

The roles of professional development leaders

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● Emily Perry

Abstract

Professional development leaders play a crucial role in effective professional development. However, they are under-researched and often lack opportunities for their own professional development. This article summarises findings from an ongoing series of studies focused on the leadership of professional development. These include a model of professional development leadership, which defines three roles: co-ordinator, designer and facilitator; and the learning and practices used by facilitators of professional development, including how they learn and enact their roles and the choices they make in their practice. These studies support improved understanding of the leadership of professional development, in turn helping to identify ways in which those operating in the roles of professional development leader can be better supported.

Introduction

Worldwide, teacher professional development is seen as key to improving teaching in order to improve educational outcomes for children and young people. Professional development can also improve teachers' wellbeing, feelings of self-efficacy, confidence and their retention in the profession (Coldwell, 2017; Korthagen, 2017; Darling-Hammond *et al*, 2017). In recent years, in England, the government has invested in teacher professional development through initiatives such as the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund, the Early Career Framework, and the new specialist National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) (Department for Education, 2017; Department for Education, 2019; Department for Education, 2020).

Numerous studies have identified characteristics of effective or high quality professional development (see, for example, Cordingley *et al*, 2015; Desimone, 2009). While there has been some critique of the methods and outcomes of these reviews (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020), these lists of characteristics have been promoted through policy initiatives such as the DfE's Standard for Teacher Professional Development (Department for Education, 2016). However, professional development leaders, those who design and deliver professional development for teachers, are under-researched (Kennedy, 2016; Perry & Boylan, 2018). They generally lack formal opportunities to develop their practice, and their skills and expertise are undervalued.

This paper summarises findings from an ongoing series of studies focused on the roles of those who lead and facilitate professional development for teachers (Perry & Boylan, 2018; Perry & Bevins, 2019; Perry & Boodt, 2019), which together aim to contribute to a better understanding of professional development leadership. In the first section of the findings, three roles involved in the leadership of professional development are identified and defined: co-ordinator, designer and facilitator. The following section of the paper looks in more depth at how facilitators of professional development learn and enact their roles. Finally, the implications of these studies for the professional development of professional development leaders are considered, along with possibilities for further research.

Methods

The findings presented here are drawn from a series of studies focused on the leadership of professional development. These include small- and large-scale programmes of research and professional development; some are focused on science educators in primary, secondary and post-16 contexts, others on different subjects and on wider, whole-school and systemic approaches to





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professional development. The studies focus on professional development leaders who are responsible for professional development with teachers in groups or collaborative arrangements.

One study derives from a programme of professional development for experienced professional development facilitators working with secondary science teachers in England (Perry & Boylan, 2018). This programme used video observation as a stimulus for collaborative reflection on practice. Another focused on a long-term programme of development for inexperienced professional development facilitators in Ghana, through a model of gradual transfer of responsibility from experienced facilitators (Perry & Bevins, 2019). In this, we showed that working alongside experienced facilitators is effective in supporting new facilitators to learn about their role.

Additional data derive from interviews with professional development facilitators working in a range of contexts including 'hybrid' teacher leaders (Margolis, 2012), independent consultants, academics and researchers. Some of these were engaged in a programme of professional development for teacher educators in the Further Education and Skills sector (Perry & Boodt, 2019); others worked across a range of programmes and professional development activities.

Finally, I draw on understanding derived from ongoing initiatives including two initiatives funded by the Wellcome Trust: the Wellcome CPD Challenge and the development and testing of a system of quality assurance of teacher professional development (Davies *et al*, 2019; Perry *et al*, 2019; Leonardi *et al*, 2020).

Figure 1. Model of leadership of professional development: three roles.





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Findings and discussion

In this section, findings from the studies mentioned above are described, focusing first on professional development leaders, identifying three roles that all contribute to the leadership of professional development. Next, the role of facilitator of professional development is considered in more depth, including exploring the learning needed to carry out the role, and the practices used as the role is enacted.

