Accident or design: To what extent do teachers plan and own their professional learning?

Aim of the project

The aim of this study was to examine the extent to which teachers working in special schools have ownership of and are able to plan their professional learning. The focus was on professional learning and in my research I made a distinction between Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and professional learning. Professional learning is not the same as CPD in the same way as participating in a lesson is not the same as learning. I am interested in whether teachers feel they have a sense of ownership of their learning and whether they get to plan their learning as part of their role as an education professional. If teachers do not have a strong sense of ownership and planning of their learning is their learning a result of serendipity or happenstance, dependant on the CPD taking place in school or as part of a national agenda?

I examined the issues through two research lenses, from the perspective of the teacher and from the perspective of the school. In this paper I am concentrating on the perspective of the teacher.

Dimensions of the study

The study involved creating cases around eight teachers in two special schools. The teachers had varying years of teaching experience. One special school is for students with autism and the other school is for students with learning difficulties that provides additional support for students with language impairment or autistic spectrum difficulties.

Background and context

I am a Deputy Headteacher at another special school with responsibility for CPD and in addition I am an Associate County Consultant for CPD. My current professional interest is in professional learning.

Sachs (2003) characterises professional learning as one of the key features of the on-going debate around the rethinking of teacher professionalism. My argument is that there are many practices and activities that we can label as professional development that teachers participate in, organised by teachers and for teachers with varying agendas, but these are not necessarily the same as professional learning. There is evidence of a weak link between school CPD and individual teacher professional learning. Ofsted (2005), Cordingley et al (2005) in a systematic review, and Bolam and Weindling (2006) in a report for the GTCE, found evidence that the relationship between the processes of CPD in schools and the professional learning of the individual teacher are often unclear. Kelly (2006) highlights the need for investigation into the way CPD processes in school support the identity of the teacher as a professional learner and McCormick (2010) indicates a paucity of literature about CPD in ordinary schools particularly in terms of teacher learning.

Research methods

Qualitative data was gathered from multiple sources to build the case studies and create the backgrounds and contextual evidence. The evidence includes documentary data from the two schools in the study and two interviews with each of the eight teachers over a four month period. The purpose of using qualitative data in an interpretive approach is that the findings can be contextualised by the setting, the findings are emergent and the intention is to look for complexity and create a developing understanding of the issues. The findings are descriptive with a search for patterns and themes.

This study uses case study as the specific method through which the data is organised. It is the 'vehicle' through which the data has been managed within the overall interpretive methodology and as a part of the research design. The focus of the study is teachers and their experiences so it is important that each teacher can be viewed as a whole before the themes and findings are drawn out. Case studies can be used within a range of research paradigms depending on the specific research methods being utilised. In this study the data is qualitative and the cases described and compared using an interpretive approach. The use of case studies has enabled the description and understanding of the 'lived experience' of teachers in relation to their professional learning with the subjects' situated in their local settings. The data in these case studies is local and subjective but it has created a focal point for an examination of wider and more general issues of teacher ownership and planning of professional learning.

Findings

Cordingley et al. (2005) and Bolam and Weindling (2006) highlight a lack of specific data about teacher professional learning and CPD particularly in the UK. At this stage in the study data has been gathered and some initial analysis carried out. The initial literature review indicates that teachers felt that institutional development needs took precedence over individual needs in CPD provision and that teachers needed to have greater determination of their professional learning (Bolam and Weindling 2006).

These are the initial findings from the study.

- All the teachers had positive attitudes towards professional learning and generally were able to talk about professional learning in the context of their sense of professionalism. The personal as well as the school focus of the teachers' professional development was on meeting the needs of the students, even if the teacher was developing a particular curriculum area.

- The teachers in the case studies had preferred professional development models and generally thought that transmissive models such as one-off courses were not as effective as models of learning that provided the learner with the opportunity to embed their learning. Examples of these included collaborative learning, peer observation and peer mentoring over a period of time. They also indicated that there were barriers that limited the opportunities for embedding such learning. These were generally around the pressures of work.

- The picture of how effectively teachers were able to plan their learning was a complex one. The results varied from case to case with factors such as work load, personal circumstances, career stage and school training needs impacting upon the degree to which the teachers felt that they could effectively plan their learning.

- In both schools teachers reported that there was a certain amount of routine training relating to the special needs of the students that had to be undertaken. This was not reported in a positive or negative manner but was a routine part of working in a special school.

- The matrix below was used as a discussion tool in the second semi structured interview. It was used to discuss how the teachers characterised their ownership and planning of their professional learning. Out of the eight case studies five teachers placed themselves in quadrant two, suggesting that they are able to plan their professional learning and have a sense of ownership of their learning.

