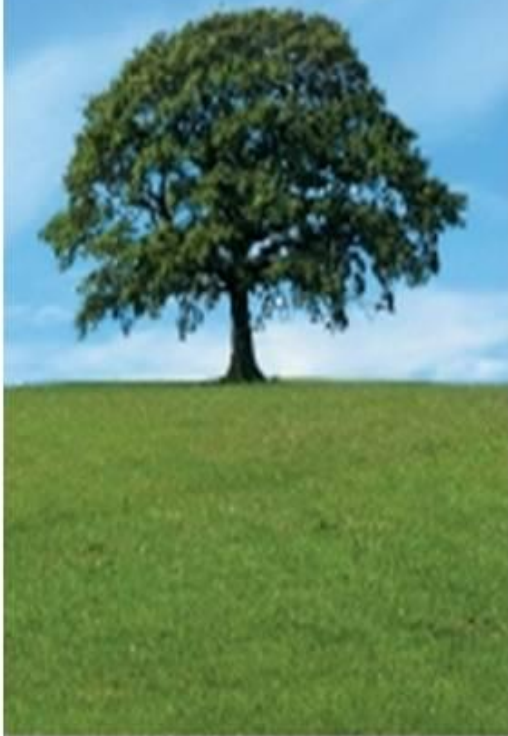# Who You Gonna Call?

- using specialists effectively

The movement towards professional development being school focused and schooled raises important implications for the important contribution of external expertise.

Philippa Cordingley and Natalia Buckler explore the evidence for using specialists effectively and cast light on who they are.

Centre for the Use of
Research and
Evidence In
Education

Table of Contents

Introduction

There has been something of a sea change in the way continuing professional development (CPD) has been supported and used in schools over the last five years. The drivers are powerful and various. School leaders are increasingly interested in growing and using existing internal expertise to support CPD, especially those who have seen the benefits of high quality in-school mentoring of trainees and new teachers on the development of everyone involved. Funding is another strong driver: touch budgets generate hard choices. School leaders, CPD facilitators and teachers themselves all value the opportunity to explore new approaches alongside colleagues who serve the same community. The growth in school-to-school support and Teaching Schools is generating an increase in school partnership based CPD too. Those providing CPD support are having to accommodate changing needs, and offer increasingly bespoke support. They are having to experiment creatively with alternatives to the one day conference which makes financial and logistical sense but is rarely structured to enable the serious and sustained professional learning activities that make a difference (Cordingley et al, 2007).

In this article we explore the extent, consequences and implications of this trend and consider how schools can be savvy and efficient about how they access the specialist expertise they need to develop teaching and learning practice and learning outcomes. In doing so we will draw on the evidence from our in-depth **Skein** research work with 25 schools and colleges, commissioned by the schools and colleges themselves in order to develop the quality of their professional learning environment, as well as on the best international evidence about school leaders' and practitioners' professional development that makes a difference to pupils.

We also consider the unique role of externalist specialist expertise (Timperly et al, 2006) and how it is being and can be sourced amongst the CPD offer out there.

Engagement with external specialist expertise diminishes

From our in-depth Skein research work with hundreds of practitioners from primary and secondary schools around the country (approximately 700), we know that more than half of them *never* attend external CPD programmes, course and events; a further third do once a year and only about a fifth of school practitioners have more frequent access to external specialist expertise.

More than half of the colleagues who *do not* attend any external CPD events and programmes are teachers and around a fifth of them are colleagues responsible for others' development within their schools, i.e. senior and middle leaders, ASTs, facilitators of in-school teaching and learning groups, etc.

Any why is that a problem, we hear you say?

Let's leave for the moment the question about the quality of external CPD opportunities and consider what specialists *can* do to support school practitioners' professional development that is likely to result in positive pupil outcomes.

What do specialists contribute to teachers' professional development?

The systematic reviews of research evidence (Cordingley et al, 2007) tell us that benefits for pupils are almost always linked with a contribution from an external specialist – although this might be quite a light touch contribution. The benefits for practitioners and their pupils included:

For teachers

- Improved knowledge and understanding (e.g. of their pupils, teaching strategies, theories of learning, the use of technology, subject knowledge and educational policy)
- Enhanced confidence, openness to new teaching approaches and willingness to experiment and take risks
- Positive changes in practice including increased confidence in tailoring teaching and learning approaches to different needs

For pupils

- Improved curriculum knowledge and skills
- Better reasoning and problem solving skills
- Improved engagement with classroom including enhanced skills in learning collaboratively
- Positive affective changes (e.g. greater confidence and self-esteem and improved attitude to learning)

In the instances where specialists' support of teachers' professional development helped secure such benefits, they (the specialists) facilitated changes to the teachers' practice through encouraging experimentation, making theory and research evidence available alongside practice development and introducing new knowledge and skills (both subject-related content and strategies and generic teaching and learning strategies). They challenged orthodoxies and raised expectations about what might be possible. The specialists were also skilled in promoting teachers' growing independence, autonomy and control. They made explicit the links between professional learning and pupil learning, taking account of teachers starting points and the emotional content of learning. The specialists encouraged peer support and helped teachers embed CPD within school goals and leadership (Cordingley, 2012).

