

Teaching for Success

# Contemporary perspectives on continuing professional development

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# 1 The importance of (continuing professional development) CPD

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'An education system is only as good as its teachers' (UNESCO, 2014: 9) and enhancing teacher quality at all stages of a teacher's career is thus a key factor in improving the quality of learning that students receive. This paper focuses on professional learning for practising teachers – what is widely known as continuing professional development (CPD) – and discusses contemporary ideas about what it is and how to make it effective.

A widely cited definition of CPD is offered by Day:

'...all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute through these to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers ... acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice.' (Day, 1999: 4).

This definition highlights several important elements of CPD: it is multifaceted (addressing behaviours, knowledge, emotions, and thinking); it may occur naturally (i.e. through workplace experience) or through planned activities (most discussions of CPD focus on the latter); and its benefits extend from individuals to groups and institutions, and ultimately to the quality of education in the classroom. This point about the benefits of CPD is particularly important in current debates and it is increasingly stressed that CPD should not only address teachers' individual growth and fulfilment. The development goals of institutions also need to be addressed through CPD, as do, of course, student outcomes. In fact some commentators (see Earley and Porritt, 2014) have argued that improving student outcomes is the primary purpose of CPD and that students' needs (rather than teachers') should be the starting point in decisions about the kinds of CPD that are pursued.

CPD is thus a critical element in successful educational systems, enhancing teacher quality, organisational effectiveness and student outcomes.

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## 2 Contemporary views of CPD

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CPD is often equated with talks, workshops and courses that teachers attend. While such activities have a role to play in teacher development, much work has been carried out internationally in recent years to extend established views of what CPD involves. A number of important reviews have been carried out (for example, Broad and Evans, 2006; Orr et al., 2013; Timperley et al., 2008) through which key characteristics of effective CPD have been identified. This literature (see Borg, 2015 for a more detailed discussion) suggests that CPD can achieve positive and sustained impacts on teachers, learners and organisations when:

- it is seen by teachers to be relevant to their needs and those of their students
- teachers are centrally involved in decisions about the content and process of CPD
- collaboration and the sharing of expertise among teachers is fostered
- CPD is a collective enterprise supported by schools and educational systems more broadly
- expert internal and/or external support for teachers is available
- CPD is situated in schools and classrooms
- CPD is recognised as an integral part of teachers' work
- inquiry and reflection are valued as central professional learning processes
- teachers are engaged in the examination and review of their beliefs
- student learning provides the motivation for professional learning
- CPD is seen as an ongoing process rather than a periodic event
- there is strategic leadership within schools.

Approaches to CPD which embody these characteristics are described variously as being developmental, socio-constructivist or inquiry-based. They share a concern for participatory, social, inquiry-driven and evidence-based professional learning which is set in context, and where teachers are the key decision-makers (although as noted above, appropriate expert support and leadership are also key contributors to effective CPD).

What does this mean in practice? It suggests an approach to CPD which addresses the needs of teachers, students and organisations, gives teachers choice and ownership, enables them to learn with and from each other, grounds that learning in what happens in the classroom, and also provides appropriate guidance and support. A number of CPD options are available which reflect these characteristics, such as:

- various forms of self-study such as teacher research, action research, and exploratory practice, through which teachers systematically investigate teaching and learning in their classrooms
- lesson study, which involves repeated cycles of collaborative lesson planning, teaching and reflection
- reading groups, where teachers meet regularly to discuss something they have read and which is relevant to their teaching

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- reflection groups, where teachers meet to share experiences of teaching and to examine evidence from their lessons (such as video recordings of teaching or examples of student work)
  - peer observation, where teachers work in pairs, visit one another's lessons and afterwards discuss these (in a constructive manner and without formal evaluation)
  - professional learning communities, through which groups of teachers meet regularly to examine critical issues in their schools and classrooms
  - curriculum study groups, where teachers collaborate to examine in detail and further their own understandings of a particular area of the curriculum they teach
  - collaborative materials writing, where teachers work together to design units of material for particular groups of learners
  - mentoring schemes, through which appropriately-skilled more experienced teachers support the development of those with less experience and expertise
  - personal learning networks, where professional development is pursued through interactions via social media.

It is important to stress that these options supplement and enhance, not eradicate, conventional approaches to CPD such as courses and workshops; there is in fact evidence that workshops that alternate with opportunities to experiment in the classroom can be effective in promoting change in teaching – see Orr et al. (2013) – and many action research schemes and reflective programmes adopt such a model. The key issue in these cases, though, is that the workshop is one part of a broader extended CPD strategy rather than the sole one-shot vehicle for professional learning.

A second point to stress here is that there are no templates for CPD that guarantee universal success – contextual variability means that what works in one context may be less effective in another. Thus while we can talk in global terms about ways of enhancing CPD, the implementation of any CPD strategy will always to a certain extent need to be localised. In other words, just because a decision is made to promote CPD through action research or lesson study, this does not mean that effective professional learning will follow. CPD options need to be chosen and implemented with careful attention both to teachers' prior experience, knowledge and beliefs and to the characteristics of the educational systems in which teachers work.

Overall, though, many practical options are now available for making CPD a social, ongoing, in context and inquiry-driven process which can contribute effectively to the growth of teachers, students and organisations.

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### 3 The scope of CPD

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Conventional approaches to CPD have tended to address a limited range of themes relevant to teaching and learning, often in relation to practical methodological issues (e.g. teaching reading, using technology, classroom management). Practical know-how of this kind is clearly a fundamental teacher attribute. However, we know that developing as an effective teacher involves much more than methodological skill and the scope of CPD has grown to reflect a more contemporary multi-faceted notion of professional practice. Thus, in addition to practical classroom skills, CPD can address, to give just a few examples, subject matter knowledge, a knowledge of learners and learning, materials design, assessment literacy, affective issues such as teachers' beliefs, motivation and confidence, and qualities for self-directed learning such as collaboration, networking, reflection and inquiry. When decisions are being made, then, about the focus of CPD, it is important to think broadly about the range of issues that might be addressed. And irrespective of the issues that CPD focuses on, of course, it is important, as discussed above, that teachers engage with these issues in a manner that involves reflection, inquiry, the sharing of expertise, and a concern for student outcomes.

Current perspectives on CPD have also moved away from the idea that teachers can be easily characterised using labels (such as 'developing' or 'proficient') which define their level of competence in a unitary manner. Because teacher knowledge is multi-faceted, the same teacher will have varying levels of competence in relation to different areas of professional practice; for example, a teacher may have a deep theoretical and practical understanding of teaching speaking, but have no awareness of assessment for learning and how to implement it. Another teacher may have excellent formal knowledge of language systems but low confidence in their target language oral proficiency. These variations suggest that a productive approach to CPD will support teachers in identifying (ideally with reference to classroom practice and student learning) those specific areas of professional practice where development is required and work with teachers to identify and implement appropriate strategies for supporting such development.

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