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Meeting the Challenge of Providing High-Quality Professional Development for Teachers: The Wellcome CPD Challenge

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The Wellcome CPD Challenge

In recent years, the Department for Education (DfE) has implemented large-scale teacher professional development initiatives including the Standard for teachers' professional development, the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund, the Early Career Framework and new specialist National Professional Qualifications (Department for Education, 2016, 2017, 2020a, 2020b). Despite this, there is limited evidence of sustained change towards a goal of all teachers being able to participate in high-quality professional development throughout their careers, and any requirement or entitlement for teachers to engage in professional development is so far missing from government policy in England (Fletcher-Wood & Zuccollo, 2020; Van den Brande & Zuccollo, 2021).

Against this background, the Wellcome CPD Challenge, which ran from 2018 to 2021, was established to understand whether and how an entitlement to teacher continuing professional development (CPD) could be implemented in schools. The project was commissioned, alongside an external evaluation, by Wellcome as part of its programme of work on teachers' professional development. The CPD Challenge was managed and delivered by staff from Sheffield Institute of Education, part of Sheffield Hallam University, working in partnership with Learn Sheffield (Perry et al., 2022). CFE Research monitored and evaluated the project (Leonardi et al., 2022).

Forty schools in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire were set the challenge of meeting defined criteria (detailed below) related to the quality and quantity of teachers' professional

development teachers. The schools represented a mix of school phases, types and contexts such as size, location and Ofsted category. Each school received an incentive payment of £7,500 in recognition of the time needed to engage in the CPD Challenge. This funding was not ring-fenced to activities relating to teacher professional development, and it was not expected that, for most schools, the funding would be sufficient to enable meeting the CPD Challenge criteria. Schools used this in various ways to support participation in the CPD Challenge and teachers' engagement in CPD (Leonardi et al., 2022).

The CPD Challenge criteria

The CPD Challenge criteria were a set of measures for schools to work towards, acting as ambitious but achievable targets, independent of schools' starting points. They were:

- Continuing professional development (CPD) meets the needs of the individual teacher and is predominantly focussed on subject-specific development.
- CPD is high quality and aligns to the DfE's (2016) Standard for teachers' professional development.
- Every teacher participates in a minimum 35 hours of CPD annually.

These criteria were designed by drawing on research evidence, international practice and stakeholder consultation. The intention was that, if schools met the criteria, all teachers would participate in a transformational amount of high-quality professional development directly relevant to their practice and contexts.

A shared definition of CPD was used in the project: *intentional processes and activities which aim to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers in order to improve student outcomes* (Perry et al., 2022). This definition included a range of activities delivered by and/or organised by teachers, colleagues, schools, or external providers, and excluded statutory training, such as health and safety, safeguarding or first aid training.

The CPD Challenge Champions

Each school designated a staff member as the 'CPD Challenge Champion' to lead change towards meeting the criteria. The Champions were supported through:

- schools' briefings which brought the Champions together to provide project updates, summaries of research evidence and share practice.
- regular contact with a CPD Challenge Facilitator, external to the school, who supported Champions to develop and reflect on their approaches (see below).

The Champions were key enablers for schools' participation in the Challenge. They led the organisation, development and review of schools' approaches to professional development,

ensuring CPD was prioritised by school staff. Most schools reported that the project would not have been successful without the Champion and that they intended to maintain the role following the project end (Leonardi et al., 2022).

How schools approached the CPD Challenge

The CPD Challenge was purposely school-led. The ways in which schools made progress towards the criteria were for Champions and their colleagues to develop based on their contexts, experiences and improvement priorities. This flexible approach meant that schools trialled a range of activities, initiatives and practices (Halliday, 2019, 2020) including:

- shared understandings of professional development, for example school-specific definitions of CPD, and re-design of meetings and other tasks such as moderation as opportunities for development and professional learning.
- new and adapted whole-school processes for professional development planning, delivery and evaluation, such as explicit linking of CPD to teacher appraisals and performance management, and systems for tracking engagement in, and the impact of, professional development activities.
- new modes of individualised and subject-specific professional development, including teacher research projects, subscriptions to subject associations, the use of departmental and phase time for developing and sharing subject-focussed practice, and the identification and deployment of in-school expertise for the leadership of professional development.

The changes implemented by schools were often of relatively low cost, yet led to fundamental shifts in schools' professional development cultures and appear to be sustainable in the long-term (Perry et al., 2022).

Outcomes of the CPD Challenge

For most schools involved in the project, the changes implemented, measured through teachers' reports of their engagement in CPD, led to increases in the quantity and quality of professional development teachers participated in. For example, in the final year of the Challenge, teachers reported participating in an average 53 hours of CPD, an increase from the baseline of 38 hours (Table 1), with a roughly proportional increase in the number of hours of subject-specific CPD (Leonardi et al., 2022).

