

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Exploring Private School Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development Sessions Through the Lens of Active Experimentation

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Abstract: The goal of this research study was to investigate the effects of D.A. Kolb's active experimentation stage of experiential learning theory (ELT) on teacher professional development. This qualitative interpretive phenomenological study addressed the problem of teachers' desires for effective professional learning experiences to improve student learning and instruction in the classroom. The research questions explored the perceptions of private school teachers regarding professional development sessions, specifically in the context of active experimentation. The study aimed to investigate the advantages of promoting a professional culture of continuous learning and teamwork among teachers through various methods such as lab classrooms, peer observation, professional learning communities, and peer coaching. The study adopts a descriptive approach utilizing focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews for data collection. Purposeful sampling was used to determine the sample and criterion sampling was used to select the participants. Biographic data were collected to provide background information about the participants involved. The biographic data allowed for stratification enabling the examination of various factors connected to the aim of the study. The study focused on understanding the benefits of providing teacher support through active experimentation during professional development sessions. Results showed that although teachers did not explicitly reference ELT when discussing effective strategies during professional development sessions, they referenced the value of hands-on, active participation in real-classroom stimulations during teacher professional development. The study's findings also indicate a need for creating a consistent framework for professional development sessions that includes active learning, teacher collaboration, and continuous support in a culture anchored in trust.

Keywords: experiential learning, active experimentation, professional development, private school, hands-on learning

1. Introduction

The current study derived from the notion that private schools struggle to identify professional development structures teachers desire to accomplish pedagogical shifts to advance student learning outcomes (Jones et al., 2020; Kahraman, 2016). Enhancing educators' professional development is essential for changing school culture and fostering academic achievement (Dennis & Hemmings, 2019; Sancar et al., 2021). Researchers have indicated many teachers have asserted lecture-based professional development is not the most effective training method (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Firestone et al., 2020; Matherson & Windle, 2017; Rodman, 2018). However, school leaders continue to design lecture-based professional development training for private school teachers. Private schools have invested significant money and human resources in professional development; however, most of these opportunities have only had

marginally favorable benefits on teacher effectiveness and student success (Sancar et al., 2021; ul Haq et al., 2018).

Professional development is vital for improving teacher competencies (Dhendup et al., 2021). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) cycle provides a framework for teacher professional development. Bell and Bell (2020) found the ELT cycle has the potential to improve knowledge retention, help develop problem-solving skills, and can result in motivation for future learning. Girvan et al. (2016) discovered significant evidence demonstrating the positive effect of underpinning ELT with professional development activities, including changing teacher practices and enhanced student learning. Jonathan and Laik (2019) found ELT can improve both the breadth and depth of students' learning; however, professional development facilitators who use ELT should protect participants from their influence and allow them to construct their own concrete experience, only guiding them through reflection. Researchers have emphasized the ELT cycle provides learners with contextually rich learning experiences that foster a deeper conceptual understanding of classroom knowledge and skills (Bell & Bell, 2020; Girvan et al., 2016; Morris, 2020).

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Less than 10% of public and private school teachers implement instructional innovations following workshops or professional development experiences in private education environments (Spelman et al., 2016). Many private schools struggle to identify which professional development characteristics teachers need to accomplish pedagogical shifts for improving student learning outcomes (Jones et al., 2020; Kahraman, 2016). Improving professional learning for private school teachers is critical in altering school culture and cultivating academic achievement (Dennis & Hemmings, 2019; Sancar et al., 2021). Professional development models have changed over the past decade (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). However, private school educators still must endure one-size-fits-all training sessions in settings disconnected from classrooms and students (Bondie et al., 2019). Numerous studies have noted typical professional development presentations for private school teachers have failed to improve student learning outcomes or alter teacher effectiveness (Dennis & Hemmings, 2019; Nguyen, 2019; Rodman, 2018; Sancar et al., 2021).

Changes in instructional practices require private school teachers to learn new teaching methods. Many private school teachers report being inadequately prepared to execute instructional strategies necessitated for teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Nguyen, 2019; Sancar et al., 2021). The knowledge and practice of private school teachers should improve after professional development, possibly influencing student knowledge (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ibrahim & Kavlu, 2020). Despite positive intent, professional learning sessions may not always lead to instructional change (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). According to Syepwa (2015), researchers have not yet presented a suitable understanding of private school teacher professional development's content, scope, and features. Therefore, a comprehensive framework is needed to provide meaningful professional development sessions.

Professional development for teachers is essential to improve education. Professional development has been a significant concern and topic of discourse in most private schools; however, these conversations have not generally been guided by teachers' desires or aligned with curriculum goals (Cooper et al., 2020; Huijboom et al., 2021). Professional development activities and topics tend to be determined by peripheral influences, such as mandated professional development requirements and guidelines, rather than teacher-driven expressed needs (Cooper et al., 2020). Prior research efforts have indicated that the support teachers receive does not always meet their expressed needs or include the desired value expressed by teachers (Cooper et al., 2020). Many teacher professional development activities are traditional and often not situated at the workplace or in a collaborative, risk-free learning environment (Huijboom et al., 2021). Despite the ever-growing literature on professional development, teachers' voices have remained absent (Cooper et al., 2020). Cooper et al. (2020) indicated that teacher competence had become a foundation for educational change, improved teaching practices, and enhancements for student learning outcomes. The current study examined private school teachers' perceptions of their professional learning desires and experiences associated with meaningful learning.

Professional learning is a multifaceted component of education for teachers because it necessitates ongoing commitment and dedication (Cooper et al., 2020). Mansfield (2019) theorized the following premise: teachers change their methods with exposure to new teaching models. Teachers must actively analyze their understandings, critically examine their professional practice, and decide what is essential in their classrooms to accelerate change (Cooper et al., 2020). Including private school teachers in

planning professional development may support their professional development (Cooper et al., 2020).

Despite solid evidence of good teachers helping students succeed, research has been inadequate in evaluating the best ways to make private school teachers more effective in their role (Sprott, 2019). Research has been minimal regarding which type of professional development best prepares private school teachers for current global situations and which type of professional development requires teachers to be collaborative problem solvers (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Sprott, 2019; Wagner et al., 2006). Ibrahim and Kavlu (2020) suggested professional development for private school teachers is vital in improving teaching and education; however, they found private school teachers lack resources, prohibiting their participation in a variety of professional development activities, but public school teachers are routinely provided training, resources, and support via district agencies. Prior research and related literature have advocated for all teachers, including private school teachers, to continue developing their instructional abilities (McShane, 2019). Teachers require resources and training to address students' needs effectively (Gaines et al., 2019; McMaster et al., 2021). Specific examples of the need for private school teachers to gain the necessary tools for effective teaching and participating in professional development include (a) curriculum development, (b) classroom management strategies, (c) resource development, (d) implementing new innovative teaching practices in the classroom, and (e) incorporating technology into lessons. Private school teachers need to be proficient in various instructional methodologies to impact students' learning and raise their teaching proficiency level (Ibrahim & Kavlu, 2020; McShane, 2019).

Prior research has found a considerable number of teachers have asserted lecture-based professional development is not the most effective method for professional development implementation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Firestone et al., 2020; Matherson & Windle, 2017; Rodman, 2018). However, school leaders have continued to design lecture-based professional development training for private school teachers (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Cooper et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Firestone et al., 2020; Matherson & Windle, 2017; Rodman, 2018). Professional development practices in education may not align with high-quality, professional learning principles that engage teachers to learn and apply new knowledge to their classroom work (Sancar et al., 2021). Private schools expend vast financial resources and human capital on professional development, yet most of these experiences have minimal positive effects on teacher instruction and student achievement (ul Haq et al., 2018; Sancar et al., 2021). Effective professional development requires comprehensive preparation, assistive structures, and appropriate resources for integrating multifaceted and complex professional learning processes into teachers' working and professional learning lives (Kalinowski et al., 2019; McShane, 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of selected private school teachers with effective and noneffective professional development sessions. This study was done in an educational conference in Florida. We looked specifically at the influence active experimentation during the learning cycle may have on teachers as learners.

The research question (RQ) was:

RQ: What are the perceptions of private school teachers regarding professional development sessions, specifically in the context of active experimentation?

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review and previous studies. Section 3 presents the methodology. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 presents a discussion of the results. Section 6 presents the findings. Section 7 presents the implications of the study. Section 8 presents the conclusions. Finally, Section 9 presents future research plans.

2. Literature Review and Previous Studies

The current study's rationale emanated from gaps in the literature to uncover effective professional development characteristics to guide the future design and delivery methods for educational professional development in schools. The study aimed to understand the benefits of providing teacher support and professional development by fostering a professional culture of continuous learning and teamwork through lab classrooms, peer observations, professional learning communities, and peer coaching during the regularly scheduled workday. Research has indicated lecture-based professional development is ineffective in providing teachers with teaching approaches to deepen learning outcomes and implement new curricula (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Dennis & Hemmings, 2019; Nguyen, 2019).

2.1. Teacher professional development

Professional development has emerged as a critical resource in ongoing teacher training in education (Carpenter & Munshower, 2020; Cooper et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2019). Teachers' input when developing educational activities and creating compelling learning experiences for educational change should be at the core of professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Nguyen, 2019). The term *professional development* has many definitions. The current study used professional development as a universal term incorporating its essential aspects. Nguyen (2019) defined professional development as activities that change individuals' professional knowledge, skills, and actions. According to Sharar and Nawab (2020), professional development is a continuous and ongoing process by which teachers continually modify their practice by investigating various strategies. In agreement with Fischer et al. (2018), professional development is a teaching procedure or activity focusing on enhancing teacher learning and altering classroom procedures to boost student results. Traditional professional development models, such as lecture-based instruction, have been characterized as teacher centered and focused on transmitting information to teachers (Girvan et al., 2016). Teacher-centered instruction promotes the notion that teachers' learning is an individual process in which the teacher asserts control over students' learning process (Amolloh et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Girvan et al., 2016). According to Amolloh et al. (2018), teachers who participate in professional development enriched with conditional knowledge in content-related subjects possess enhanced confidence and motivation to boost learner achievement, unlike teachers who learn in a teacher-centered environment. Amolloh et al. (2018) and Girvan et al. (2016) assert, teacher training lacks experiential learning opportunities, ideal for applying inventive approaches to instruction. Thus, not all professional development approaches effectively improve teacher quality and effectiveness.

Private school teachers can enhance their practice by using an experiential approach to professional development, which entails activities such as demonstration, observation, collaboration, active experimentation, and reflection (Burke, 2013). According to Perry and Booth (2021), teachers who demonstrate propensity for

reflecting on their classroom teaching experiences are more prone to implementing modifications to their instructional practices. Girvan et al. (2016) highlighted the value of engaging teachers in meaningful professional development experiences that align with their personal views and standards. Amolloh et al. (2018) found change occurs when teachers have opportunities to observe real teaching situations to develop skills and help them gain a more profound knowledge of their teaching practices. Concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation skills acquired in peer observations enhance instruction for both the observer and teacher (Amolloh et al., 2018; Girvan et al., 2016; Perry & Booth, 2021). Martin et al. (2019) emphasized the significance of involving teachers in professional development sessions that empower them as catalysts of change and lead to adaptations in their professional practices.

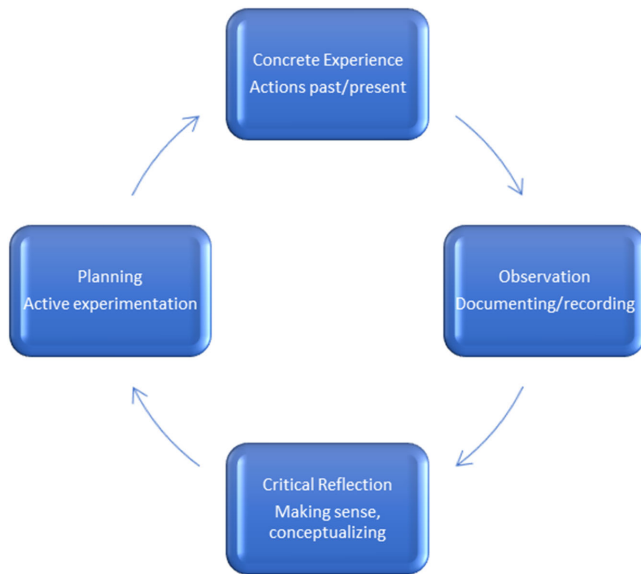
The professional work of public and private school teachers has changed radically over time (Connolly & Hughes-Stanton, 2020; Wagner et al., 2006). Prior research has provided evidence for creating lasting change in education when teachers are involved in designing professional development (Huijboom et al., 2021). For educational modernization to be successful, teacher collaboration and redesigned professional development sessions are essential (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Robust teacher learning may occur when teachers are directly involved in developing and implementing professional development sessions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). An effective private school teacher should be able to choose methodology, educational technology, teaching resources, activities, and materials because private independent schools are not under government mandates and in most cases do not receive funding from federal or state sources (Ibrahim & Kavlu, 2020; McShane, 2019). According to McShane (2019), private schools frequently act as independent and autonomous organizations; private school teachers may need more support to grow programs, develop curricula, and perfect instructional strategies. Professional development for private school teachers is essential to improve private school education; therefore, more attention to professional education is a vital requirement identified in the literature (Ibrahim & Kavlu, 2020; McShane, 2019).

The current study sought to explore private school teachers' insights relative to their perceptions of effective and noneffective professional development. The information generated from this inquiry provided new understanding for school leaders when implementing professional development for teachers in private education environments. Craig et al. (2022) created the vision on the conceptualization of teachers as learners. The current study explored how private school teachers' training impacted teaching and learning.

2.2. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in Kolb's (1984) ELT. The foundational constructs in ELT include action that results in experience, reflection on action and experience, abstraction drawn from reflection, and action resulting from reflection (Kolb, 1984). Figure 1 depicts the four stages of Kolb's (1984) ELT: (a) concrete learning, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. The first two phases center on assimilating experience, and the third and fourth stages emphasize shaping experience. Kolb (1984) argued successful learning involves the learner spiraling through a cycle oriented on the learning process. Kolb (1984) asserted the cycle could be entered at any point, but the stages should be followed

Figure 1
Kolb's experiential learning model. This figure demonstrates the four phases of learning in the experiential learning model (Dummer et al., 2008). Adapted with permission



in sequence. Thus, learners should go through the ELT cycle several times to maximize the learning of new knowledge.

