Effective leadership for professional development: a literature review

Research Reviews

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Date: Oct 09, 2017

One strong theme throughout literature, is the need for professional development to be personalised

In 2014, the Department for Education published a consultation: ‘A world-class teaching profession’. It stated that ‘it is vital that serving teachers have access to on-going, high-quality opportunities to update and refresh their skills and knowledge’ and that ‘evidence-driven, career-long learning is the hallmark of top professions’; also identifying that ‘teachers report that far too much professional development is currently of poor quality and has little or no impact on improving the quality of their teaching’ (Department for Education, 2014: 10).

In this literature review, I will consider what characterises effective professional development according to research, and the leadership models, strategies and actions that are required.

Whilst the current focus on professional development has heightened awareness, it is not a new field. In order to locate this research in current thinking and practices, a focus will be placed on more recent work.

For a profession so dedicated to learning, teachers seem to take little care of their own learning.

Coe, 2013

Research and current thinking on effective professional development

There are a number of elements that frequently feature in the literature about effective professional development. It is important to note that professional development is a ‘complex process, which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively’ (Avalos, 2011: 10) and whilst most professionals would instinctively tell you what they feel is effective (Cordingley, 2015) this review is also interested in attempts to find causal relationships.

Here, that complexity has been addressed by broadly grouping features regularly discussed in research into five categories for consideration which will serve as a vehicle for analysis.

Time

Time scales and the length of the professional development is frequently cited as an important factor. In a review of nine separate studies, an IES publication found that professional development activities of 14 hours or more produced a statistically significant impact on pupil outcomes, the studies involving less input saw no statistically significant effects on pupil achievement (Yoon et al., 2007).

This is a finding mirrored in other studies that found a positive correlation between time invested and outcomes (Capps, Crawford and Constas, 2012; Garet et al., 2001). Alongside the time allocated to professional development activities, it would also seem important for teachers to have time to ‘reconsider their knowledge and beliefs’ (van Driel et al., 2012: 130) since for change to be lasting it requires teachers to reflect on what they say and do (Fullan, 2001). As well as there being a positive correlation between time spent and student achievement, there are also significant positive correlations between frequency of CPD sessions and duration of those sessions, suggesting that professional development is more effective when that allocated time is divided into a regular pattern of activities (Blank and Alas, 2009). This is also identified by Cordingley et al. (2015) who also stated the importance of a rhythm of professional development activities over the course of two terms or more.

However, the same report notes that ‘the crucial factor differentiating more from less successful programmes is *what* the time is used for’ (Cordingley et al., 2015: 4 – italics added). So, it would appear that whilst the duration of the professional development activity is important, that time must be used wisely. As a result, the remaining sections relate to content and structure.

Structure

Given the literature largely agrees that more time, if used well, will have a positive impact on the efficacy of professional development, then it seems pertinent to consider the way that time is structured and delivered. A recurring theme of the literature is the importance of time to reflect and review previous learning and how it has been implemented (Avalos, 2010; Capps, Crawford and Constas, 2012; Cordingley et al., 2003; Cordingley, 2015; Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009; Timperley et al., 2007).

It is also important that the professional development activities are organised in such a way as to fit in around the day to day operations of school life (Bank and Alas, 2009). With teachers in England working above the OECD average hours per week (OECD, 2014), ensuring professional development does not impinge on work-life balance will increase teacher engagement (Coe, 2013) and strategically reducing competing demands will increase impact (Timperley, 2008).

Notable change in a complex environment needs opportunities for reflection or ‘coherence making’ (Fullan, 2001) and clear structures to avoid ‘fragmentation of effort’ (Timperley, 2008). Finally, Byrant et al. (2001) suggests that time should also be allocated within the cycle for teachers sharing their professional experience and expertise, which connects to the next section considering collaboration.

Collaboration

Harwell (2001) concluded that professional development needed to be a combination of expert input and collaborative effort. Collaboration forms a central theme in literature on professional development.

While studying surveys from over 300 schools, Bollam (2005) found that participation in collaborative professional development activities has a positive impact on both teaching practice and morale, and has a statistically significant impact on pupil outcomes at both primary and secondary. The TALIS report suggests that a significant proportion of teachers still work largely in isolation (OECD, 2014) and Vescio et al. (2008) identify collaborative working as the primary means to combat isolation. Cordingley (2015) makes the observation that professional learning communities should be the outcome of good professional development rather than the approach, and the development of a culture of professional learning will be addressed with leadership later on the literature review.