Roles of professional development leaders

Studies of the leadership of professional development often combine various roles, and this means that the skills and knowledge required lack clarity. Looking more closely at the activities and tasks performed by those who carry out the leadership of professional development, it appears that there are three distinct roles: co-ordinator, facilitator and designer (Figure 1 on page 11) (Perry & Boylan, 2020).

Co-ordinators of professional development are those who organise, plan or broker teacher professional development activities. They may be professional development leads in schools, multi-academy trusts or other school groups. For example, in the Wellcome CPD Challenge (Davies *et al*, 2019), each of the participating schools identified a 'CPD Challenge Champion' to lead the project in school, identifying and implementing changes to school practices to increase the quality and quantity of professional development available to teachers. Early findings from the evaluation of this initiative show that these co-ordinators can play a vital role in leading professional development in schools and may benefit from external support to develop their understanding of professional development, such as the factors that influence its quality, and how it can be improved within school structures (Leonardi *et al*, 2020).

Facilitators of professional development are those who lead professional development activities with

teachers. They may deliver sessions or programmes online or face-to-face, using a variety of approaches and content. The role of facilitator is vital in engaging teachers in professional development and supporting their learning. Given the importance of this role, it has been a key focus of our studies, and this role will be considered in more depth in the next section.

Designers of professional development devise the content and delivery of professional development activities. They may work individually or in groups, for commercial or charitable organisations, or for a school or school group. Designers might plan an entire programme of professional development, or work on a single activity or session within a programme. Sometimes, the designer role overlaps with those of facilitator and/or co-ordinator, as in some school groups where 'hybrid' teacher leaders (Margolis, 2012) take on one or more of these roles. In other situations, they are separated. For example, in 'cascade' or 'train the trainer' models of professional development, those in the role of facilitator are often disconnected from the original design of the professional development, and therefore have restricted understanding of the aims and/or underlying principles of the professional development compared to those in the role of designer. This may contribute to well-documented issues with the effectiveness of 'cascade models' of professional development (Perry & Bevins, 2019).

The three roles overlap and interact. Professional development leaders may have roles or responsibilities in which they focus on one of these roles, or they might switch between them, either as they move between different types of professional development, or even within a single professional development activity. They may work in collaboration with other professional development leaders to share or combine roles. Each of the three roles plays a part in the overall effectiveness of professional development in improving practice.





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The model helps us to consider different aspects of the leadership of professional development, in order to identify what support or learning opportunities would be useful in developing the learning, knowledge and skills of those operating in each role.

