# An innovative model for professional development

*Sharon McMurray,[1] Susan O'Neill[2] and Ross Thompson[1]*
[1]Stranmillis University College, