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Title: **Contextually Sensitive Evaluation Tools for School Based  
Professional Learning: A Feasibility Study**

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**Contextually Sensitive Evaluation Tools for School Based Professional Learning: A Feasibility Study**

*Executive Summary*

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### Introduction

It is widely accepted that teachers have both a right and a responsibility to engage in Career-long Professional Development (CPD) (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2009). In this context, the current CPD situation in England is interesting for two reasons. First, the UK Government's White Paper in Education (Department for Education, 2010) argues for professional development that is collaborative and undertaken *in situ*. Echoing international research (Timperley, 2011), informal activities of professional learning such as teachers developing curriculum material, analysing pupils' work, and solving problems collaboratively are widely advocated. Second, over the past 10 years England has seen the expansion of Academy Schools and Free Schools with increased devolvement from local authority control. Taken together, these two policy initiatives have resulted in schools having unprecedented flexibility in governance and decisions about policies, staffing, performance management, levels of teacher pay and career development at school level (Machin & Veroit, 2011). As a result, variability between schools in the nature, purpose and quality of CPD provision for teachers is both necessary (in order to address local needs) and inevitable. This poses new challenges for schools, teachers and researchers seeking to evaluate the 'effectiveness' of CPD provision.

The aim of this project was to develop and trial contextually sensitive evaluation tools that would be appropriate for school-based CPD in the new differentiated education landscape. Building upon existing work, the purpose of the project was threefold: to support schools and other CPD stakeholders to identify factors that influence teachers' 'learning capacity' (Claxton, 2002); understand how different school-based CPD initiatives can impact on teachers and pupils; and use this information to re-design CPD tools.

The main research questions that framed this study were:

1. How have schools responded to changes in educational policy in relation to workplace learning, and what are the key issues and challenges that schools/teachers encounter in facilitating professional learning?
2. How can schools evaluate the impact of school-based CPD initiatives on teachers and pupils?

### Methods

The study adopted an exploratory sequential design in order to examine the utility of contextually sensitive evaluation tools in teacher CPD. Informed by interviews with senior managers charged with professional development in each school, the research was conducted in two interlinked phases:

**Phase 1** (exploratory) - we analysed the ways in which CPD is re-enacted in four different schools, and constructed a provisional evaluation framework of factors that schools need to take into account when designing and evaluating their CPD provision.

**Phase 2** – four different schools were then piloted in order to examine the feasibility of constructed evaluation framework. The tools were a series on-line questionnaires that schools could use to measure localised teacher CPD initiatives designed and delivered *in situ*.

### Participating Schools

In this study it was not possible to examine the breadth of secondary school contexts in the UK, so we focused on CPD structures and cultures in secondary schools with specific characteristics (e.g. location and performance criteria). It is known in the research literature, for instance, that urban schools experience a set of challenges in recruiting and retaining effective teachers (Pedder *et al.* 2008), yet we have little understanding about teachers' professional development needs in such settings. In the English context, there is some evidence to suggest that schools with different Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspection classifications (outstanding, good, requiring improvement and inadequate) support teacher professional development differently (Earley & Porritt, 2013). These two criteria, location (urban) and OFSTED performance criteria were utilised to select purposively the schools involved in the study.

