Staff development for raising attainment: a practitioner's view of what works

Sharon Bates & Laura Watt

To cite this article: Sharon Bates & Laura Watt (2015): Staff development for raising attainment: a practitioner's view of what works, Education 3-13, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2015.1122317

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2015.1122317

Published online: 31 Dec 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 20

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Staff development for raising attainment: a practitioner’s view of what works

Sharon Bates and Laura Watt

Mill Hill Primary School, Stoke-on-Trent Primary School, Stoke-on-Trent, UK; School of Public Policy, Keele University, Keele, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a practitioner’s view of how continuing professional development (CPD) can help raise achievement in schools. It is one of four papers in this issue linked to a research project in Stoke-on-Trent seeking to raise attainment in schools in deprived communities. Based on over 20 years’ experience working in and with different schools in the UK, this paper frames a head teacher’s perspective, outlining seven strategies she believes are key to improving school performance. These strategies are providing CPD opportunities to all staff rather than just those involved in teaching, planning CPD activities in the light of school development priorities, mentoring and coaching between staff, forming inter-school networks and partnerships, team teaching, peer review and continual assessment of CPD impact.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 August 2015
Accepted 15 October 2015

KEYWORDS

Staff; development; CPD; practitioner; partnerships

Introduction

This paper offers an exploration of the effective use of continuing professional development (CPD) to raise attainment in schools. The paper is not intended to cover all aspects of effective CPD but rather highlight the key strategies that could be incorporated into a staff development plan if it is to help raise school attainment. The opinions expressed in this paper are based on over 20 years’ personal experience working in and with different primary and secondary schools in the UK, in particular across Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, Cheshire and the West Midlands. Some of the ideas presented here are drawn from non-academic texts that have proved successful. Thus, the paper offers a practitioner’s view of what works in terms of staff development.

Seven strategies of staff development are presented. Firstly, the importance of providing opportunities of CPD to all members of staff, not just teaching staff, are discussed. This strategy can help instil a culture of learning and leadership across the school, which can have a wider effect on pupils than the CPD activities themselves. Second, I argue that CPD activities should be planned in the light of, and to support, school development priorities to help ensure that they are congruent with wider aims and objectives. Four specific CPD activities viewed as effective in school improvement are then discussed: mentoring and coaching between staff, forming inter-school networks and partnerships, team teaching, and peer review. Finally, I explain why and how the impact of any CPD activity should be continuously assessed to assure their utility to specified aims and objectives. The paper concludes by considering possible barriers to effective CPD and provides a summary of guiding principles to inform how CPD may be successful in securing school improvement.
CPD for all: using CPD to develop a school-wide culture of learning and leadership

When considering what will make the most effective, sustainable impact on improving schools through CPD, one first needs to consider to whom it should be provided. One might assume that all professionals working in schools are, themselves, inquisitive, life-long learners. This is not necessarily the case and it can be unhelpful to assume so. An important question to address is whether professionals in schools should be inquisitive, life-long learners, and if so, which professionals in particular. Would this only be teachers, or classroom support staff or could it be extended to administration support staff, site staff or all staff?

In many schools, CPD programmes are only considered for certain groups of staff, typically teachers and classroom support staff. In doing so there is a risk of making these particular groups entirely responsible for school improvement. Instead, investment in the professional development of all employees within a school should be a priority. Focusing solely upon the development of teaching staff ignores the positive impact that can result from developing a wider culture of learning across the school. If we are to raise achievement for our pupils, we must not prevent any staff from the opportunity to achieve. Valuing the learning of all employees and fostering their aspirations for success can create a widespread culture of achievement in the school from which pupils can benefit.

While schools, and staff, can be partitioned into separate domains, every aspect of the way a school operates can contribute to the wider culture, expectations and aspirations regarding achievement. Every member of the school community can influence one another, whether explicitly or implicitly, and each can be a role model to the pupils. Promoting a culture of learning for all staff can therefore have a positive impact upon the pupils’ internal value system, raising aspirations for their own learning and potentially increasing attainment levels.

A further key question when considering whether CPD activities may help secure school improvement is ‘how solution-focused is the community of this school?’ Meaning, has a community ethos been established which is firmly based on a ‘how can we’ attitude rather than a ‘we cannot do this because’ attitude? If the culture is pre-dominantly the latter, firmly entrenched in responding to problems with no expectation of ever being able to overcome them, then even the highest quality CPD is unlikely to effectively address issues and transform practice. The culture must be one of effective learning for all to enable improved outcomes.

