

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the findings from a recent research study that explored the ways in which continuing professional development is being evaluated in schools. It focuses upon the extent to which schools are gauging the impact of continuing professional development (CPD) particularly at the classroom level. The article provides a contemporary overview of evaluative practice of CPD and concludes that the impact of CPD on student learning remains significantly under-evaluated. The article suggests that schools require more support and training in order to evaluate the impact of CPD more effectively.

INTRODUCTION

“Evaluation is as basic to professional development as it is to education. Unfortunately, as is so often the case in education, systematic evaluations of professional development programs are rarely undertaken. Millions of dollars have been provided in the name of faculty professional development, but the quality of these programs goes virtually unchallenged.” (Clare, 1976:1)

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is widely acknowledged to be important in the pursuit of improvements in teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 1994; Harland and Kinder, 1997; Craft, 2000). The relationship between teacher development and school development is well established and reinforced in research literature (Day, 1999; 2003). While there are many interpretations of CPD, at its core is reflection and professional learning. As Day (1999:5) suggests CPD encompasses *all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school*. Successive research projects have reiterated that the quality of professional interaction, the focus on staff development and the relentless pursuit of improved teaching and learning are key characteristics of school effectiveness and improvement (Maden and Hillman, 1996; Gray, 2000; OFSTED, 2000; Harris, 2002). In addition, the research evidence acknowledges the importance of teachers engaging in continuing career-long development that meets their own personal and professional needs.

A key factor in ensuring CPD is effective is the matching of appropriate professional development provision to particular professional needs (Garret, *et al.*, 2001). This ‘fit’ between the developmental needs of the teacher and the selected activity is critically important in ensuring that there is a positive impact at the school and classroom level (Hopkins and Harris, 2001). Where staff development opportunities are poorly conceptualised, insensitive to the concerns of individual participants and make little effort to relate learning experiences to workplace conditions, the evidence shows that they make little impact upon teachers or their pupils (Day, 1999). It is important therefore that any evaluation of CPD needs to take careful account of the important relationship between purposes and outcomes in order for the evaluation to be meaningful.

EVALUATING CPD: POSSIBILITIES AND PRACTICALITIES

It is clear that there are a wide variety of levels at which CPD can be evaluated. It is also clear that most useful evaluations combine methods, marrying the rigour of quantitative measures to the deeper formative information provided by qualitative methods, a process sometimes known as 'holistic' evaluation (Clare, 1976). Especially where CPD programs are complex and multifaceted, this needs to be reflected in evaluation strategies, with methods appropriate for each component (Schwartz, *et al.*, 1977). Evaluation of CPD will usually want to serve two main purposes: summative evaluation (does the program improve outcomes?) and formative assessment (how can the program be improved?). These two goals can best be served by collecting data in different ways, test scores for example often being used summatively while interview and survey data can be used to guide formative evaluation (Scannell, 1996). A further point is that in order to minimise bias, data needs to be collected from a variety of stakeholders, rather than just one group, and to use a variety of research method (Smith, 2002).

Evaluation can be carried out either entirely in-house or with the help of external experts. When pure in-house evaluation is carried out, evaluation capacity must exist, and where necessary be developed through professional development (Trevisan, 2002). When external evaluation is preferred, it is important to ensure that participants contribute to evaluation design and activities, as use of evaluation results has often been found to be patchy where that is not the case (Torres and Preskill, 2002). Furthermore, it has been found that where participants themselves are not involved in developing evaluation, they are less likely to take account of evaluation information to change their practice (Gordan, 1997).

