Schools as Learning Communities: Effective Professional Development

Peter Earley and Sara Bubb

London Centre for Leadership in Learning, Department of Learning and Leadership

UCL Institute of Education, University College London

Abstract

This paper draws upon recent research and literature to discuss what is known about effective professional development. It begins with a brief discussion of terminology and offers a definition of professional development before investigating in more detail what constitutes effective professional development. This links to a discussion about the nature of learning communities and how professional development is led within such communities. Finally, we consider the changing nature of provision and approaches to teacher development and learning with a greater focus on school-based provision with a practitioner emphasis.

Key words: Learning-centred communities; leadership for learning; effective professional development and learning.

Introduction

This presentation given at the Eger Conference in September 2015 discusses what is known about effective professional development by drawing upon recent research and literature. It begins with a brief discussion of terminology and provides a definition of professional development before investigating in more detail what constitutes effective professional development. This links to a brief discussion about the nature of learning-centred communities and how professional development is led within such communities. Finally, we consider the changing nature of provision and approaches to teacher development and learning with a greater focus on school-based provision with a more practitioner emphasis.

Definitions and terminology

Language in the field of 'staff development' is a fundamental source of confusion even in English. For example the following terms are sometimes used interchangeably and at other times they carry specific meanings:

- Early professional development (EPD)
- Induction
- Continuing professional development (CPD)
- Professional learning or Continuing professional development and learning (CPDL)
- Training and development
- In-service education and training (INSET)
- Learning communities, schools, organisations.

Partly because of this confusion and lack of clarity about what is meant by staff development we developed the following definition which we published in our 2007 book on leading and managing continuing professional development. We said it was:

> an on-going process encompassing all formal and informal learning experiences that enable all staff in schools, individually and with others, to think about what they are doing, enhance their knowledge and skills and improve ways of working so that pupil learning and wellbeing is enhanced as a result. It should achieve a balance between individual, group, school and national needs; encourage a commitment to professional and personal growth; and increase self-esteem, resilience, self-confidence, job satisfaction and enthusiasm for working with children and colleagues. (Bubb & Earley, 2007, p4)

In our 2010 book 'Helping Staff Develop' we revisited this definition and attempted to unpack it by considering its various features. We make reference to nine features which together go to make up our definition of staff development. They are:

1. Staff development is an <u>on-going process</u>
    The process is what is important: development is something that is within the person all the time, not something done to or provided for them.
2. It encompasses all <u>formal and informal </u>learning experiences
    We develop in many ways: through the planned and formal activities as well as the learning through experience, to say nothing of the thoughts that occur while watching a film or which pop into your head in the shower.
3. It enables all staff in schools, individually and with others, to <u>think about </u>what they are doing
    Thinking about what you're doing is crucial. As Socrates said, *I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think.*
4. It <u>enhances knowledge and skills</u>.
    You've got plenty of knowledge and skills and now you're going to get yet more.
5. It <u>improves ways of working </u>so that pupil learning and well-being is enhanced
    The goal of all development should be that ultimately things are better for the children and young people.
6. It achieves <u>a balance </u>between individual, group, school and national needs
    We need to develop and help others to so that the benefits are multiplied.
7. It encourages a <u>commitment</u> to growth
    As Benjamin Britten said, 'Learning is like rowing against the tide. Once you stop doing it, you drift back'.
8. It <u>increases resilience</u>, self-confidence and job satisfaction
    Working with children and young people can be tough, especially on the emotions so we need to look after and develop our resilience, confidence – and enjoyment of our work.
9. It gives staff <u>renewed enthusiasm </u>for working with children and with colleagues. (Bubb and Earley, 2010, p2)