	Number of hours of CPD reported		Percentage increase from baseline
	Baseline	Year 3	

CPD participation (average per year per teacher)	38	53	39%
Subject-specific CPD participation (average per year per teacher)	22	32	45%

Table 1. Changes in quantity of professional development during the CPD Challenge

To measure quality, a series of indicators, related to the DfE's (2016) Standard for teachers' professional development, were used. From baseline to Year 3, teachers reported increases against all quality indicators (Table 2).

	Proportion of CPD meeting this quality indicator		Percentage point change from baseline
	Baseline	Year 3	
Formed part of a sustained programme	66%	81%	+15
Underpinned by evidence and expertise	78%	91%	+13
Involved expert challenge	60%	71%	+11
Meets your individual needs	87%	94%	+7
Meets the needs of the school	91%	96%	+5
Have a clear focus on improving and evaluating pupil outcomes	87%	91%	+4

Involved collaboration with colleagues	86%	88%	+2
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Table 2. Changes in quality of professional development indicators during the CPD Challenge

There were some differences between phases. For example, on average, secondary schools reported larger increases in the quantity and quality of CPD than primary schools, with secondary schools starting from lower baseline measures (Leonardi et al., 2022).

The importance of support

The CPD Challenge Champions identified the essential roles played by CPD Challenge Facilitators and school senior leaders in supporting them to lead change (Leonardi et al., 2022; Perry et al., 2022).

The CPD Challenge Facilitators provided dynamic and flexible support enabling Champions to manage both developmental and logistical aspects of their role. The Facilitators acted as sounding board, mentor and coach, problem solver, critical friend, and a link to other schools. They signposted resources such as subject associations and research studies on professional development, and supported Champions to consider how to deliver and evaluate professional development activity.

Meanwhile, schools where school leaders were committed to and engaged in the Challenge were characterised by greater progress towards meeting the CPD Challenge criteria. The Champions in these schools were given a clear mandate to lead change and, often, resources were made available to support this. In general, these schools experienced deeper cultural change in relation to professional development.

Barriers to meeting the criteria

The barriers to improving the quality and quantity of professional development were frequently related, perhaps not surprisingly, to resources such as finance and time, particularly in terms of accessing external professional development (Leonardi et al., 2022). For example, in the final year of the CPD Challenge, around 10% of teachers across all schools reported being unable to find relevant CPD opportunities and/or finding it difficult to navigate the choice of CPD opportunities available.

Furthermore, some schools which made less progress towards meeting the CPD Challenge criteria experienced competing priorities, such as recent or imminent Ofsted inspections. These took attention away from professional development and limited the Champions' ability to lead change.

The impact of COVID-19

Many schools experiencing the most challenging of circumstances, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, were able to adapt their approaches to professional development in response to those competing priorities and changing external conditions.

The pandemic began in the second year of the CPD Challenge and initially had a significant impact on schools' ability to participate in the project and the ways their teachers engaged with professional development (Leonardi et al., 2021, 2022). However, as the practicalities of dealing with COVID-19 became embedded in day-to-day practice, Champions and their colleagues adapted existing professional development plans to remote learning solutions and emerging professional learning needs such as supporting pupil wellbeing.

The consequence was that, for many schools in the CPD Challenge, the changes made to professional development practices before the pandemic were largely resilient to its impact. Further, the use of online learning environments, and teachers' increasing confidence in working within these, opened up opportunities for more flexible and individualised professional development.

Conclusion

The level of commitment shown by the schools in the CPD Challenge indicates that there is an appetite for school-level and system-wide change in approaches to teachers' professional development. The project's outcomes suggest that, given appropriate support for school leaders, schools are able to meet an entitlement to the provision of high-quality professional development (where quality is clearly defined) for teachers at all stages of their careers. Such an entitlement provides a focus for change in schools' practices around professional development. This suggests that policy makers in England should strongly consider the implementation of an entitlement to professional development for teachers at all stages of their careers.

To end, we offer these recommendations for school leaders:

- appoint a senior leader with explicit responsibility for leading professional development, who is given appropriate support to develop their understanding of professional development, to plan for, lead and evaluate change and to engage staff in these changes.
- embed small changes in practice to balance and align school development objectives with teachers' individual learning needs, such as redefining the purpose and content of staff meetings, linking professional development with performance management or appraisals, and developing systems of teacher-led inquiry.
- support all school staff to build a shared understanding of the purpose and outcomes of high-quality professional development and move towards shared ownership of

professional development as an ongoing process of learning through multiple sustained activities.

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