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Research Associate Full report

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Resource

Teachers' continuing professional development within two clusters of small rural primary schools

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Abstract

This research project examines teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) within two clusters of rural primary schools in the north of England. The research considers teachers' attitudes to, and their understanding of, the meaning and purpose of CPD and how it affects them and their pupils.

Through a combination of survey and case study, quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection were used and initial questionnaires were followed by semi-structured interviews in two case study schools. A tripartite definition (Bolam, 1993), which subdivides CPD into the areas of training, education and support, was used not only to define CPD but also to provide an appropriate analytical framework.

The data analysis showed that across both clusters studied, teachers' CPD was mainly driven by national government initiatives and, where those initiatives became national priorities, there appeared to be little opportunity for an individual, school-based approach to CPD. Across the clusters there was a clear and established relationship between the school development plan (SDP), performance management and CPD. The one-year performance management cycle, together with the five statutory training days, appeared to dictate the length of the CPD cycle, thus promoting short-term development and reducing opportunities for longer courses, such as advanced diplomas and higher degrees.

Introduction

This enquiry developed from the researcher's experience as headteacher of a small rural primary school and through increasing dissatisfaction with the deficit model which was widely used to deliver prescriptive training packages associated with education reform, following the Education Reform Act 1988 (Dadds, 1995, 2001; Bottery & Wright, 2000; Higgins & Leat, 2001). It arose from a concern that teachers' continuing professional development (CPD), when driven by national initiatives and delivered through prescriptive training packages, may not meet the needs of individual schools.

The research question considered was 'How much choice do teachers have over the content and direction of their CPD?' In exploring this, the research focused on the views of headteachers and teachers as it was considered that they play a central part in the delivery and evaluation of CPD. The research explored teachers' CPD following the initiatives generated by the Education Reform Act 1988 and examined the perceptions of individual teachers as to its quality and relevance. It further explored how the needs of individual schools are met within the context of initiatives resulting from government policy. The research argues against a deficit model of CPD and in favour of a benefits and growth model with its tailored approach to CPD and its emphasis on the development needs of individual schools.

This enquiry was located within two rural primary school clusters in northern England where the majority of schools have fewer than 100 pupils. Within such schools, headteachers have a substantial teaching commitment and, in the smallest schools, may teach up to four days a week, as well as having to deal with their leadership and management responsibilities. The cluster schools have much in common as they share a rural setting within the same local authority and operate within similar external parameters: they are subject to the same local authority advice and support, follow the same curriculum, have the same pressures to meet their performance targets and ascribe to the same judgemental criteria shared with the local authority and Ofsted.

Literature review

Defining CPD

Following a search of the literature for an appropriate definition of CPD, Bolam's (1993) distinction between 'professional training', 'professional education' and 'professional support' was chosen, as it provides a useful analytical framework that can be applied to this study. It permits the codification of the range of CPD activity that is available to teachers.

1. Professional training:

- Subject-based training delivered to support the strategies or specific subject teaching including the national literacy and numeracy strategies
- Training in management-based activities to help teachers deliver their role, eg as subject co-ordinator or special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO)
- Peripheral training, eg in first aid and child protection issues

2. Professional education:

- Longer award-bearing courses that examine educational practice and take a view of beliefs and values in education, eg higher degrees and diplomas
- Non-award-bearing practitioner research and reflective practice, eg small-scale enquiry
- Non-award-bearing courses and conferences that examine current educational practice

3. Professional support:

- Formal support from colleagues, eg workplace learning and communities of practice
- Informal support from colleagues
- Support from external advisers and others, eg local authority advisers and advanced skills teachers

From the Education Reform Act (1988) to the white paper (2010)

The Education Reform Act 1988 brought with it the advent of compulsory testing for all pupils in state schools in the core curriculum subjects. In an attempt to cover the new subject-based curriculum within this climate of increasing accountability, many primary schools returned to subject-based teaching. This was supported by subject-specific professional development, particularly in the core curriculum areas, and this influenced the content and delivery of teachers' CPD.