Collaborative working also seems to lead to a greater focus on teaching and learning, and more sustained change to practice (Capps, Crawford and Constas, 2012; Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009). Blank and Alas (2009) also found use of learning networks to be a positive structure, since collaboration increased engagement in professional development programmes.

Engaging professionals

Described in one report as the difference between ‘volunteers and conscripts’, (Cordingley et al., 2015: 5) it is important that teachers are engaged by their professional development. One way to ensure this is to make sure the professional development activities are authentic learning experiences, where the teacher is genuinely engaged in a process (Lotter, Harwood and Bonner, 2006) which forms part of everyday activities (Timperley, 2008).

TALIS identifies that ‘teachers derive the most satisfaction…when treated as professionals’ (OECD, 2014: 27), giving them some capacity to ‘shape the agenda to their interests’ (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008: 85). It is also important that it ties in with school policy, priorities, curriculum and goals (Blank and Alas, 2009), so its purpose is clear and relevant to the situation they are working in. Teacher satisfaction increased when professional development activities were seen to be ‘close to home’ (Avalos, 2011: 13).

Ultimately teachers are looking to do the best by their pupils, and so making explicit links between professional development and student achievement, even down to pupil level, can increase engagement and ownership (Blank and Alas, 2009; Cordingley, 2015; Cordingley et al., 2007).

Style and content

When considering content, one theme that comes through the literature strongly is the need for professional development to be personalised. Activities should be linked to both the instructional practices and knowledge required for teachers’ specific needs (Blank and Alas, 2009), where teachers can choose or tailor those activities to their perceived needs (Cordingley, 2015; Cordingley et al., 2003) or individual starting points (Cordingley et al., 2007).

There is a need for professional development to foster a sense of cognitive dissonance (mental discomfort that comes from new ideas that are inconsistent with currently held beliefs, hence requiring consideration and more likely to lead to change) to promote change (Timperley et al., 2007) and encourage discussion around teaching and learning, since professional development has both formal and informal elements (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009). There is also a division of focus needed between pedagogy and subject knowledge, with subject specific professional development and subject knowledge, and more general pedagogic training both required (Avalos, 2011; Blank and Alas, 2009; Cordingley et al., 2015; Cordingley, 2015).

A related side issue is the place that external experts or consultants play in the delivery of professional development. Literature is mixed in how positively it views the use of external experts in professional development. They can provide expertise that is not present within the organisation, and leave the teachers to enact the learning and take more ownership (Cordingley et al., 2007). However, in order to be successful, ongoing internal support was usually needed to ensure lasting impact of the professional learning (Cordingley et al., 2015).

There are two further areas that require consideration. First, how are we defining or measuring effective professional development? And second, what is the impact of accountability, both positive and negative, on professional development?

Evaluation of effectiveness

Most of the literature I have used has focused on the impact on student outcomes gained as a result of effective teacher professional development, but this has two potential flaws. Firstly, identifying a causal relationship is very difficult with such a complex process with so many factors involved (Avalos, 2011). Secondly, although focussing professional development on improving pupil outcomes is good practise, it is not always the case that professional development is designed with this focus in mind, and in these cases it is a less reliable measure. (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008). It is also worth considering that any improvement in pupil outcomes could be a result of the Hawthorne Effect (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008: 88), where changes in behaviour and associated impact are as a result of being studied, or a number of other factors involved.

Another means to evaluate the efficacy of professional development is satisfaction or impact surveys (OECD, 2014; Avalos, 2011) however these are only a measure of perception. Cordingley (2015) suggests that rather than just using a survey at the end of the day, it would be more valuable to have a detailed conversation a few months later to explore sustained changes, equally, ‘deep professional learning…can be very uncomfortable and generate negative immediate feedback which translates into more positive feedback once teachers have had time to reflect’ (Cordingley, 2015: 5). Yoon et al. (2007) suggest a cyclical model for identifying the impact of professional development on pupil outcomes, by connecting the professional developmentto knowledge and skills, then to classroom practice and ultimately to pupil outcomes, all impacted by curriculum models, assessments and accountability.

Impact of accountability

Accountability can be a force for good, focusing action on the areas where it is needed and ensuring that teachers engage with the process (Cordingley et al., 2015), and a number of studies ‘note the effect of standards based reform and accountability’ on professional development impact (Avalos, 2011: 12). Conversely, high stakes accountability can force a school’s hand into ‘panic purchasing’ external expertise which is too superficial to have lasting impact, looking for ‘quick fix programmes’ to address the requirements of organisations such as Ofsted or programmes that do not focus on pupil outcomes (Cordingley, 2015: 3). Equally, Cranston (2013) argues for professional responsibility rather than accountability as the driving force.

