Effective professional learning

Graham Handscomb reflects on the range of ingredients that comprise effective professional learning.

◼◼◼ Connected learning

What enables teachers to give of their best to pupils? What contributes to great teaching? How can teachers make the most difference to student learning and outcomes? What professional learning enables teachers to improve? What professional development is most effective? These are perhaps the most prescient issues currently facing the teaching profession. The assumption which underpins, and to a great extent connects, these questions is that the professional learning of teachers on the one hand and the learning and outcomes of the pupils they teach on the other, are intimately interrelated.

This was the clear message emerging from the major synthesis of evidence into *Teacher Professional Learning and Development* conducted by Helen Timperley and colleagues (2007). In constructing their "teacher knowledge building cycle" they concluded that: "Many factors influence student learning, but it is increasingly clear that what teachers know and are able to do is one of the most important of all." Indeed the Timperley *Best Evidence Synthesis* came to see "that what goes on in the black box of teacher learning is fundamentally similar to student learning." This integral link between teacher and student learning is also the basis of the recent Sutton Trust report on *Developing Teachers* (2015), and of the review carried out by Coe and colleagues (2014) into *What makes great teaching*. Here we gain some important insights into what might be the essential ingredients of effective professional learning:

Sustained professional learning is most likely to result when:

◼ *the focus is kept clearly on improving student outcomes;*
◼ *feedback is related to clear, specific and challenging goals for the recipient;*
◼ *attention is on the learning rather than to the person or to comparisons with others;*
◼ *teachers are encouraged to be continual independent learners;*
◼ *feedback is mediated by a mentor in an environment of trust and support;*
◼ *an environment of professional learning and support is promoted by the school's leadership.*

(Coe, Aloisi, Higgins and Elliot Major, 2014)

◼◼◼ Collaborative contribution

This pursuit of what constitutes effective professional learning is reflected in the range of contributions to this issue of *Professional Development Today*. One of the clear expectations of Teaching Schools is that they be a means of providing effective professional development and a vehicle for improving schools. In the first article Qing Gu gives a detailed account of large scale research into the impact of Teaching Schools and their Alliances (TSAs). The evaluation was carried out on behalf of the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) by a team from the ISOS Partnership and Universities of Nottingham Trent, Oxford and Manchester. Twenty-six TSAs were visited and over three hundred of the first three cohorts were surveyed.

The overall picture that arises from the investigation is pretty positive: "Teaching Schools and their alliances have made a significant contribution to the sharing of good practice among schools and to enhancing the professional practice of many teachers and school leaders within and beyond alliance partnerships." A number of significant features make up this portrayal. This includes the TSAs' provision of a continuum of bespoke professional development from new entrants to teaching through to leadership development. They are seen as "a vehicle for professional relationships across a range of settings and as having opened doors to further development and improvement opportunities" and the Teaching School model is judged to have "an important role to play in driving forward a school-led 'self-improving' system."

The article also reports on the importance of these groupings needing to connect and contribute to each other and to schools beyond their alliance. Although there are signs of such reaching out, it is significant that "collaboration between TSAs and with other schools and school networks in an area can be triggered more by LA activity than by TSA activity." Other challenges facing the future development of TSAs are issues of resourcing, stabilising relationships

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with higher education partners and addressing the lack of clarity as to how Teaching Schools and their alliances are to be judged as effective. If Teaching Schools are to be a fundamental feature of the educational infrastructure then there is "a widely perceived need to join up relationships, resources and capacity to produce a coherent and systemic approach to school-to-school support."

■■■ Empowering teachers and reaching the disaffected

In her article Sonia Blandford is keen to explore the professional learning and growth needed to make a difference to the many children who have become disaffected with education and switched-off learning. Professional learning that has been shown to be effective has drawn on the *Achievement for All* approach which "aims to transform the lives of those vulnerable or disadvantaged students by raising educational aspiration, access and achievement." In common with the messages in other articles, there is an emphasis on empowering teachers in their own development as continuing leaners, "buying into their personal and professional aims and their aspirations for their pupils."

■■■ Effective enquiry

In Qing Gu's account of the impact of Teaching Schools she reported that a culture of research and development was beginning to emerge and develop in most TSAs. This is certainly the case in The Mead Teaching School Alliance which is the source of the contributions to our HOW TO section. Lindsay Palmer and Nicola Theobald describe how The Mead Primary School and its alliance sought to make school-based research the key foundation for its whole approach to professional learning. In doing so they provide readers with a guide on how to establish an R&D culture; how to use a model of Learning Sets to promote teacher research; how to integrate practitioner enquiry with performance management; and how to grow leadership capacity for research engagement.

■■■ Expertise in professional learning

A good deal of understanding into what effective professional learning looks like is gained from Philippa Cordingley's article. She describes the analysis of systematic reviews of research by her organisation CUREE which examined support for professional learning and the follow up activities

initiated and sustained by teachers. The review confirmed many elements we know to be part of effective practice such as the importance of sustaining professional learning over time; the need for teachers to organise and test their own learning through the lens of their aspirations for their pupils; and developing an underpinning rationale about why approaches do and don't work in different contexts. There were also a number of new insights gained; these included recognising that no single element worked on its own; developing assessment for learning (AfL) strategies; and facilitators having expertise in teacher professional learning.

The article draws on specific research carried out in twenty eighty schools gathering data through interviews, focus groups and surveys. The findings from this emphasis the crucial importance of "differentiating support for CPD and involving teachers and CPD facilitators in building coherent and personalised sequences of professional learning." They also stress another fundamental issue. If we are to take professional learning of teachers seriously then there is a need to invest in evaluating systematically the depth of expertise of those who facilitate the professional learning of their colleagues.

■■■ External involvement

One of the key issues identified by Cordingley in the CUREE research and review of evidence was the significance of "contributions from experts who are sufficiently external to the day to day working context to be in a position to challenge orthodoxies supportively." A potentially negative consequence of the otherwise welcome focus in recent times on school-led and school-focussed professional development has been a tentative resistance to external expertise. Glenys Hart argues that ignoring the benefits that external involvement can bring is counterproductive. External consultants can complement school-based programmes, bring new ideas and provide the stimulus of evaluative challenge. She presents a wide array of sources and contacts and in particular explores the range of on-line expertise and modes of engagement that are available to enhance teachers' professional learning experience. This reflects the fundamental point made elsewhere in other articles that effective professional learning is not one dimensional but entails a range of ingredients, a potent mix that dynamically enriches teachers' development and makes a significant difference to student outcomes.

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References: Coe, R., Aloisi, C., Higgins, R. and Elliot Major, L. (2014) What makes great teaching? Review of the underpinning research. Centre for Evaluation & Monitoring; Durham University and The Sutton Trust. ■ Sutton Trust (2015) Developing Teachers: Improving professional development for teachers. The Sutton Trust, January 2015. ■ Timperley, H., Wilson, A,. Barrar, H. and Fung, I. (2007) Teacher Professional Learning and Development. New Zealand Ministry of Education and University of Auckland.