

We need to talk about subjects: findings from a review of subject-specific professional development and learning for teachers

Philippa Cordingley, CUREE

Professor Toby Greany, Institute of Education



- A rapid practice and evidence review funded by the Wellcome Foundation to inform a new project for encouraging more Subject Specific CPD working to 10 different questions
- For practice this involved:
 - Secondary analysis of studies of CPD and national evaluations from across 4 home nations including a large scale survey for Wellcome, 24 in-depth school case studies & a study of teaching school and MAT practices for DFE
 - Interviews with CPD facilitators and leaders
 - Analysis of PISA and TALIs data to compare evidence from the UK with international data for high performing countries
- For wider research this involved looking for and, if appropriate adding findings from new reviews published since 2015 to DGT findings (none met our criteria but three added useful illustrations)

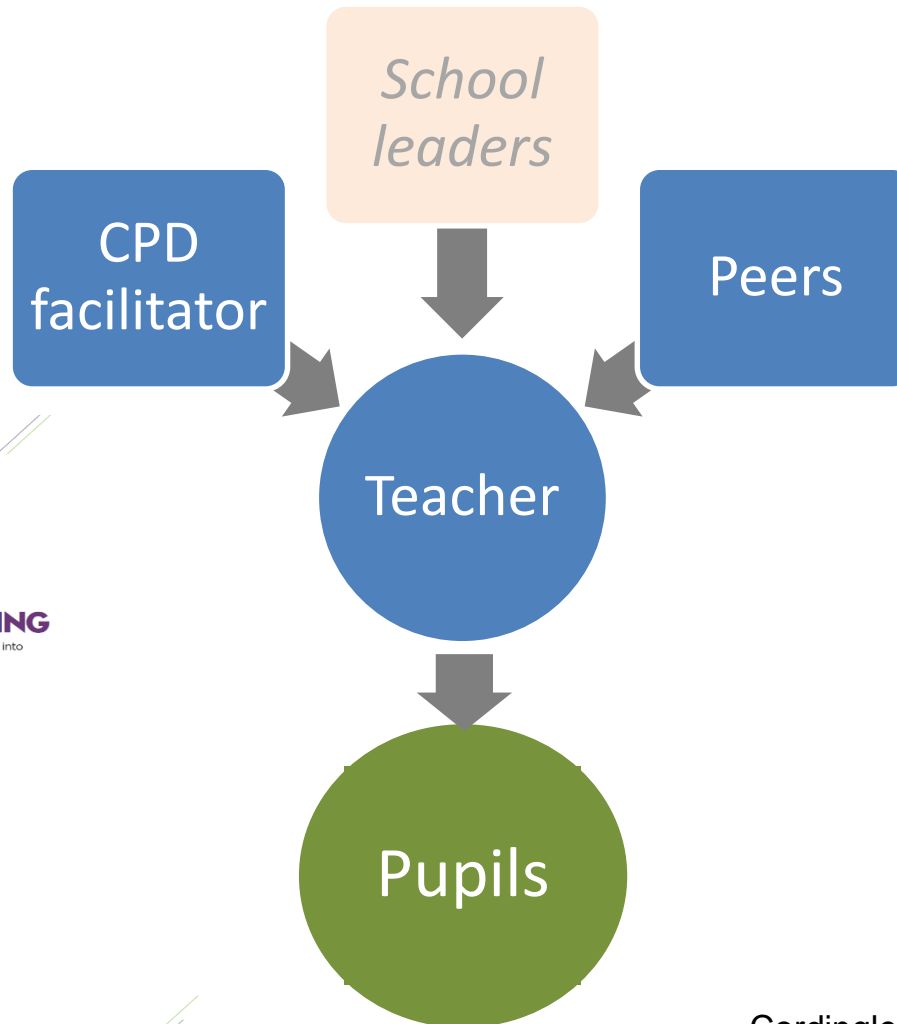


Subject specific CPD - programmes and activities which focus on:

- enhancing teachers' understanding of the subjects they teach, how pupils learn in those subjects and how to teach them – encompassing both subject and pedagogic content knowledge; or
- helping teachers understand how pedagogic issues and approaches might apply to specific learning issues in the subjects they teach, in explicit and structured ways.

Generic pedagogic CPD - activities and programmes which seek to develop teaching and learning approaches which can be applied across any subject area.