The other aspect to accountability is the internal accountability process. TALIS suggests that half of appraisals are purely for administrative purposes, and do not impact on professional development (OECD, 2014). However, a significant proportion of teachers say that good quality feedback can impact on teaching practice and inform professional development priorities (OECD, 2014). Earley (2013) discusses the importance of ongoing professional dialogue, especially with respect to monitoring and accountability processes.

Leadership of professional development

If professional development is to be effective, it is clear that leadership forms a crucial role in facilitating, developing and encouraging the structures and activities described above (Cordingley et al., 2015). It is important to consider that ‘how leaders can best fulfil this role depends on how leadership itself is understood’ (Timperley et al., 2007: 192).

When conceptualising leadership of professional development, formal models of leadership tend to ‘underestimate the contribution of the individual’ (Bush, 2003: 63), thus favouring more participative or collegial models that promote the collaboration and teacher ownership already described.. The literature tends to talk about leadership in two distinct way;. there are explicit references to what leaders should be doing, as well as implied references to leadership. Finally, it is also acknowledged by some of the literature that culture plays a key role, and so this will also be considered here.

Explicit leadership actions

It is true that leaders are responsible for ‘organising and promoting engagement in professional learning opportunities’ (Timperley, 2008: 22). Arguably the most fundamental action described is the need for school leaders to value and as such invest in high quality professional development (Coe, 2013), with the literature identifying that investing in and modelling professional development is the highest impact leadership activity which correlates to student achievement (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009).

TALIS identified that teachers feel the most job satisfaction if they are treated as professionals, have their opinions valued, and collaboration is encouraged by leadership (OECD, 2014: 27). Already mentioned is the importance of making explicit links to pupil outcomes and engaging teachers as professionals in the process, but also important is explicitly connecting pupils, professional development, curriculum and pedagogy (Cordingley, 2015).

The research describes leaders as facilitators of learning and as model learners (Cordingley et al., 2007; Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009), stating that leaders should never stop being learners and should be actively involved in the professional development programmes in schools (Lingard, 2003; Tomsett, 2015). Timperley (2007) states that ‘effective leaders did not leave the learning to their teachers – they became involved themselves’ (Timperley et al., 2007: 196).

Coaching and mentoring are also often mentioned. Cordingley (2015) cites Ofsted’s reviews of CPD as suggesting that much too much reflection is ‘informal and unstructured’ and too few teachers are trained as coaches or mentors (Cordingley, 2015: 4). Mentoring and coaching are generally considered to be a highly effective tools in developing teachers; improving the quality of appraisal, observation feedback and other professional conversations if managed and led effectively (OECD, 2014; Tomsett, 2015; Cordingley et al., 2003). However, mentoring especially requires leaders who have credibility and who can walk the talk (Earley, 2013).

Another key theme of explicit leadership actions is the logistical support needed for professional development to be effective. Already highlighted is the need for professional development to tie in with school priorities, to be congruent with day to day programmes, to not be an added burden, to be personalised to each teacher’s needs and so on. If this is to be true then leaders need to ensure that the processes are in place to facilitate teachers engaging in those professional development activities (Cordingley et al., 2007; Tomsett, 2015). This is echoed by Blank and Alas (2009), who state the importance of policies, practices and a school’s systems supporting professional development, and goes on to highlight how this can lead to improvement and professional development being sustained. Timperley (2008) describes it in different terms, talking of the need for avoiding the fragmentation of effort and reducing competing demands.

A recurring theme is the importance of vision. Vision, visionary or transformational leadership, or direction setting is highlighted in the literature as vital to both engaging teachers in the first instance, and then sustaining the engagement and impact (Timperley, 2008; Bush, 2003; Capps, Crawford and Constas, 2012; Cordingley et al., 2015). Vision can both ‘ensure collective effort’ and ‘neglect the mundane elements of school life’, however, it is not ‘pursued in a vacuum’ and requires organisational leadership to facilitate its effectiveness (Timperley et al., 2007: 192).

There are subtler expectations of leaders too. In the best institutions, leaders manage and engage dissonance effectively to challenge assumptions and promote action and debate (Timperley, 2008). Leaders need to balance pedagogical development, subject knowledge and subject specific development needs, taking into account the individual needs of teachers (Blank and Alas, 2009; Timperley, 2008; Cordingley et al., 2015). That balance between challenge and appropriately chosen activities and focus leads to better engagement in activities (OECD, 2014). Professional development activities should avoid being generic pedagogy, in favour of subject knowledge and subject specific pedagogy, and opportunities to contextualise all the learning (Cordingley, 2015).