2.3. Rethinking teacher development

Effective professional development is necessary for teachers to grow their practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Gaines et al., 2019; Huijboom et al., 2021). Schools still require unsuitable one-size-fits-all methods for teachers' professional development, frequently in the form of lectures or all-day, sit-and-get workshops (Ajani, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ennis et al., 2020; Rodman, 2018). Sit-and-get professional development relies on an expert in the field to model and distribute material (Ennis et al., 2020). The implementation of this professional development approach relies entirely on the participants to independently apply their newly acquired knowledge (Rodman, 2018). The majority of existing professional development programs are not practical, relevant, or linked to the core work of maximizing student achievement; according to numerous researchers, traditional forms of professional development rarely result in significant changes in instructional practices or student outcomes (Dennis & Hemmings, 2019; Ennis et al., 2020; Knight & Skrtic, 2021; Sancar et al., 2021). Liou and Canrinus (2020) found teachers' professional development is complex and requires a holistic lens to understand the fundamental mechanisms. An extensive teaching and learning structure supporting student learning outcomes must include well-designed professional development (Ajani, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ibrahim & Kavlu, 2020; Powell & Bodur, 2019). Voon et al. (2019) found experiential learning has a positive impact on teachers, helping them (a) acquire new pedagogy, (b) improve knowledge and skills in the content area, and (c) nurture reflective practices when designing and implementing lessons. Private school leaders fail to leverage adequate support to ensure every educator's benefits from highly effective professional development. Thus, private school teacher

trainers need appropriate guidance when providing high-quality teacher training combined with active participation.

Professional development is vital in altering teachers' instructional methodologies and deepening their understanding of new ideas and innovations. According to Powell and Bodur (2019), effective professional development must allow educators to collaborate and network with peers and apply newly learned concepts to their instruction. Some researchers have supported teachers as more likely to alter instructional practices, advance content knowledge, and enhance teaching skills when professional development is connected to everyday experiences and linked to standards and assessments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Samoilenko et al., 2020). According to Dewey (1938), students actively construct knowledge through their interactions with a situation as both individuals and members of groups. For teachers to embrace change, Martin et al. (2019) discovered school leaders must recognize them as learners and offer plenty of rich experiences. The objective of educational reform should be to change the overall school culture to one that embraces new methodologies because teachers are a component of the school culture (Martin et al., 2019). Professional development is constructivist, and school leaders can improve the process by embracing teachers' perspectives in the planning process. Teachers must be allowed to overcome whatever difficulties they may experience when introduced to new instructional techniques for change to occur (Martin et al., 2019; Powell & Bodur, 2019).

2.4. Active learning

Amolloh et al. (2018) emphasized incorporating active learning opportunities, and the requirement of collective participation promotes teacher participants' transfer of what they are learning in professional development into instruction. Kolb (1984) asserted for learning to be effective, learners must shape content and skill information through real practice, such as reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Lo (2021) found new learning forms when knowledge and skills are introduced to learners through direct application in an authentic context. Maeng et al. (2020) found active learning opportunities incorporating inquiry facilitating skill transfer into instruction. Lo (2021) found learning occurs when teachers participate and are directly engaged in practices connected to their classroom and students during professional development. Matherson and Windle (2017) discovered teachers desire interactive, engaging, and relevant professional learning opportunities for their students. Voon et al. (2019) found active participation in learning and self-growth, when linked to teachers' work place needs and practices, has a significant positive impact on sustained growth in instructional methodologies. Researchers have underscored professional development is multidimensional and must emphasize active participation and hands-on experience rather than abstract discussions (Dhendup et al., 2021; Lo, 2021; Matherson & Windle, 2017; Powell & Bodur, 2019).

2.5. Beyond one-size-fits-all teacher development

Professional development is vital for improving teacher competencies (Dhendup et al., 2021). The ELT cycle provides a framework for teacher professional development (Kolb, 1984). Bell and Bell (2020) found the ELT cycle has the potential to improve knowledge retention, help develop problem-solving skills, and can result in motivation for future learning. Girvan et al. (2016) discovered significant evidence demonstrating the

positive effect of underpinning ELT with professional development activities, including changing teacher practices and enhanced student learning. Girvan et al. (2016) found ELT can improve both the breadth and depth of students’ learning; however, professional development facilitators who use ELT should protect teacher participants from their influence and allow them to construct their own concrete experience, only guiding them through reflection. Researchers have emphasized the ELT cycle provides learners with contextually rich learning experiences that foster a deeper conceptual understanding of classroom knowledge and skills (Bell & Bell, 2020; Girvan et al., 2016; Morris, 2020).