Learning centred communities

The types of schools in which teachers work are crucial to their development. Many years ago the American Judith Warren Little said: 'Imagine that you could become a better teacher just by virtue of being on the staff of a particular school – just that fact alone' (Little, 1990). This sentiment was also developed by Susan Rosenholz writing about the same time in the US when she referred to 'Learning impoverished' and 'Learning enriched' schools (Rosenholz, 1989). In her seminal research she saw the latter schools as learning-centred communities where everyone sees themselves as a learner. They also appreciate that professional learning goes on as part of their work – the workplace is a learning workshop. Teachers share their work and collaboratively seek to develop innovative practice since staff believe these to be valuable and productive ways to improve students' learning experiences. They also seize learning opportunities at other sites and events such as conferences, seminars and courses outside the school. Leaders in a learning-centred community promote a strong sense of shared vision for the future; they lead the learning, by being seen to be learning with everyone else; and they share and distribute leadership and empower others. They also promote collaboration and collegial ways of working and continuous improvement is built into the fabric of the school. In Rosenholtz's (1989) terms they are 'learning enriched' rather than 'learning impoverished' schools. An adapted version of her typology of schools is shown below:

'Learning impoverished'
- teacher isolation
- teachers compete with each other
- lack of positive feedback
- pulling in different directions
- avoidance of risk-taking
- a sense of powerlessness
- made to do professional development (PD)
- PD treated negatively

'Learning enriched'
- collaboration and sharing
- continuous teacher talk about practice
- a common focus
- a sense of efficacy
- belief in life-long learning
- looking out as well as in
- focus on improving things for pupils
- feedback is welcomed
- safe to take risks and try out new things teachers share values (from Bubb and Earley, 2007, p.18).

Interestingly, and much more recently our colleagues at London have analysed the OECD TALIS data for England and note the following:

> Teachers with less experience tend to have lower self-efficacy… self-efficacy tends to be higher when teachers report good relations with others in the school. This

includes cooperation and collaboration with colleagues, supportive feedback which is associated with positive changes in behaviour – such as the amount or type of CPD – and also good relations with students in the school… (although) we cannot be sure about the direction of causality here. (Micklewright et al, DfE TALIS report, 2014, p190)

Of course professional development (PD) can take a wide variety of forms and vary in terms of expense and effectiveness. It does not only consist of going on courses, conferences and workshops. The following although not exhaustive gives an idea of the very wide range of professional development opportunities schools make use of: Observation, Being observed, Learning walks, Professional learning conversations, Study groups and Lesson study, Reading, Coaching/mentoring, Pupils' views, Joint practice development, Teamwork (e.g. planning), Video, Action research and professional inquiry, Networks, New roles, On-line communities, Working with specialists, Disseminating learning and Training others.

Again data from TALIS suggest that teachers in England report higher than average participation in courses and workshops (75%) and in-service training in outside organisations (22%), but lower than average participation in more in-depth activities, such as research or formal qualifications – and less time spent overall on professional development.

We are beginning to have a better idea of what forms and types of PD offer greatest value. The process of teachers working together or collaboratively and learning from each other has become much more commonplace in England over the last few years as it has been seen to be more effective. Collaborative PD is seen as powerful. As Sebba (2013) has noted:

> Traditional approaches to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) are largely based on transferring knowledge or 'best practices' from an expert presenter to his or her audience. Research shows that this is rarely effective. By contrast, Joint Practice Development (JPD) is a process by which individuals, schools or other organisations learn from one another.

Joint Practice Development has three key characteristics; it:
- involves interaction and mutual development related to practice
- recognises that each partner in the interaction has something to offer and, as such, is based on the assumption of mutually beneficial learning
- is research-informed, often involving collaborative inquiry.

Although not a term coined by him, David Hargreaves has promoted its use in England and notes that joint practice development is:
- a joint activity in which two or more people interact and influence one another (beyond 'sharing good practice')
- an activity that focuses on teachers' professional practice, i.e. what they do, not merely what they know
- a development of the practice, not simply a transfer of it from one person or place to another, and so a form of school improvement. (Hargreaves, 2012, p9)

Another relatively new form of collaborative teacher development deemed to be effective is Research Lesson study. This helps teachers to:

▸ develop and innovate new practice in order to solve classroom problems
▸ provides a framework for the collaborative study of the basic unit of teaching and learning – the lesson
▸ engineer the way the lesson is framed and talked about.

