The role of professional learning in determining the profession's future

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Introduction

This note focuses on the nature and role of teacher professional learning in shaping the future of the profession. It offers insights from six systematic and technical reviews of the evidence about Continuing Professional Learning and Development and extensive research and evaluation focussed on the impact of such activity on teachers and pupils and the effectiveness of school as learning environments for them both.

It starts with a proposition. Since schools are a microcosm of society, there are as many challenges facing the teaching profession as there are facing society more generally. Papers for a February conference exploring The Future of the Teaching Profession by the OECD and Education International set out such challenges somewhat tellingly through social, political and economic lenses. But consideration of learning also has a role here. If the profession and its knowledge base lag woefully behind the demands placed on schools, teachers, pupils and society, surely teachers' own learning is key to their capacity to respond to new demands? Since learning (albeit, the learning of pupils) sits at the core of professional identity and modelling is fundamental to the learning process, logically teachers' own learning should contribute to progress at two levels; in increasing teachers' confidence and efficacy and in making the benefits of effortful learning visible to pupils.

One reason that teacher learning does not yet sit at the heart of professional identity is that support for professional learning and development has been rather limited in conception and execution. In effect we have made the same mistakes about teacher learning we were making 10-15 years ago about pupil learning. We have learned, albeit relatively recently, to focus on quality in the facilitation of CPD. But we have given, so far, scant attention to the processes, and content of teachers' learning post qualification – or to their agency in the process. For teachers, as for pupils, some of the way forwards lies in them taking increasing responsibility for their own learning; in understanding and enhancing the pedagogy and curriculum of teacher formation

and development; in enabling the profession to recognise the role of specialist expertise and the depth of collaboration and learning on which a successful future for teachers individually and collectively depends.

The rest of this note sets out the evidence about content, process and effectiveness of professional learning as a springboard for exploring the ways in which moving professional learning centre stage would increase professional self efficacy whilst equipping the profession to rise to the challenges being posed.

The Evidence base

The dramatic increase in access to an online, international, knowledge base has enabled many breakthroughs and the identification of a mature, evidence base and emerging theory for teacher continuing professional development (CPD) and, more recently, teacher learning is one such beneficiary. In the early 21st Century a series of systematic and technical reviews of the evidence about CPD which made a difference to both pupil and teacher learning revealed a surprisingly coherent, challenging picture of what is involved in effective professional development (EPPI 1-4[1]). At the outset the Academe was doubtful about the possibility of connecting teacher and pupil learning and indeed the research about CPD by and large failed to do this. But the power of internet searching enabled the exploration not simply of studies of CPD, but also of studies of a wide range of interventions that included CPD and explored its contributions to a wide range of educational goals. The cumulative series of reviews first identified key characteristics linked to benefits for pupils, then unpacked features such as the nature of specialist and peer contributions in more depth and tested the evidence for technical issues such as the effects of researcher involvement in the CPD. Meanwhile best Evidence syntheses from New Zealand (Timperley, 2006[2]) used a different methodology to reach very similar conclusions. In unpacking what emerged as one strong and pervasive success factor,

[1]Cordingley P, Bell M, Evans D, Firth A (2005) The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning. Review: What do teacher impact data tell us about collaborative CPD? In: Research Evidence in Education Library. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=395&language=en-US Cordingley P, Bell M, Thomason S, 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. http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=392&language=en-US
Cordingley P, Bell M, Rundell B, Evans D (2003) The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning. In: Research Evidence in Education Library. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London. http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=133&language=en-US
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. http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=2275
[2] Timperley H, Fung, L., Wilson, A., & Barrar, H. (2006) Professional learning and development: A Best Evidence Synthesis of impact on students outcomes. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, April 7-11

the contribution of peer support to professional development, the reviews also began to map, not simply what was being offer to teachers, but also their learning processes and dispositions.

Gradually, partly perhaps in response to systematic reviews, primary studies of education interventions and CPD accumulated, creating an increasingly fine grained picture of the connections between teacher and pupil learning. So that a 2010 review (PURR[3]) of teacher engagement with the research of others and in their own research, which also compared the evidence about teachers with evidence about the experiences of health and social care workers, was able to surface both inhibitors to teacher learning from engaging in and with research and also approaches that help accelerate such learning.

