

Hearing the teacher voice: teachers' views of their needs for professional development

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Abstract

Research literature (Little, 1993; Goodall et al, 2005; Joubert and Sutherland, 2008) suggests that for professional development (PD) to be effective the aims of the PD should fit the perceived needs of the teacher. This paper reports on a study, which investigated teachers' views of their needs for PD and how these needs were being addressed when partaking in PD. Data consisted of responses to semi-structured interviews with 38 teachers who were involved in different types of PD initiatives. The data was analysed using a process of constant comparison (grounded theory). The analysis offers descriptive categories of teachers' perceived needs for PD which seem to resonate with Perry's (1999) descriptions of learner development. The findings corroborate a model of teacher change as growth or learning where teachers are themselves learners who work in a learning community and support models of empowerment for professional development, not models of deficiency (Clarke and Hollingsworth, 2002).

Keywords: teachers' needs, professional development, teacher voice

Introduction

Several authors in the research literature (Little, 1993; Goodall, 2005; Joubert and Sutherland, 2008) have reported that for PD to be effective the aims of the PD should fit the perceived needs of the teacher. Joubert and Sutherland (2008) report in their review of recent literature on professional development of mathematics teachers that formal professional development can arise from changes in government policy and innovation, from identified student-performance and from under-qualification of teachers. This suggests a deficiency of skills and knowledge leading to the adaptation of a deficiency model of PD with the needs of the teachers perceived as needs for prescribed knowledge and skills. At the same time, research indicates that PD initiatives based on deficiency models are ineffective (for example Clarke and Hollingsworth, 2002; Guskey 1986) questioning the rationale for supporting such models of PD.

The study

The study reported on in this paper was part of the Researching Effective CPD in Mathematics Education (RECME) project, a large research project funded by the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) and explored factors of effective PD for mathematics teachers. It was a short term (15 months) non-interventionist project investigating 30 ongoing PD initiatives representing different models of PD for teachers of mathematics in England. Overall,

about 250 teachers in pre-primary, primary, secondary, further and adult education settings were involved in these initiatives. The project adopted the theoretical framework that all human activity, including the learning of teachers, is historically, socially, culturally and temporally situated (Vygotsky 1978). This suggests that the experiences and contexts of teachers will have a major influence on their learning and implies a need to pay attention not only to the situation, the opportunities and the context of sites of learning (in this case initiatives of professional development), but also to the individuals taking part in professional development. Importantly, the philosophical underpinning of the project was one of co-constructing meaning with teachers, researchers and other stakeholders. The data we obtained for the study we report on in this paper reflects this and contains self-reported data from teachers. Details and descriptions of the full data set, the research design and case studies can be found in the final RECME report and other publications (NCETM 2009; De Geest *et al* 2008).

Joubert and Sutherland (2008) report in their review that the voice of the teacher is under-represented in most research on PD of teachers. The RECME project offered us the opportunity to hear the teacher's voice on what they perceived to be their needs for professional development. We addressed the following research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive their needs to be addressed in the PD they are involved in?
2. Are there common characteristics in their perceived needs, independent of the model of PD?

The study was conducted using a constant comparison approach from grounded theory looked at from a social constructivist theoretical perspective (Vygotsky 1978). Insights into the perceived needs are given through descriptive categorisation of empirical evidence. Data consisted of 38 responses from interviews with case study teachers representing the participating PD initiatives in the RECME study. We asked the questions: "Does this PD in which you are currently involved address your needs? Could you please explain why?"

Findings

Of the 38 teachers, two teachers replied 'no', four said 'partly' and 32 said 'yes' to the question "Does this PD address your needs? Could you please explain why?"

Some of the interviewed teachers voiced that they were not sure what their needs were, or made a distinction between professional and personal needs, for example: "In some ways the PD addresses my needs in that I like meeting up with others in the field. However, I do not feel that I have direct needs concerning my immediate work and I am not looking to the PD to fill any particular needs at the moment. However, applying standards unit principles to Key Skills does have a useful role in validating my ongoing classroom practices in a college environment where learner

training is sometimes seen as more important than educating – the network is also an excellent place to get support if needed”

“Yes – my NQT targets were all in maths as area for development. Ironically this is where I have made the most success. All my professional targets relate to raising attainment in mathematics with specific improvement grades for my children. My personal need for PD is that I want to be inspired. I feel a bit like a groupie when involved in all this academic debate – I am hanging on to every word. I find the talk so interesting. “

The PD addressed the needs of the teacher

Teachers reported factors or a combination of factors of how the PD *had* addressed their needs (n=32). Through constant comparison of the responses of the teachers who considered their PD to address their needs, we identified six descriptive categories:

1. The teachers felt enabled to respond, and at times find solutions, to issues they had identified as problematic, or not knowing how to do address, in their classroom practice. For example:

“It was clear that there was also a need for a good assessment system and for recording assessment for learning and to see where support is needed on a day to day basis and that has come from [the PD initiative] as well”

2. The PD made them *think* at a high level, had *challenged* them which had made it interesting. For example:

“It seems a long time since I last engaged in research at this level – reading about what current thinking is in maths. It is interesting. [the PD organiser] fed a few articles that started me going“

3. The PD made them look afresh at things and had inspired them with new ideas. For example:

“Really inspired to do lots of things] “

“It challenges me, makes me think, makes me look afresh”

4. They had been able to follow/satisfy their own interests within the PD. For example:

“Yes we have the opportunity to say if there are things we’d like to do so we can shape it. I think it’s invaluable”

“I am really pursuing my own interests”

5. They felt strengthened in their views, their opinions, their thinking because the input into the PD had been theirs, based in their needs. Some teachers reported this had made them feel stronger, enabled them to argue their views better. For example:

“Yes because we run it ourselves and it follows the needs of the group like the problem solving” “The more we’ve had to stand up for ourselves the more we feel we’re not alone”

6. They knew how to put the theory of their professional development into their classrooms by having concrete examples and practical skills, and had experienced positive responses from the students. For example:

“Yes because you are seeing someone work in a practical context and seeing someone work in your class and that is amazing. Because a lot of training you have is theoretical rather than practical. We all want ideas that you can apply straight away and that’s what [the PD organizer] provides really.”

“Yes exactly so you are using that as well as in action so you are using the theory and you know how to apply it because you have been shown that”.

The PD *partly* addressed the needs of the teacher

The teachers (n=4) who said the PD was only *partly* addressing their needs lacked some of the factors identified above, and these missing factors were considered *important* by these teachers. They included some, but not necessarily all of:

The teachers could not see a pragmatic use of what was learned for the teacher’s specific classroom in *some* parts of the PD, and as a result had no interest in that aspect of the PD. This referred to the learning of subject knowledge. For example: “Some of the things we don’t even touch on well I can’t really use any of this and I’m not interested in learning that. It depends how interested in maths you are yourself. A lot of us just wanted to find different ways of presenting things to children and resources and so on. Some of the earlier stuff like the algebra we couldn’t really use with our children”

The teachers acknowledged a personal enriching of new pedagogies and tools for teaching, but experienced the mathematics learned as too advanced for him/her. The PD also did create an awareness of what alternatives might have worked better. Again, this concerned PD on subject knowledge. For example:

“It has certainly given me lots of tools and allowed me to consider different strategies for teaching. I was not confident going in, I maybe could have used a refresher course in GCSE maths. I know you can do level 3 numeracy courses and they are more on personal skills, so I wondered whether that would have been good for me to do that first. Then do this higher level course ...I think it is just confidence for me, I know that for some I can remember how to do it, but for some I was reading it before the lesson trying to work out how do I re-arrange the formulae. That is not always the best position to be in”

One teacher considered the PD very useful, but felt nothing new was learned because he/she had worked on the same issues at university the year before:

“I think it has been very useful but I think, as I am new out of university quite recently I think it backs up what I have already learnt at university”.

One teacher was missing seeing what was worked on at the PD in a pragmatic setting of the classroom:

“I need to see other people using the resources and have the chance to speak with some of the kids about how they experience it or would they rather have the book back?”

The PD did *not* address the needs of the teacher

The teachers (n=2) who said the PD was *not* addressing their needs lacked some of the factors identified, and these missing factors were considered *crucial* by these teachers:

One teacher reported that the course on subject knowledge did “its best to cater for what they saw as our needs”, however did not address the teacher’s need because the teacher could not perceive a pragmatic use of what was learned in the classroom.

“I am teacher of less able children and I’m doing proof theory but practically it is of no use to me at all. Maybe something to go on for the hands on, nitty gritty, in the classroom ideas and resources. Whereas modulo arithmetic is of less use”.

The other teacher acknowledged that she liked the discussions that were taking place during the PD, however she personally would like to do a higher degree

“I am thinking of doing something else – maybe a doctorate. We’ve got, what I like is having a discussion about the mathematics and we have two good NQTs and I can have really good discussions”

Discussion and conclusion

The needs the teachers perceived and reported as being met in the PD seem to concern one or more of: finding answers and solutions to issues they had identified as problematic, made to think at a high level, being inspired with new ideas, being able to follow their own interests, feeling strengthened in their thinking and views on teaching and learning, being able to put theory into practice. The teachers who felt the PD had met their needs only partly or not at all identified a shortcoming in one or more of the above factors.

Several researchers consider the professional development of teachers as professional learning, and see the process of developing professionally similar to a process of learning (Eraut, 2007; Franke et al.,1998; Clark and Hollingworth, 2002). What struck us is how the descriptive categories of this study seem to resonate with ideas of learner development as described by Perry (1999/1968) confirming views that PD is similar to the process of learning and development. Perry developed a framework for characterizing student development at university level.

Our findings seem to resonate with his ideas of student development in terms of self-trust and commitment. To think, be challenged, be inspired and find solutions to problems, teachers are exposed to views and interpretations, which can new, different or a re-phrasing of existing views, allowing for learning. This resonates Perry’s description of his ‘relativism’ phase, when there is “*a plurality of points of view, interpretations, frames of reference, value systems, and contingencies in which the structural properties of contexts and forms allow of various sorts of analysis, comparison, and evaluation of multiplicity*” [Perry, in glossary]. The views of the teachers in our study were strengthened by following their own needs and interests,

using their input, and being able to apply what was learned into their own classrooms. Their own personal values and choices were affirmed.

This study wanted to hear the teacher voice on what they perceived to be their needs for professional development. Findings and analysis suggest their needs are similar to those in adult learner development. We suggest professional development should not be based on a model of deficiency seeking to address perceived inadequacies but on a model of professional growth, which builds on existing knowledge, and expertise of the practitioner.

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