In addition to the classroom-focused training packages for the national literacy strategy (NLS) and national numeracy strategy (NNS), central government also introduced leadership training and management development programmes for headteachers and senior staff. Educational consultancies were invited to undertake the delivery of these including the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) and the Leadership Programme for Serving Heads (LPSH), later to be delivered exclusively through the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). These are both competence-based models which were established to promote standardised leadership practice.

The introduction of national training initiatives, where the objective was to retrain as many teachers as possible within a very limited timescale, led to the adoption of prescriptive one-size-fits-all training. The plan for the implementation of the NNS (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998), with its short timescale and prescriptive training, established the way that teachers were trained in the new strategy on a national scale. Dadds (2001:56), commenting on this deficit model with its prescriptive training methods, refers to teachers being treated like empty vessels with no consideration given to their prior knowledge or experience.

In contrast to this deficit model, the white paper [The Importance of Teaching](#) (Department for Education (DfE), 2010) has as one of its key aims that of supporting teachers to learn from one another and from proven best practice. It is proposed that this should be done through a national network of teaching schools which are expected to draw together outstanding teachers in an area to support other schools, and also enable many more clusters of schools to offer their own high-quality leadership development programmes, through a benefits and growth model of CPD applied through communities of practice and professional learning communities.

Communities of practice and professional learning communities

The idea of communities of practice was first developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and since extended by Wenger (1998, 2000). Wenger (1998) summarises the characteristics of communities of practice in the following three dimensions: a community of mutual engagement, a negotiated enterprise and a repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time. Implicit in the work of Lave and Wenger is the assumption that their theories form a valid generic framework in all organisational settings including the school setting where learning takes place on many levels. Their model has been used in educational research by McGregor (2003), and in NCSL (2007) research into learning-centred leadership where success is dependent upon high levels of trust (Bottery, 2004) and professional dialogue. Wenger (2000) argues that the success of organisations ultimately depends upon their ability to form as a learning system and, at the same time, take part in a broad range of extended learning opportunities within broader and associated areas.

Hargreaves (2007) notes the rise of the professional learning community (PLC) within schools and considers what makes them successful. He considers that a PLC is embodied in the ethos of a school and is an attitude, a way of thinking. It is acknowledged (Stoll et al, 2006) that PLCs have a significant role in promoting capacity-building for sustainable school improvement. Hargreaves sees PLCs operating most effectively when they:

‘are connected to other schools around them, in networked learning communities that spread across a system.’

Hargreaves, 2007:192

This is in line with Wenger’s (2000) view of the importance of alignment in communities of practice. Hargreaves also maintains that teachers’ energy is renewed when the professional learning community is used to invigorate their collective learning, which includes personal development, and is not simply a tool to implement mandatory change.

In research on learning-centred leadership (NCSL, 2007), where the importance of the workplace as a learning environment is recognised, it is claimed that work-based learning, although powerful, can also be narrowing and conservative, sometimes lacking a focus on change because it only sustains existing role orthodoxies.

Wenger recommends periods of reflection and information-sharing following CPD and maintains that teachers’ professional development should always refer to their classroom practice. This is in line with the work of Eraut (1997), Clements (2001) and Stenhouse (1975). However, neither Wenger (1998) nor NCSL (2007) mention the benefits ensuing from participation in longer CPD courses, as discussed below, which, it is felt, have much to commend them (Dadds, 1995; Conner, 1994; Webb, 1990).

Dadds (1995), in support of practitioner research, argued that teachers are better placed than academics to match the focus of their research to their practical and professional needs. Stenhouse (1975), a central figure in the practitioner research movement, argued that ideas derived from research must be regarded as provisional, and therefore open to critique and analysis through action research. Teachers were encouraged to see themselves as researchers in their own right, exploring issues that were important to them. Critics view practitioner research as too subjective but Stenhouse claimed that in an attempt to improve professional practice through systematic enquiry, the practitioner’s subjectivity was a necessary part of the knowledge-base of action research.

‘There is no escaping the fact that it is the teacher’s subjective perception which is crucial for practice.’

Dadds, 1995:122

Perceived advantages of long CPD courses

There has been a recognised movement away from secondment and long-term courses for teachers (Conner, 1994) and a general lack of opportunity to take time to reflect, and very little opportunity to have even a short sabbatical experience, even though such experiences are reportedly highly valued by participants (Flintham 2010:128-34). Instead we see the dominant preference for provision through one-day courses or a series of twilight sessions. Reflecting on Conner in the light of initiatives such as the introduction of the NLS, NNS, performance management, target-setting and the resulting emphasis on short-term CPD, it can be seen that the central formalisation and control of CPD activities has become normal practice.