Professional development facilitators' learning and practice

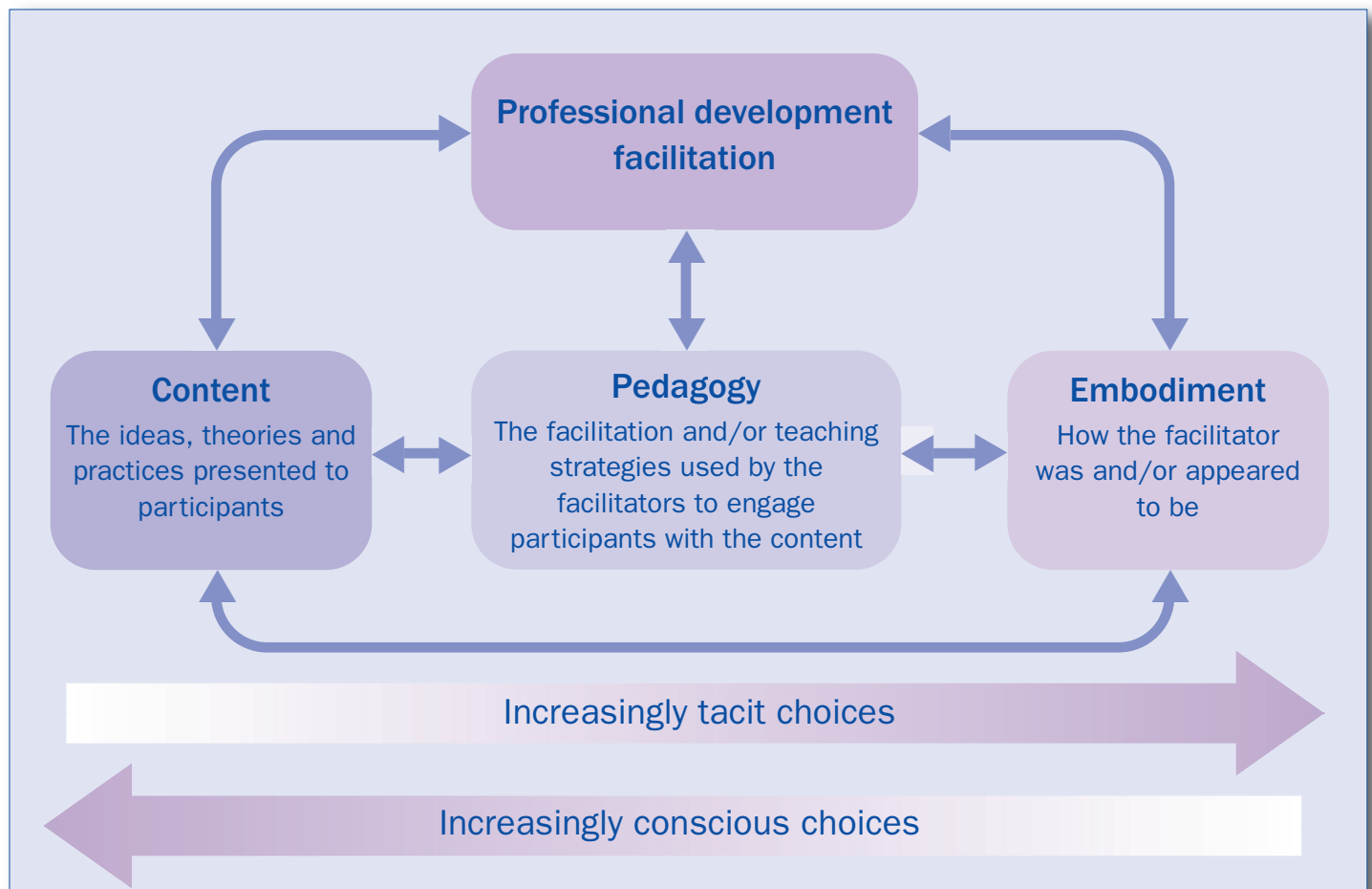
As described above, facilitators of professional development deliver and lead professional development activities and programmes with teachers. Studies of professional development have often focused more on this role than those of co-ordinator and designer, and identified its complexity, since it includes varied functions including mentoring, modelling, observing, co-learning and acting as a critical friend, often all

within a single professional development activity (Cordingley *et al*, 2015).

There are few formal opportunities for professional development facilitators to develop their practice. Instead, learning often takes place as a result of experience, reflection and informal opportunities, such as reading or online engagement. Many facilitators learn new ideas for practice through participation in teacher professional development activities, and some are able to learn by working together in the design and delivery of professional development.

In earlier work, we have classified the knowledge needed by professional development facilitators as: knowledge and skills of teaching; facilitation knowledge and skills; and knowledge of

Figure 2. Aspects of professional development facilitators' practice.





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professional development (Perry & Boylan, 2018). Therefore, learning about and developing these three areas could support professional development facilitators' professional development. Learning about teaching enables facilitators to develop and maintain their understanding of the subject content of their professional development, and how it is effectively taught. Facilitation knowledge and skills include understanding of how to deliver professional development to a group of experienced practitioners. Finally, learning about professional development supports professional development facilitators to understand how teachers learn, including, for example, research into how teachers learn, the principles of different models of professional development and common teacher misconceptions, both subject-specific and around aspects of practice. It appears that this final area of knowledge is least likely to be considered or represented in opportunities for professional development (Perry & Boylan, 2018).

Facilitators see themselves as effective, confident teachers, with excellent subject and pedagogical knowledge. They use their experience of teaching, and draw on their beliefs about teaching, in their facilitation (Perry & Bevins, 2019). Drawing on findings from across studies, we have identified three aspects of facilitators' practice that combine together in the act of facilitation: content, pedagogy and embodiment (Perry & Booth, 2020).

