

## **In the know ...**

**The role of subject-specific CPD and curriculum development in effective teaching is vital. Maria Cunningham looks at some of the research and considers best practice approaches.**

## **EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH**



### **Prioritising subject-specific CPD in your school**

In 2015, the Developing Great Teaching report commissioned by the Teacher Development Trust (TDT) found that in terms of impact on pupil outcomes, sustained subject-specific CPD is more effective than the one-off generic pedagogic activities that UK schools have traditionally favoured.

Indeed, our frequent visits to schools and colleges around the country and activity in our hubs confirms that there has been a growing recognition of the importance of teachers' subject knowledge, as well as their understanding of how generic CPD can be contextualised to respond to specific learning issues in the subjects they teach.

In the past, the issue was often that it tended to be classroom teachers who were more interested in subject-specific development than senior leaders. Particularly in schools struggling for budget or resource, these colleagues tended to have much less influence over the design and content of professional development across the organisation.

If and when they did manage to get any subject-specific input, it might have been limited to one teacher being expected to "cascade" knowledge back to colleagues, rather than the rich and collaborative professional development that we know is ultimately more likely to make a difference to students.

Yet in just the past year or so, you may well have found that this has shifted up the agenda of school leaders, given the tighter focus being taken by Ofsted on subject leadership in the new Education Inspection Framework.

While the attention given to subject-specific CPD is undoubtedly welcome, it is worth being cautious about making changes only for the sake of inspection. In order to implement and evaluate CPD effectively it should be driven by pupil need, not for performativity.

The Wellcome Trust's recent Developing Great Subject Teaching report (2018) found that: "The kinds of subject-specific CPD that schools engage in as a result of such policy-driven changes can often be limited to – for example – exam board briefings attended by one or two members of staff rather than extended professional development programmes for all staff."

Among the common barriers that we see and hear about to creating optimal subject-specific CPD are a lack of time, undistributed leadership or a poor staff culture, where colleagues do not feel trusted to take subject ownership or lead curriculum development. However, when done well it can have a powerful and long-term ripple effect on wider organisational efficacy, staff motivation, teacher impact and retention.

### **Empowering middle leaders**

Middle leaders are sometimes described as the engine-room of a school, and they are often the lynchpin within a staffroom. Where these leaders are well supported and are able to support and develop subject CPD in their teams, we can see real transformation and impact for both staff and pupils.

In schools where leadership is successfully distributed, middle leaders are given the time, space and trust to not only engage with their own professional development, but also plan and facilitate this for others, moving away from clunky performance reviews to creating more regular discussions about how things are going and where support is needed. Some of the best middle leaders adopt coaching strategies to help them encourage colleagues to reflect and to add just enough challenge to keep everyone moving forwards.

### **Curriculum development as CPD**

With increasing demands being put on subject leaders, they will inevitably be thinking about answering questions that clarify the curriculum picture; including what pupils should know and be able to do by the end of school, what they need to cover in breadth and depth, how to define key concepts and skills, and – importantly – how they should be sequenced.

Yet rather than being an individual's burden to bear, where possible, curriculum should be seen as a powerful opportunity for teachers to collaborate, align thinking and share practice.

In one particular multi-academy trust we worked with, leaders identified curriculum development as having twin aims – first, to accelerate pupil progress, but second, to reduce workload for staff across schools in the trust.

Senior leaders started by auditing processes and structures across each school, from staffing, to the calendar, to making the use of exam boards more consistent. This commitment to reducing workload soon contributed to a wider shared vision that “the primary role of school leadership is to create and ensure the conditions for teaching to take place”, with the message around curriculum being “we’ll enable you to own this and remove unnecessary workload”.

The things removed included organisational “wastes of time” and new “shiny” classroom fads. While in the process of writing the new curriculum, teachers were able to express their love of their subjects, middle leaders used cross-trust meetings to upskill themselves and generally staff became more impassioned about curriculum discussion, more open to identifying and sharing expertise and more incentivised to create high-quality resources because everyone would be using and reviewing them.

The chief executive of the trust called curriculum “the sweet spot” and to put it simply, “it turns out that teachers like learning!”

### **Carving out time**

Teachers are always pushed for time, so you want to be sure that any collaborative time is used effectively. That time might be a team meeting, where all staff teaching a certain key stage come together, it might be joint planning, or it might be part of a wider staff meeting focused on a subject area.

It is easy for all of these to slip into more administrative tasks or unfocused conversations. I am sure we can all remember meetings that have been dominated

by housekeeping. It is easy to spend time sharing information that gets lost, with little benefit to students.

Teachers should be encouraged to plan in time – without guilt – for developing their subject knowledge, just as they would for marking or moderation.

At a large secondary school we worked with in Norwich, for example, leaders restructured their timetable to eliminate less effective meetings and limit administrative or procedural conversations to email. They reallocated this time (a total of nine hours per year) to collaborative subject-specific CPD, in which groups of staff now focus on a particular pupil learning issue (or “threshold topics”) related to subjects that they would like to improve, e.g. concept variation in maths, or developing enquiry skills in history.

At subsequent teaching and learning meetings, colleagues from a range of subjects then share how they have implemented strategies in their classrooms and explore how this might be adapted or trialled by different departments. Colleagues we interviewed felt this to be a “hugely useful use of time” which “enables better sharing between teams” and “gives teachers the opportunity to contribute” to the planning and design of CPD.

### **Infusing your teams with expertise**

Though allowing faculties or subject teams the time and space to meaningfully collaborate and the opportunity to share their expertise is crucial, it is just as important to ensure that there is an element of external input or challenge that disrupts the existing thinking or orthodoxies of staff.

This could be facilitated through a collaborative enquiry-based model of CPD within teams, such as Lesson Study or Disciplined Inquiry, where staff jointly diagnose pupil needs and trial strategies based on a piece of research they have read (this might be circulated in a staff reading bulletin, or included in your CPD library).

Enabling subject teams to make links with subject associations can be a particularly powerful way to drive this even further. Middle leaders frequently tell us that their departments do have existing group memberships that are not fully utilised. Some useful ways to make the most of the resources on offer could be for lead practitioners to circulate subject publications or specific articles within them, or to signpost colleagues towards training opportunities.

### **Final remarks**

When it comes to professional learning, there is a lot to think about. While every middle leader spends a long time thinking about planning pupils' learning, they can often miss the same strategic focus when it comes to their team's learning.

It can be helpful to use the new Standard for Teachers' Professional Development (DfE, 2016) to review practice as a leader, adapting some of the whole-school leadership ideas to the team level and ensuring that subject teachers and external experts work together in harmony.

Powerful professional learning helps transform student outcomes, but also supports teachers and teams in their roles. Where professional learning is working well, you see stronger retention of staff, more confidence and self-efficacy among colleagues, and a thriving and successful team.

- ***Written by Maria Cunningham and first published on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2019.***

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