The value of a part-time, long-term professional course such as a Master's degree, stretching over two years, is explored by Conner (1994), who views it as a very powerful experience for teachers and considers it more valuable than the widely used short courses. Conner (1994) argued in support of the need for part-time Master's, along with advanced diploma courses, at a time when funding for these courses was at risk. They were, and still are, expensive, yet their relative value, compared with the short in-service education and training (Inset) courses of the 1990s, was rated extremely highly by those teachers who commented in Conner's research. Conner makes a strong case for the place of the Master's degree in CPD provision and is supported by Webb and Vulliamy (1996), and Drummond and McLaughlin (1994).

There is a clear distinction, however, between what is offered through part-time Master's degrees and advanced diplomas and what is offered through the NPQH and LPSH programmes. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2007) claimed that teachers generally found that the NPQH and LPSH were both worthwhile. However, no reference was made to the alternative of long courses. In this present research study, the availability of long courses, based on ideas of reflective learning through practitioner research (Stenhouse, 1975; Webb & Vulliamy, 1996; Drummond & McLaughlin, 1994), and reinforced by the arguments of Conner (1994), appear to have largely vanished from provision accessed by the teachers studied. In their place, there has been a shift in emphasis to the extensive national learning programmes promoted through the National College.

Two significant reports on CPD

The analysis arising from this literature review that centrally prescribed deficit models of CPD based on identified system requirements have been dominant over benefits and growth models synthesised on a self-help, collaborative basis in line with local contextual developmental needs, is supported by two significant studies on CPD in education. First the [Independent Study into School Leadership](#) (PwC, 2007), undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), placed significant importance upon CPD across all phases and called for the DfES to consider its recommendations as part of 'a major ratcheting up of participation in innovative CPD initiatives' (DfES, 2007:152). However it is clear that teachers' individual development needs within this are seen as subordinate to system requirements. The report's recommendations emphasised system priorities which act as control measures: the CPD, as proposed in the report and without reference to award-bearing courses, is seen as serving the system's interests rather than developing the personal capacity and understanding of individual teachers. The report did however acknowledge the importance of ongoing CPD to teacher development, along with the need to tailor such CPD to the needs of the individual school and foster links with other professions as part of the Every Child Matters agenda. It found that national courses such as NPQH and LPSH were valued by the majority of participants. However, no reference was made to the value or importance of longer courses such as Master's degrees or advanced diplomas.

Second, the [State of the Nation](#) report, commissioned by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) (Pedder et al, 2008) examined CPD in English schools. The report identified misalignment between CPD needs as identified by teachers and the TDA's prescriptive view of what constituted effective CPD. Teachers' CPD requirements were generally found to be linked to issues of whole-school improvement which were 'prioritised at the expense of personal-professional CPD needs' (Pedder et al, 2008:9). Broadly speaking, strategic planning was lacking and CPD activities were rarely evaluated against planned outcomes. Storey (2009) identifies the mismatch between the current practice of central prescription and expressed individual need for localised school-focused CPD as a significant barrier to school improvement. The present research study, in capturing and analysing the views of teachers within two similar clusters of small rural primary schools as to the degree of personal choice available to them in CPD provision, attempts to explore this perceived mismatch.

Methodology

The research explored whether the teachers surveyed felt they had an element of personal choice in their CPD or if it was chosen for them. This meant seeking their view of who was responsible for the control and direction of CPD. The choice of survey and multiple case studies allowed access to data from across both clusters and also the development of a case study within each cluster where data revealed in the survey could be further explored.