For evaluation to be most effective in contributing to CPD as well as evaluating it, feedback on evaluation should be provided to participants wherever possible (Schwartz, *et al.*, 1977). Providing continuous feedback that is useful to program developers is also one way of reducing 'excessive evaluation anxiety', which has been found to be a problem in many evaluations. Characterised by conflict with evaluators, refusal to cooperate, stalling and resistance and trying to hide program weaknesses, evaluation anxiety often results from negative past experience of evaluation, high personal stakes in the innovation, and fear of negative consequences, and is strongest where evaluation is conducted by externals or senior management. As well as providing continuous feedback, evaluation anxiety can be reduced by stressing positive as well as negative outcomes, involving stakeholders in evaluation, clearly explaining the purpose of the evaluation and discussing the purpose of the evaluation and prior experiences of evaluation with stakeholders (Donaldson, Gooler and Scriven, 2002).

Evaluation at best will provide not just an overview of whether CPD itself has been successful, but will also have strong positive learning benefits to teachers in the school (Knight, 2002). To be most effective evaluation processes need to be embedded in the school and just not added on at the end of a CPD programme of activity (Guskey, 2002).

LIMITATIONS OF EVALUATING CPD

While the ultimate purpose of CPD is to secure changes in classroom practice that will have a positive impact, directly or indirectly, on student learning the evaluative evidence to support this relationship appears to be less forthcoming. The current CPD evaluation processes would appear to be restricted in a number of ways. Firstly, it is clear that most evaluation models applied to CPD overlook or omit the issue of cost effectiveness. Benfield, *et al.* (2001) point out that CPD should not be undertaken if the costs to the system outweigh the benefits. Yet in evaluating the impact of CPD in schools the issue of cost effectiveness is rarely explored. As a result, we know relatively little about the cost effectiveness of alternative forms of CPD. Secondly,

CPD evaluation processes are rarely fine grained or sufficiently robust enough to capture evidence about the relationship between CPD and learning outcomes. It would appear that there are major limitations in the evaluation methodologies employed in schools. Guskey (2000) has suggested that there are three major weaknesses of the evaluation processes applied to CPD. These are as follows:

1. Most 'evaluation' consists merely of summarising the activities undertaken as part of the professional development program. What courses were attended, how many credits accrued etc. This clearly gives no indication of the effectiveness of the activities undertaken, making this form of data-collection inadequate as a means of looking at the effects of CPD.
2. Where some evaluation does exist, this usually takes the form of participant satisfaction questionnaires. Obviously, this allows one to gauge whether participants consider the event to have been enjoyable and successful, but does not engage with issues such as gains in knowledge, changes in practice expected from professional development and certainly does not evaluate whether there have been changes in student outcomes.
3. Evaluations are also typically brief, one-off events, often undertaken post hoc. As most meaningful change will tend to be long-term, and many professional development activities will take place over a longer period of time, evaluation efforts need to reflect this and likewise take place over time. Evaluation will also need to be built in to run alongside professional development activities.

A recent study of CPD activity in England by Edmonds and Lee (2004) also highlighted certain limitations of evaluative practices in schools. This study showed that in the majority of cases the evaluation of CPD involved a feedback sheet that was completed by teachers. This sheet included questions on delivery, content, and whether they felt the course had met its objectives. In some cases the evaluation sheet also asked teachers whether they felt the course was cost-effective and in a few cases asked whether it was likely to have an impact on teaching and learning. The evidence also showed that other forms of evaluation were rare as most school relied on the feedback sheets. The effects on teaching and learning were hardly ever studied and long-term monitoring of the impact of CPD was simply not addressed. Although teachers reported that they thought CPD had improved their teaching the evidence of impact was not there to substantiate such claims.

One of the major problems in collecting evidence about the impact of CPD resides in schools' attention at one level i.e. the teacher. As noted earlier, most attention is paid to the response of teachers to the CPD which can be both superficial and limited. In contrast Guskey (2002) suggests that there are five levels at which the impact of CPD can be evaluated. These are as follows:

- Participant reaction
- Participant learning
- Organisational support and change
- Participant use of new knowledge and skills
- Pupil learning outcomes.

Both Stake (1967) and Stufflebeum (1983) add an antecedent level to this list that concerns the prior conditions of the evaluation. These conditions would include some consideration of the motivations behind and reasons for the professional development programme or activity. It would also focus upon why the particular programme was chosen, or why it was developed in a particular way and would explore the other factors affecting choice and development of the CPD programme.