Consistent finding across all reviews

Carefully designed/aligned teacher CPDL with a strong focus on pupil outcomes has a significant impact on student achievement

Generic pedagogic CPD does not work - effective CPD is contextualised for subjects

Teachers in England engage in less CPD overall and are less likely to engage in SSCPDPD than in most other high performing countries. E.G.

- Under **50%** of teachers in England experienced curriculum-related CPD in the 12 months before TALIS - but almost **90%** of teachers in Shanghai and **80%** of teachers in Singapore did.
- English teachers **three times less likely** than international peers to say they need more subject-specific CPD



- **Existing subject knowledge of teachers is often weak** – compounded by recruitment challenges
- **Needs differ between schools** – eg size, phase and stage on improvement journey
- Subject Specific **CPD is mostly restricted to English and maths in primary schools**
- Changes in **curriculum and assessment policies** are key drivers of demand for SS CPD, but often be limited to exam board briefings etc



Subject specific differences

- There are important **differences between different subjects** (maths, science and English) in terms of how the effective CPD in these areas is designed for impact.
- Differences relate to:
 - how the **subject content connects with the curriculum and pre-existing teacher knowledge;**
 - **how new approaches** and new subject/pedagogic content knowledge **are supported through classroom materials for different subjects; and**
 - **how CPD content reflects the values and nature of the subject discipline** in question.



Key findings from review in England/UK

- **School cultures and levels of expertise** shape how far subject specific needs are identified and addressed. Some schools don't know what they don't know about Subject expertise and Subject specific CPD
- **Performance review** is widely used to **identify and balance individual and whole school CPD needs.**
 - Schools with a strong CPD offer put a lot of **effort into doing this systematically**, using different evidence sources and aligning analysis of individual needs with school self-evaluation, improvement and CPD activities
 - **Offering choices** to teachers and ensuring a range in the CPD offer are also help achieve balance.
 - More individualised CPD processes such as **enquiry, coaching and lesson study** also help some schools to achieve this balance



Key findings from review in England/UK

- **School leaders** have a big role in setting CPD expectations and shaping how far SSCPD is prioritised, supported and integrated with other internal initiatives.
- Middle leaders, heads of departments and senior leaders:
 - **Enable staff to participate** in CPD and to implement what they learn from it,
 - **Create the necessary conditions** for effective SSCPD to flourish.
 - **Determine the level of control** that individual staff have over their own CPD
- This varied across school case studies and phases, but in general **teachers had less control in lower performing schools.**



Barriers – findings from the review

- **Budgets and resources** - most significant?
- **Teacher workloads**
- **Perceptions of CPD quality** - a vicious circle of low expectations or a healthy reliance on in-school and school to school support models?
- Lack of quality assurance in the **market place** - schools rely on what is familiar and focus on codified knowledge ('best practices')
- **Competing improvement priorities** – impact of the accountability framework



Overcoming barriers – findings

- **Networks** – have grown in importance in England as LA support reduced. Some Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) developing subject-specific expertise in core teams and Teaching Schools often have subject networks
- **Secondary schools with strong CPD** do still seek out external SSCPD support
- Many **primary schools seek out SSCPD for English, maths, and (less so) science**



Implications

- Schools and CPD leaders need help in understanding **the real costs of CPD** and to be able to spend their money more effectively on things that last and work. The accountability system and CPD market isn't encouraging this.
- There is a need **for more CPD for school and CPD leaders** to help them:
 - understand the evidence about what effective CPD looks like, especially the evidence about the nature and impact of subject-specific CPD;
 - judge the quality of CPD opportunities/ provision suggested by heads of departments/phase and/or external providers.



Implications

- **Changes in curriculum and assessment policies are key drivers of demand** - but need to move beyond exam board briefings and raise the bar in terms of quality.
- Low expectations are not universal – but **need to identify and share what great – and poor - practice looks like.**
- **Schools and CPD leaders need help/CPD** to understand the real costs and benefits of quality SS CPD.
- **The current CPD market isn't providing this, so need government to step in** to create some stepping stones – though consultation on QTS and funding for SSIF/TLIF etc are helpful.



philippa.cordingley@curee.co.uk

[@PhilippaCcuree](#)

www.curee.co.uk

Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in
Education

Tel: 024 7652 4036

