The Contribution of Portfolios to Professional Development in TESOL: An Investigation into Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes

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Abstract

This article explores teachers' beliefs and attitudes in relation to the implementation of portfolios and their contribution to professional development in Malta. Based on the results of a mixed methods study, the article demonstrates that in order for the implementation of a portfolio system to cultivate professional development teachers' beliefs and attitudes need to be adequately examined. Through an investigation of such beliefs and attitudes, this study highlighted a number of issues that need to be considered in order to maximize the benefits of portfolios. Such research is necessary because it provides an opportunity to foreground teacher agency with respect to effective portfolio implementation and use.

1. Introduction

In many TESOL contexts all over the world, teacher portfolios have been a staple part of educators' professional development for a number of decades. A portfolio is defined as

> an evolving collection of carefully selected or composed professional thoughts, goals, and experiences that are threaded with reflection and self-assessment. It represents who you are, what you do, why you do it, where you have been, where you are, where you want to go, and how you plan on getting there. (Evans, 1995, p. 11)

In line with this idea, Antonek, McCormick and Donato (1997) remark that "just as the portfolio is a tool for professional change, so too is the portfolio an instrument for the construction of the self as teacher" (p. 17). They claim that "because the portfolio is created within the historical and cultural context of each individual, each portfolio is a unique autobiography of its author" (Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997, p. 24). For such reasons, Woodward (2000) suggests that portfolios are not just a record of facts but can be thought of as meaning making narratives. Thus, besides being "an organized collection of evidence about a teacher's best work that is selective, reflective, and

collaborative" (Xu, 2004, p. 199), the portfolio is an intrinsic part of their professional identity. In fact, Haniford (2010) affirms that the discourse employed in a portfolio may be indicative of how practitioners construct their identity.

This article explores teachers' beliefs and attitudes in relation to the implementation of portfolios and their contribution to professional development in Malta. The study was carried out partly because of the idea that "however sound the theoretical base, the potential of portfolios has not always been realized in practice" (Darling, 2001, pp. 117-118). One reason for this deficit could be that the beliefs and attitudes of the very professionals at the heart of the portfolio process have not been adequately researched. Despite the fact that "portfolios might provide a valuable means of engaging in practitioner inquiry and putting professional knowledge into wider circulation" (Doecke, 2006, p. 47), there is a lack of research on the concomitant beliefs and attitudes held by teachers. This research gap exacerbates the problematic situation in which "too often the professional knowledge and practice of teachers remains confined to the schools in which teachers are working – sometimes it does not even get beyond the classroom door" (Doecke, 2006, p. 47). By investigating the beliefs and attitudes of a group of teachers who were going through the experience of compiling a portfolio for the very first time in their career as ELT professionals, this article foregrounds the significance of teacher agency for effective portfolio implementation and use.

2. Value of Teacher Portfolios

Perhaps the most important means by which a portfolio allows teachers to negotiate their identity is by enabling them to examine their beliefs and practices as professionals. This is because "when presenting a (personal) professional portfolio, the professional presents material that characterizes themselves and distinguishes their practices, values and beliefs from those of another professional in the same field" (Goodfellow, 2004, p. 72). Berrill and Whalen (2007) found that the portfolio acted as a way for teachers "to make their beliefs visible, to demonstrate how their practice reflected those beliefs, and to demonstrate how they could teach in ways that had integrity for them and still satisfy external expectations" (p. 882). Speaking about pre-service education, Berrill and Addison (2010) maintain that through the portfolio "teacher candidates might more deeply understand and articulate their beliefs and competencies regarding the expected repertoires of practice in the teaching profession and therefore, their teaching identities" (p. 1184). The portfolio's contribution to teachers' professional identity makes it a significant artifact of practice.

In compiling a portfolio teachers usually rely on self-reflection as a tool for evaluating beliefs and practices. Self-reflection is included in the portfolio because teachers see "it as a way to articulate their tacit knowledge of teaching… Teaching contains a great deal of knowledge that is not theoretical in nature and is, therefore, difficult to describe. Reflection requires articulation of this type of knowledge" (van der Westhuizen & Smith, 2000, p. 347). Montgomery (2003) claims that "the insights of self-reflection enable practitioners to examine ways that their own beliefs and actions impact students" (p. 181). Through self-reflection, "practitioners can scaffold their own ethical and professional development" (Montgomery, 2003, p. 181). This is related to the fact that "teachers have to think about their goals and priorities for future development or improvement when compiling their portfolio" (Darasawang, 2006, p. 308). According to Jones (2010a), "selection and annotation of evidence and the writing of reflective

statements in relation to the three foci (technical, contextual and critical) encourage meta-cognition and reflection" (p. 309). Nonetheless, besides reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, portfolios can also promote a form of reflection which "is not bound to and by specific events but rather becomes a means of looking programmatically at one's practice over time" (Berrill & Whalen, 2007, p. 882). The potential to foster self-reflection seems to be one of the most significant benefits of compiling a portfolio.