In addition, developing a culture of ‘every-one is a leader’ is key. Much has been written about moving leadership within schools to a model of distributed leadership (Harris 2013). The core dilemma, as outlined by West-Burnham and Harris (2015), is balancing authority and responsibility to secure true distributed leadership. To effectively realise school improvement, underpinned by a culture of high expectations and achievement, the balance of responsibility and authority must be secured. Effective performance management and accountability systems are key to supporting this.

Using CPD to support school development priorities

Choice of foci for CPD must be critically considered alongside, and within, the school’s self-evaluation, supported by integrated data, external review reports and national agendas as appropriate. It should be informed by the school development planning priorities which, in turn are informed by the evaluation processes. If the evaluation of the school and the school development plans do not indicate a need for a certain CPD focus, then that focus need not be there. However, new ideas for development may be considered as the school continuously seeks to move forwards. Continuous, systematic reflection against the school priorities will help ensure that CPD is not ‘hijacked’ by superfluous, unrequired aspects, whilst also allowing flexibility and adaptability of CPD in light of emerging evaluations that indicate an unexpected need to be met.

When considering the most effective CPD models to secure cultural and systemic school improvement, there may be benefit in adopting the new approach in the national curriculum model of pupils in which there has been a recent and significant change in thinking and practice, from a content...
coverage driven curriculum to a mastery curriculum approach (National Curriculum 2014). Content has been reduced; breadth of knowledge, skills and understanding is replaced with a focus on depth of knowledge, skills and understanding. Priority is now placed upon a student’s ability to apply learning in a wide range of contexts, making connections and seeing relationships, synthesising learning.

So likewise, rather than school leaders having a vast range of CPD for professionals that may not be rooted in the needs of the school or staff, and being only superficially engaging, we should be involved in more finally tuned provision that can become embedded in the school and thinking of those engaged with it. As Smith (2011, 152) argues, ‘Get away from thinking about continuous professional development being about finding and going on a suitable course. Seek a balance of professional learning and development models to avoid over-reliance on one type of provision’.

**Mentoring and coaching**

When focusing on bespoke CPD to support the development needs of both individuals and groups, mentoring and coaching programmes can be highly effective, if implemented appropriately and consistently. Such programmes also provide an excellent source of evidence to reference as part of performance management. Coaching, in particular, aligns very effectively to the stages of planning, and the mid-review and final review of staff by helping a colleague identify his or her own learning needs, establish steps to realise those needs and evaluate their impact.

While highlighting similarities between them, Tolhurst (2006) makes a clear distinction between mentoring and coaching. The key difference, she claims, is that mentoring can be more directive: mentors ‘freely give hints and tips on how they have tackled situations [and] will have had the same role as the mentees at some point in their career’ (Tolhurst 2006, 9). Meanwhile, coaches ‘do not readily give advice on specific ways of working [and] do not need to have carried out the specific role of the learner in school’ (Tolhurst 2006, 9).

In schools, mentoring is more readily associated with programmes used to support trainee and newly qualified teachers. Staff who are commencing in a new role may also be mentored by a colleague experienced in that role. In the meantime, coaching requires a real shift in role, where the coachee carries far more responsibility for driving the process; it is ‘learner centred’. The coach has the key role of guiding, supporting and motivating. Mentoring programmes ideally lend themselves to a one-to-one professional development context whereas coaching works highly effectively as a CPD tool, either in small groups or as a one to one programme.

As with any CPD programme, mentoring or coaching demands high-quality planning and training before implementation if results are to have high impact on cultural change and school improvement. It is not enough to state that in a school there is mentoring and coaching to support CPD. Rather, there must be a committed approach to developing a culture through which competencies are developed to enable all learners, pupils and adults alike, to reflect on learning in order to improve. Pask and Joy (2007) give clear focus to the need to develop cultural competencies, if mentoring and coaching are to be highly effective.

There also needs to be a structure to the process itself. Murray (2001) presents different schools of thought on this, but argues that ‘facilitated mentoring is a structure and series of processes designed to create effective mentoring relationships; guide the desired behaviour change of those involved; and evaluate the results for the protégés, the mentors, and the organisation’ (5). Equally, in a coaching scenario, either one-to-one or in small groups, Tolhurst (2006) states that, ‘coaching is a conversation but it is not a cosy chat. One of the elements that formalises it is the structure, i.e. the model of the conversation’ (60).