Case studies

The case studies provided a narrative and analysis of data gathered from interviews, together with the presentation and analysis of the associated questionnaire data. It is recognised that case studies do not lend themselves to generalisation (Cohen et al, 2007); however, the purpose of this project was not to produce generalisations that could necessarily be applied to other schools, but to explore the specific setting and nature of these local clusters. Whilst the case study material is not reproduced in total in this research report but simply drawn upon, it is available elsewhere (Ridley, 2010). From it, significant generic themes may be identified, as set out under 'Findings' below.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed to be semi-structured, being a combination of the closed and numerical type together with a more open, word-based structure. This allowed respondents, categorised according to their roles and length of service, to make basic judgements according to Likert rating scales, providing a range of responses to a given question or statement (Cohen et al, 2007). The ethical conventions promulgated by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) were followed and the respondents' views and schools were anonymised.

Two questionnaires were distributed: questionnaire 1 was designed to collect a range of data from the cluster headteachers and teachers including their role, teaching experience and methods of CPD delivery. The questionnaire included a section on Bolam's (1993) tripartite definition namely 'professional training', 'professional education' and 'professional support'. Teachers were asked to rate their responses to specific questions about each area and to qualify their judgements on the impact of CPD on themselves as professionals, on their teaching and on the school. Questionnaire 2 was distributed to headteachers following the initial analysis of questionnaire 1 and requested additional information about the relationship between CPD and the school development plan. Tables showing the numerical outcomes from the questionnaire data are in the Appendix to this report.

Semi-structured interviews

Through taped and transcribed semi-structured interviews in the two case study schools, areas of interest appearing in the questionnaire responses, along with aspects of workplace learning, were explored. In the interviews the same questions were used and the same themes developed both as a means of exploration and for validation purposes. In order to explore pupils' perceptions, interviews were also carried out with groups of children in each school. The data gathered from the interviews was analysed within the context of each school.

Analysis of the data

From the totality of data gathered for this study it is possible to obtain an overview of teachers' CPD within two clusters of rural primary schools in the north of England. This data is, by definition, limited to the local setting and cannot therefore be taken necessarily to represent a wider view. The purpose of this enquiry, however, was to inform practice at a local level and also to provide a view of an ordinary situation that could inform others in similar settings. The data was gathered within a limited timeframe (2005 to 2006), and it is recognised that this captures merely part of a constantly changing view of educational development brought about by legislation and in particular the Education Reform Act 1988 and subsequent developments.

Findings

In response to the research question 'How much choice do teachers have over the content and direction of their CPD?' the research findings may be analysed in terms of the range of CPD priorities, the organisation of teachers' CPD, preferred models of CPD, professional learning communities and levels of satisfaction.

CPD priorities

It was recognised (GTC, 2006) that the range of CPD on offer nationally was at that stage to a large extent limited to national development issues. This was reflected in data found in both clusters where CPD priorities were also in line with national initiatives. Where training for government-led initiatives came with funding, and where supply costs were paid centrally, it was likely that these courses would be a priority. In most schools national initiatives were also school development plan (SDP) targets and therefore a priority, and there were clear links between the SDP, performance management and CPD. Other areas of school development had to compete: often, because of a lack of funding and time constraints, they were neglected. Reflected in the range of CPD topics across both clusters was the high attendance on courses such as PE (see Appendix, Table 7) where teachers were funded, through a local sports partnership, to undergo training. Courses on the transition from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 were also part of a national agenda and this was also reflected in the high attendance figures for these funded courses. This indicated that national initiatives continued to influence teachers' CPD and how it is valued.

It is clear that both the individual teachers and the headteachers made decisions about CPD priorities and many respondents indicated that these decisions were made in consultation with the headteacher. The SDP was the document in which the school's priorities were detailed and through the performance management process the SDP priorities became the teachers' targets. The focus was on short-term solutions, manifesting as short-term action plans which fit neatly into teachers' one-year performance management review cycles. Where the SDP was used to identify the school's CPD priorities, this may suggest that teachers' CPD needs are truly aligned with the needs of the school as identified in the SDP, or more possibly that teachers were forfeiting their individual needs to have personal professional development opportunities.

Organisation of teachers' CPD

In the clusters studied, headteachers invariably assumed the role of the CPD co-ordinator along with their many additional roles and responsibilities and it was rare for teachers to have an established CPD entitlement. It would appear that, although teachers did not generally have an allocation of funding for their own CPD or a specified entitlement, nevertheless teachers claimed to have adequate access to CPD through their headteachers. Although the quality of CPD often varied there was a general agreement across the clusters that it went a long way to matching their needs. The promise of an entitlement of CPD for all and a dedicated CPD co-ordinator in each school (GTC, 2006) was not evident in these rural clusters.