In addition to self-reflection, a teacher portfolio leads to a number of related outcomes. Antonek, McCormick and Donato (1997) indicate that using a portfolio leads to the consolidation of teachers' confidence through self-reflection. Gelfer and Filler (1997) claim that "a portfolio can serve as a potentially effective method to encourage teachers to evaluate their own abilities and to enhance their skills" (p. 117). As teachers "reflect, refine and clarify personal professional growth and performance they impose organization upon what can appear, at first, to be little more than a mass of unrelated events" (Gelfer & Filler, 1997, p. 117). Partly for this reason, a portfolio is "a highly useful means of demonstrating a teacher's level of professionalism" (Murdoch, 2000, p. 58). Smith and Tillema (2001) maintain that a portfolio's "sustained use results in a gradual increase in benefits, starting with documentation of accomplishments and moving to a learning-oriented use or acceptance of mistake through the stages of collegial discussion and systematic reflection" (p. 201). This is why a portfolio can act as a "mirror of competence" (Smith & Tillema, 2001, p. 201) for teachers. Linked to this is "the opportunity to describe the teaching process from their own perspectives" (Xu, 2004, p. 201). According to Goodfellow (2004), "documentation of professional practice not only enables a developing professional to reflect on their practices but also provides a testament to those practices in ways that are enriching and empowering" (p. 72). The process of compiling a portfolio leads to evidence of professional growth as well as the organization and articulation of teachers' thoughts (McIntyre & Dangel, 2009). Moreover, it "encourages the integration of theory and practice and the articulation of a theory of practice" (Jones, 2010a, p. 309). The above outcomes make the portfolio an invaluable tool for cultivating teachers' professional development.

3. Purpose of Teacher Portfolios

Portfolios are valued for facilitating the professional development of teachers. Tanner et al. (2000) maintain that "professional growth portfolios value the learning process and reflection…and are used to show development or growth" (p. 20). Portfolios are credited with demonstrating a teacher's learning process over time, illustrating an individual's development, showing the complexity of a teacher's life, and stimulating reflection (Tanner et al., 2000, p. 20). According to Goodfellow (2004), a portfolio enables the practitioner to "provide analytical and interpretative records of reflection on practices and so enhance the skills of critical thinking" as well as "identify professional growth and establish a basis for furthering one's own professional development" (p. 72). However, in most TESOL contexts a portfolio's professional development purpose seems to be meshed with a range of purposes related to evaluation and employment.

One of the purposes behind expecting teachers to compile a portfolio is professional appraisal. Despite the fact that "portfolios can go beyond a gatekeeping function" (Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997, p. 24), there is a risk that educational institutions prioritize this purpose above everything else. Doecke (2006) posits that

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any attempt to advocate the value of portfolios as a vehicle for learning and inquiry…will always conflict with managerial attempts to use portfolios to regulate teaching and measure teachers' performance against a reified set of standards that are completely unanchored in ongoing professional practice. (p. 48)

In line with this idea, Buckridge (2008) contends that using a portfolio for both appraisal and developmental purposes might be problematic as this risks "de-basing the currency and displacing the deeper transformative possibilities" (p. 123) of this tool. Hence, "an institution might be better served by acknowledging a separation between decision-making and academic development, and ensuring that the summative processes were frankly served with summative forms of evidence that would not include a discursive portfolio" (Buckridge, 2008, pp. 122-123). Using a portfolio for appraisal purposes might be complicated further by "the fact that raters' interpretations of teacher beliefs do not necessarily correspond with the beliefs the teachers hold themselves" (van der Schaaf, Stokking, & Verloop, 2008, p. 1700). Thus, separating the appraisal and developmental purposes of a portfolio might be one way of ensuring that teachers do not suffer from the "uncertainty generated by the multiple purposes of the portfolio task" (FitzPatrick & Spiller, 2010, p. 177). However, those who do not agree with this idea claim that "as an authentic assessment tool, portfolio data (i.e., evidence such as the reflections contained in them) can provide an important lens for capturing teachers' development and insight into the complexity of professional development for practicing teachers" (Fox, White, & Kidd, 2011, p. 164). Given the richness of portfolio data it might be better to seek ways of streamlining its appraisal and developmental purposes rather than opting to keep them separate.

For such streamlining to work successfully teachers need to be provided with a sense of ownership over the entire process. Knapper and Wright (2001) argue that portfolios "have put more control of the evaluation process into the hands of the individual teacher" (p. 27). They maintain that "portfolios blur the line between summative and formative evaluation. Although they can be used for accountability purposes, to prepare a persuasive teaching portfolio requires both self-evaluation and reflection about personal teaching goals" (Knapper & Wright, 2001, p. 27). Smith (2001) claims that "giving more responsibility to teachers includes helping them to internalize assessment standards" (p. 225). By encouraging them to discuss portfolio criteria in light of tasks completed for the purposes of their portfolio, teachers will be able to assess their own compiling of a portfolio. Such discussions are necessary because "a lack of a clear understanding of the purpose and ownership of a portfolio constitutes a serious flaw in the process" (Imhof & Picard, 2009, p. 153). Janssen et al. (2013) affirm that "it is therefore important to be clear about the ownership of the [portfolio] and give teachers the opportunity to decide how they want to use it for their career" (p. 274). Even while underscoring the appraisal purpose of a portfolio, it is still fundamental for management "to make it clear that it is used to support self-regulated learning" (Janssen et al., 2013, p. 274). Given that using a portfolio for the purposes of professional development and appraisal might seem contradictory, it is crucial for the issues of ownership and purpose to be clarified. In order to maximize the portfolio's effectiveness, teachers need to be convinced that it is a tool that they own and which primarily exists to spur their professional development.

4. Implementation of Teacher Portfolios

When implementing a portfolio system it is highly important to pre-empt any potential pitfalls, the most significant of which is perhaps resistance on the part of teachers. Encouraging teachers to buy into the concept is necessary given the fact that "the introduction of portfolios is often plagued by mistakes and misunderstandings. Resistance to change is easily projected onto the portfolio" (van Tartwijk, Driessen, van der Vleuten, & Stokking, 2005, p. 77). For this reason it is fundamental "to first formulate a coherent vision of the new educational mission and to put considerable energy into building general commitment. Only when this stage has been successfully completed does it make sense to develop a portfolio" (van Tartwijk et al., 2005, p. 77). Orland-Barak (2005) suggests that "policy-makers must take up the challenge of encouraging discussions around the 'untold'. This implies focusing on how innovations dictated by centralized policy actually connect (or not) to the unique and dynamic character and needs of local practices" (p. 41). The effort to engage teachers in a discussion about the value of portfolios is rewarding because those "who understand the why and how of a portfolio and appreciate its use will probably be more willing to invest time in using this instrument" (van Tartwijk, van Rijswijk, Tuithof, & Driessen, 2008, p. 936). When teachers come to perceive the portfolio as possessing a capacity for professional development they are much more likely to have a positive attitude towards it and to use it successfully.

Besides seeking to develop teachers' beliefs and attitudes in relation to the portfolio, it is imperative that they are provided with training on how to compile a portfolio and use it for professional development. Referring to portfolios within teacher education, Wade and Yarbrough (1996) recommend "focusing attention on students' initial understanding of the process and its purpose, encouraging student ownership and individual expression, providing some structured aspects to balance the open-ended nature of portfolios, and evaluating the portfolio process and students' responses" (p. 63). Dingham and Scott (2003) affirm that "the professional portfolio, with suitable frameworks and guidance, can be a powerful and effective professional development device, given suitable encouragement and guidance" (p. 243). Orland-Barak (2005) warns "against espousing the popular and somehow inflated view that the mere construction of a portfolio automatically yields critical levels of reflection on action" (p. 41). This implies that for most of the tasks that teachers have to do as part of compiling a portfolio they will probably require training. Kurita (2013), in fact, acknowledges that portfolio implementation "requires careful planning and execution to attain its full potential" (p. 77). Teachers need to be provided with training about the concepts and processes informing a portfolio as well as consistent and continuous support (Kurita, 2013). It is clear that a sustained form of training needs to be built into the implementation process in order to ensure its success.

5. Study Context

This study examined the beliefs and attitudes of a group of teachers in relation to the contribution of portfolios to professional development after these were implemented in Malta's TESOL industry in 2012. Malta is a Mediterranean archipelago forming part of the European Union. It recognizes Maltese and English as official languages, the latter having been accorded this status partly in acknowledgement of the fact that the country was a colony of the British Empire until being granted independence in 1964. Malta's population consists of around 423,000 people, the majority of whom are bilingual.

Malta has had a TESOL industry since the 1960s when the first foreign students travelled to the country to learn English. By means of a legal notice published in 1996,

Malta became the first country in the world to regulate its EFL industry. As part of this legal notice, the Ministry of Education set up the EFL Monitoring Board in order to ensure quality standards in the academic and non-academic services provided by private language schools in Malta. There are currently more than 40 schools in Malta and its sister island Gozo. In 2013 alone, these schools catered for the English language needs of nearly 75,000 students coming from more than 40 countries. The average length of stay per student amounted to 3.1 weeks.

The teaching population in Malta's TESOL industry amounts to more than 1,400 professionals, the majority of whom are employed on a part-time basis. Most of these teachers are second language speakers of English, however, native speakers from the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand also service the industry. Every teacher is required to have a permit issued by the EFL Monitoring Board and this is granted on the basis of a set of qualifications in methodology and language awareness at a minimum level 5 on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Every school is obliged to have a Director of Studies who is expected to have a Master's degree in TESOL or comparable EQF level 7 qualifications, and adequate teaching experience. The Director of Studies is responsible for the academic management of the school, teacher recruitment and training.

The EFL Monitoring Board devises policies that serve to promote high standards in the industry, and it conducts regular quality assurance visits to schools. By means of such visits the EFL Monitoring Board ensures that there exists an effective mechanism to maintain teaching standards, advises schools on how to support teachers in their CPD, and assists schools in developing a strong CPD culture. As shown above, research has established "just how powerful a professional development and personal affirmation process the portfolio can be" (Dingham & Scott, 2003, p. 243). Jones (2010b) asserts that "a mandatory portfolio may…be the prompt needed for the reflection required to promote professional development" (p. 603). Her research recognizes "the portfolio as a powerful mechanism by which teachers can examine their beliefs and be challenged, informed and confirmed in their practice" (Jones, 2010b, p. 603). For these reasons, the EFL Monitoring Board introduced teacher portfolios as part of a quality assurance policy governing academic school visits. This policy was developed in collaboration with the leading stakeholders in the industry, including teachers, trainers, Directors of Studies, and school owners. This was done for two separate reasons. Firstly, successful implementation relies on adapting the portfolio to the local context (Kurita, 2013). Secondly, when teachers are involved in a process of consultation about the development and implementation of a portfolio system then they are much more likely to be persuaded of its benefits (Janssen et al., 2013).

6. Study Participants

The teachers that took part in this study were all employed at Easy School of Languages in Valletta, Malta's capital city. In 2014, the school employed 36 teachers, 12 of them all year round. It had a population of circa 1,200 learners originating from a variety of countries and speaking a wide array of first languages. Table 1 shows that the majority of the study participants were experienced teachers that had been at Easy School of Languages for more than a year. Most of them had an EQF level 5 qualification in TESOL, which is equivalent to a Cambridge ESOL CELTA or Trinity Cert. TESOL. The other two teachers held a TEFL Cert., which is an EQF level 4 qualification in TESOL

71

methodology devised by the EFL Monitoring Board and delivered and assessed by those language schools accredited to run the course.

Teacher	Gender	Teaching experience in years/months	Years/months at Easy School of Languages	TESOL qualification EQF level
T1	F	13	3	5
T2	M	7	7	5
T3	F	10 months	10 months	4
T4	F	4	6 months	5
T5	F	7	2	5
T6	F	14	1	5
T7	F	7	7	5
T8	F	12	10	5
T9	F	7	7	4

Table 1. Study Participant Information

7. Methodology

Despite our respective roles as the Chairperson of the EFL Monitoring Board and the school's Director of Studies, in carrying out this study we sought to position ourselves as researchers. The study used a mixed methods approach. It acted as a case study by focusing on a sample of teachers at one particular school. This sample consisted of teachers who taught at the school all year round. A self-completed questionnaire comprised of a series of open-ended questions was first distributed amongst the participants in order to gauge their attitudes in relation to teacher portfolios. This was followed by a face-to-face semi-structured interview with every participant. Each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The purpose of the interviews was to probe more deeply the beliefs and attitudes of the participants and examine their practices in relation to their use of the portfolio. The questionnaire and interview responses were coded and subsequently analysed. For crosschecking purposes, each participant's portfolio was analysed in terms of a number of criteria, including content, level of self-reflection, and CPD attendance.

8. Portfolio Contents

The policy on teacher portfolios issued by EFL Monitoring Board prescribes the minimum items that should feature in each portfolio. These include a CV, classroom observation reports, self-evaluations, and a selection of course or weekly timetables. Nonetheless, the policy encourages teachers and Directors of Studies to add any other relevant material to the portfolio.

The first item in the portfolios examined in this study consisted of the teacher profile. This was meant to serve as an opportunity for practitioners to reflect on their identity by writing a description of who they are and the most significant highlights of their career. Despite being guided as to what could possibly feature in the profile, the teachers at the school were free to decide as to what they wanted to include in it and as to how long it should be. Despite complementing their CV, the profile was meant to adopt a less impersonal style.

72

Another item in the portfolio consisted of a log of all the CPD events the teachers had attended, including the date and length of each session. This was accompanied by copies of attendance certificates as well as a copy of their academic and professional qualifications. Such hard evidence is typically included in portfolios because "teachers who undertake in-service training want this to be acknowledged by others. It is viewed as official documentation of professional knowledge" (van der Westhuizen & Smith, 2000, p. 347). In addition, the teachers at Easy School of Languages completed a self-evaluation report to reflect on what they aimed to achieve in terms of professional development. This was completed in the weeks prior to the classroom observation sessions conducted by the Director of Studies.

Given that the teacher portfolio was closely linked to the classroom observation sessions forming part of the appraisal process in operation at the school, teachers included a copy of the timetable for the week in which they had been observed as well as lesson plans for observed sessions. These documents were accompanied by the teacher's post-lesson evaluation report and the Director of Studies' observation report. A summary sheet served as a dated checklist of all the documents the teachers were meant to complete and submit as part of appraisal. After being evaluated by the Director of Studies all the documents were added to the portfolio.

Besides the documents that they were expected to include in the portfolio for the purposes of appraisal, teachers were also encouraged to add anything that they considered relevant within the scope of professional development. Hence, copies of teachers' publications also featured in some of the portfolios analyzed as part of this study.

9. Implementation and Use

All the teachers agreed with the implementation of the portfolios. They indicated that a portfolio provided them with professional recognition and made them feel accountable. One of the questionnaire respondents claimed, "it makes my career more professional and valuable." A colleague of his explained, "it helps to make us more aware of the importance of our work and increases our sense of responsibility. Other stakeholders, such as the government, show that the standards and quality of our work matter." These teachers implied that portfolios were a manifestation of the professionalism of their role, both for themselves and for those to whom they were accountable.

The teachers used the portfolio in three interconnected ways. It firstly served the purpose of an organiser of documentation related to their professional development. Besides that, it also acted as a record of any CPD events they had attended. Moreover, the teachers used the portfolio as a self-reflection record. For a few teachers the portfolio was "just another piece of paperwork" (T6) to be used "when observations come up" (T2). However, for the majority it was "a method to reflect on how I've progressed as a teacher" (T5). One interviewee affirmed, "This is my life as a teacher and it's a good feeling to have something that reflects your profession" (T7). Despite the fact that the portfolio added to these teachers' workload they did seem to appreciate the instrumental role it played in allowing them to grow as professionals.

In fact, the portfolio analysis revealed that eight of these teachers sought regular CPD opportunities and were receptive to feedback and willing to build on it. This was reassuring since in their study McLean and Bullard's (2000) "analysis of the portfolios

revealed the difficulties teachers were having in putting intentions into practice" (p. 93). Furthermore, our analysis seemed to corroborate evidence showing that "teachers improve their professional knowledge through the implementation of teaching portfolios" (Sung, Chang, Yu, & Chang, 2009, p. 384). Six of the teachers in this study had written detailed strengths and weaknesses, and engaged in in-depth self-reflection in the self-evaluation report and teacher profile. Five of them had also written an in-depth reflective account in the post-lesson evaluation report. In line with Tanner et al.'s criteria (2000), when evaluating the 'depth' of reflection we sought to identify whether the teachers "explore possible reasons for events happening in the classroom, analyse the advantages and disadvantages of possible actions, and justify their eventual choice of action" (p. 25). We also sought to ascertain whether the teachers "try to make clear the links between theory and practice" (Tanner et al., 2000, p. 25). Moreover, we followed Imhof and Picard's (2009) suggestion that "the evaluation of the portfolio process ought to concentrate on the quality of the reflection captured in the individual texts" (p. 153). Despite the fact that more than half the teachers demonstrated an ability to engage in in-depth reflection, we realised that this was still a training priority.

10. Portfolio Significance

The teachers ranked a number of portfolio items in terms of importance. They all seemed to value the observation feedback most of all. One interviewee pointed out that "observations are useful because when you're in the hot seat some things don't come to mind; you just get stuck in a mire" (T6). A colleague of hers asserted, "the DoS is like a mirror and I trust her. You have to rely on your DoS to be truthful and encouraging in her comments" (T9). Self-reflection records were indicated as being another highly significant item in the portfolio. One teacher remarked that "you could have been teaching for many years but it's still essential for you to reflect because there is always something you can improve on" (T4). The teacher's profile was also considered important, especially because it compelled interviewees to reflect on their professional journey and identity. Other items mentioned by these teachers were the CPD attendance record and a copy of their publications in professional magazines and journals. Both of these items seemed to illustrate how the portfolio could serve as a record of achievement.

The teachers assessed the portfolio's level of importance in terms of a number of factors. For all of them the portfolio afforded opportunities for self-reflection and served as a means of charting professional development. One teacher explained, "it's very important to know who you are as a teacher because when you're talking to other people you can actually reflect on whether those things will work for you or not" (T5). Accountability was another factor that contributed to the portfolio's significance. An interviewee stated, "I like it because it makes the teachers accountable in terms of their professional development" (T1). However, its significance as a professional development instrument was closely linked to the trust cultivated between teachers and the Director of Studies. One teacher explained this issue by saying,

> It's important if it's not done in a threatening way. When the Director of Studies listens to the teachers that's very important. If the Director of Studies had to use the portfolio to constantly check on teachers then that would be nerve-wracking for me. If the portfolio is used with a certain amount of trust and respect for the teacher then it's a positive thing. If it's done with a sense of control then I don't think I would stay long in this job. (T2)

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Being able to trust the Director of Studies to use the portfolio as a tool for fostering professional development rather than policing was highly important for these teachers. Equally so was the accessibility of the portfolio. The teachers indicated that its significance was only in so far as they could have access to it whenever they wanted to and not only when invited to by the Director of Studies.

11. Contribution to Development and Change

With one exception, all the teachers agreed that the portfolio contributed to their professional development by providing them with a record of professional growth and a log of attendance at CPD events. One teacher maintained that "the importance of having a portfolio is that you can use it to look back at the way you were in the past, to reflect on where you are now, and to think about where you would like to be in the future" (T5). A questionnaire respondent stated that the portfolio "imposes a certain discipline and commitment to take part in educational seminars." T1 disagreed with this idea because she felt she had always possessed a positive orientation towards professional development and because "sharing with other teachers and exchanging ideas is more beneficial and useful". Unlike her colleagues, she seemed unable to see the portfolio as an extension of the CPD activities the teachers already practised and as a complement to their staffroom sharing of ideas.

For these teachers, professional change ensued as a result of using the portfolio. They indicated that with the implementation of the portfolios they started giving more importance to self-reflection, classroom observation, and attendance at CPD events. One interviewee affirmed, "It helps you to respect yourself as a teacher…because when I look at it I think of it as a journey I'm doing and these are my milestones" (T7). Another teacher explained,

> Doing something like a portfolio hasn't been a big change to the way I teach because it's always been part of my personality to be like that. What it has done though is that it's given me a record…which is quite important because it's good to have something concrete that you can go through again. (T5)

Seven teachers indicated that the introduction of the portfolios had led to a change in their attitudes to teaching and CPD. A questionnaire respondent asserted, "I feel I'm valued more as a teacher and my efforts are appreciated." A colleague pointed out, "being able to see remarks on your teaching...helps you to reflect and examine the possibilities for improvement." Confirming the idea that "Portfolios tend to be reflective" (Thaine, 2004, p. 336), the teachers seemed convinced that one of the portfolio's main benefits was the opportunity it provided them for self-reflection. One interviewee explained,

> I really believe that as teachers we are constantly learning and we learn mainly from experience not books. You have to be humble enough sometimes to admit your mistakes. So a portfolio helps you in your development by making you reflect on experience. (T7)

T1 underscored the portfolio's role in enhancing the value given to self-reflection amongst her colleagues. However, she dismissed its contribution to professional change by saying, "I don't want to overemphasize its importance and say that this is some guiding light for

me because it isn't. I'd be lying" (T1). It seems clear that the implementation of the portfolios seemed to have consolidated these teachers' beliefs in relation to the merits of professional growth via self-reflection, observation, and participation in CPD events.

Furthermore, the teachers pointed out that the portfolios had brought about change in the school's CPD culture. They felt that there was now a collective sense of accountability, with one teacher maintaining that "it's a great way to force people to organize their training… When you're putting things in here physically…visually seeing it…it's a kind of accountability" (T1). For some teachers this was linked to a sense of pride in professional development: "We are proud of our development and it's nice to have everything in one portfolio" (T3). Despite the fact that these teachers had always been active in CPD, the portfolio spurred them to become more self-reflective. An interviewee asserted, "in this school the attitude of going to seminars and different events has always existed so I think the difference it may have made here is in the way people reflect on their teaching particularly because of the observations" (T5). Some of the teachers felt that the portfolios were a testament to their professionalism. As one interviewee declared,

> The direction is more professional now. It no longer feels as if you're just a housewife who comes in to teach for a couple of hours to fill in your time… Your development as a teacher is acknowledged. It's more concrete. (T7)

These teachers confirmed that the implementation of the portfolios had succeeded in fostering the school's CPD culture by underscoring their role as professionals following a path of constant development.

12. Challenges

The teachers faced a number of challenges in keeping a portfolio. They all highlighted the fact that it is a time consuming task because of the paperwork involved. One respondent summed this up by saying,

> It seems to be a human weakness that once we embark on a constructive road, we don't know when to stop. The most important work happens in the classroom in communication with the students. We don't want a situation where papers and forms to be filled in stifle and suffocate the enthusiasm of teachers!

This seems to underscore the need to provide teachers with comprehensive and appropriate resources that mitigate the time-consuming and labor-intensive characteristics of portfolio compilation (Kurita, 2013). Compiling a portfolio "costs time, especially when wanting to do it right, resulting in more understanding of one's own performance and meaningful learning goals" (Janssen et al., 2013, p. 274). When implementing a portfolio system one needs to ensure that this tool is integrated within teachers' workload or else it might be seen as an additional burden.

Despite the time required, what made keeping a portfolio particularly challenging was the amount and style of writing required. One teacher confessed, "I find it difficult to write about myself… I'm not used to it and I find myself in an uncomfortable position having to write about myself" (T9). This was closely associated with the issues of purpose and audience: "I think teachers agonize over the purpose of the self-reflection and who is going to read it" (T1). This interviewee emphasised the need for clarity when instructing

76

teachers to write the various documents comprising the portfolio: "I've heard them stress about actually sitting down to write it…because they're not sure what the expectation is… There was confusion for us and that confusion breeds stress" (T1). The risk of a lack of clarity is that teachers might not be truthful in their writing. In fact, T1 pointed this out by saying,

> I think a lot of people, when they write it down and know that other people are reading it, they're not fully honest. We write what we think people want to hear. You just have to learn buzz words and buzz phrases that sound impressive on paper and write them down like anyone else and sound really amazing… But what we talk about in our staffroom, that's honesty. (T1)

What this interviewee seemed to be highlighting was one of the basic weaknesses of a portfolio. By providing teachers with "a chance to make their best case by including positive examples and information, the portfolio does not usually present a balanced view. Certainly some people are better than others at putting a positive spin on their performance" (Centra, 2000, p. 91). For this reason it might be worth considering Centra's (2000) suggestion that a committee of colleagues should be involved in the process of evaluating a teacher's portfolio.

In spite of its challenging nature, not all the interviewees perceived writing negatively: "writing a self-reflection is challenging because it's new, but it's a good type of challenge" (T3). Another challenge associated with the portfolios was teachers' sensitivity in relation to the feedback given by the Director of Studies. One teacher claimed that "it's not always easy to be critical of yourself or to take constructive criticism from others so it can be a sensitive area" (T5). Lastly, the accessibility of the portfolio itself posed a problem for some teachers. As one interviewee narrated, "In my previous school the portfolios were locked in a cupboard" (T6). These teachers seemed to be implying that the implementation of the portfolios would have been more successful if the above challenges could have been pre-empted and adequately addressed.

Teachers need to be provided with adequate support in order to minimise the anxiety that they might feel in relation to the task of starting to compile a portfolio. This will allow them to enrich themselves as much as possible as a result of implementation. It must be borne in mind that despite "how initially daunting the process of portfolio construction was for some teachers, there is an implication that all teachers need and would benefit from introduction to the portfolio" (Dingham & Scott, 2003, p. 243). Wray (2007) explains that "voicing concerns and frustrations around the development of a teaching portfolio is part of the process of both portfolio development and participating in a teacher learning community" (p. 1150). The "emotional destabilisation experienced in the process of taking stock of oneself as a teacher" is typical of the act of "traversing the jagged and uneven terrain of the path towards self-knowledge and growth as a teacher" (FitzPatrick & Spiller, 2010, p. 177). Supporting teachers' efforts to harness the potential of portfolios will allow them to develop as much as possible whilst on that journey.