3. Method

This study focuses on private school teachers who attended a professional development conference that utilized various types of professional development sessions, including hands-on workshops. The recruitment questionnaire gathered data representing years of experience as a teacher and the number of professional development sessions attended over the prior 3 and 5 years (see Table 1). The questionnaire also asked participants to describe the type of professional development each teacher experienced (see Table 2). Participants had 11–37 years of teaching experience, with four participants having under 20 years of experience, five participants having between 20 and 30 years of experience, and two participants having over 30 years of experience. The 11 participants were K-12 private school teachers with a minimum of 3 years of private school training experience. All participants had attended at least five professional development sessions over the prior 5 years, with two participants attending five professional development sessions, five participants attending between 6 and 15 professional development sessions, one participant attending 16–20 professional development sessions, and three participants attending 21–50 professional development sessions.

The research question provided important insights into how active experimentation learning phase worked (or did not work) (Kolb, 1984). This study sheds light on the conditions that influence effective professional development and may provide schools with critical information to improve professional development sessions.

3.1. Participants

This study involved 11 private school teachers who attended an educational conference in Florida. The 11 participants were K-12 private school teachers with a minimum of 3 years of private school teaching experience, and they had participated in at least three professional development sessions in the prior 5 years.

This research study used purposeful and criterion sampling. The purposeful sampling method determined the 75-member sample. Then, the criterion sampling selected the 11 participants who met inclusion criteria. A participant selection criteria questionnaire gathered information about potential participants professional backgrounds (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews; a focus group; and an optional follow-up interview served as the study’s primary data sources used to ask participants about their experiences with or without active experimentation during professional development sessions.

Participants had varied years of teaching experience: (a) four had been teaching between 10–20 years, (b) five had been teaching for 20–30 years, and (c) two had 30–40 years of teaching experience. Participants represented five states: (a) six from Florida, (b) two from Virginia, (c) two from North Carolina, (d) two from Delaware, and (e) one from California. The study’s participants comprised 10 representing science, technology, engineering, library, and mathematics teachers and 1 representing other teachers. All participants served as private school teachers and held at least a bachelor’s degree (see Table 2).

3.2. Data sources

To validate the results of the current study, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were used during data collection to learn in-depth insights about participants’ experiences and perspectives with effective and noneffective professional development (Patton, 2015). The questions measured the participants’ experiences in professional development sessions that provided active involvement during the learning process. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed us to probe for additional information. A focus group created a candid conversation that addressed in-depth insight connected to effective and noneffective professional development. When formulating the focus group question guide, we

Table 1
Demographics of participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Total number of years teaching	Race	Location	Number of professional development sessions over prior 3 years	Number of professional development sessions over prior 5 years	Highest level of education
Teacher 1	56	Female	17	White/Non-Hispanic	Virginia	2	5	Bachelors
Teacher 2	43	Female	14	White/Non-Hispanic	North Carolina	25	30	PhD
Teacher 3	55	Female	23	White/Non-Hispanic	Delaware	12	20	EdD
Teacher 4	47	Female	23	White/Non-Hispanic	Florida	5	14	Masters
Teacher 5	61	Male	28	White/Non-Hispanic	California	30	50	Masters
Teacher 6	48	Female	15	White/Non-Hispanic	Florida	20	50	Masters
Teacher 7	51	Male	20	White/Non-Hispanic	Florida	2	5	Masters
Teacher 8	40	Female	11	White/Non-Hispanic	Florida	5	12	Bachelors
Teacher 9	63	Female	37	White/Non-Hispanic	Florida	5	10	Masters
Teacher 10	55	Female	34	White/Hispanic	Florida	6	15	Masters
Teacher 11	49	Female	28	White/Non-Hispanic	Virginia	5	10	Masters

Note. Participant demographics were obtained from each teacher using the participant criteria questionnaire and participation in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview.

Table 2
Teachers’ types of professional development attended

Participant	Lecture based	Professional learning community	Hands-on workshop	Lab classroom	Instructional coach	Online
Teacher 1	X		X			X
Teacher 2	X		X			X
Teacher 3	X	X	X			X
Teacher 4	X	X	X	X	X	X
Teacher 5	X	X	X			X
Teacher 6	X	X	X		X	X
Teacher 7	X		X			X
Teacher 8	X		X		X	X
Teacher 9		X	X	X	X	X
Teacher 10	X	X	X	X		
Teacher 11	X	X	X			X

Note. The participant questionnaire obtained the types of professional development sessions each teacher attended.

looked for gaps and concepts from the one-on-one interviews that needed additional clarification. Open-ended questions allowed for probing questions and allowed each participant to share their thoughts during the focus group. Focus group questions directly connected to active experimentation in ELT (Kolb, 1984). The questions measured the participants’ experiences in professional development sessions that provided active involvement and hands-on experiences during the learning process.

To ensure credibility, we measured a credible conceptual interpretation of the data and ensured they accurately reflected the reality of the participants (Patton, 2015). To confirm dependability of the current study, we created a detailed audit trail (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). We also utilized confirmability to minimize investigator bias by acknowledging dispositions (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). We used mentors to establish interrater reliability when coding several interviews (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). We ensured the raters were consistent, which reduced the risk of bias from a single researcher collecting and assessing the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018).

