

Identifying the Influence of CPD on Day-to-Day Decisions Made Within the Classroom

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Abstract

This project sought to evaluate the link between professional learning and practice, by exploring the extent to which teacher training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) influences decisions made in the classroom. Findings were unclear as to how much theoretical training was internalised, but demonstrated that practical, skills-based training was not only preferred by teachers, but that it resulted in the acknowledgement of immediate results and had a hand in many of the decisions made for the rest of a teacher's career. However, what became clear as findings were explored is the unknown value of theoretical training upon individual teaching practise. Interviewees were unsure of how much they had 'internalised' theoretical training and the exact practical consequences of taking part in such training. Explored in the scope of this research, is whether individual's awareness of 'internalisation' of theoretical training is a true indicator of 'internalisation' occurring.

Key words: CPD; continuing professional development; practise; training; professional learning; internalisation; decisions; classroom

Introduction

The promises of good Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are enticing and speak to both teachers of a high level of experience and student teachers looking to continue their education and improve their efficacy in the classroom. CPD for teachers aims to address 'immediate classroom needs' through improving professional ability, classroom practice, and maximising pupil learning and academic achievement (Pedder *et al.* 2008: 6). Unsuccessful or ineffective CPD occurs when senior management or CPD co-ordinators fail to recognise the needs of teachers (Ofsted 2006: 4). Good CPD occurs when it is 'a key driver for school improvement' (Ofsted 2006: 4) and 'where a wide range of different types' are offered (Ofsted *ibid*). However just how 'good CPD' can be arranged and indeed any positive impact it has will vary greatly from school to school; to suggest generic, blanket CPD initiatives to be rolled out on a national level would fail to address individual's needs as each school, made up of a diverse number of teaching individuals, will vary. This research suggests a new digital format to be used in schools to detect diverse CPD needs and that this can be achieved by recognising that detection of CPD needs- in the first instance- must be a tailored approach, wholly individualistic in nature, fully recognising bias, agenda, school culture and subjectivity and how these constrain teaching professionals in terms of which needs (within their practice) they choose to share. By acknowledging these difficulties, a

greater number of needs can be addressed with CPD as a greater number of needs can be disclosed.

On the surface Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has a positive impact on teaching practice (Pedder et al., p.6). CPD has always had and will continue to have positive aims, intentions and promises for progress in a variety of areas. A report commissioned by the Training and Development Agency in 2008 specifies these intentions as improving 'professional abilities and classroom practice' (Pedder et al., p.6) and 'academic achievement' (Pedder et al., p.6), as having a 'positive impact on pupil learning' (Pedder et al., p.6) and finally addressing 'immediate classroom needs' (Pedder et al., p.6). These are high expectations for CPD and this research tries to uncover whether or not these intentions transfer into realistic actions and whether the actual impact of CPD on the decision-making process within the classroom is measurable.

Literature Review

The impact of CPD on the individual and such an individual's teaching practice is qualitative in nature, although it can be measured to some extent, the results are subjective and personal; dependent upon individual practice and learning styles (Burchell et al. 2002) and so the measurement of this impact is 'fraught with difficulties' (Glover & Law 1996, p. 83), therefore little progress has been made to measure these effects nationally (Harland & Kinder, 1997, p.74).

The expected aims of CPD are to expand one's horizons and improve teaching practice for the betterment of all students (Pedder et, al, 2008, p.6). Largely CPD and its intentions are taken seriously as the majority of teachers are committed to improving the progress and wellbeing of their students (Guskey,2002, p. 384). However with this aim in mind Guskey (2002) found that in order to achieve this, many teachers go through a selective process of distinguishing which parts of training they will carry forward into their own classrooms. Just how this selection takes shape is dependent on the individual but 'tend[s] to be quite pragmatic' (Guskey,2002, p.382). What they hope to gain through professional development are specific concrete and practical ideas that directly relate to the day-to-day operation of their classrooms.' (Guskey,2002, p. 343).