Also gaining popularity as a form of professional development is coaching and mentoring; most commonly, coaching involves the 'coach' watching the 'learner' teach but the strongest evidence comes from Showers and Joyce (1996), who report the greatest benefit when the 'coach' is the person teaching and the observer, the one being 'coached', since the observer is expected to learn more from watching a colleague teach. In general, they state, coaching should be perceived as a collaborative activity between teachers, not a one-way expert critique. These examples of collaborative professional development or joint practice development have been found to be very beneficial forms of PD but what else do we know about effective professional development?

Effective professional development

We know that development activities are likely to be more effective if participants do most of the following:

1. choose them to fit in with their life and work
2. want to do them, see their relevance, know the intended outcomes
3. are involved in evaluating impact
4. feel that their existing expertise is taken into account
5. like the teaching & learning strategies used
6. can apply what they have learned
7. are open to learning beyond that intended (Bubb and Earley, 2010, p91).

Research into outstanding staff development practices shows that they were likely to be most effective when there was a strong ethos in the school. Leaders fostered, and all staff felt a sense of entitlement to and responsibility for their own development, closely linked to benefits for pupils. At the case study schools we studied with strong staff development staff turnover was low and morale was high, staff development was led and managed by experienced senior staff who were well-informed and gave it much time, linking it strategically to school improvement in efficient and cost-effective ways.

In a review of the literature conducted for England's National College, nine strong claims were made about effective professional development that leads to great pedagogy. It was found that such professional development:

1. starts with the end in mind
2. challenges thinking as part of changing practice
3. is based on assessment of individual and school needs
4. involves connecting work-based learning and external stimulation
5. ensures learning opportunities are varied, rich and sustainable

6. uses action research and enquiry as key tools
7. is strongly enhanced through collaborative learning and joint practice development
8. is enhanced by creating professional learning communities within and between schools
9. requires leadership to create the necessary conditions (Stoll, Harris and Handscomb, 2012)

Earlier research conducted by Earley and Porritt in 2009 in England identified nine factors that underpinned the most successful PD projects and strongly influenced effective practice. These were:

• Establishing clarity of purpose at the outset in PD activity
• Specifying a focus and goal for PD activity aligned to clear timescales
• Including a focus on pupil outcomes in PD activity
• Participants' ownership of PD activity
• Engagement with a variety of PD opportunities
• Time for reflection and feedback
• Collaborative approaches to PD
• Developing strategic leadership of PD
• Understanding how to evaluate the impact of PD

The above were determining factors in PD activity having an impact on colleagues' thinking and practice, the learning of pupils and organisational improvement.
Having this impact is the hallmark of effective PD. A key finding of the research was that PD activity, to be effective, needed to be underpinned by the nine factors identified above, irrespective of the PD activity, the participants, the context or the setting. This means that any developmental activity (attending a course, lesson observation, joint planning or being coached, etc.) will be more effective and have a greater impact if these nine factors underpin the strategic approach to PD activity in the organisation.

It has been argued that PD is only effective when it makes a tangible difference to the attitudes, thinking and practice of colleagues and has the potential to make a difference for the organisation and for pupils. The key question, therefore, is to know whether PD has made a difference and the ways in which it has brought about improvement. The last of the nine factors – 'understanding how to evaluate the impact of PD' – was crucial but many schools still struggle with this.

There are many models and theories about PD and its evaluation. Kirkpatrick's (1959) pioneering work on impact evaluation identified impact on four levels: reactions; learning; behaviour; and outcomes. Thomas Guskey (2000) developed this thinking for education and introduced a significant focus on evaluating PD through 'learning outcomes' for young people. Guskey's well-known model sees impact from PD as being achieved at five potential levels:
• participants' reactions,
• participants' learning,
• organisation support and change,
• participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and

• student learning outcomes.