Preferred models of CPD

For most teachers in the two case study schools, there was a reaction against the prescriptive one-size-fits-all method of delivery that had been used for the NNS and NLS and a preference for tailored approaches where there was a relationship between the teacher's previous knowledge, their personal setting and the course content. Some tailored training was delivered directly in school and, where the course or training session was led by a member of staff, the teachers would have the opportunity to follow up related issues with the course leader in school at a later date.

For example, Vicky, a teacher in a case study school, referred to some successful training that had been led by the headteacher who was also the ICT co-ordinator:

“Simon will give a workshop to us one morning on training days and he’ll deliver it really well so we’ll all understand it and support us and say come and get me if you need me.”

Teacher, southern cluster

One headteacher actively searched for suitable courses away from school and outside the local authority. It was claimed that removing the teacher from the working environment increased his or her capacity to reflect and be aware of the bigger picture (Wenger, 1998). CPD in both clusters, particularly where it was based in school or closely related, was mainly integrative and it was usual for CPD to take place on the five statutory training days, or during twilight sessions after school. There were, however, occasions when individual or small groups of teachers would attend extractive CPD at a central venue, but it was uncommon for the whole staff to do this. On occasions in both case study schools, there was a pragmatic approach to the selection of CPD courses and activities. A course might be selected from a range of providers as long as the course met the needs of the school.

Very few teachers indicated that they had taken postgraduate qualifications but those who had, found it a very positive and professionalising experience. For example, a new head said that her Master’s studies had ‘deepened my understanding and given me confidence’.

Across both clusters, only three teachers had undertaken accredited courses during the previous year and this represents a very low level of interest in this area of development. There was little evidence of teachers taking advantage of funded research opportunities, and only one teacher was participating in the National College’s Leading from the Middle programme. A small number of teachers and headteachers had taken NPQH and LPSH qualifications and spoke positively of the experience, for example:

“on the management side the most effective CPD in terms of what impact it had on the classroom was indeed the LPSH because it was time for reflective stuff and it gave me a few home truths which was good.”

Headteacher, northern cluster

Communities of practice and professional learning communities

It could be argued that to some extent the development of the professional learning community is a reaction against prescriptive one-size-fits-all professional development. In the professional learning community, Lieberman (2007) sees the emphasis being placed on starting where learners are and also recognition that learning comes from colleagues and research generated within the communities themselves. This matches the view of teachers in the case study schools, where teachers’ existing knowledge and the development needs of the school are seen to be of the utmost importance. This model is in opposition to the deficit forms of CPD identified earlier. Lieberman (2007) sees this development as giving dignity to participants’ work and also enabling them to connect with knowledge from outside their context. Underpinning Lieberman’s support for professional learning communities is her view that participants ‘learn by participation in their communities, rather than being told what to do’ (Lieberman, 2007:202).

The two case study schools reflect this and match Hargreaves’ (2007) indicators of successful professional learning communities in that they do not depend on a single leader, but instead distribute leadership widely, build new leaders and are dedicated to improving learning and achievement:

“this is the bread and butter of an effective communicating school because you are surrounded by people with a wealth of experience in your work environment.”

Experienced Key Stage 1 teacher, southern cluster

Levels of satisfaction

The questionnaire produced mainly positive responses to the three forms of CPD in Bolam's definition. 'Professional training' and 'professional support' were valued, but the highest levels of satisfaction were with 'professional education' which ironically had the lowest levels of participation. In the clusters studied, there were only occasional examples of teachers doing higher degrees and other academic award-bearing courses, however, their levels of satisfaction were high. From the data analysis (see Appendix), it is clear that in both clusters the courses with the highest attendance levels reflect prevailing national initiatives which were also priorities in the schools' development plans.

Analysis of satisfaction levels against length of teaching experience, particularly if that experience predated the Education Reform Act 1988 to an era when individual schools had greater control of their curriculum and development needs, showed that in both clusters, the longer serving teachers generally registered the highest levels of satisfaction with their CPD. Levels of satisfaction were highest in the area of professional education.