Guskey states the obvious: each teacher will naturally pick out which classroom routines or strategies would work with a specific group of children. As parents would discriminate between behaviour strategies and managers with management strategies. Being pragmatic and selective is part of developing effective practice as practice revolves around specific individuals with specific needs.

Opfer and Pedder (2011) find that teachers' understanding of which types of CPD will provide the greatest efficacy within the classroom is dependent upon beliefs and perceptions of said training. Initially we can examine what may constitute perceptions or beliefs around the efficacy of a particular CPD programme. If a teacher working in an SEN school finds Team Teach training offers concrete solutions, such a perception of what Team teach training can

offer her is dependent upon the context in this case as Team teach training will provide her with practical concrete solutions. Opfer et. al suggest that impact on student learning, efficiency in the classroom, personal goal attainment and improvement of professional practice are elements which constitute such perceptions of CPD efficiency which affect its subsequent selection, engagement with key concepts and final use within practice.

Indeed the very selection of CPD opportunities is based upon pragmatic decisions establishing the nature of needs and matching these with the proposed aims of a CPD opportunity (Opfer et. al, 2011) The nature of this pragmatism is somewhat different from Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes designed for student teachers, as such programmes are chosen for student teachers, and the onus of these decisions rests upon programme organisers. The 'precise nature of the relationship' between research and teacher education is unclear (Whitney et. al, 2012); it is unclear if programme design is based upon research in education or educational experience of the organisers and is most probably a combination of both.

Selecting what to take away from CPD is a very conscious activity that involves using practical aspects of training whether this be setting up certain classroom routines, using visuals or using specific strategies. Furthermore, the practical application of training may not be evident or even very efficient after the first try; Guskey suggests CPD is essentially getting teachers to try new things and this will amount to success or failure (Guskey, 2002), even the most motivational training has this potential to fail in the classroom which 'runs counter to most teachers' strong commitment to student learning' (2002, p.386-387). What really motivates teachers to change their practice is evidence of success in the classroom that training and thus change of practice is rather a 'cyclical' process than a 'linear' one (Guskey, 2002, p.385), whereby teachers try new things, realise that they worked and they augment these processes, strategies and routines as time goes on.

But there is another side to CPD that is distinctly unconscious. Learning becomes 'internalised' (Burchell et al., 2002, p. 220) this 'internalisation' becomes realised through different kinds of activity, but mainly through 'self-reports' (Burchell et al., 2002, p.202), and through the sharing with others (Burchell et al., 2002, p.222). Burchell, Dyson and Rees (2002) explain the internalisation of training as being realised through 'self-reports' (2002, p. 220). McGill and Beaty (1995) speak of something similar but suggest that CPD is 'enriched by sharing' (p.205). This term 'enriched by sharing' (McGill & Beaty, 1995, p.205) seems intuitively true and was echoed by many of the teachers interviewed. Whether sharing is a prerequisite for the realisation of the internalisation of learning is still questionable however. Realisation and internalisation are not the same, rather one is an indication of the other. And whether discussions with others are the only way in which CPD becomes 'enriched' (p.205) is also questionable.

A case study conducted by Burchell, Dyson and Rees (2002) found that one of the participants of the study was able to reflect upon her training and that this was a clear indicator that 'learning has been internalised and embedded in practice.' (p. 220) Although she found that sharing what she had learnt with

colleagues extremely helpful she describes some of her experiences thus: 'But nobody's got time to sit down and mull over all these interesting points about education, you know and all these things I'm interested in unless it's particularly going to impact on what they're doing right now.' (Burchell et al., 2002, p. 224) Although the participant was interested in lots of different aspects of her training she was limited as to how much she could share with colleagues because of what they were interested in. Pragmatism comes in again with teachers being pragmatic when sharing learning with other teachers, as well as their own learning. Reporting on learning to others is more restrictive than self-reflection.