In summary, the literature and recent research evidence points towards some significant shortcomings in schools' evaluation of CPD and suggests that at best it captures the impact of professional development and training on teachers rather than students. It also suggests that while a great deal of CPD is undertaken by teachers, the systematic evaluation of its impact is far from extensive or conclusive (Goodall, *et al.*, 2005).

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In 2003 a two year research and development project was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skill to explore levels of evaluation of CPD in schools. The project was set within a policy context in England where teacher development was acknowledged to be increasingly important in the quest for raised standards. It was also set against a backdrop of increased school self evaluation and the establishment of the General Teaching Council's 'Teaching and Learning' Academy that aimed to acknowledge teachers professional development experiences in a more formalised way. During the life of the project the major responsibility for CPD moved from the DfES to the newly formed Teacher Development Agency which was yet another indicator of the centrality of teacher development within contemporary education policy in England.

The project had two main aims. Firstly to ascertain the range of evaluative practices used by schools to gauge the impact of CPD. Secondly to develop materials to assist schools in evaluating the impact of CPD at each of the five levels proposed by (Guskey, 2000). This research project employed a mixed methodology of both qualitative and quantitative data collection¹. Throughout the project key stakeholders were engaged in reviewing the progress of the research and offering feedback. The research methodology is outlined in Figure 1.

Research Methodology

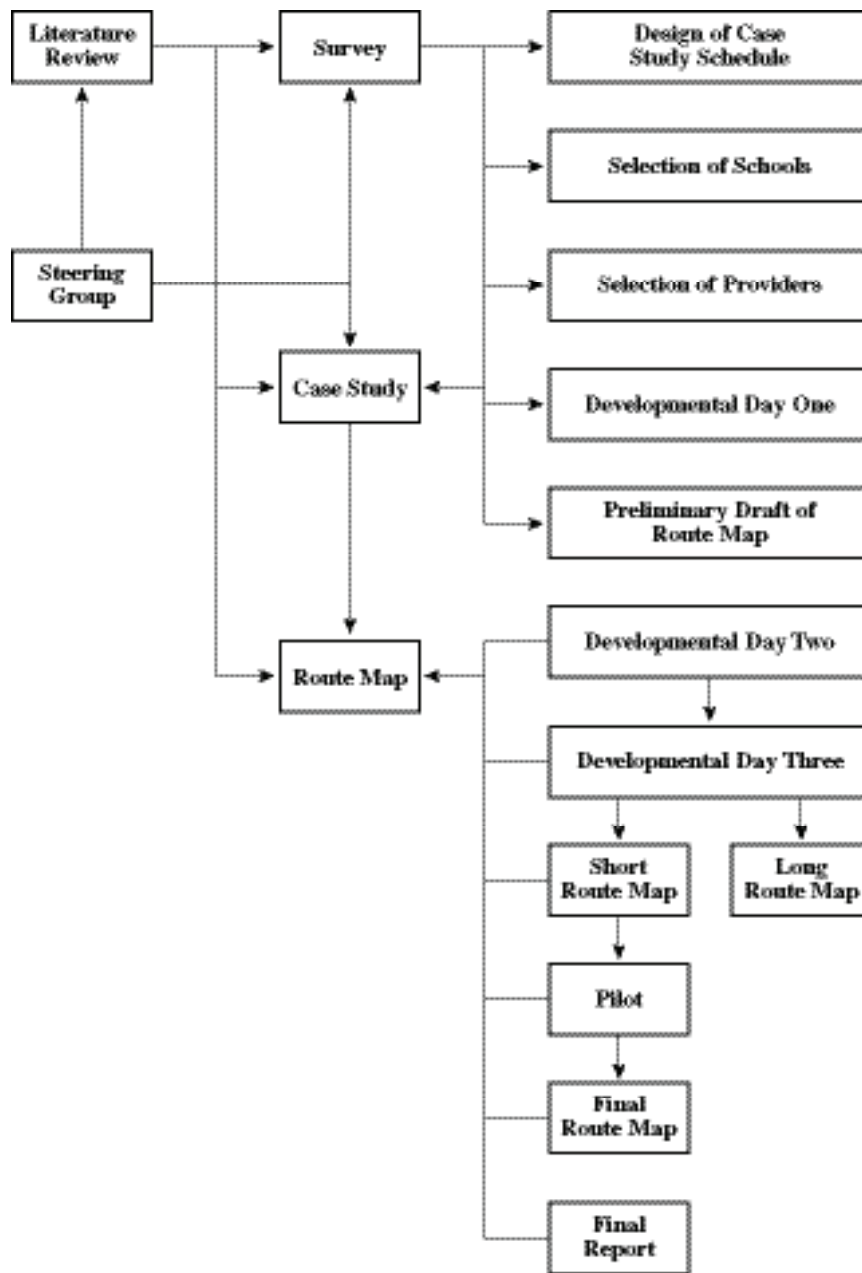
The research was conducted in four phases². Phase one involved a comprehensive *review of the international literature*. This review informed subsequent stages of the project and set the context for the other phases of the project (Muijs, *et al.*, 2004).