## Main Findings

- Findings from phase one identified how school evaluation frameworks drew heavily from the ‘levels approach’ with a focus on teachers’ satisfaction, perceived learning and then fragile links to impact on practice. Supplementary to the literature which argues that such models focus on *describing* what happened rather than identifying developmental *differences* (Earley & Porritt, 2013), also tells us little about the theories/assumptions for change that underpin school-based CPD initiatives. In a period of budget cuts and increased accountability, understanding the impact of localised CPD initiatives is paramount in order to guide further CPD investment.
- Schools should be encouraged to reflect on existing CPD before planning / revising school-based opportunities. More specifically, schools should be encouraged to reflect upon those contextual factors that might influence the extent to which school staff engage in and benefit from school-based CPD (e.g. school culture, trust, connections).
- High performing schools engaged in three initial planning steps towards existing CPD provision: step 1 - self-assessment in terms of content, learning processes and impact on knowledge, practice, and pupil achievement; step 2 - developed clear anticipated outcomes of the CPD intervention; outcomes were tangible, and with a clear vision of what teaching and learning should look like as a result of CPD participation; step 3 – understood that robust measures included baseline and post-CPD evidence – but were challenged both conceptually and practically on how to deploy such methodology.
- Data indicated that schools were challenged in capturing the relational interdependency between the learning culture of the school and individual teachers learning. There was consensus from senior managers that evaluation tools should take into account *how* and *what* individuals learn in different situations, but providing robust evidence of the impact of school learning culture on teacher’s practices, actions and dispositions was problematic.
- In schools where the professional community was described by Ofsted as “outstanding” and “good”, CPD activities were explicitly linked to performance related pay, national teacher standards and teacher audits/observations by senior management. In these schools, evidence suggested there had been cultural shift in the ways teacher learning was quantified and an ethos of increased collaboration was advocated in promoting professional learning and staff retention.
- In schools where the professional community was less functional and performance criteria was deemed to be “failing” (OFSTED), CPD activities were used by senior managers as a mechanism for whole school change, and as a result, CPD activities were viewed with distrust by staff who questioned its relevance to their particular circumstances. There was little evidence of systematic evaluation processes on the impact of CPD activities.
- A particular feature across all four case studies in phase one was a cultural shift in the way schools perceived professional development; both in terms of individual and school accountability. Significantly, the focus of professional development had shifted from career development to the impact on pupil learning.
- Schools were ‘data rich’ in terms of pupil performance and for many schools investment in any professional development activity had to be explicitly linked to national teacher standards and improving pupil performance. National performance school tables were used to justify professional development strategies.
- Evidence suggested that different schools drew upon different data sources (e.g. pupil performance, teacher appraisals, lesson observations) to explore and ‘measure’ CPD impact. The importance of looking across a variety of data sources in order to develop a holistic understanding of CPD impact was a feature of strongly performing schools.
- There was agreement between schools of a need to follow the learning trail from intervention (e.g. CPD activity) to pupil learning. However, variation was identified in the ways schools implemented this in practice. Student voices combined with other data sources were highly regarded.

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- There was an emerging interest in understanding the role of social learning networks within schools in engendering professional learning. Through school based PD activities, senior managers were interested in capturing the social capital (e.g. trust, networks and norms) that teachers develop because of increased collaboration and school community engagement. Curiosity towards ‘measuring’ the development of social capital was linked to staff retention issues, and an increase in Academy Trusts with associated growth in school/teacher partnership and collaboration.

### Recommendations

- Findings from the study suggest that some schools are more effective in designing, implementing and evaluating school-based initiatives than others. Even in schools who have extensive evaluation processes linked to teacher and pupil performance, there is emerging interest in how they might ‘measure’ the social capital outcomes from collaborative teacher focused activities. Schools interested in evaluating school based CPD therefore need both conceptual and practical guides on *what* to measure and *how* to administer and analyse evaluation tools (both qualitatively and quantitatively). This important educational element seeks to develop schools’ capacity to be independently effective in gathering and making sense of robust evidence of CPD effectiveness.
- Schools need to examine the interactions between teacher agency and school learning infrastructures, and how these interactions are acted upon in the school environment. The concept of social capital is useful therefore in measuring the connections between teacher learning and the role of social networks within schools in engendering professional learning. The implications in capturing the localized impact of professional development activities on teacher learning are threefold:
  - 1) Measuring through a survey approach, using social capital as an independent variable to capture social–psychological terms such as self-confidence and teacher identity;
  - 2) Measuring the development of social capital through the linkages between individuals and networks/groups, and the linkages between networks and groups;
  - 3) Social capital as a dependent variable which focuses attention on how schools produce and shape social capital (e.g. learning communities, school partnerships).
- As might be expected, the literature suggests connected organisations are more valuable in developing social capital than isolated organisations and in this context, it is interesting to consider the expanding role of school partnerships in growing the network of learning collaboration for teachers.

### Study Outputs

An output of the study is the development of a dedicated website as a free resource for schools to download and use in order to engage effectively in all three initial planning steps. In addressing calls from the literature to develop cultural and strategic change in school evaluations (Earley & Porritt, 2013), the website will include data collection tools, methodologies to establish evidential baselines, and guidance on how to engage in statistical analysis. The resource will offer tangible support to schools in conducting robust CPD evaluations in order to improve future professional learning initiatives.

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