Most successful mentoring and coaching programmes are formalised through a time-bound programme which, at the outset, formalises the structure of the process and contracts all parties to agreed ways of working. These elements ensure rigour and support process and progress. A six- to eight-week cycle seems most suitable. Clearly, with the appraisal cycle, this would be different
as the coaching process runs across the full appraisal cycle, with an initial planning meeting, mid-cycle review and final appraisal reviews forming the three key points for coaching.

The decision on whether mentoring or coaching is the best approach should be informed by the individual situation. However, a combination of both mentoring and coaching can be extremely effective, that is, a model which begins with a formal mentoring cycle and then moves into a coaching cycle on successful completion of the mentoring programme. This can be particularly effective when working to improve the quality of teaching. Mentor expertise to support a colleague in securing ‘good’ practice, followed by a coaching programme to enable that colleague to explore how to move practice to ‘outstanding’ serves two key purposes. Initially, the more directed programme, supported by an experienced colleague, secures the mentee’s understanding of what ‘good’ looks like and how to achieve it. The move to coaching then enables a transition period, where the coached individual still feels supported, but carries more responsibility for driving the learning and taking ownership of the approaches and processes within the programme.

Networks and partnerships
West-Burnham (2009) reflects upon the changing face of education and, in particular, the move away from schools working autonomously for school improvement towards a more collaborative process.

For education there might be the point at which there is a need to move from improvement to transformation. This will require re-thinking of long-held assumptions about the process of improvement. Of these changes perhaps the most significant is the move from the strivings of the individual to collaborative strategies. (West-Burnham 2009, 100)

Even with the clear government drive for schools to formally collaborate, operating through, for example, Multi-Academy Trusts and Federations, this is easier said than done. For many years, schools have been effectively ‘pitted against each other’ in a competitive state, driven by rankings, league tables and Ofsted judgements. However, if a collaboration is to be effective, it must be built upon a foundation of mutual trust, respect and rapport. The way in which staff approach CPD may not be exclusively related to the school in which they are employed but across the schools within a trust, where both expertise and staff development may be shared.

West-Burnham (2009) goes on to state that a willingness to engage and learn collaboratively is key. He advocates that: ‘If transformation is to be achieved then a starting point may need to be the way that educationalists view integration, collaboration and cooperation and perhaps, most importantly, shared approaches to learning and development’ (West-Burnham 2009, 102). If any network, partnership or collaborative is to transform schools and be truly outward facing they must move away from simply sharing what each partner does, has historically done and will continue to do. Instead, a collaborative approach needs to explore and question practice beyond the schools within the collaborative partnerships, to consider other systems of education, the impact of those systems and what national and international research can teach us. Further still, it may consider what may be learned from non-educational systems, what business and industry may teach us about successful leadership. CPD thus needs to be both internally and externally facing.

It can be contentious to view schools as a business, but it is ‘the business of education’ that matters. In a business model, the children are the clients along with their parents, families and communities. Educators are the service providers and it is both telling, and compelling, to think in this mode to consider whether the clients are receiving high-quality products and services. Is the ‘company’ led in ways that innovate for excellence? Adair (2002) advocates analysis, synthesis, imagination, conceptual thinking, intuition, innovation, value and weighing up the options in the decision-making of leaders. He also cautions against the trap of compromise:

Decision makers rarely settle for the ‘best’ or optimum solution, being affected by emotion, power politics, the influences of other people and by their own values. Often, a decision is a compromise between different courses of action, being one that:
• Agrees to some extent with one’s own personal interests, needs or values
• Meets the value standards of superiors
• Is acceptable to those affected (by the decision and for carrying it out)
• Look reasonable
• Has an escape element of self-justification if it all goes wrong

Clearly, such approaches to decision making must be removed from your own approach! (Adair 2002, 55–60)

If networks, partnerships and collaborations are to transform education and school improvement, there must be a relentless focus on evaluating impact. So how can this be ensured? There are external review systems and structures to which schools are subject, including Ofsted, DFE performance tables and RAISEonline annual data analysis, to name just three. The problem with these systems and structures is that they are retrospective, the judgements and analyses come too late. Of course, such retrospective data can help to yield a picture of progress which can be tracked over time. However, also of importance is the need to look to the future. Future-orientated thinking and planning may help to build and develop sustainable educational communities that are self-improving.

**Team teaching**

Berry, Daughtrey, and Wieder (2009) argue, ‘teacher effectiveness has less to do with individual attributes, and far more to do with the extent to which teachers work with each other and provide collective leadership for their schools and communities’ (2). Learning can improve when teachers witness and implement the ‘good’ practice of other teachers, not just in their own school but other schools across the wider community. Indeed, with the growing development of Multi-Academy Trusts, comprising both primary and secondary schools, there has been an increased focus upon teachers sharing ‘good’ practice throughout the community.