The interview protocol was piloted with two teachers similar to the participants and minor changes were made prior to implementation. The two pilot teachers provided suggestions and modifications to ensure the instrument captured essential data. For example, the pilot teachers stated the questions needed framing to be shorter and more concise so participants could more easily understand them. The pilot teachers suggested revising some of the language in the interview questions so it would be easier to comprehend. Interview and focus group transcripts were emailed to the participants, so they had the opportunity to verify their responses through member checking. The video conference format of the interview and focus group allowed for revisiting the interviews multiple times, which helped with confirming the accuracy of the data.

3.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed using Creswell and Poth’s (2018) five-step approach, known as the data analysis spiral. We examined participant statements contained in the data using NVivo software to draw codes directly from participants’ experiences of effective and noneffective professional development experiences. We visited the data multiple times, analyzed each statement, and applied codes. Two themes emerged related to how teachers’ perceive active experimentation during professional development sessions.

The findings produced two themes: (a) the impact of knowledge and practice and (b) prioritizing individual needs versus group needs. These two themes are discussed later in the results section.

4. Results

In this section, we present the findings from the thematic analysis. These themes emerged by organizing the interview transcriptions in NVivo and by evaluating and addressing the data and noting areas where additional information was needed. Then, we used gaps in the data to create focus group questions. The findings produced two themes: (a) the impact of knowledge and practice and (b) prioritizing individual needs versus group needs. The research question (RQ) was:

RQ: What are the perceptions of private school teachers regarding professional development sessions, specifically in the context of active experimentation?

4.1. Theme 1: Tailored professional development sessions

Overwhelmingly, participants shared that they need professional development sessions tailored to meet their learning needs, which aligned with previous research (Abu-Tineh & Sadiq, 2018; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). All 11 participants shared professional development that influenced their practice positively when it was personalized and aligned with their learning goals. Teacher 1 shared, “Providing differentiated instruction or scaffolding, as we do in our classrooms, and remembering that people learn in all different ways is an effective strategy for planning professional development sessions.” Teacher 8 noted, “Usually, professional development sessions I have to attend are not aligned with my personal goals.” Teacher 10 said, “The most effective professional development sessions for me have been those where the presenter understands me and my needs as a participant.”

4.2. Theme 2: Individual needs versus group needs

Five out of the 11 participants stated professional development was more effective when it included subject-specific training and content knowledge. Teacher 1 said, “I think it is essential private school teachers have the opportunity to attend professional development in what they teach. Content-specific professional development is valuable for teachers. Professional development facilitators need to remember teachers learn in different ways.”

Teacher 4 shared, “Sometimes, professional development sessions are a waste of time because the content does not apply.” Teacher 7 reiterated, “Professional development can be a waste of time for people if it is not what they need or meets their perceived needs.” Teacher 5 said, “I think the biggest mistake professional development facilitators make is that they do not know their audience. The one-size-fits-all model of professional development is deadly.” Teacher 5 continued, “For professional development to meet the individual needs of each participant, teachers need to be involved in structuring it.” Teacher 11 said, “I think professional development needs to be changed. It needs to model how we teach our students.”

4.3. Unexpected finding

The theme of student involvement during professional development sessions emerged from the current study as an effective method for designing teacher training sessions. Two participants’ responses to questions during the focus group and interview revealed the unexpected theme. Two participants discussed when students presented information to teachers during training sessions, their growth as educators was positively impacted. During professional development sessions, when students were involved in the presentations, participants noted interactions with students contributed to changes in their pedagogy. Teacher 1 shared, “I like hearing from the student’s perspective regarding what is working in the classroom, and how that lesson or the lessons have been taught in that particular school or content area. I want to hear what motivates the student to learn.” Teacher 6 shared, “Hearing from students during professional development is meaningful. We, as teachers, can easily make assumptions about what students need, but hearing directly from them is inspiring. It allows us the opportunity to develop meaningful instruction customized for them.”

5. Discussion

Some major themes emerged from this study’s findings and analysis aligned with existing literature, as discussed in the following sections.

The data support the fact that private school teachers view passive learning experiences, including lecture-based, one-size-fits-all, traditional professional compliance learning (TPCL), and teacher-centered experiences, as ineffective for changing teaching practices. Private school teachers referenced that lecture-based professional development sessions do not provide opportunities for participants to connect the content to their classroom situations and provide no opportunities for teachers to learn skills by actively trying them out. Silver et al. (2019) noted similar findings connected to active learning during professional development sessions, suggesting teachers developed a deeper understanding of strategies as they adapted them through collaborative lesson planning. Private school teachers referenced that one-size-fits-all professional development sessions do not meet the learning needs of all teachers because teachers have vastly different instructional strengths and areas for growth. The participants identified lecture-based and one-size-fits-all professional development sessions as ineffective for improving instructional pedagogy. Research has shown that traditional professional development programs, such as lecture-based and one-size-fits-all instructional practices, have not consistently demonstrated teacher practice improvements that impact student learning (Cooper et al., 2020; Cavendish et al., 2021; Lo, 2021; Sprott, 2019).

