

# It's all about learning and growth

**Graham Handscomb** argues that effective professional development has to have learning at its core.

## ■ ■ ■ Training, development or learning?

What's in a name? Over the years a variety of terms have been used when referring to the ongoing development of those involved in the teaching enterprise. *In-service training* was often used to provide a distinction from *initial teacher training*. The once ubiquitous term *continuing professional development (CPD)* then gained considerable popularity and traction. It could be seen to embrace not just teachers but also other adults who work with children, and was a concept used in other professions as well. Above all it was seen as a powerful expression because it signalled an on-going process that was a fundamental feature of what it was to be a professional - someone who took seriously and invested in keeping up to date and in improving their practice.

In all of this there was an interesting debate about whether this was a process of training or education; was teaching a craft with skills to be acquired and honed or more of an art to be nurtured and developed (Fish, 1998)? In more recent times there has been an emerging emphasis on *professional knowledge* and indeed on the whole notion of *professional learning* (Timperley and Alton-Lee, 2008). If schools are envisaged as being learning organisations then this embraces the learning of staff as well as pupils. This has led some commentators to use *professional learning* as a preferred term, or in the case of the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) the composite expression *professional development and learning*.

## ■ ■ ■ Schools as learning communities

Adopting the perspective of teachers as learners within schools seen as learning communities raises intriguing questions about the nature of such learning and how it relates to the learning of pupils – is it similar and shared or different and distinctive? Certainly there are some who see a distinction between pedagogy: child-led learning, and andragogy: “man” or adult-led learning (Knowles, 1984). But there is much that bridges the two; just as we aim to enable children to become curious inquirers who take increasing control of their own learning, so we also see the great benefits for teachers in becoming research engaged practitioners (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2006).

## ■ ■ ■ Learning-centred classrooms

All these matters concerned with learning, development and growth are reflected in this issue of *Professional Development Today*. The HOW TO section, written by Chris Watkins, is forthright in claiming that actually “learning is a rare focus in classrooms and schools” and that the dominant pattern persists of: “teacher initiates, students responds, teacher evaluates.” Watkins provocatively claims that we have socialised children into schooling but forgotten to socialise them into learning! He provides step by step guidance to restoring and developing learning-centred classrooms where adults as well as children learn and flourish. These HOW TO contributions provide much food for thought including the pithy observation: “The links between teaching and learning are complex and multiple. High-level learning doesn't come from us teaching our socks off.” This brings to mind the Dylan Wiliam quip that students go to school not to learn but to watch teachers work!

## ■ ■ ■ Learning, leadership and school improvement

In the article by Christopher Chapman and Kevin Lowden they describe how the key concepts of professional learning, co-production and enquiry were built into their initiative, commissioned by the Scottish Government. This aimed to grow teacher leadership and build the capacity of schools, local authorities and their partners. They portray a “solution-focused approach” which promotes sustained collaboration across classroom, school and local authority boundaries to tackle educational inequality. Evidence indicates significant outcomes showing that this School Improvement Partnership Project had a positive impact on both teachers and students. Teacher leaders developed considerable research skills and exercised leadership beyond their school context; and the Partnership helped to close the attainment gap for students. In terms of professional learning the authors suggest that such “networked improvement communities tend to flourish when they draw on a range of approaches including lesson study, instructional rounds, improvement science and collaborative action.”

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The next article also explores how a network sought to reduce educational inequality through a professional learning initiative – this time in Bristol and focused on the development of teaching assistants (TAs) to improve the transfer of children with high behaviour support needs from nursery into reception. Interestingly the authors, Liz Jenkins and Rebecca Nelson, highlight the context of schools which have chosen not to convert to academies finding professional development opportunities drastically reduced. This initiative attempted to redress this through a programme which enabled teaching assistants to collaboratively explore case studies. A key feature of this approach was moving from training directed by teachers or external experts to a greater emphasis on TAs' control of their own development and "participation in a learning community for which they have shared responsibility."

### ■■■ Incremental coaching

Ownership of one's own professional learning is similarly a major feature of Peter Matthews' research article. He describes the research he has carried out into the practice of incremental coaching which is defined as a "regular, frequent and ongoing cycle of observation and action-based coaching." Great claims are made for this sustained programme of regular 15 minute observation and 15 minute feedbacks. These include that a teacher develops as much in one year as most teachers do in 20! Indeed the author states that "incremental coaching is *the* core process for developing the teaching workforce; it builds on other training and is central to continuing professional development, effectively transforming continuing to *continuous* professional development."

A number of features are identified as being significant to the process. These include it being best to detach it from performance management, the need for senior leader support, the provision of coordinated, protected time and space, and access to relevant research resources. The last is seen as particularly important in ensuring teachers are able to engage with and apply research when attempting to improve their practice ... and to recognise the impact of doing so.

### ■■■ Engagement and collaborative learning

Chris Brown continues this theme of research engagement in his account of an investigation into increasing "research capital" within a federation of primary schools. The aim was "to foster positive attitudes towards, and engagement in, research by teachers so that this increased 'research capital' can in turn result in improvement dividends." He identified four "evidence-use types" among the schools, ranging from intensive collaborative use to none at all. Some key learning emerging from this evaluation is that those teachers who do research are more likely to make active use of research. He also concludes that what fundamentally "drives positive attitudes towards research use for school improvement" are "teachers' *collaborative* and *networked* orientations." It seems then that, as with all forms of effective professional learning, first-hand experience and joint working with others are pivotal.

### ■■■ Reflection and learning

The final contributions are first from David Weston who describes the work of the *Teacher Development Trust* which he helped to found. He reflects on the achievements of the TDT which is becoming increasingly influential. Among these are its contribution to developing a new Chartered College of Teaching, the formulation of new CPD standards (DfE, 2016), and the commissioning of a major review of what works in professional development (Cordingley et al, 2016).

The issue finishes with Jo Evans reflecting on her headteacher experience and the tremendous value she found in professional reading. Reading educational and research literature may seem a rather esoteric activity to some busy teachers and school leaders but she makes a compelling case. Indeed we get a sense of how such reading provides the therapeutic conditions and strategic space in which professional learning may take root and grow.

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