'But we have all the expertise we need in-house!'

Obviously, schools do not keep their staff in a professional development vacuum: at the same time as the external CPD decreases, the number and (sometimes) range of internal development opportunities grows. The way in which specialist expertise informs, shapes and supports this, is obviously key. Whole school staff development sessions are frequent and dominate many teachers' experience of CPD. Across schools, they differ in form and content, focusing for example on the current national policy and its implications (such as the new national curriculum), school development priorities (e.g. encouraging pupil independence), and teaching and learning approaches and strategies (development of teacher questioning skills). Yet, our research shows that classroom practitioners often struggle to make good use of these development opportunities.

Only a third of the school practitioners reported that they find whole school CPD activities useful for developing their practice. The majority highlighted their lack of relevance with a varying degree of patience, ranging from acknowledging occasional usefulness (around half of the practitioners involved in our Skein research), through to noticing their relevance to others and finally describing them as a complete 'was of time' (nearly a fifth of practitioners) altogether (Cordingley, 2013).

The focus on introducing or promoting particular teaching of learning approaches highlighted by research as being effective makes sense. Tackling this at whole school level is obviously important in building coherence and aligning efforts. Teaching and learning approaches are self-evidently central

to the work of the profession. So why would the majority of teachers in these schools feel that CPD focused in this way is irrelevant?

The reasons why whole school CPD opportunities are often ineffective in supporting teachers' professional development seem to fall into four broad categories.

1) Prevalence of general pedagogy and lack of contextualisation

The focus in introducing or promoting teaching and learning approaches highlighted by research is self evidently rational. It is important from the point of view of developing a coherent approach and is efficient. Importantly, it also targets a significant proportion of education professionals' expertise (teaching and learning). But not all of it. Secondary colleagues in particular, passionate about their subject knowledge and skills, often feel frustrated by what they feel to be overly generic content of whole school CPD and are desperate for opportunities to contextualise and understand generic approaches in their specialist contexts. Primary school teachers whose pupils are at such very different stages of the journey towards autonomous leaders are similarly keen to work out the specific implications of generic approaches for particular pupils and year groups. Both primary and secondary teachers also need the opportunity to analyse how new approaches relate to existing ones.

2) Poor match with individual practitioners' needs

Schools are getting increasingly good at identifying the training and development needs of individual members of staff. In most schools this is no longer limited to a chat between a teacher and their line manager about what would be good to focus on next. Extensive diagnostic use of observation evidence and pupil progress data is common. Yet, individual teacher development needs, identified in some instances quite forensically, are not yet regularly being amalgamated to shape and fine tune whole school CPD activities. In particular, these data are not being explored to identify the kinds of CPD activities that would be most useful for different groups.

3) Lack of differentiation

We are not yet applying to teachers, or modelling for them, the very skills in differentiation we hope our CPD offer will enable them to offer to pupils. All too often ASTs, Heads of faculty, department or key stage and NQTs and struggling teachers are offered the same CPD session focussed, for example, on developing the quality of feedback. Very rarely do schools pitch their CPD activities to cater for different levels of expertise or build formative assessment approaches into CPD approaches so that facilitators can access evidence about how deeply the teachers they are supporting are engaging with what is being offered and using that evidence to adjust their approach mid-session. The concerns teachers express about relevance probably flow more from the need for greater responsiveness to their different starting points during CPD sessions that from the focus of the activities.

4) Poor understanding and of effective professional learning process

'Why do we have to learn in a way that we consider unacceptable with students?' – This is one of the rhetorical questions we frequently hear from teachers and other staff when we listen to them about their professional learning experiences. Must to the frustration of (particularly secondary) schools practitioners, extended PowerPoint presentations shorn of active learning opportunities or accompanied by unfocussed discussion are still abound. Too few practitioners report the use of approaches that the evidence points to as being effective; practices such as collaborative problem

solving, action research, shared planning observation and debriefing or high quality coaching. Indeed even in schools that describe themselves as Coaching Schools, colleagues tell us that the reality is that they have just one coaching type conversation a year and that is the performance review session.

So what does good practice for whole school sessions look like?