Phase two of the project involved *three major surveys* of teachers, CPD Leaders and CPD Providers. Teachers and CPD Leaders in 1000 schools were asked about their involvement in and the use of evaluation processes. The survey phase of the project provided a broadly representative set of view about the evaluation of CPD from practitioners and stakeholders.

The third phase encompassed *in depth field work* that was conducted across a wide range of case study schools. The rationale for selecting a case study approach stems from a view, well supported in the research literature, that cases are a powerful means of understanding complexity; sharing knowledge about processes, practices and outcomes; and understanding the relevance of local context (Robson, 1993; Shkedi, 1998; Wengraf, 2001). This approach gave robustness to the study; providing an effective means of capturing the diverse experiences and perceptions of all those involved and yield rich data.

During the field work phase, 44 schools were visited. The research team sought to include a wide range of schools, from different LEAs, different phases and situations, a variation in SES banding, small and large schools. The smallest school included in the field work had just over 50 pupils, the largest had 2000. In total, 180 semi structured interviews were conducted with head teachers, CPD leaders³, heads of department, main scale teachers, newly qualified teachers and teaching assistants. This qualitative data provided in depth accounts of how CPD was being evaluated. It also highlighted some key issues and concerns about the evaluation practices being adopted by schools. In addition, a wide range of documentary evidence of practice was collected at each participating case study school.

Figure 1: Research Methodology



The fourth phase of the project was the development and testing of materials for schools. This became known as the *Route Map* and was a document intended to support schools in evaluating the impact of CPD. The Route Map was generated from the data emerging from the other three phases of the project and was piloted with 12 schools. All were given the Route Map along with a pro-forma to assess the materials. They were also contacted by the research team to discuss their results.

The development of the Route Map was guided by a number of principles, taken both from the literature review and from the results of the previous phases of the project. These principles were as follows:

- The materials had to be brief and practical
- The materials had to be grounded in the everyday experience of schools
- The materials had to point to resources which are easily available to schools
- The materials needed to assist schools in examining their current evaluation practice at each of Guskey's five levels.

The piloting of the materials allowed refinements to be made and for the final version to be published. All of the schools involved in the pilot expressed a desire to continue to use and adapt the materials. The next section outlines the findings from the research project.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

It is important to offer some contextualisation before outlining the findings from the project. Firstly although the project was not directly about the nature, type and quality of CPD provision, inevitably some of these issues were highlighted in the data. Secondly, we present findings about the role of the CPD leader within schools even though this was not the prime purpose of the project. As the study progressed it became clear that an examination of this role was vital to understanding the evaluation processes underway in schools. All of the findings are drawn from the three research strands of the project i.e. the literature review, the survey and the field work. The findings are presented under the thematic headings of 'Provision of CPD' and 'Evaluation Processes'.