Bubb and Earley (2010) build on Guskey's (2002) five evaluation levels to offer a model of 12 different levels of impact from any development activity, the first of which is establishing a baseline or knowing where you are. Other impact levels are: setting goals (knowing what you want to achieve); plan (planning the best way); the PD experience (initial satisfaction); learning (knowledge, skills, attitudes acquired or enhanced); organisational support (how the school helps or hinders the person using their new learning in their job); putting new learning into practice (degree and quality of change following from the PD activity); pupils' learning outcomes (impact on experience, attainment and achievement of pupils); other adults in school (sharing learning with other adults and the impact on them); other pupils in school (impact on experience, attainment and achievement of other pupils); adults in other schools (sharing learning with adults in other schools and the impact on them); and pupils in other schools (impact on experience, attainment and achievement of other pupils).

Frost and Durrant (2003), have made a helpful distinction between three sorts of impact on staff: classroom practice, personal capacity and interpersonal capacity. They also discuss the impact of PD on children in terms of distinguishing factors such as their enjoyment in learning, attitudes, participation, pride in and organisation of work, response to questions and tasks, performance and progress and their engagement in a wider range of learning activities.

Robinsons' meta-analysis (2009) showed that 'promoting and participating in teacher learning and development' is the single most important dimension of the leadership of schools. From their meta-analysis of 23 international studies they derived the key factors associated with effective school leadership. They used statistical data to establish effect sizes (ES) for five dimensions of leadership in terms of impact on student learning. Their results were striking, with leadership related to teacher development having by far the greatest impact on students. Acting as learning-centred leaders was crucial for as she notes 'the more leaders focus their relationships, their work and their learning on the core business of teaching and learning the greater their influence on student outcomes' (Robinson, 2011). Developing teachers makes the biggest contribution to student learning outcomes and school leaders' actions are crucial for creating that 'learning enriched atmosphere' within school for both pupils and adults.

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1. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development (0.84)
2. Establishing goals and expectations (0.42)
3. Planning, co-ordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (0.42)
4. Resourcing strategically (0.31)
5. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (0.27)

The figures in brackets are 'effect sizes'.
Effect sizes are measured on a scale of 0-1 where anything below 0.2 shows a weak or no effect, and anything greater than 0.6 reveals a significant impact.

Figure 1: Five dimensions of effective school leadership (Robinson, 2011)

Conclusion

In summary, the changing professional development landscape in England over the last five years or so involves:

- collaboration – within and across school/s
- coaching and mentoring
- research and inquiry approaches
- school led professional development
- school to school support/alliances
- teachers learning from each other to improve skills and practices

and impact evaluation with an unrelenting focus on improving outcomes for pupils.

Reviews and summaries of factors making for effective professional development continue to be published on a regular basis (e.g. see findings from review of reviews on effective teacher PD from the Teacher Development Trust and the publication *Developing Great Teaching*, 2015). These reviews and meta analyses - and their frequency - give an indication of the importance that is now given to teachers and their professional development. But as suggested the forms and processes of PD are different today than they were ten years ago. David Hargreaves, an influential writer in this field, has suggested we have moved or are in the process of moving to a better model of professional development and learning - from a 'knowledge model' to a 'practice model'. The latter consists of regular opportunities for PD throughout a teacher's career; progressive development fused with best professional practice; learning by doing; teachers' own research; improving what teachers do not just what they know; coaching and mentoring; in-house design and in-house facilitation; and developed by schools for schools.

One of the key messages of this paper is that 'Good schools make good teachers' and 'Good teachers make good schools'. It is a reciprocal and complementary relationship. The school workforce and especially teachers are the school's most important and expensive resource. This means that schools need to be 'good employers' and that means getting the balance right and meeting the needs of the whole school (through its school development plan) and its staff - and their needs. Schools must be learning communities or learning enriched after all:

> To learn from one who is still learning is like learning from a running stream.
> To learn from someone who has stopped learning is like learning from a stagnant pond.

Key readings

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