Research shows using differentiated professional development approaches revealed growth in teacher practice and instructional methodologies and found whole group, lecture-based sessions did not always lead to an instructional shift (Sprott, 2019). Likewise, in the current study, teachers expressed that lecture-based and one-size-fits-all professional development sessions rarely resulted in a change in practice. Teachers who participated in this study expressed that professional development sessions that create opportunities to learn actively enhanced instructional practices and student learning outcomes. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) found that TPCL rarely enabled participants to experience newly learned skills or strategies. Similarly, through qualitative methods, Dennis and Hemmings (2019) found teacher-centered, lecture-based professional development sessions to be nonpractical, irrelevant, or unlinked to the core work of maximizing student achievement. Additionally, Bondie et al. (2019) found private school teachers endure ineffective one-size-fits-all training sessions disconnected from classrooms and studies.

Researchers who documented teachers’ frustrations with ineffective professional development sessions, such as lecture-based ones, also concluded that typical professional development sessions for private school teachers have failed to improve student learning outcomes or alter teacher effectiveness (Nguyen, 2019; Rahman, 2020; Sancar et al., 2021). Conversely, Perry and Booth (2021) found teachers are more likely to use strategies in their classrooms when professional development facilitators mimic the classroom environment in their session presentations and employ techniques like interactive modeling, which makes the hidden elements of knowledge and practice to learners. Researchers have concurred that teachers benefit when active learning, including collaboration with peers during professional development sessions, is highly valued (Bair et al., 2019; Carpenter & Munshower, 2020; Huijboom et al., 2021; Perry & Booth, 2021).

Next, the data support that when hands-on learning is encouraged during professional development sessions, teachers have higher success levels with integrating newly learned strategies into their instructional practices. Effective hands-on professional development sessions align with several researchers’ findings connected with teachers’ views of professional development (Lo, 2021). In the current study, teachers described the effectiveness of learning by doing during professional development sessions because it promoted collaboration and increased participants’ knowledge and application of the skill. In addition, hands-on learning sessions promoted reflective practices to reshape their beliefs and attitudes about the technique. Amolloh et al. (2018) emphasized incorporating active learning opportunities and a requirement for teachers to collectively participate facilitates teacher participants’ transfer of what they are learning in professional development into instruction. Kolb (1984) asserted learners must shape content and skill knowledge through authentic practice, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation for learning to be real. Likewise, Lo (2021) and Maeng et al. (2020) found new learning forms when knowledge and skills are introduced to learners through direct application in an authentic context. Previous researchers have underscored professional development as multidimensional, and it must emphasize active participation and hands-on experience rather than abstract discussions (Dhendup et al., 2021; Lo, 2021; Matherson & Windle, 2017; Powell & Bodur, 2019).

The findings support that professional development is beneficial when linked to practice and supports knowledge or skill areas that private school teachers desire to advance. Teachers in private school’s desire to invest time in applying what they believe will be necessary to improve students’ achievements and

put it into practice. A one-size-fits-all approach to professional development fails to meet the desires of private school teachers because teaching and learning are complex processes. For example, supporting private school teachers to develop new practices is not something they can absorb through TPCL sessions that are not personalized for the needs of individual teachers. Professional development should be personally fulfilling, centered on teachers' needs, and created to give learners agency. According to Cavazos et al. (2018), improving instruction in the classroom requires adopting a comprehensive, tailored professional development strategy satisfying the fundamental requirements of teachers. Therefore, a supportive school culture of trust and a growth mindset is vital for change. Private school teachers desire a school environment that provides instructional support and feedback through a trusting and caring learning environment. Yaakob and Yunus (2016) stated a positive school culture open to experimentation with new pedagogies significantly enhances teachers' and students' learning.

6. Findings

This study found, private school teachers need opportunities for effective professional development. The current study's findings inform educational policy on exploring the use of professional development sessions created from a teacher's perceptive versus a policymaker's perception. The study also supports the evaluation and redesign of time during professional development sessions to increase professional learning, collaboration, peer coaching, and collaborative lesson planning opportunities. Data also revealed regularly conducted professional needs assessments using data from private school teachers to recognize areas of professional learning most required and wanted would be beneficial for enhancing teaching practice.

