

A Longitudinal Study of Teacher Change: What makes professional development effective? Report of the third year of the study.

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Introduction

This paper reports on the third year of a longitudinal study designed to investigate the influence of models of longer term professional development on the teaching strategies of primary and secondary teachers across England. The study addresses four key research areas. The prevailing models of type and duration of professional development activity for primary and secondary teachers in England were identified in the first year's baseline phase and changes are revisited annually. The second and third year's data collection monitored the changes in types and duration of professional development (PD) activity, extent of subject content-emphasis of the PD and subsequent changes to teaching practice affected by involvement in the PD activity.

In 2002 at the completion of the baseline survey we wrote that there were several features of the baseline data that were worthy of comment (Boyle et al, 2003). Pressure from the national government to achieve improvements in pupils' attainments in literacy and numeracy was reflected in the subject focus of the reported teacher participation rates in professional development. English and mathematics respondents from primary schools were far more likely to participate in professional development than their science colleagues (97%, 96% and 79% respectively).

Within-school the longer term duration (more than 2 days) workshop model of PD was reported as a minority activity in 2002 (it still is with a slight increase to 8% in 2004) but within-LEA this model, while still low as a percentage of the whole, is increasing in frequency (6%, 2002 - 11%, 2004).

In 2004, the most popular longer-term professional development activities were the observation of colleagues with 67% and sharing practice 59%. Just over half (51%, 2002) of the sample indicated that they were involved in both these strategies. The evidence from this study was that just over three quarters of the sample participating in longer-term professional development activities reported a change to at least one aspect of their teaching practice because of the impact of the PD.

The implications of the changes in the sample schools' responses reported in the 2004 third wave survey are explored in this paper along with the initial stages of research to enrich the quantitative data through case study investigation of type of longer term PD and changes in teaching strategies.

Background

'The successful transformation of schools calls for a 'new professionalism' in which teachers' work is increasingly research-based, outcomes-oriented, data-driven and team-focused at the same time as it is globalised, localised and individualised, with lifelong professional learning the norm for the specialist in school education as it is for the specialist in medicine' (Caldwell, 2003)

The continual deepening of knowledge and skills is an integral part of the development of any professional working in any profession. One important means of achieving competitive advantage is the creation of conditions for the rapid acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Teaching is no exception (Shulman and Sparks, 1992; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1989). 'Do I have a detailed, up to date knowledge of the subjects I teach? Is this deep and flexible enough to challenge and elicit confidence in the highest attainers and to support the lowest attainers?' (Ofsted 2002b p73).

In the context of the fifteen years of change, reforms and revisions in the school curriculum and its assessment, which have taken place in England since the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), the quality of teachers' professional development has

come under increased scrutiny. In 2001, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) visited a representative sample of 112 schools across ten local education authorities (LEAs) to evaluate the effect of professional development activities on raising standards in schools. The inspectors assessed the quality of the procedures used by the schools to measure the effect of professional development activities on the standards achieved by pupils, evaluated evidence of the effect of the activities on the schools' standards and explored with teachers which forms of professional development activities were most effective in enhancing their skills, knowledge and understanding. HMI found that course attendance was the main vehicle for professional development in most of the schools. However, they reported evidence of growing awareness of the value of other forms of professional development e.g. sharing the expertise of teachers in the same school, sharing knowledge and skills with teachers in other schools and using consultants to provide in-school programmes of support to tackle specific needs. However the conclusion of the HMI was that schools in general failed to allow enough time to support effective professional development and to ensure that acquired knowledge and skills were consolidated, implemented and shared with other teachers. (Ofsted, 2002a, p3). A survey of the types and duration of annual PD activity undertaken by a national sample of heads of the English, mathematics and science departments (secondary) or core subject coordinators (primary schools), the exercise to be repeated over time, was determined as our first step to model these PD activities and to research their effects on changes in teaching practice and on raising pupil performance outcomes.

National policy makers have drawn the public and media spotlight onto the education system through well-publicised efforts to 'improve education and raise standards' by creating a fundamental shift in 'how' and 'what' children learn and 'how' they are taught. If children are to achieve to the levels of these 'higher standards', teachers will have to help them do so, (Garet, 2001) as they must deliver the demands of high standards in the classroom (Cuban 1990). Therefore, the success of education reform initiatives depends on the effectiveness of teachers and consequently teacher professional development has become a major focus of systemic reform initiatives (Corcoran 1995, Corcoran, Shields & Zucker, 1998).

Some research, however, has shown that using the performance of the students alone to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development programmes is not very successful (Shymansky, Yore, Anderson and Hand, 2001). Fletcher and Barufaldi (2002) also agreed that student achievement measures do not reveal classroom changes as a result of teacher professional development programmes. Other indicators like the opinion of the teachers on whether they personally felt that they were benefited by the professional development activities may prove in the future to be useful.