Although addressed already, it is important to note here that holding teachers to account also forms an important part of leading professional development. Treating teachers as professionals is important for their engagement (OECD, 2014) but part of being treated as a professional is being accountable, through formal and informal processes (Timperley et al., 2007).

Implied leadership actions

Alongside the explicitly stated leadership actions, many of the studies considered here imply further requirements of leadership that are not overtly stated. For example, Timperley et al. (2007) identifies four key roles that leaders adopt (developing a vision, managing and organising, leading professional learning and developing leadership), however, she goes on to state that ‘in no study did leaders take on all four roles’ (Timperley et al., 2007: 196). This implies the importance of distributed leadership, a key leadership style echoed by Bush (2003) and Lingard (2003), but not directly related to professional development specifically. A connected idea is the requirement for leaders to give control and ownership to teachers to make decisions about their professional development priorities (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008).

A significant implied requirement of leadersis the need for time for professional development. None of the studies specifically state that leaders should free up time for teachers or state the actions that would make time available, but they do say that teachers require time for reflection, for collaboration, for mentoring and coaching and so on. As such it must be true that for professional development to be effective leaders must create the time for these activities.

Already discussed earlier in the review is the importance of, and challenges around, evaluation. The implication is that leaders must ensure that the time and money invested in professional development makes a difference to pupil outcomes. Evaluation must go beyond a survey at the end of the day and ensure it monitors long as well as short term impact on practice, ideally combining qualitative and quantitative tools (Cordingley, 2015).

In high performing schools, leaders model best practice, participate in conversations and promote engagement in professional development activities (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009). The implication is that leaders continue to develop their own practice, to maintain credibility. In order for genuine pedagogic leadership, leaders must ensure they are up to date with current practice and education theory in order to set the academic direction of travel (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009). Cordingley et al. (2007) suggests that it is important that the current knowledge base in the field is made available to teachers, but this requires leaders to be familiar with it in order to act as facilitators.

There is a further, overarching assumption that seems to run through much of the literature. That school leaders must be experts in how their teachers learn, understanding that teachers react in different ways to the same professional learning activities (Timperley, 2008) and as such must understand the diverse learning needs of the staff and facilitate the different starting points and needs of staff.

Creating culture and its impact

Avalos (2011) states ‘professional development can be helped or hindered by school organisational context’ (Avalos, 2011: 12). Equally, professional development can be a means to shift the school culture, as identified in relation to the impact of learning communities on culture (Vescio, Ross and Adams, 2008).

It would appear that the culture that is framed by the leadership actions already discussed (implicit and explicit) sets the conditions and culture that seem important for the success and sustainability of professional development (Little, 2012). Crawford et al. (1993) state that fear is incompatible with development, that for professional development to be truly effective, it needs to be founded in a culture of trust. Tomsett (2015) echoes this, making the point that for teachers to engage with professional development for themselves it must be underpinned by a culture that values and supports them and allows them ownership of their own progression.

Lingard (2003) goes into more detail on the types of leadership actions that create a positive culture to support professional development. He talks about the importance of stimulating discussion and debate, facilitating intellectual discussions, and about creating safe spaces for reflection; about supporting action research and inviting the academic to be part of school life; and about ensuring that everything connects back to pupils (Lingard, 2003). The literature also highlights the importance of culture being coherent with what is being asked and the messages that come from leadership (van Driel et al., 2012). Although writing about systemic improvements and collaboration *between*schools, Ainscow 2012) makes an interesting observation about the importance of shared responsibility and a culture of trust for collaboration to work well, and this would be true *within* a school too. Also connected to vision is setting high expectations, which frame the culture and what teachers are aiming for, related both to their own practice and pupil outcomes (Timperley, 2008: 22).

Conclusions

What is clear is that there is a reasonable quantity of research, both qualitative and quantitative, identifying several key features of effective professional development; these being: time invested, personalisation, ownership, alignment with organisational needs, collaboration and inclusion of subject specific pedagogy (Cordingley et al., 2015). There is also a variety of leadership literature, some which deals specifically with professional development, although there is a ‘scarcity of leadership studies’ which tie these together (Cordingley et al., 2015: 9).

A focus should be put on the culture that underpins all organisations, rather than the structures that the institutions employ. It is important for leaders to bring coherence to all of the professional development activities that teachers are employed in, ensuring time is well invested and professional development is given appropriate status in the organisation. Leaders also need to continue to invest in their own professional development, in order to act as model learners and to be credible in their leadership of it.

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