

The Best Evidence Synthesis on Professional Learning - What's in it for Principals and Providers?¹

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¹ My thanks to Paul Barker, Principal of Kaeo Primary for suggesting that I write this article.

Great fanfare greeted *Teacher Professional Learning and Development* (Timperley, H; Wilson, A; Barrar, H and Fung, I (2007)². This very large document now sits proudly in the offices of Principals nation-wide. The sheer thickness of the document is mind-boggling, and I wondered who would read it, yet there is presumably a Ministry of Education expectation that it would be read by Principals and teachers throughout the country. Other questions that were prompted by the work included: would this document be a guide to PL/PD that would ‘work’ in low decile schools? Would this document detail the ‘ingredients’ of good PL/PD? Would it unlock a box of secrets previously unknown to schools? Would the BES help providers of PL/PD?

With those questions in mind, I decided to tackle this document. Reading the BES from cover to cover took 9 working days, spending 2 - 4 hours each day. My personal notations based only on chapters 1 - 12 total just over 11 000 words! The reason for imparting this autobiographical information is not to elicit sympathy or awe, but to raise a critical question regarding the unrealistic expectations that emanate from Wellington especially in light of the pressures faced by Principals and senior managers in New Zealand schools. Understanding and knowing well those pressures, tackling the task of reading the BES and producing a jargon-free article that could be quickly read and digested seemed a positive contribution.

The focussing concern for the BES writers was to unpack the ‘black box’ that seems to exist between teachers’ learning and the impact of this learning on student outcomes (2007, p.1). They therefore looked at a range of research studies, ultimately selecting 97, of which 72 met their criteria as ‘core’ studies because

² Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development*. Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Education. (From now on in this article, simply ‘BES’).

these fitted the statistical selection criteria determined by the researchers (2007, p. 35). Of all 97 studies (a mix of New Zealand and international), the question the researchers were hoping to answer was what kind of PL/PD for teachers would impact positively on student learning (2007, p. 1).

For Providers and PD Co-ordinators

The BES demonstrates that ‘theory’ is vitally important. Personal experience over the years suggests that teachers can be theory-averse; hence this conclusion came as a surprise. However, the term probably needs to be understood more loosely than one might usually apply to it, hence the use of inverted commas. Essentially, teachers need to be given good conceptual (and evidential) grounds for altering their practice. The BES points out that this is a high-risk activity, as teachers, with their years of experience and tacit ways of working need to be carefully won over to any new approach for its implementation to succeed, as they can just as quickly reject the new approach.

It follows from this insight that effective Professional Learning is not a flash in the pan; rather it has to be slow burning if change is to be fully mastered and embedded in daily practice. What is equally critical is that there is coherent and meaningful content to be conveyed, both in terms of curriculum content and in terms of the teaching methods that will be used to put that curriculum content in place. Therefore, teachers must both deepen their knowledge of the curriculum area (eg literacy, maths, etc) as well as their knowledge of the strategies that will best convey the curriculum. This deepened knowledge takes shape in light of the enhanced theoretical understanding that the teacher-participants will first have

gained to motivate the need to change (examples from the BES studies include theoretical arguments about how certain students may better acquire particular concepts or skills in a different way than perhaps traditionally done, and to support this with video evidence of these new methods working successfully in other, similar schools).

Finally, the BES points in several places to the importance of assessment, particularly in reference to teacher-participants learning how they can assess the progress of their students as the new method/content is implemented in the classroom. Forms of assessment (usually formative assessment) have to be understood by teacher-participants in the context not only of the new curriculum and pedagogical content they have learnt, but against the background of their changed theoretical positions. Integration of these various elements is crucial in helping to ensure the success of the Professional Learning.

For Principals

As a Principal, there are some questions you should be asking of PD (if you do not already do so) based on this BES. There are also some insights from the BES you may find helpful. The BES writers frequently make the distinction between what is necessary and what is sufficient; so for example, it may be necessary that teachers have time off to develop their learning, but having this time off is no guarantee that they will in fact learn!

