

Making sense of school CPD policy in England

Outline and discussion of some emerging themes and components of policy

'...a well-structured and thought-through strategy and implementation plan for the professional development of a huge and disparate workforce. But might it be too late?'

It is nothing new to hear policy-makers talk about improvement; in fact, *long-term school improvement* and all that goes with it in the form of pupil performance, league table positions, inspections, international comparisons and much else has been the leitmotif of educational policy-making for many years, shared by all political parties.

There are major concerns that the means that we employ and the assumptions we make in order to decide what represents improvement and how it should be measured are poor foundations for policy. Nevertheless, phrases such as 'improved pupil outcomes' or 'narrowing the gap' or 'raising the bar' are seldom challenged. We have to recognise the resolve of policy-makers that education in England (Westminster educational policy scarcely reaches much further these days) must be established at the top of international league tables; and because of the nearness of the next general election, and the consequent pressure upon the administration to achieve its targets, the imperatives to action, no matter how unsoundly based, are becoming stronger and exerting great force upon professional formation and continuing professional learning.

I want to:

- outline what I perceive to be key emerging priorities and bases for current CPD policy for all professionals working in schools;
- raise some issues and point out some risks;
- provide some personal comment; and
- offer some suggestions.

For what follows I have drawn upon the draft Strategy for the Professional Development of the Children's Workforce in Schools produced in February 2009 by the TDA in consultation with stakeholders representing, I am told, 2.8 million professionals.

We can expect an announcement and full publication of the Strategy and implementation plan later in the year. Maybe what I have written will help

you to engage with it. If you wish to read an electronic copy of the draft Strategy and implementation plan please contact me or the editor.

Please note that although I have tried to summarise the Priorities below as fairly as possible, based upon the TDA's draft, I share with no-one the responsibility for what I have written under 'issues and risks', 'comment' and 'suggestions'.

One specific component of policy to which I have drawn attention is the proposed masters degree in teaching and learning (MTL).

Priorities for the professional development of the children's workforce in schools

1. Establishing a learning culture

Outline

The basic elements of this priority are:

- active promotion of an entitlement to sustained and effective professional development;
- encouragement of the reflective practitioner;
- positive impact upon children and young people;
- links between the development and improvement of individual, team and school; and
- use of the performance management processes to plan CPD that has maximum impact upon professional practice and outcomes for children and young people.

Issues and risks

These include:

- establishing a sound definition of the concept of entitlement which can, if handled badly, be perceived instead as an unwanted imposition and risks being reduced to a set number of hours;
- the need for a critically reflective mindset that allows people to learn from mistakes rather than to just follow the 'best practice' of others;
- opportunity to study;
- the sheer scale and significance of the job of ensuring that the entitlement of diverse professional groups is delivered and reviewed coherently, cogently, comprehensively and fairly;

- the need for a systematic approach to learning *from* professional learning;
- the risk that performance management review will be reduced to questions about the achievement of, or failure to achieve, targets relating to national standards and school priorities;
- the risk of mistaking *output* (examination and test scores etc.) for *outcomes* (what the output signifies after critical examination);
- neglecting to consider unexpected evidence for unintended outcomes;
- possibly too much focus upon timed, tidy and targeted professional learning;
- possible neglect of what can be learned from untimed, untidy and untargeted professional learning; and
- impact evaluation that looks *for* evidence rather than *among* it.

Comment

I have not taken the trouble to trace back the earliest use by policy-makers of the word 'culture' in the context of what I prefer to call 'professional learning' but I have noticed that while at one time the word would have sounded unusual when used at a meeting with civil servants and officers of government agencies it would now seem unusual if it were not. My feeling is that it was after the sudden cancellation of its Early Professional Development policy which was supported by earmarked funding that we began to hear much more about a professional learning culture. At first I saw this as an inevitable cheap substitute for distinctive funded programmes: if schools became imbued with a belief that professional learning is important then there would not be a need to allocate any more specific resources.

If that sounds cynical I want to make amends by saying that I am convinced that the civil servants and officers who switched over to 'culture' were driven by a belief that professionals working in education deserved to be treated with respect. And I agree that this is 'a good thing' if done well.

Unfortunately, the draft strategy underestimates the role that HE can play in relation to this priority. Maybe we can change minds on that before the final version.

The approach taken so far to the proposed masters degree in teaching and learning (MTL) has not helped. In terms of helping to create a learning culture for professionals it would have been better for the TDA to have developed the award out of its postgraduate professional development programme (PPD) which has probably been inspected, reviewed, surveyed and evaluated for impact more extensively than anything similar in the World and always been highly praised. MTL has,

instead, been developed as an extension of Initial Teacher Training and is being so closely tied into a loudly declared policy for improved performance (closing or narrowing the gap is the usual slogan) that, rather than, for example, critiquing national standards and targets as you might expect in a masters programme, participants will be taught how to follow and achieve them. The irony, as I see it, is that it is often by critiquing and problematising them that more effective meaning is given to standards and targets.

I say more about MTL under the other priorities.