These aspects of practice interact with and influence each other, and appear to have varying levels of conscious control and choice by the facilitator (Figure 2 on page 13).

Content includes the theory, ideas and/or new practices presented to participants in the professional development. Previous studies of professional development have shown that content should be relevant, contextualised and focused on pupil outcomes (Department for

Education, 2016; Cordingley *et al*, 2015). Our findings suggest that balance is also important, between theory and practice and between new ideas and reinforcement of existing practice (Perry & Booth, 2020).

Pedagogy covers the ways in which facilitators present content to participants, using approaches such as discussion, role play, group work, enquiry and questioning. When the content of the professional development includes a new or adapted pedagogical approach, there is an overlap between pedagogy and content. Indeed, modelling of approaches appears to be key to the success of pedagogy. This is an aspect of 'second order' (Murray & Male, 2005) practice, which is often described in relation to initial teacher education, but rarely identified in teacher professional development.

Embodiment refers to how the facilitator acts, using their body language and other aspects of their physical presence. The positive characteristics associated with embodiment include appearing knowledgeable, friendly and relaxed. Facilitators balance a desire to avoid appearing patronising to participants with a need to be seen as 'expert'.

This final aspect of practice, embodiment, appears to be the least consciously controlled by facilitators although, even here, choices are made, such as how the facilitator moves around the room or interacts with the participants. The most conscious choices are made about content, and the least about embodiment. The content of the professional development is decided by reading, research and/or experience. However, in some contexts, these choices may be limited by the nature of the professional development design, for example when the designer and the facilitator of the professional development are separated in 'cascade models' of professional development, as mentioned above. The facilitators we interviewed made choices about pedagogy by drawing on their prior experiences as





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teacher and facilitator, through participation in professional development, including observing other facilitators, and by responding to in-the-moment feedback from participants.

Facilitators learn their practice in varied ways, including from prior and ongoing experience of facilitating and participating in professional development, and from working in collaboration with other facilitators. This understanding of how facilitators enact their role could be used to support them to 'notice' (Mason, 2002) the choices that they make in their practice, and thereby to further develop their knowledge and skills of facilitation. Each of these three aspects of practice contributes to the overall effectiveness of the facilitator's role. We are currently exploring whether similar categorisations of practice might be applicable to the other roles involved in the leadership of professional development (co-ordinator and designer).

Conclusions and implications for practice

This paper summarises findings from a series of studies focused on the leadership of professional development. The aim is to shed light on this under-researched aspect of professional development and, by doing so, to identify possible professional development opportunities for leaders of professional development.

The roles and practices involved in the leadership of professional development are complex. Given this complexity, effective professional development for professional development leaders will look different from that for teachers, although our findings suggest that some professional development leaders do participate in teacher professional development, perhaps as a way of increasing and maintaining their knowledge of teaching. Depending on whether they are operating in the role of co-ordinator, facilitator or designer, professional development for leaders of

professional development may contain different content, and different models of professional development may be appropriate. For example, facilitators of professional development may benefit from support in developing new or improved approaches to facilitation, while co-ordinators might be supported to better understand models of professional development or how to lead organisational change.

The studies described here focus on those who lead professional development with groups of teachers; further research is needed to understand whether the findings are applicable to those who work predominantly in individual models of development such as mentoring or coaching. Further, the experience of being or having been a good teacher appears to be important in building facilitators' credibility with participants. Where facilitators have not been or are not teachers, they may derive credibility instead from being expert in other aspects of educational practice, such as psychology or special educational needs. All professional development leaders may benefit from support to understand and work with a variety of school and classroom contexts.

The need for formal professional development opportunities for all professional development leaders is great, and it seems likely that, no matter in what role they operate, their professional development is likely to benefit from inclusion of opportunities for critical reflection on the intended purposes of professional development and how teachers learn. The studies described here provide some insights into what this professional development could offer.

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