Insights:

- The 'voice from the outside' can be a crucial ingredient (ie, using external providers and experts)
- Develop PL/PD around a problem that needs a solution (ie avoid PD for the sake of having PD)
- Get stuck in yourself (you are the leader of learning, so 'walk the talk'). This insight suggests that if you as the Principal do not think you will learn anything new, then why put your staff through it? Another perspective is also that either you are the problem (dinosaur) or the PD/PD Provider is the problem (overselling what your school does not need)
- PL/PD is more likely to succeed and be sustained if there is a corporate mood or climate accepting of change in your school and if you have good structures and processes for handling staff transitions

Questions:

- What is the point/purpose of the PL/PD? (are its goals and intentions clearly spelt out to you beforehand?)
- What will be learnt? (what is its content?)
- What will your teachers do differently afterwards?
- Do your teachers have a plan whereby they are accountable to you for these different strategies? For example, if your Economics teacher wants to go on a 'PD Day', what will that teacher learn that will be of benefit to the Economics classes? Is there available evidence that these classes currently do not have that knowledge, skill or understanding? How does this affect their chances? What

guarantee can the teacher provide that by going on this PD, these classes will better their chances and results? In 6 months from now, can the teacher show evidence of positive change?

What does not work?

The BES draws attention in the studies reviewed to several negative features of the PL/PD offerings on which they report. In some cases, what is said not to work well in one context seems not to have had such a negative impact in another. What follows draws attention to only some of the more compelling issues.

I may sound like a turkey voting for Christmas, but it needs to be said that the one-off, one day PD and short conference are generally not good value. As one who has sat through a fair share of these, it seems that a massive effort of will is required to implement into daily practice what one takes away from the superficial one day or the rah-rah motivational surge of the short conference. However, I will return to this topic in a moment.

The points above relating to content suggest that meaningful PL/PD is that which is intellectually challenging and substantial. The 'Tips for Teachers' and simple solutions to complex problems make little or no difference. This is often the stuff of the one day, and the learning may do little more than blow a gentle breeze through the brain (the BES writers refer to this as 'cueing and retrieving

knowledge' (2007, p. 8). The teacher-participant finds the PD interesting, but is not seriously challenged³.

Finally is what I would call the 'shotgun approach', whereby the PL/PD provider comes out all guns blazing in the hope of hitting someone in the audience. This is characteristic of whole staff PD, and again, personal experience is sure to find echoes in many readers, who will have been required to sit through an afternoon of non-specific or irrelevant PD, or a PD session that is rich for some yet barren for others. The point is made by the BES is that there has to be a high degree of staff consensus for whole staff PD to have a chance of success.

It is appropriate to provide a brief defence of shorter forms of PD, some of which is positively acknowledged by the BES. If a school has just embarked upon the introduction of a new Student Management System, for instance, there are specific skills that must be acquired by some or all the staff. These are often best handled in one or half day bursts, particularly if the skills are complex. Where this model fits well with the findings of the BES, is that these skills need to be learnt, taken away and applied, and then the relevant staff returned to learning to extend and diversify that knowledge, and so on in an ever-widening spiral.

Similarly, schools presently are required to look closely at their current curriculum situation as they begin to grapple with the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum. A school may benefit by the expertise of an outsider to prompt this process and get it moving in a concerted and targeted direction. This is feasibly a one day workshop to begin with, allowing for a return to further develop this progress as the staff

³ I am reminded of an undergraduate Education lecturer of mine who used to say, "new knowledge makes a hole in your head".

gradually establishes structures and approaches. As the previous example, a model of a widening spiral is a suitable conceptual model for teacher learning.

Some critical comments

From an academic point of view, the BES is an admirable piece of research, well documented and clearly justified in its approach and methodology. Does it answer its central focussing question? It certainly makes the effort to do so, despite the number of caveats and, in places by the admission of the writers, tentative conclusions. What the BES writers have done by their identification of gaps in the literature is to create a new growth industry for those who may be interested to research the field of teacher professional learning.

A highly problematic assumption is the view of the BES writers that the only worthwhile PL/PD is that which is focussed on bringing about direct impacts on student learning and particularly student outcomes. The BES reflects the dominant discourse that portrays student outcomes as the only educational subject of merit. I realise that even typing these words is akin to suggesting that tuckshops sell meat pies, however, the longer 'distorting and corrupting influences' that follow by implication the fixation on outcomes is even highlighted by the BES team (2007, p. 18). A further, connected assumption, is that based on the view that the researchers take that schools are for educating students and not teachers (2007, p. 19). Whilst they hasten to acknowledge the value of other forms of PD, it seems that they call into question a myriad of other learning opportunities that have no direct bearing on student outcomes. Furthermore, the denigration of the right of teachers to continue learning suggests an utter contradiction in terms of the very

formative nature of education: on one hand, teachers are called upon to lead learning and to shape the reflective and critical thinking capacities of their students, yet on the other are to accept an ossified conception of their own work that sees their learning cease the day they begin teaching.