Provision of CPD

The research project found that CPD generally still tends to be equated, by teachers in particular, with in-service courses. Although the project found an increasing number of alternative models of CPD prevalent in many of the case study schools such as mentoring, observation, professional discussion it was evident that many of the respondents still equated CPD with in service courses. The research found that teachers' experiences of CPD varied considerably and their access to CPD was heavily dependent upon the attitude of the school and the LEA to professional development and training. It was clear that some LEAs and schools were much more proactive than others in promoting and providing access to CPD. This would suggest that teachers' knowledge of and access to CPD is far from equitable across the country.

The survey data showed that the most effective forms of CPD were considered to be INSET days with over 50% of the total respondents in the survey rating this form of CPD as "highly effective", Mentoring and critical friendships were rated as the next most effective by 50 % of respondents although interestingly 8% of respondents stated that they had not experienced this form of CPD. Informal networking was considered effective by 49% with 47% supporting a series of workshops as an effective means of CPD. The data showed that CPD co-ordinators tended to be more positive about INSET days than teachers.

The interview data reflected a different opinion with teachers rating observation and professional discussion as the most effective forms of CPD. These forms of CPD

were consistently viewed by the teachers interviewed to have the greatest impact on professional growth and change. By contrast INSET days were not generally viewed as particularly effective by teachers unless these days were delivered from within the school by other teachers. There was considerable support for in service training by teachers for teachers although it was acknowledged that these events took a great deal of preparation time.

It was clear from both the survey and the interview data that the most effective types of CPD were considered to be those that directly met individual needs, as well as those which responded directly to school based needs. Teachers in the case study schools expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with CPD events that were not practically focused or failed to live up to their expectations.

The research found that within schools the evaluation of CPD is most often responsibility of CPD leader. In most schools responsibility for CPD is given to a senior member of staff. If the role is not taken by the Head teacher, it is most often a deputy or a member of the Senior Management Team (SMT). However it was clear that many CPD leaders felt that they had insufficient support advice and training about the modes of evaluation available for use. In general CPD leaders in the study felt unprepared for their evaluation role and expressed a need for evaluation training. There was also widespread agreement amongst CPD leaders of a need for standards for their role aligned with clear guidelines for fulfilling the role. It was also suggested that standards, training and a clear job description would highlight the value of the role of CPD leader within schools.

Evaluation Processes

The research found that the vast majority of evaluation practice remains at the level of participant reaction and learning. There was consistent evidence that participant reaction, learning and use of new knowledge and skills were evaluated by all schools in the field work. However, the impact upon organisational support and change was evaluated by only 41% of the schools and pupil learning outcomes were evaluated by only one in four schools in the study. The project found that across the case study schools the impact on student learning is not always evaluated and if done so, is rarely executed very effectively or well.

The data revealed that the case study schools were generally not skilled in the processes of evaluation and lacked experience along with the tools to consider the impact of CPD at all of the 5 levels. Across all schools the most widely used evaluation tool was a questionnaire or short evaluation form. In the majority of cases schools see the completion of the questionnaire or 'happy sheet' as an end in itself and they rarely do anything with the information collected.

Among the schools in the study there was a high degree of confusion between dissemination and evaluation. If information about training and the consequences of training were shared this was seen as evaluation. This meant that in many of the case study schools there was a proliferation of low level dissemination rather than targeted evaluation. The survey showed that the most frequently evaluated component was teacher or participant satisfaction with the training. Value for money was the second most frequently evaluated element, with over 51% of respondents claiming that this element was evaluated *usually* or *always*. The survey data showed that changes in pupil learning was only a feature of the evaluation processes of 24% of schools, making it the least frequently evaluated source of impact.

