

RJA3

Professional Development – Critically reflect on your continuing professional development (CPD); the extent to which it has and how it will improve pupil learning; and how it will inform targets for your NQT year.

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Introduction

“Schools with low numbers of pupils entitled to free school meals were more likely to have strong staff development than those with high numbers” (Bubb, et al., 2008). This major finding from a research study conducted by the Institute of Education is shocking. As a teacher committed to alleviating the educational inequality observed in the UK between disparate socio-economic groups, this quotation spurs me to investigate the effectiveness of CPD in these types of schools. In particular, for this assignment, I wish to evaluate the CPD that I have experienced, as a teacher in a school with a high number of students entitled to free school meals (FSM). The proportion of students eligible for FSM at Faraday Community College¹ is nearly double the national average at 34% (School Guide, 2014).

The Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) defines CPD as a results oriented “combination of approaches, ideas and techniques” (CIPD, 2015) that facilitate personal growth in the context of one’s workplace. Since commencing teaching this year, my professional development (PD) has revolved around three major facets: the university led “professional studies” and “subject day” sessions; internal school-wide CPD sessions, INSET days, and those NQT sessions planned by my professional mentor; and finally, the self-sought PD I deemed necessary after reflecting on my own practise.

Much of the learning from these various sessions has been collated in the weekly mentor meetings that I have at school, and also the monthly university tutor visits. These have given me a platform to discuss my ongoing development and; plan, adapt and organise for the next steps.

Impact on pupil learning

Recent research case studies (NCTL, 2015) show that there is a lot to be gained from effective CPD, including: improved teacher subject knowledge, pedagogical understanding, and confidence. This has been shown to drive improvements in attitudes of learners, their skills, and understanding. Research from CUREE (n.d.) also supports these views and adds that effective CPD allows teachers to develop their repertoire of strategies and become more committed to CPD. I will reflect on my own CPD, and whether I feel that these outcomes have been attained or not. More importantly, I shall link the CPD received to its direct or indirect effect impact on pupil learning in the classroom.

Marx et al. (1998) state that the best way to ensure effective CPD is to allow for a period of reflection time. This ideology has been strongly reiterated by Teach First colleagues, and university tutors. By reflecting on lessons, revisiting areas for development, and recapping prior targets, it is

¹ Faraday Community College is used as a pseudonym to preserve anonymity.

possible to evaluate own performance and plan for the future. Although, on some occasions, time has been scarce during the school day for long periods of reflection, the weekly mentor meetings have provided a valuable timeslot to allow for this process. Accompanied with the Teach First Journal, weekly reflection has been actively encouraged. The setting of personalised PD targets has also been possible with the use of this resource. This has provided a valuable focus for conversations with my mentor and a productive use of our time in order to meet my developmental needs.

In the classroom, this regular process has allowed me to focus my efforts in addressing the most pertinent issues that would directly allow my practise to improve. An example of this is where upon meeting with my mentor with the issue of low level disruption, I was given the target of improving behaviour for learning (BfL) by waiting for silence. Later reflection on this same issue, evidenced with observations, showed an improvement in class behaviour, which will undoubtedly improve pupil learning.

It is stated by Lord (2008) that the reflection in the mentoring process promotes a collaborative learning culture that will allow the sharing of best practise and experience. However, this relationship easily turns in to one which is more like an apprenticeship model. I have found this to be true on multiple occasions where I have been instructed to take my mentor's words as the only way to do something. Although there is valuable experience that the mentor has gained over their years of teaching, it is questionable whether something that may have been historically effective is still just as effective in the modern classroom. I feel there needs to be a balance between having advice based upon experience, but also first-hand independent learning that I would expect of my students in the classroom.

The most significant CPD offered at Faraday is in the form of whole-school INSET days, morning lecture-style briefings, and weekly one-hour faculty meetings. I feel that most of these sessions do not take into consideration the experiences and prior knowledge of certain members of staff. In a lesson, if I were to deliver content in a "one size fits all" manner to all the students, disregarding their starting points, individual strengths and weaknesses, it would be an inadequate lesson. However, this type of CPD is still ubiquitous. This is echoed in Coldwell et al. (2008), where the impact of CPD is directly related to how tailored and personalised it is for specific groups of teachers. I feel that optional twilight CPD sessions ran throughout the year would be a more effective method of delivering internal CPD. This way, the teacher has greater ownership of their development and can pick and choose the sessions most aligned to their development goals.

