being knowledgeable in and about teaching" (Adler, 2000). To conclude, adopting better frameworks for teacher professional development programme must consider the multiple contexts, both the individual teacher-learners and the social systems in which they are participants. As in the case of student learning, situative perspectives provide a powerful research tool, enabling

researchers to focus attention on individual teachers as learners and on their participation in professional learning communities (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

## 8. CONCLUSION

Teacher professional development must be meaningful and connected with the needs, circumstances and expectations of the trainees. It is a great opportunity for BTC to work with other international partners who have long experience and successful results such as NIE. However it is important to contextualise the professional development programs and adapt the international programs more with the actual circumstances of teachers in the classrooms. When the trainee see meaningful connections between what they learn in BTC and what they face in schools then their motivation will be higher and their application of knowledge and skills would be better. One of the main issues that need more consideration is the language of instruction. As most of the professional development programs materials are written in English and it's taught by different instructors (bilingual Arabic and English or monolingual). Most of the professional development participants have limited English skills and Arabic is the official language of instruction in schools. Here the sociocultural theory reminds us that teachers identities, values, motivation and culture are significant for their learning. Professional development programs should also give more consideration of linking theory with practice and make a balance between the needs of the individual, the school and the system.

Research on professional development is an important source for insights on professional development. The college and the Ministry of Education can work together on : First there is a need to build a structured framework that is research based, shaped by international standards and also connected with the local needs. Research is also essential to investigate the best practices of professional development, asses the efficiency of certain types of professional development, evaluating the impact of professional development on teaching practices in the classroom, and assessing the needs of schools according to the quality assurance reports and school improvement projects. To see how professional development experiences have impact on teachers in the classroom. How and to what extent they benefited from professional development. What are their suggestions for



improvement? BTC and MoE should work together in facilitating and funding research in this area. Teachers' sense of ownership of their learning is vital. They need to be involved in the process of professional development planning, implementation and evaluation. This paper proposes how the teachers' voice can be echoed through inviting them to discuss, critique, exchange ideas and suggestions and reflect on professional development.

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