With the rise of school collaborations, there is growing understanding of the need for schools to perceive learning from the perspective of the recipients. How can schools co-operate and collaborate to seamlessly integrate that learning journey for children, envisaging that they will undertake that journey from ages 3 to 19, potentially, within the structure and systems of that Academy Trust? First, one must gain insight, experience, skills and understanding of pedagogical approaches and practices *cross-phase*. Add to that the potential depth of learning that primary colleagues can gain from co-teaching with secondary subject specialists and that secondary colleagues can gain from working with primary colleagues, highly experienced in cross-curricular pedagogy. As Cordingley (2013) states,

> observation, when coupled with structured, collaborative co-coaching or shared analysis of data within action research, allows the teacher to observe and gain support in reviewing practice. It also acts as a catalyst for analysis and reflection on how professional development and enhanced practice connect with pupil learning experiences and outcomes. (6)

Introducing peer support through a model of collaborative teaching which brings together teachers from primary and secondary sectors could be considered risky. Indeed, as with any CPD model, caution should be well balanced with risk-taking to innovate for improving standards. Combining caution with risk secures a ‘supported risk-taking’ learning context when it is, again, underpinned by an action research cycle to evaluate progress and impact and rapidly identify issues arising. Cordingley (2013) argues that ‘peer support is recognised as making an important contribution to embedding new practices (including practices from research) introduced by others in day-to-day practice and providing practical and emotional support through shared risk-taking’ (5).

It is a seamless transition from collaborative teaching to a model of lesson study to support effective CPD. Doing so further builds upon the learning for the teachers involved, and facilitates
opportunities to expand this process across an individual school or partnership of schools. The format for lesson study is simple, but requires an organisational commitment to facilitate it effectively.

Lesson Study is a professional learning process. It works because it focuses on the learning and progress made by children as their teachers develop specific pedagogic techniques designed to improve a particular aspect of teaching and learning that they have identified within their school. (DCSF 2008, 5)

Figure 1 illustrates a model of team teaching that I have found particularly effective. It is created from ideas contained within the Improving practice and profession through Lesson Study handbook (DCSF 2008) and the Improving subject pedagogy through Lesson Study handbook (DFE 2009).

Peer review

Schools, individually at least, collaboratively at best, need to have a rigorous system of self – evaluation and correction, ideally further supported by transparency through peer review. Through networks and collaborations, schools have the ideal opportunity to combine ‘peer learning’ and ‘peer review’, to fully implement a transformational model for school improvement. As reported via The London Challenge (2014),

schools felt strongly that being reviewed by serving practitioners was by far the most significant strength of the QA Review process. The authenticity comes from being reviewed by fellow professionals who have the knowledge and credibility and bring a high level of challenge. (Challenge Partners 2014, 11)

Peer review offers schools an excellent opportunity to engage in reflective dialogue with partner schools, under a clear and rigorous framework, which is underpinned by high-quality training and development. Although peer review is fairly new as an option for schools to engage with,
research emerging from The London Challenge (2014) indicates the high value for schools, as reviewers and reviewees, of engaging with this process. Key factors emerging from the research reflect on:

- The high value of the external challenge that this review process brings;
- The two key aspects of ‘proving quality’ of the school’s own self-evaluation, and ‘improving quality’ through informing next steps for development;
- The core need for a culture of absolute trust within the peer review partnership for this process to thrive, linked to the rigour of the professional development programme that review teams undertake and the ‘buy in’ of the schools to both aspects of the programme.

Undoubtedly, peer review can form a crucial aspect of school improvement, effectively supporting and validating a school’s own self-evaluation processes, signposting ways forward and facilitating high-quality professional dialogue between professionals from partner schools. As with any review process it can form part of an improvement cycle which not only helps school improvement but also professional development.

**Continous assessment of CPD impact**

Carr and Kemmis (1986) define action research as ‘a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out’ (162). This type of self-reflective enquiry is essential to ensuring CPD has an impact upon school improvement. Embedding systems for evaluating the impact of staff development is key.

Action research should underpin all CPD activities in place across the school. Schools that adopt action research as a key driver behind all school planning, evaluation and CPD programmes are placing self and school improvement at the core of the school culture. Action research fosters a community of enquiry, self-criticism, self-reflection and analysis of improvements as well as providing a key vehicle via which schools can evaluate what is not effective practice or practice which is not working in the most effective way possible.