More often than not school culture is 'the way we do things around here' (Law, 1997, p. 70) 'particularly in reference to how people relate (or fail to relate) to each other.' (p. 70). The ways in which people communicate and relate to one another in the school environment needs to be open and supportive (Law, 1997, p. 70). However it is more often restricted by the school culture; a culture made up of 'guiding beliefs' (p.70) and 'expectations' (p.70) of how the 'school operates' (p.70), which has an effect on how teachers operate or should be perceived to be operating. The effects of school culture have long-standing acknowledgement (Hargreaves, 1997). In asking for help or reporting on practices, information may be moderated and certain details undisclosed, depending on what is considered acceptable within that school culture. Furthermore, in the interests of educational change and policy drive, Fullan (2007) provides three dimensions which provide wide scale change, the second dimension considers new teaching practice as a key driver for wide scale change within education. It is within our best interests as school leaders and teachers to allow for new practises to take shape, this starts with trust and subsequently full disclosure of needs and interests without worry of repercussions if such needs are contrary to school culture.

Three out of the four participants in the study were very explicit about the effectiveness of sharing with other colleagues, having group discussions, voicing their concerns or seeking advice from more senior members of staff, teachers are pragmatic about how they voice their concerns, which information they might share or may not share, based upon who they are voicing their concerns to. In short, sharing is helpful in its immediacy, by making us feel at ease, or by gaining quick solutions, but is a discursive process of what is shared and what is not shared, which problems we choose to unearth, and which we do not. Sharing of this nature means there is no way of knowing if the problems which are not shared are the real problems which need to be addressed.

Research Approach

Action Research is a 'rigorous' approach (Berg, 2009, p. 252, Mcgrath & Cole, 2013, p. 109) which advocates an initial 'systematic line of enquiry' (Berg, 2009, p. 252), which starts by 'identifying a problem' (Mcgrath & Cole pg.109). CPD has effective application and is often 'rolled out' to many either by using an internal specialist belonging to the same school as recipients or an external specialist, invited to share their programme, experience or wisdom. Contrary to this generic manner (in respect of the number of teaching professionals and their varying needs) in which CPD is delivered, the effects upon individual teaching practice are greatly varied. What transpires after CPD is administered

is mixed bag of affected and unaffected practice. In keeping with the structure of an action research project is that, after the initial investigation one of the final stages of Action Research is implemented, 'an intervention or practical solution that promotes change' (McGrath & Cole, 2013, p. 109). Within the scope of this research a practical outcome is given as a suggestion to make progress towards CPD which is 'related to the actual lives of participants in this research project.' (Berg, 2009, p. 252). There are hopes that the intervention suggested will help those that plan CPD within Schools, to devise training opportunities which directly address the needs of its staff.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants – Teacher one, Teacher two, Teacher three and Teacher four - at different stages of their career: the interviewees were of a range of different ages and backgrounds, ensuring an appropriate cross-section demographic of the school. A demographic which could typically be found in most schools. Conducting semi-structured interviews meant delving into the perceptions and views of these individuals to understand '[...] the perceptions of participants [and] how participants come to attach certain meanings to phenomena or events' (Berg 2009, p. 110) There was a danger of participants divulging lots of information about themselves and their experiences, becoming very relaxed within the interview and going off track (McGrath & Cole, 2013, p.133). To maintain structure, a set number of questions had to be answered by the end of each interview. The results were cross-referenced and trends were easily identified across all four responses through complex coding.

Considering the highly personal subject matter, generalisability was difficult to achieve. The responses of each teacher initially appeared to reflect their position within the school. More senior participants preferred to rely upon prior information from previous teachers, a senior teacher would understand this routine of handover. Less senior participants sought frequent practical advice from senior teachers that provided immediate solutions. Senior participants who were in a position of greater responsibility had consulting roles within the school and admitted to seeking advice, discussing with other adults and using previous experience to provide insight into new problems when consulted. In a very general sense these needs are consistent with their positions and could be understood as general points of view of teachers within the same positions.