13. Implications

This study examined teachers' beliefs and attitudes in relation to the implementation of portfolios and their contribution to professional development in Malta. The above findings suggest that a number of changes are required in order for portfolio use

to be more effective. First of all, it is important that teachers feel that they have ownership over their portfolio. They should be able to have constant access to the portfolio rather than seeing it only as part of the school's official documentation, which they are invited to add to whenever they are up for appraisal. Constant access might be facilitated by the move to e-portfolios but at the same time teachers' professional development should not be seen as something that is eating into their free time. This kind of perception would be a result of a policy that is imposed from above without any consultation, let alone an attempt to develop teachers' beliefs and attitudes in relation to a new professional development tool.

Another important change that needs to be made is that training should target teachers' writing skills and ability to engage in critical self-reflection. Given that a portfolio requires teachers to engage in a substantial amount of self-reflective writing, training should focus in particular on developing their skills in adopting such a style. It should also aim to enhance their attitudes towards writing and help them position themselves as writers so that they feel confident about their writing and enjoy the process. Clear guidelines in relation to what purpose such writing has and who will be reading it will help to allay their fears. Pelliccione and Raison (2009) show why providing teachers with a guide on how to engage in self-reflection is crucial. A reflection guide assisted the participants in their study "in structuring their reflections in a more cohesive manner. The study revealed that without such a guide the majority of the comments were descriptive and indicated less thought about the actual learning involved in the task" (p. 280). Similarly, Chetcuti, Buhagiar and Cardona (2011) found that the "purpose of reflection remains an individualistic objective to solve classroom dilemmas, rather than as a contribution to professional knowledge… [Teachers'] reflection was still limited to their immediate environment rather than the social, cultural milieu in which they were teaching" (p. 69). For reflective writing to contribute to teachers' professional development, they need to be provided with sustained training in how to engage in such a practice in a critical manner.

Given the value that teachers seem to give to the informal discussions that take place in the staffroom and other places where teachers normally talk shop, spoken forms of self-reflection should be encouraged alongside the written ones forming part of the portfolio. This could occur within a small group setting in which teachers can feel safe enough to discuss their pedagogical practices and beliefs without fear of judgment but with an awareness that they are going to receive adequate support through constructive feedback. An advantage of this would be the fostering of collaborative practices in relation to the process of compiling a portfolio. Sung, Chang, Yu and Chang (2009) underscore the significance of collaboration in the use of portfolios: "observing, reviewing and discussing the content of portfolios might help teachers to clarify their previous conceptions about their own practices and portfolios, and help stimulate deeper contemplation of the merits and weaknesses of their own and each other's work" (p. 383). Teachers should be encouraged to share the contents of the portfolio rather than being overprotective about them. Teachers stand to learn from one another's self-reflective pieces and observation reports. Promoting critical discussions about portfolios will persuade teachers to value the use of this tool as a collaborative task whose benefits transcend the individual practitioner and have the potential of transforming the entire professional community each one forms part of. At the same time this kind of sharing can only occur if there exists an atmosphere of trust amongst teachers. Moreover, each teacher's privacy should be respected and thus sharing should only be encouraged not imposed.

14. Conclusion

Portfolios can contribute to teachers' professional development by acting as a platform for reflection, enabling teachers to evaluate their beliefs, attitudes and practices and take corrective action if need be. Portfolios chart practitioners' development over their professional lives and become a reflection of their identity as teachers. Portfolios act as a repository of achievements and can spur teachers to achieve even further. Nonetheless, the challenges associated with portfolios might hamper teachers from fully profiting from them. If teachers feel they do not own the portfolio or if access to it is considered difficult due to an institution's control, then it is unlikely that they will benefit from keeping a portfolio. If the amount and kind of writing involved in keeping a portfolio serves as a hindrance to teachers, professional development will not ensue easily due to the possibility of anxiety and resentment. If the implementation of a portfolio system fails to lead to the creation of a professional community of teachers who are willing to share the contents of their respective portfolios to facilitate each other's growth, it is unlikely that collaboration will increase as a result of portfolios.

Despite the fact that implementing a portfolio system might easily be interpreted as an ideal means of cultivating professional development, this tool might fail to fulfill its potential unless teachers' beliefs and attitudes are adequately examined. Through an investigation of such beliefs and attitudes, this study has highlighted a number of issues that need to be considered in order to maximize the benefits of portfolios. Conducting further research on teachers' beliefs and attitudes in relation to this professional development tool will ensure that both the portfolio and these very same beliefs and attitudes continue to be developed. Such research is necessary because it will provide an opportunity to foreground teacher agency with respect to effective portfolio implementation and use.

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