Summary of findings

In the two clusters of schools studied in this research, the following findings stood out.

- CPD priorities tended to be linked more to national initiatives and the SDP than to individual personal professional development needs.
- Decisions on CPD priorities tended to be taken in association with the headteacher (often acting as CPD co-ordinator) in accordance with SDP needs. Generally, there was no specific individual entitlement to CPD funding.
- Teachers expressed a preference for tailored in-school provision delivered by colleagues in which the school functioned as a community of practice and a professional learning community, rather than a perceived one-size-fits-all, centrally imposed deficit model.
- Funding for long CPD courses such as higher degrees was severely limited, yet satisfaction levels in this area of professional education were higher than for professional training and professional support. This was particularly the case for longer serving teachers.

Conclusion

In the course of the changes resulting from the Education Reform Act 1988, teachers were viewed as compliant as they offered no resistance to the raft of new initiatives (Dadds, 2001; Fielding, 1994). Since that watershed, not only have teachers followed new policies but the prevailing government priorities for education appear, at least from this research, to have become schools' priorities too. CPD associated with national initiatives was to a large extent also perceived to meet schools' needs. This is in line with Bottery and Wright (2000), who suggest that schools have absorbed external demands to such an extent that they have become the schools' demands too.

Headteachers are well positioned to take control of their schools' CPD (DfES, 2007; GTC, 2000) and their responsibility remains to make sure that it is of high quality and based on the professional and personal development needs of their school and their staff. Whilst government priorities for education would appear to have become those of the school, and teachers' priorities too, claiming the professional right to question and challenge change, based on a view of education supported by research and development emerging from schools acting as communities of practice and professional learning communities, may enable teachers to claim back some localised contextual control of their CPD and allow schools to meet their individual needs as they feel appropriate. In this is also the opportunity to promote practitioner research that is both meaningful to the teachers and beneficial to the specific school. The availability of the long course (Conner, 1994; Webb & Vulliamy, 1996) may be useful here as such higher degrees can be tailored to individual needs and also provide teachers with the opportunity to take an informed critical view of current issues to the benefit of the profession as a whole.

More than 20 years after the Education Reform Act 1988 and the wave of initiatives that followed, the emergence of the teaching school concept (DfE, 2010) to facilitate training, research and professional development of teachers and headteachers with the aim that every school can have access to highly effective professional development support is a further significant development in ensuring that teachers can work and grow professionally within a CPD system that they can see as having become theirs.

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Appendix: data analysis

Table 1: Distribution of questionnaire 1 respondents across clusters according to roles

Headteacher	Deputy head	Subject co-ordinator	CPD co-ordinator	Key Stage (KS) co-ordinator
18	3	28	3	7
Teacher Foundation Stage	Teacher KS1	Teacher KS2	Teacher KS1 and KS2	SENCO
15	24	27	5	11

Note: Many respondents identified more than one role.

Table 2: Distribution of teaching experience

NQT	1–10 years	11–20 years	21–30 years	Over 31 years
4	20	22	21	10

Note: NQT = newly qualified teacher.

Table 3: Who decides on CPD priorities?

Individual teacher	CPD co-ordinator	Curriculum co-ordinator(s)	Headteacher	Other
46	2	10	49	19

Note: Many respondents identified more than one individual.

Table 4: Who decides who attends CPD?

Individual teacher	CPD co-ordinator	Curriculum co-ordinator(s)	Headteacher	Other
30	3	9	54	10

Note: Many respondents identified more than one individual.

Table 5: The time taken for CPD activities held in school

None	1-5 days	6-10 days	More than 11 days
3	52	10	0

Table 6: The time taken for CPD activities held externally

None	1-5 days	6-10 days	More than 11 days
11	35	18	6

Table 7: Questionnaire 2 top ranking CPD over one year in both clusters

SDP-related CPD		CPD not related to SDP	
Physical education	18	Physical education	3
Early Years/Foundation Stage	14	Child protection	2
Special educational needs	11	SENCO development	2
Leadership	10	Assessment	2
Maths	9	Behaviour	2
Workforce remodelling	7	First aid	2
Literacy	6	Asbestos training	2
Interactive whiteboards	4	RE/collective worship	2

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