Of course, good schools can and do find ways of tackling all these challenges. Making the role of departments and/or phase leaders explicit and central to contextualising whole school CPD is a powerful approach in several schools for helping teachers contextualise new knowledge and strategies and apply them to their practice in a particular subject or phase. They make sure, for example, that each whole school session is followed up by departmental meetings with specific protocols for helping colleagues make sense of the new knowledge and expertise collectively. Other schools choose to plan for such sense making and contextualisation within the whole school sessions through the role of CPD champions or members of Teaching and Learning Groups who have a specific responsibility to facilitating professional learning.

Many schools we work with recognise the importance of formative use of evidence for professional learning (Wigham, 2012) collecting and making use of the evidence about teachers' development needs. Audits of skills, use of observation data, focus groups and one-to-one conversations with staff, analysis of pupil progress data, work scrutiny, feedback from pupils; these are some of the sources of evidence that help colleagues relate their own learning to their pupils' learning. Such evidence then helps teachers make informed choices from a range of options for the kinds of high impact approaches as described above (http://www.curee.co.uk/publication/developing-learning-community-all).

One school uses its CPD facilitator team to act as hosts and hostesses at annual school network CPD sessions. These facilitators research colleagues' current interests before big "market place" events and also ensure they have a detailed grasp of what is on offer so they can spend a few minutes with teachers throughout the day helping them to identify workshops or market stalls from their own and others schools that relate to those interests.

The missing link

Even in the schools with a very strong focus on CPD as part of their approach to school improvement there is one aspect of effective professional learning that seems to be consistently underestimated by both teachers and those planning and supporting CPD; the development of the theory and practice side by side.

We know from the research reviews that if teachers are not engaged with underpinning principles and questions about why things do and do not work when they encounter new approaches they are dependent on the form in which they first encounter them. Only when teachers develop a practical theory or rationale alongside practical skills can they make informed adaptations for individual pupils or specific pupil groups or for particular subject or age contexts. Attending to links between theory and practise is, of course, something that specialists have had the opportunity to develop by virtue of their experience in digging down deep into understanding particular subjects, practices or pupil groups. Interestingly this is not yet something many teachers themselves notice as an omission. Here is an area of significant untapped potential, and an important way of thinking about

how to identify and make good use of specialism to enrich and embed effective professional development.

Sourcing and selecting external specialists

The fact that whole schools internal CPD is often ineffective does not mean that external CPD is necessarily better. Our evaluation of CPD provision nationally confirms just that (CUREE, 2011). Whilst many providers were reasonably good at designing sessions that were engaging and active, few of them managed to established their participants' (i.e. teachers') starting points or were able to help practitioners apply their learning or interrogate underpinning principles. Those who did succeeded because either they were proactive in their communications and pre and post activities with schools and individual participants, or schools they worked with were demanding in their expectations. Similarly, our Skein research work shows that good schools are learning to be demanding customers. They no longer just attend the events advertised in a circular; instead they decide on what they need (content, processes and outcomes) and they shop around to find the specialists who best match their needs – both inside their school and network and beyond it.

Conclusion

So, are we saying that the schools need more external specialist expertise? Yes and no. Yes, if it means acting on a clear understanding of any gaps that may exist internally, being selective about the content and processes that external specialists offer and taking care to ensure they are complemented by effective, in-school contextualisation. Yes too, if it means opening up established practices and group think for analysis and review. Certainly not, if it simply means more courses that do not lead to changes in classroom practice and/or missing out on important opportunities to build in-depth in-school CPD capacity.

References

Cordingley, P. (2013) Continuing professional development and learning (CPDL). Focus group evidence about practice on the ground. Paper presented at: BERA Annual Conference. University of Sussex, 3-5 September 2013

Cordingley, P. (2013) The role of professional learning in determining the profession's future. In: McLaughlin, C. (ed) Teachers Learning: Professional development and education, p21-32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Cordingley P, Bell M, Isham C, Evans D, Firth A (2007) What do specialists do in CPD programmes for which there is evidence of positive outcomes for pupils and teachers? Report. In: Research Evidence in Education Library. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. Available at:
http://www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=27_OKOKeWnI%3d&tabid=2275&mid=4198

CUREE (2011) TDA: Evaluation of CPD providers in England 2010-11: Report for CPD Providers. Coventry: Centre for Use of Research and Evidence in Education. Available at:
http://www.cureepaccts.com/publication/tda-evaluation-cpd-providers-national-cpd-database-reports

Timperley, H., Fung, I., Wilson, A. & Barrar, H. (2006) Professional learning and development: a best evidence synthesis of impact on student outcomes. Paper presented at: the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association: San Francisco, CA, April 7-11.

Wigham, V. (2012) Developing a learning community for all. CPD Update, September 2012, p8-9.

CUREE Ltd
8th Floor
Eaton House
Eaton Road
Coventry CV1 2FL
☎ +44 (024) 7652 4036
www.curee.co.uk