The study's findings also indicate a need for creating a consistent framework for professional development sessions, including active learning, reflection, teacher collaboration, and continuous support in a school culture anchored in trust. The ability of private school teachers to acquire the subject-matter expertise and pedagogical strategies required to raise student achievement could be improved through the redesign of professional development sessions. Study data also give private school leaders a deeper understanding what qualities private school teachers believe make successful professional development sessions. Because teachers are the main stakeholders who define the caliber of education, professional development sessions must include their perspectives to establish structures for effective profession learning sessions to fulfill the demands of private school teachers (Cavazos et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ibrahim & Kavlu, 2020). This study's results can help private school leaders and teacher trainers create and carry out efficient professional development programs for private school teachers.

7. Implications of the Study

This study supports evaluating and redesigning time during professional development sessions to increase professional learning, collaboration, peer coaching, and collaborative lesson planning opportunities. Furthermore, this study supports professional development facilitators in developing structures that include teachers' voices and presence. Evidence described in this study will assist school leaders in developing practices aligned with high-quality learning principles that engage teachers to learn and apply new knowledge confidently. The study's findings also indicate a need for

creating a consistent framework for professional development sessions, including active learning, reflection, teacher collaboration, and continuous support in a school culture anchored in trust. The findings encourage professional development facilitators to remove ineffective methods in professional development sessions from their professional development offerings.

The study suggests most existing professional development programs for private school teachers are not practical, relevant, or linked to maximizing student achievement. Participants described effective professional development sessions as teacher-led and teacher-driven experiences. They also stated opportunities for reflection during professional development sessions supported behaviors to improve practice. Participants agreed effective professional development workshops helped private school teachers improve their practice by deepening their understanding, changing their pedagogy, and transforming their practice. Participants shared experiencing learning through hands-on sessions made the training more meaningful. Therefore, redesigning private school professional development sessions could enhance private school teachers' capacities to learn the subject-matter expertise and pedagogical strategies required to raise student achievement.

Implications for practice highlighted the need for a more extensive understanding of the characteristics private school teachers associated with effective professional development sessions. This study intended to provide private school leaders with valuable data to guide private school professional development designers and facilitators in creating effective professional development sessions. Furthermore, this study's results can assist private school professional development designers in providing private school teachers the assistance they require to adopt new pedagogies and instructional techniques. This study aimed to supplement research by guiding the development of successful private school professional development strategies.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, the study's findings suggested most existing professional programs for teachers are not practical, relevant, or linked to maximizing student achievement. Participants described effective professional development sessions as teacher-led and teacher-driven experiences. Participants agreed effective professional development workshops helped teachers improve their practice by deepening their understanding, changing their pedagogy, and transforming their practice. Participants shared experiencing learning through active, hands-on sessions could enhance teachers' capacities to learn the subject-matter expertise and pedagogical strategies required to raise student achievement.

The findings support interactive professional development sessions incorporating hands-on learning positively impact teachers' learning processes. Private school teachers desire opportunities during professional development sessions to practice, reflect, and apply what has been taught. Active participation connected to reflection helps private school teachers use what they have learned in the classroom. Private school teachers have found when hands-on learning and reflection structures are incorporated into professional development sessions, they are more likely to transfer the new skill or strategy to everyday classroom practices. When learners have no direct interaction with the subject, they cannot problem solve (Kolb, 1984). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) found adequate new knowledge is required for new teaching practices to be mastered. The findings align with Matherson and Windle (2017), who found professional development is more successful when it allows teachers to learn the concepts in varied, active ways.

Other available literature on the impact of active learning when applying new information to classroom practices also supports Matherson and Windle's (2017) and Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2017) findings. For example, Amolloh et al. (2018) reported professional development that provides teachers with opportunities to actively engage in meaningful discussion, planning, and practice effectively increases skills in the classroom. The findings connected to the positive impact active learning has during teacher professional development sessions also align with Kolb's (1984) ELT. In this regard, Kolb's (1984) ELT is supported because active learning during professional development sessions allows for practice through a repetitive series.

In conclusion, active participation in professional development can provide instructional practice change and lead to greater student success. Practicing new instructional approaches results in sustained change because it often takes time to digest novel information. Additionally, active professional development helps teachers improve their practice by deepening their understanding, changing their pedagogy, and transforming their practice. Therefore, redesigning private school professional development sessions could enhance teachers' capacities to learn the subject-matter expertise and pedagogical strategies required to raise student achievement.

9. Future Research

Future research would benefit from exploring K-12 teachers' experiences in more depth to learn how this phenomenon engages the learning process. Because this study examined qualitative data of participants' experiences and engagement with the phenomenon of ELT as it applied to the learning process during professional development, future research would benefit from exploring statistical data from K-12 teachers who used it during professional development sessions. Such a study could evaluate the implementation success of K-12 school teachers before participating in professional development sessions using ELT construct of active experimentation and compare the results to their scores after participating in professional development sessions using active experimentation. Finally, future research studies should consider whether customized professional development programs that offer real-world learning opportunities (e.g., peer coaching) significantly assist teachers in developing their skills. We advise using the data as a starting point to create improved teacher preparation programs, potentially leading to policy adjustments for teachers' in-service training.

Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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