The survey and interview study data highlighted that many schools still equate CPD with in-service training (INSET), although alternative models of CPD are now much more prevalent (e.g. mentoring, observation, professional discussion). It was also evident that many teachers' experiences of CPD are heavily dependent on their school and the LEA in which they work. The research found that opportunities to engage in CPD vary considerably between schools and LEAs.

The research found a trend towards 'in-house' provision of CPD for a number of reasons. These were: perceived cost effectiveness, acknowledged expertise within the school and direct applicability (i.e. a focus on teaching and learning). Schools in the study identified a number of barriers to the provision of effective CPD. Time and cost were the main barriers identified. Time was mentioned in terms of both the actual time spent in the CPD event, but also in terms of taking time to implement changes. The costs included cover, transport, and course fees. CPD leaders in particular highlighted knowledge of a range of providers but teachers highlighted that they were often unaware of the range of CPD possibilities on offer.

Schools in the study highlighted concerns about CPD opportunities that removed staff from their teaching duties. Headteachers commented on the need to explore the idea of non-disruptive CPD, which did not take teachers from the classroom and so disrupt pupil learning. However the data showed that headteachers had not moved beyond the initial stages of thinking about this issue.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study are important for policy makers, researchers and practitioners. In short, the study highlighted that Continuing Professional Development in schools needs to be evaluated more effectively. It showed that the current practices are not conducive to tracking or exploring CPD at the five levels outlined by Guskey (2000). It also showed that the evaluation of CPD is not a high priority for many schools therefore low level evaluation practices such as feedback sheets are employed. Also it highlighted that within schools there is restricted expertise in evaluation processes and practices that could explore the more complex outcomes of professional development and training.

The implications of the study are five fold. Firstly, evaluation of CPD should be appropriate to the events and experience(s) evaluated: not all events need formal evaluation. Secondly, training in the use of tools for effective evaluation of CPD should be made available to schools. Thirdly, evaluation of the impact of CPD should be linked to other parts of the life of the school, cf. planning cycle, performance management cycle, etc. as appropriate. Fourthly, the leadership and management roles of the CPD leader need to be clearly defined and role should be undertaken by a senior member of staff. It is clear that dedicated training for the role of CPD leader should be made available to all who fulfil this role.

Finally, the study showed that schools should be supported in provided opportunities for all staff to access a range of professional training opportunities. It also highlighted that greater differentiation of provision is needed in CPD to ensure the needs of all staff are adequately met. The report concluded that schools should be supported in providing opportunities for all staff to access a range of CPD which should be related to the needs of the individual and the school.

One of the most striking findings from the school improvement research base is that improving schools are marked by a constant interchange of professional dialogue at both a formal and informal level. Similarly, schools that are improving invest in professional development and are able to engage staff in various forms of professional learning. It has been argued that creating a collaborative professional learning environment for teachers is the 'single most important factor' for successful school improvement and 'the first order of business' for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Eastwood and Louis, 1992:215). Consequently, it would seem imperative that schools adopt evaluative approaches to CPD that not only accurately gauge learning outcomes at organisational, teacher and student level but that also accurately assesses professional learning needs.

It would appear from this research project that evaluative practices need to be much more sophisticated and fine grained to capture the complexity of organisational and individual change. A range of evaluative approaches are needed that match

Guskey's (2000) five levels and have the potential to give meaningful formative and summative feedback to schools and teachers. Without these evaluative approaches, gauging the relative effectiveness of different forms of CPD will remain elusive and by implication investing in forms of CPD that have little or no impact on the teacher and learner will unfortunately remain a real possibility.

NOTES

- 1 A full account of the research design and findings can be found in Goodall, J., Day, C., Lindsay, G., Muijs, D. and Harris, A. (2005) *Evaluating the Impact of Continuing Professional Development, Research Report, 659*, Department for Education and Skills (206 pages).
- 2 A more detailed account of the methodology can be found in Goodall, *et al.* (2005).
- 3 "CPD Leaders" was adopted at this phase in the research, as a replacement for "CPD Coordinators". This change reflects the dynamic and proactive requirements of the role.

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