Key characteristics of effective professional development and learning

Before considering what foregrounding professional learning as a key attribute of the profession and a key mechanisms for rising to the challenges of the future it seems prudent to clarify what effective professional learning looks like. Key components of professional learning that is linked with significant benefits to staff and pupils range through:

- drawing down targeted, usually external, specialist expertise
- giving and receiving structured peer support
- professional dialogue rooted directly in evidence from trying out new things,
- focusing on why things do and don't work as well as how they work ie defining professional reflection as building theory and practice together
- sustained enquiry oriented learning over (usually) two terms or more;
- learning to learn from observing the practice of others
- ambitious goals set in the context of aspirations for pupils
- the use of tools and protocols(see below) to help secure coherence, sustain learning, secure depth and make evidence collection and analysis manageable and useful

Specialist expertise is ever present and serves a range of functions. Teachers who are effective professional learners use specialist sources of advice or information to identify high leverage strategies that address their concerns and aspirations for pupils. They look to specialists for help when they don't know what they don't know; for illustration of new approaches and phenomena in action and for help in unpacking what did and didn't work well in their early experiments. They also use specialists to help them take increasing control over their own learning about new approaches. Such specialist support is usually drawn from colleagues who sit outside day to day routines, the immediate school environment and accountability systems and are thus well placed to provide objective information and create a sense of openness to experimenting and risk taking.

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[3] Bell, M., Cordingley, P., Isham., C. & Davis., R. (2010) *Report of Professional Practitioner Use of Research Review: Practitioner engagement in and/or with research*. Coventry: CUREE, GTCE, LSIS & NTRP. Available at: http://www.curee-paccts.com/node/2303.

Peer support is also omni present. It is linked with embedding new practices introduced by others, in day to day contexts and providing emotional support through, reciprocal vulnerability. The studies are replete with accounts of teachers persisting through difficulties 'because they don't want to let each other down'. Teachers who share the risk of looking silly as they abandon familiar routines to try something new find they trust each other more quickly and deeply than specialists, however skilful they may be. Interestingly such CPD works as well for conscripts as for natural enthusiasts. The process of working out with a partner how to tackle new approaches on the ground and coming together regularly to offer each other a listening ear and moral support, offers a strong catalyst for ownership of professional learning, however it is initiated. There are one or two studies of CPD with benefits for pupils and staff but without extensive use of peer support. But here the specialist contributors are in fact so embedded in school life (eg working in school for a full day each week for two years) and working in such close partnership with teachers as co-enquirers that they have become, in effect, rather costly peer supporters.

Such professional learning and support for it is variously labelled but at its best it tends to be configured as combinations of specialist and collaborative or peer coaching, collaborative enquiry and, more recently[4], joint practice development. The English National Framework for Effective Mentoring and Coaching operationalises this evidence in a set of principles, skills and core concepts underpinning effectiveness. In doing so, importantly for this note, the framework identifies the skills of teachers being coached and mentored as well as those of the people who support them.

This early example of an emphasis by government on the skills and processes of professional learning illustrates neatly the need for such symbolic reinforcement. In research interviews conducted as part of the development of the Framework and later development of tools to support its use, teachers were asked about their contributions to coaching and mentoring based development as professional learners. Most were more conscious of their coach's and mentors' contributions than their own. Some did cite their own planning or the stresses involved in reviewing videos of their practice. Not one identified questions they had asked of their coaches or mentors as a professional learning strategy or activity. When the absence of teacher questioning as a learning strategy was probed teachers tended to reply in a very similar vein. Either asking questions of a coach or mentor would make it "difficult to get a word in edgeways" or result in a focus on the coach or mentor's agenda rather than on the teachers' own aspirations or concerns. This illustrates clearly the extent to which teachers in the mid noughties in England were experiencing even the most effective forms of CPD as something done to them rather than as a learning journey in which they had a proactive professional role and responsibility.

Focussing on building teachers' skills in making good use of mentoring, coaching and enquiry opportunities is an important step in shifting the balance of attention away from what CPD providers do to and for teachers to the professional learning contributions of the teachers and

[4] Hargreaves, D. H. (2010) *Creating a self-improving school system* Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

the way they draw down support in the process. Tools they can use to structure their own learning have an important contribution to make and help differentiate sustained and significant professional learning from day to day and unreflective exchange of practical tips and solutions. For example, formal learning agreements that set out aspirational goals and the respective learning contributions of both a specialist coach and teacher can even up the power disequilibrium that results from specialists having greater knowledge of expertise of new practices. Properly structured learning agreements also make clear the contribution that the teacher's knowledge of the specific needs of their pupils makes to rendering external, specialist contributions meaningful and useful. Similarly, questioning frameworks help coaches recognise teachers' increasing control over their learning and step back from a desire to intervene. They also prompt teachers to consider when they don't know what they don't know and to ask both closed and open questions of specialists thus taking charge of the process of inviting skilled others into their learning journey.