However, policy makers still directly link the effectiveness of professional development with the performance of the students. The 'Schools: Achieving Success' White Paper (HMSO, 2001) located 'the professional growth of our teachers at the heart of the transformation of the education system.' Recent work by the OECD (2001) suggests that the most likely scenario is the transformation of schools on a dramatic scale in the early years of the 21st century. This transformation will mean that the school of the future will look quite unlike the school of the present. 'The transformation of schools means the transformation of work for those engaged in the core business of teaching and learning, the transformation of the teaching profession.' (Caldwell, 2003,p.2)

Unsurprisingly, a body of literature has emerged focussing on descriptions of and definitions for 'effective' professional development for teachers (Richardson & Placier 2001, Hustler et al, 2003). The international literature indicates that traditional approaches to professional development such as short workshops or conference attendance do foster teachers' awareness or interest in deepening their knowledge and skills. However these approaches to professional development appear insufficient to foster learning which fundamentally alters what teachers teach or how they teach (Shields, Marsh and Adelman, 1998, Weiss, Montgomery, Ridgeway and Bond, 1998). Recent research has shown that PD activities now take the form of collaborative action research (Levin & Rock, 2003) which is of a more long-term nature than the usual PD activities. Levin and Rock (2003) claim that teachers who get involved in this type of PD

activity can become more reflective, critical and analytical when they think about their teaching style in the classroom.

It is this potential linkage between teachers' learning through professional development and resultant changes in their teaching strategies, which is one of the areas of investigation in the research study. Prior to conducting the survey, the literature indicated that for the majority of teachers, professional development appeared to be still characterised by fragmented 'one-shot' workshops at which they listened passively to 'experts' and learned about topics not essential to teaching (National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 1996). A national survey conducted in the USA in 1998 reported that 81% of teachers reported that their professional development activities did not exceed eight hours during the previous twelve months (US Department of Education, 1999). Even when the professional development focused on 'in-depth' study in the subject area of the teacher's main specialism, only 56% of the teachers reported more than eight hours of professional development. Additionally, studies of professional development in England (Hustler, 2003) and across states in the USA reported that activities were often of insufficient duration (Corcoran, Shields and Zucker, 1998).

The above statements, however, do not necessarily mean that the longer the PD activity, the better the results. For example, it has been recently suggested that PD activities in the form of completing degree studies may not directly serve the linkage between teachers' learning and resultant changes in their teaching strategies. Although degree studies are a very long-lasting (and expensive both in terms of money and time) PD activity, Nasser and Fresko (2003) suggested that they mainly contributed to the maintenance of interest and commitment to the teaching profession. Although it was shown that degree studies did contribute to the acquisition of new knowledge and professional skills, it was found that this happened to a lesser extent.

Through a large-scale survey repeated annually, our research establishes the current and the annually changing position in types and duration of professional development in core subject departments in schools in both the primary and secondary sectors. The research explores the premise that professional development that has a substantial number of

contact hours and is sustained over a period of time has a generally stronger impact on teaching practice and is more consistent with systemic reform efforts than professional development of a more limited duration (Corcoran 1995, Darling-Hammond 1995, Hargreaves and Fullan 1992, Hiebert 1999, Lieberman 1996, Little 1993, Richardson 1994, Stiles, Loucks-Horsley and Hewson 1996). The above body of research evidence suggests that certain types of professional development activities are more likely than others to offer such sustained learning opportunities, ie. they provide teachers with sufficient time, activities and content necessary to increase knowledge and encourage meaningful changes in their classroom practice. These 'reform' types of PD activities include: study groups in which teachers are engaged on regular, structured and collaborative interactions around topics identified by the group; coaching or mentoring arrangements where teachers work one-on-one with an equally or more experienced teacher; networks which link teachers or groups, either in person or electronically, to explore and discuss topics of interest, pursue common goals, share information and address common concerns; immersion in inquiry, in which teachers engage in the kinds of learning that they are expected to practice with their students (Loucks-Horsley et al, 1998). In comparison to the traditional 'one-hit' workshops, these types of activities are usually longer in duration, allow teachers the opportunity to practice and reflect upon their teaching and are embedded in ongoing teaching activities. Some of these activities eg. mentoring, coaching, observation, take place during the process of teaching and are therefore easier to sustain over time (Garet, 2001). Other activities e.g. study groups sustained across time can have very beneficial effects not only on the self-efficacy of the teachers but also on building community and relationships, making connections across theory and practice, curriculum reform, and developing a sense of professionalism (Arbaugh, 2003).

A recent survey in the USA (US Department of Education, 1999) found that many teachers believed that job-embedded, collaborative professional development activities, such as common planning time, being formally monitored by another teacher or networking with other teachers outside the school are more helpful as professional development than the more traditional forms of development strategies. This is mirrored

in the recent Ofsted evaluation in England which reported that ‘the narrow perception that professional development always involves off-site activity, such as attendance at a course hosted by the LEA, is gradually being replaced by a wider and more comprehensive view of continuing professional development.’ (Ofsted 2002a, p11). However, this positive view is qualified by statements in the same evaluation study that ‘it (professional development) was rarely perceived as part of a longer-term sequence or cycle of activities which would lead to enhancing the skills or knowledge of the teacher to enable pupils to achieve higher levels of performance.’ (Ofsted 2002a, p15) and ‘few of the schools specified the outcomes that were expected from professional development activities in terms of improving teachers’ expertise, classroom practice, pupils’ progress and standards of achievement.’ (Ofsted 2002a, p15).