All participants were made aware of the aims of research being conducted and in keeping with ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011, p.5). All participants were made aware that they could ask to be withdrawn from the research at any given time also (BERA, 2011, p.6). Methods of recording responses during the interviews were made using a dictaphone; prior to the commencement of the interview a verbal agreement was made; specifying how the recording was to be used thereafter. Being sensitive to the needs of participant information and how it is used thereafter is becoming increasingly real with the rise of social media: 'Social networking and other online activities including their video-based environments present challenges for consideration of consent issues and the participants must be clearly informed that their participation and interactions are being monitored and analysed for research.' (BERA, 2011, p. 5)

Discussion of Findings

All four of the interviews were recorded and transcribed and then coded using emerging themes that arose. The initial aim being to establish how much of an impact CPD had had on the interviewees day-to-day decisions within the classroom and furthermore to understand what predominantly was influencing their day-to-day decisions if this was not CPD itself.

All four of the participants stressed that seeking advice was often more helpful and went further towards finding a solution for problems with specific children. Teacher one sought out a behavioural psychologist to help with a child who was exhibiting anxiety over certain tasks. Teacher two admitted: 'advice is probably a lot more valuable than any training itself'. Teacher four described seeking advice but with a less immediate outcome: 'Just recently I asked about a child and a certain situation and the advice didn't work, I used it a few days later however and it did work.' Teacher three's perspective is quite different, s/he described advice seeking in a peer related way of discussions and sharing: 'you all get together and it's about real learning and sharing. And you learn a lot from other people too.' Teacher three considered sharing with others as a way of building upon insight rather than providing an immediate practical solution.

Several authors stress the need to converse with others as an important part of learning and changing one's practice (McGill & Beaty, 1995, Burchell et.al, 2002). However each teacher had a slightly different insight into the uses of seeking advice and how helpful it could be. This need for practical immediate results is consistent with Harland and Kinder's (1997) model for change in practice as teachers seek out strategies that will show immediate evidence of change in the classroom, once this evidence is found, these strategies are verified and kept as a result. 'According to the model, significant change in teacher's attitudes and beliefs occurs primarily after they gain evidence of improvements in student learning.' (1997, p.383)

Several interviewees mentioned the significance of practical solutions over theoretical insights. One interviewee claimed that practical strategies were more immediate, they could be used the next day in the classroom and seemed to work '[...] we were able to do the training with our support staff so it felt a lot more like we could use it the next day in a team [...]' Other interviewees did not make this connection but preferred training that offered whole class routines and consistent behaviour management strategies 'The 'Teech' training was particularly effective because it tells you how to set up a classroom for the benefit of autistic children'.

Teacher one sought advice for the sake of gaining a practical strategy, the behavioural psychologist was able to give them a practical activity to do with child X, teacher two said that 'advice is normally based upon previous practice, which is much more helpful.' Teacher four did not explicitly show a preference for practical training but when asked to provide an example of the most effective training they had attended they gave the example of "Team Teach Training" where they describe the training in terms of its practical side and its applicability: 'We had Team Teach training and that was good because they drove concepts

and treated it like an exercise and made you repeat what you were learning a lot so that you got it. We were able to do the training with our support staff so it felt a lot more like we could use it the next day in a team and we would all be on the same page.’ Although they do not explicitly mention a preference for practical training throughout the interview, this last statement is telling of a preference for training with immediate practical application.

Finally, participants were unsure of how much they use training within the classroom because they were unaware of how much they had internalised concepts. When asked about how much teacher two felt that training informed their decisions within the classroom, s/he replied: ‘I reckon its far more regular than I would think. I think that I would naturally make decisions based upon what I have learnt. I’d say that in the back of your mind that you always have these ideas of “Oh like this happened, maybe I’ll think about trying this.” And then you naturally do it. So I think it’s probably quite frequent that training plays an effective role in your decision making in class.’. Teacher three echoed this statement but with more clarity: ‘That’s a difficult one to say isn’t it? You don’t know what you’ve internalised and what has become part of your practice. You don’t analyse “Oh I’m doing this because I attended that training ten years ago, or I read that article.” You know, it’s human nature isn’t it?’ All four subjects were aware that they had internalised aspects of training.