Suggestions

I strongly suggest that there is a need for input from HE here. Areas for involvement and contribution of expertise include:

- consultancy and up-dating;
- developing leaders and leadership for professional learning;
- high quality needs analysis;
- provision of perspective;
- skills of enquiry, examining evidence and proper reporting;
- accreditation;
- experience of partnered working;
- understanding of the potential richness of impact evaluation;
- familiarity with inter-professional learning.

2. Improving quality and capacity

Outline

The basic elements of this priority are:

- supporting schools to lead and sustain their own improvement;
- using research and best practice;
- ensuring that external provision complements school provision;
- a systematic approach to CPD;
- ensuring that qualifications meet workforce needs and career progression.

Issues and risks

These include:

- possible subjection of individual professional learning needs to school priorities and targets;

- possible miss-use of mentoring and coaching to reinforce orthodox approaches to teaching, learning and assessment;
- possibly less professional experimentation and risk-taking;
- inwardly-looking schools;
- schools as 'purchasers' of external support rather than as partners in professional learning communities;
- research becoming more of a noun than a verb: something you obtain rather than engage in.

Comment

I have lost count of the number of postgraduate professional development (PPD) bids and impact evaluation reports I have read and worked on. One major feature of them all is the work that has taken place to establish and develop (encouraged by the TDA) critical professional learning communities (usually called Partnerships). These communities/partnerships are mostly led by universities and include schools and local authorities. They are relatively easy to expand to include partnerships for Initial Teacher Education and they could easily encompass the masters in teaching and learning (MTL). Doing this might have gradually added more teacher voice to the partnerships.

Unfortunately, MTL is almost out-of-bounds to those universities that, notwithstanding their skill, knowledge and track record on M-level work for and with teachers, schools and local authorities, do not have a satisfactory Initial Teacher Training profile. The structure for the provision of MTL is also different and will almost certainly adversely affect the PPD professional learning communities/partnerships. At best this means a proliferation of partnerships doing slightly different things; and even at its best it will generate confusion, followed by irritation and discontent (all of which are seldom costed but do actually cost money). They also cost enthusiasm. Does anybody remember how difficult it was to re-excite children about another project you wanted them to do after you had already disappointed them by cancelling an earlier one?

In terms of communities and partnerships the one good thing to say about MTL is that it has fostered collaboration between HEIs; even if that has also meant much shared frustration. Maybe another good thing to say is that the role of M-Coach in a school, although by no means a new idea, is a good one; providing it is done properly.

Schools are, furthermore, exhorted to both compete to the death and to collaborate (see next priority). That is a funny way to get the best out of them. An inwardly looking and selfish school may become an ox-bow school. A school that unselfishly shares its expertise may lose out to others in the league tables.

Suggestions

Again, I strongly suggest that HE has a significant role to play: a far greater role or set of roles than simply providing foundation degrees and other qualifications. Roles could include:

- designing and delivering with schools and local authorities advice, guidance, consultancy services and complete accredited programmes for leaders and managers of professional learning;
- designing and delivering bespoke or boutique programmes;
- providing an understanding of needs analysis, enquiry, critical professional learning frameworks and evaluation;
- devising linkages between different programmes of professional learning;
- imparting considerable knowledge;
- creating new knowledge in partnership.

3. Increasing coherence and collaboration

Outline

The basic elements of this priority are:

- increased collaboration at local, regional and national levels;
- sharing what works well;
- working together to develop solutions to professional development needs which will improve outcomes for children and young people;
- collaboration within and across the workforce;
- fulfilment of the commitment in the Children's Plan that schools must contribute to a 21st Century system of children's services.

Issues and risks

These include:

- the size and complexity of the task;
- bridging the abyss between schools and post compulsory education (14-19);
- the expansion of state funded private education (academies) independent of collaborative networks such as local authorities that will help to make the Strategy work;
- the short timescale before the general election after which many of the agencies (and the local government structure) upon which the Strategy depends for implementation may disappear;

- the imminent move of the TDA to Manchester and its likely loss of corporate memory because 85% of its staff will not make the move.

Comment

One of the most irritating adverse comments to hear is 'You should have thought of this earlier'. It feels to me as though, notwithstanding my lists of issues, risks and criticisms, the TDA has finally put together a well-structured and thought-through strategy and implementation plan for the professional development of a huge and disparate workforce. But might it be too late? The TDA have had to work against the grain of other policies that set schools against their neighbours in a kind of educational civil war and they have also had to draw together groups and people that have seldom co-operated before.

Yes, they have made mistakes with MTL and so far handled badly something that could have been much less old-fashioned in its structure and approach; yes, they fail to recognise the creativeness of universities; yes, they have swallowed too readily Michael Barber's ideas about how to be 'top nation' in education (try going to the McKinsey Education site for 'How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top' September 2007); and yes they have allowed government's belief that everybody has to be above average to subvert the concept of improvement; but the Strategy and its implementation plan represent a considerable achievement.

The question to ask is, however, will it stick if the policy-makers change?

Suggestion

I shall limit myself to one suggestion. I believe that representatives of HE should be talking to the TDA about the Strategy. As things stand there seems to be insufficient recognition of what can be gained by doing this and I suspect that some policy-makers have a stereotypical vision of HE as Oxbridge circa 1935.

One last big issue

Where is the money for the Strategy?

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