A more personalised training programme would better impact pupil learning both directly and indirectly. For example, I attended an extra session on differentiating for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) as I felt this was an area I was lacking in. This allowed me to build my toolkit of activities and strategies to better support and scaffold the learning of students with these needs. By choosing the sessions most relevant to my needs, I would also free up time misallocated on those sessions that impact me the least (e.g. ICT training). This preserved time indirectly affects pupil learning by the fact that I can use this to give more formative feedback, plan more lessons, or create better differentiated resources.

Muijs and Reynolds (2011) suggest that in the twenty-first century, an increasing amount of emphasis will be placed on remoulding the teaching profession to be one where teachers are actively engaged in research within the classroom; experimenting with different techniques and

strategies and assessing their impact on pupil learning. I have experienced this type of systemic inquiry first hand at Faraday, in which Mertler (2008) calls “Action Research.”

I have been engaged in a whole school research project from the first term. The staff at Faraday had been split seemingly randomly to form small cross-discipline groups to conduct this action research. My group are focussing on Assessment for Learning (AfL). The first task was collating information from secondary sources on what is already known about AfL. The second phase was to design and plan a form of AfL to test with a particular group of students. Thirdly, we were asked to evidence progress and results of this research throughout the second term. Finally, as yet incomplete, we have to present our findings to the rest of the school.

I have found this activity to be very engaging and an interesting form of CPD. It allows the classroom practitioner to innovate in peer groups and experiment with new techniques. I have found that much of the research that is available may have credence in the classroom, but much is dependent on the context of the school, demographic of the student body, skills of the teacher, and confidence of the students. For this reason, it is very difficult to replicate something that may have worked really well in another school, or even another class. Action research allows me, as the teacher, to develop techniques and gear my professional development to become more focused on an empirical approach. This will ultimately generate valuable research from within the classroom, but also directly impact students’ learning. For example, I have noted that by conducting this research project, I have seemingly unknowingly developed my repertoire of AfL strategies to check students’ understanding. In the future, this type of action research could be continued in a field where I felt I needed the most development.

I have spoken in some detail about the internal, formal CPD that I have received, but I would now like to discuss some of the self-sought PD that I have gained this year.

In the first term, I was very keen on setting up an after school Science club, but had no experience or knowledge in how to do so. Therefore, I decided to attend a twilight session by the STEM Advisory Network of the Leicestershire Education and Business Company (LEBC) with one of the technicians from Faraday to learn more about how to set up a club and develop the prerequisite skills. This example of CPD that I actively pursued was essential in allowing me to successfully set up a club that oversees another teacher and technician, and attracts several regular attendees. The impact of this particular piece of CPD is obvious and direct. The engagement and enjoyment that the students experience in this club is transferred to their lessons. Based on the students that not only attend the club, but the ones I teach as well, I can see an marked improvement in overall engagement in lessons, the rapport built with them, and their progress and attainment through the year.

Conclusion

Since completing their NQT year, 84% of respondents of an NFER research project (Springate, 2009) say that they have taken up additional responsibilities as early career teachers. However, only half of teachers say they receive adequate support to help them to develop the skills needed to transition successfully into positions of new responsibility (ibid).

For this reason, I believe it is of utmost importance that I have clearly defined targets going into my NQT year so that I have the strong foundation that will allow me to capitalise on any new

opportunities. Setting my own targets going into the NQT year will allow me to take ownership of my own PD. This will ultimately have a significant impact on me, given that seeking and meeting CPD requirements will fall increasingly on my shoulders as I progress within the profession.

The first target that I have identified is to improve engagement in my lessons. This encompasses many different facets of teaching that will ultimately lead to a significantly improved attitude to learning, and more importantly, a love of Science and all that it stands for. I hope to achieve this target by actively planning lessons to include a variety of well-pitched activities and ensuring that they contain layers of scaffolds to support students. By being able to access a range of activities, students should hopefully remain engaged and feel valued in their lesson. To initially hook them into the lesson and want to learn in the first place, I will also have to make sure that I convey the relevance of the scientific content to their daily lives, but also to the wider world that they will enter.

In order to meet this, I will continue to observe senior practitioners to see the range of activities they use in their lessons and aim to replicate the most effective ones in my own lessons. Furthermore, I will try to increase out-of-school engagement with the Science club, an increasing online presence and links within lessons to the wider world based on what is in the news, scientific literature or popular culture.

The second target that I have set myself is that of maintaining high expectations and enforcing a consistent behaviour management policy to ensure students are always on-task and making progress. This will be done by setting out clear expectations that will be reiterated, along with routines set in place to reassure students of what I expect in lessons. I will also seek out the school behaviour policy to inform my decisions, and observe other teachers to develop my repertoire of BfL techniques.

These goals will provide a clear focus and direction as I enter my second year of teaching, building on what I have already learned from this first year.

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