- One teacher placed themself both in quadrant two and in quadrant three. This teacher (highlighted in green) felt that they needed to distinguish between their learning organised as part of school CPD programmes and the professional learning they personally organised such as a masters level qualification. The green circle in quadrant two represents their own professional learning and the green circle in quadrant three represents their learning in school. Other teachers in the case studies did not make a particular distinction between personal and professional learning and viewed their learning more holistically.

- There was generally a positive attitude towards the processes that support CPD, for example the processes of performance management and the development of CPD plans.

- Both schools had well developed programmes of professional development focusing on a wide range of issues relating to special educational needs. These included routine training programmes that were compulsory for staff to enable them to carry out their duties. They had an impact on the degree of choice staff could make on their professional learning. Both schools appeared to be moving towards more transformative models of professional development.

Recommendations

Schools need to develop professional development systems and programmes that support professional learning. The teachers in this study preferred learning opportunities that enabled them to develop and embed their learning, for example time to work with colleagues on a new strategy or a period of peer mentoring. Most of the teachers found one-off development opportunities of less value because of the lack of opportunity to develop or refine their learning. Schools could create professional development programmes with longer term development opportunities built in.

Matrix to map the planning and ownership of professional learning by teachers
Each teacher in the second interview placed themselves on the matrix as part of the discussion

Detailed planning by the teacher of professional learning

1

2

No sense of ownership of professional learning

Strong ownership of professional learning

*See note

3

4

No planning of professional learning
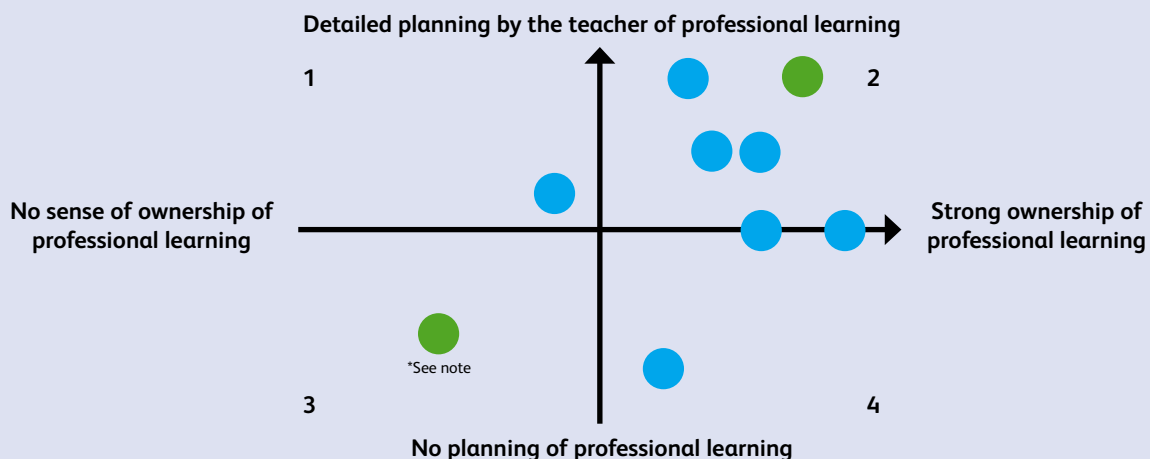
The evidence from the literature and from the individual case studies is that schools need to focus more on the learning needs of the teacher as part of their overall professional development strategies, for example by providing teachers with opportunities to carry out practitioner enquiry in the classroom and then sharing the findings with other colleagues. One of the issues identified by the literature review is that teachers feel that their own learning needs should be more of a priority within whole school CPD programmes. If professional development planning as part of performance management focused on the learning needs of the teacher first, the perceived imbalance could be adjusted.

Suggestions for further reading

Bolam, R. and Weindling, D. (2006) *Synthesis of research and evaluation projects concerned with capacity-building through teachers' professional development* London: GTCE

Cordingley, P., Bell, M., Thomason, S. and Firth, A. (2005) The impact of collaborative continuing professional development (CPD) on classroom teaching and learning. Review: How do collaborative and sustained CPD and sustained but not collaborative CPD affect teaching and learning? In: *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

Kennedy, A. (2005) Models of Continuing Professional Development: a framework for analysis, *Journal of In-service Education*. 31(2):235-250

McCormick, R. (2010) 'The state of the nation in CPD: a literature review', *Curriculum Journal*, 21:4, 395 - 412

Ofsted, (2006) The logical chain: continuing professional development in effective schools: HMSO available from: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Good-professional-development-in-schools

Sachs, J. (2003) *The Activist Teaching Profession*. Buckingham: Open University Press

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