The pace of change within schools and across the education profession is relentless. Such pace does not lend itself to establishing a culture of detailed reflection, yet reflection and reflective practitioners are key to school improvement. Action research enables practitioners to reflect in two ways: *In action* – within the action research cycle itself, and *on action* – following the undertaking of an action research programme. The cycle of plan, do, observe/reflect, review, keeps at the forefront of the mind, the need for critical reflection to inform next steps. Brookfield (1986) comments that ‘the process of reflection-in-action is essentially artistic, that is, the practitioner makes judgments and exercises skills for which no explicit rationale has been articulated but in which she nevertheless feels an intuitive sense of confidence’ (247) Although it may be ‘in the moment’ and sometimes hard to capture, it is an essential part of teachers’ own development. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), in discussing the importance of ‘professional capital’, identify that the starting point is the willingness of each individual staff member to move forwards, with a disposition to learn. Action research cycles support this process of reflection on action, and reflection in action, and can be applied to any school improvement system or process and the people within them.

We must ask: what impact has each strand of CPD had on the priority areas of the school development plan? This evaluation needs to integrate all available sources of evidence and having action research as an underpinning principle of all CPD can support the entire process. If so, it is unlikely that a programme of CPD will continue forward where no impact is evident. The very nature of the action research cycle will identify weaknesses in the programme, and support further decision-making with regards to changes required to secure improvement outcomes.

Goodall et al. (2005) explored approaches that may be used to evaluate CPD, giving caution to relying mainly on participant feedback, and urging a more explicit and consistent focus on evaluating
the quality of CPD through its impact on outcomes for pupils. Guiding principles to secure effective CPD to secure school improvement and raise achievement are outlined as:

- **System leadership** – how forward thinking and outward facing is the system leadership of the school?
- **Focus and content of the CPD programme** must be informed by rigorous and accurate school self-evaluation and development planning.
- **Learning and development** should be an entitlement of all within the organisation.
- **CPD programmes and systems** should be tailored to the needs of individuals as well as aligning to school development priorities.
- **CPD activities and programmes** should be underpinned by critical evaluation to ensure their utility.

**Conclusion**

This paper has outlined seven strategies of CPD that I argue are essential if staff development is to help raise school attainment. First is the importance of providing CPD opportunities for all members of staff, not just those involved in teaching. This strategy can help develop a cross-school culture of learning and development which can be instilled in the values of the pupils themselves. The second is to try and ensure that all CPD activities support and help fulfil the school development plan. CPD activities should be planned in light of the design, and evaluation, of this plan, which in turn should reflect wider national agendas. Four specific CPD activities were then outlined: coaching and mentoring between staff, forming networks and partnerships across both primary and secondary schools within a community, team teaching and peer review that, in turn, should occur both within the school and between different schools in the network/partnership. Finally, a constant process of self-reflection to assess the worth of any CPD activity should underpin...

---

![Proposed model of CPD effective for school improvement.](image-url)

---

This image illustrates a proposed model of CPD effective for school improvement, highlighting the importance of planning, observing, reflecting, and doing to achieve desired outcomes.
each stage of the staff development process. Figure 2 offers a graphical depiction of these core strategies as a summary of the ideas presented.

Three core themes amongst these CPD strategies emerge. First, the purpose of CPD activities should be wider than the activity itself, that is, by playing an important role in the wider school development plan and helping to develop a school-wide culture of learning and self-improvement. Second, schools and staff need to be outward focused, looking to other staff members and schools to help develop one’s own practice. Forming networks and partnerships between schools, team teaching programmes and peer review helps achieve this. Third, staff and schools need to be constantly engaged in the practice of self-reflection. The worth of CPD activities (or any school practice) should not be taken for granted but critically considered, again in light of the school development plan and wider aims and objectives. Being outward focused, comparing practice with other staff members and schools, can also help in this process.

In considering these, and other, strategies that might be key to effective CPD, it is important to be aware of potential barriers faced when trying to implement them. Research from Goodall et al. (2005) cite time and cost of CPD as being key here. The issue of time can be both the time of the CPD activity itself, but also the time then required to implement the CPD into practice across the whole school. Other barriers can include a lack of knowledge of providers, knowing who would be an ideal expert to lead CPD should external expertise be required. CPD can also have an immediate negative impact as teachers have to be taken out of the classroom in order to participate. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, CPD can and should play a central role in any school development plan, with the potential to have lasting impact on raising school attainment.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References