Burchell suggests that ‘self-reports’ (p.220) like the two just mentioned are strong indicators that ‘learning has been internalised and embedded in practice.’ (p.220) But Burchell goes one step further and says that all self-reports of how training has affected practice are all indicators that training has been internalised, even if this fact goes unacknowledged (p.220). This goes some way towards why teachers may seek advice when they encounter a problem rather than, or as well as, seek additional training. Even if one is aware that they internalise training, they are unsure of the specifics of this, so that when one encounters a new problem in the classroom one cannot predict if some aspect of training will ‘kick in’, therefore do teachers seek advice because it’s not necessarily better but a more reliable process of finding a solution?

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Conclusion

The main research question was to try and understand how much CPD influences decisions made in the classroom, this question was about uncovering the link between learning and professional practice for specific individuals. This brought further research questions, namely, if there is a strong influential link between training and practice? And finally if there is a weak link what do teachers rely upon to inform their decisions, if not training? A variety of answers arose from the interviews conducted: training does influence classroom based decisions but participants at times are only semi-aware of how much. Practical training lends itself to immediate results and teachers prefer this over theoretical training because of this. However although they showed a preference for practical training, it is unclear how much theoretical training is internalised and has a hand in many of the decisions made for the rest of their career, therefore it is just as important even if this fact is not always acknowledged.

As already mentioned the teaching professionals who took part in this study were able to make decisions based upon both theoretical training and practical training but that practical training based decisions were more conscious and more obvious. Seeking advice was a good way of gaining instantaneous solutions or even if this is not the case, the act of sharing concerns with another member of staff is a positive act and alleviates anxiety over a problem. However training should reinforce any advice that members of staff receive so that this advice is supported with further learning, turning immediate solutions into long-term changes in practice.

Discussion of issues amongst teachers is valuable, supportive and practical yet discursive (Law 1997, p.70) process, subject to factors in the school environment which may inhibit full disclosure and cause teaching professionals to omit certain details or concerns on the basis of what the nature of these factors are. To combat this problem, I propose that an anonymous digitally shared form should be used so that teaching staff feel comfortable enough to report all information regarding a problem in the classroom and whether or not this information fits in with the school culture, nothing can be traced back to participants; therefore there is no risk of failing to meet certain expectations (Deal & Kennedy 1982) or of being judged as not conforming to certain 'guiding beliefs' (Law, 1997, p.70).

Once this information has been recorded anonymously and CPD coordinators or senior leadership can access it, it is important to propose how this information is translated into CPD coordination. In short: what one coordinator picks out of a set of information as a need that should be addressed, another coordinator may not. The deciphering of needs as a process is problematic as it may be subject to agendas, bias and the general theoretical or political standpoint that that individual has with regards to teaching practice (whether they are aware of this or not). This is somewhat unavoidable, as all interpretation is an intrinsically flawed process but to counteract any avoidable bias or misinterpretation, I propose that the information provided on the form should always be reviewed by more than one professional so that any bias or misinterpretation can be challenged; whether this 'shared review' take the form of an initial joint discussion of the information provided on the form or if one professional has the responsibility of initially reviewing the information and presenting their results to another for agreement or dispute.

Finally, a typical initial response to a problem would be to try and seek help from other more experienced members of staff, however to support greater changes in practice it is as much about what we do not approach other members of staff with as the issues we feel comfortable enough to share. Allowing a CPD coordinator or those who plan CPD opportunities, as much information about the surrounding issues, whether or not these actions or issues fit into school culture and expectations or not means that teaching professionals have more opportunities to experience CPD which addresses a greater number of their needs and which in turn, goes towards improving practice.

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