The role of effective professional learning at system level

What might the system look like if taking charge of professional learning in the service of pupil learning were seen as the central priority for teachers and those who support and lead them?

At the level of the school, leaders would be acting in accordance with the findings of Vivianne Robinson's best evidence synthesis[5] about leadership contributions to pupil effectiveness. She identified 5 key leadership activities that correlate with effective outcomes for pupils and school leaders'. With a large effect size of .84, promoting and participating in professional learning had the biggest effect of all and twice the effect of the next most effective contribution, planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum (0.42). The school determines the learning environment for staff as well as pupils and needs to apply many of the same principles and expertise in structuring this. Where this is not the case both staff and pupils will sense the inconsistencies and question the validity of the approach or at least depth of commitment to it. Where the two align they will establish a virtuous circle of development reinforcing the status of purposeful and effortful learning in depth. Extrapolating from the above reviews and a study of effective school based learning carried out in preparation for the creation of a new National masters programme in Teaching and learning initiated by the Labour government in England in 2009[6] effective staff learning environments:

- attend to the use of collaboration as a sustained learning strategy at every level,
- enable the collection and use of evidence about processes as well as outcomes to link staff and pupil learning,

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[5] Robinson, V. Hohepa, M & Lloyd, C. (2009) *School leadership and student outcomes: identifying what works and why.* Wellington: University of Auckland

[6] CUREE (2009) *Professional Learning and the Role of the Coach in the new Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL)*. Coventry: CUREE. Available at: http://www.curee-paccts.com/resources/publications/curee-mtl-summaries

- identify learning starting points and needs formatively as well as summatively,
- respect, evaluate and make accessible specialist expertise in a range of forms to all colleagues; and
- invest in professional learning financially, through modelling it, through the use of tools and by exploring how it connects with pupil learning.

So there is a lot that school leaders can and should be doing to promote professional learning both as a motor for improvement and for securing the future for the profession.

Beyond individual schools, there is less evidence to hand about what makes a difference to young people. So exploration of what school districts, national agencies, Higher education and Profession Associations might contribute is necessarily more speculative. Here are some reflections on the extension of the logical argument:

- For school districts or authorities, making professional learning a key priority and a central plank of professional identity and functionality, might require analysis of their offer and contribution to identify the ways in which they both enable and inhibit professional learning. What might be the effect, for example, of considering the extent to which CPD is organised as something done to teachers to remedy deficits or co-constructed with them as a demanding and ongoing aspect of professional formation? What might be the effect of selecting school leaders for their skills in recognising, participating in and enabling professional learning and their track record in making skilled use of specialist expertise and tools and resources to secure depth in the process? Whilst, no doubt many interview panels touch on this, making it a key priority would mean developing reliable assessment measures.
- For Professional Associations, making professional learning a key priority might prompt the commissioning and promotion of research into its effectiveness, the modelling of stat of the art approaches or the use of their formidable press skills to celebrate successes such as the results of teachers' own research based learning. Perhaps it might lead to the defence of opportunities for professional learning including, for example, peer observation, that are as fierce as the defence of pension rights? Or it might generate challenges to school leaders and school districts about the nature and quality of the school as a learning environment for staff and pupils?
- For Higher education institutions making professional learning instead of CPD a key priority might involve attending to the process and outcomes of professional learning as much as to the relatively narrow range of written outputs on which accreditation at masters and PHD level currently concentrates. Perhaps a focus on professional learning as a central plank of professional identity also help HE to configure initial teacher education, continuing professional learning and education research as a dynamic continuum rather than the business of separate departments working in silos?
- For some National Governments, making professional learning a key priority might involve some significant shifts in the focus of accountability measures. It might involve, for example, moving accountability on from superficial performance in say observed

lessons and towards the ability to identify and evaluate high leverage strategies, make informed adaptations to them and to demonstrate an underpinning rationale or practical theory. Professional standards might be refined to reflect developing abilities to take charge of one's own learning and support that of others. There might also be a strategic investment in an infrastructure of access to research, frameworks for identifying specialist knowledge and ways of involving serving professionals in the development of all national policies.

What this note argues, in effect is that making professional learning a key priority for the future of the profession has the capacity both to respond to the challenges posed and to model approaches to learning we seek for young people. It requires a significant shift in focus but one that is well within the system's zone of proximal development – because it simply requires us to match deeds and words at different levels. There is a well known saying in English that what is sauce for the goose is also sauce for the gander. Hattie demonstrates convincingly that we should make pupil learning visible. By making teacher professional learning equally visible at structural, operational and practical levels, how much more easily might the profession rise to the challenges it faces?

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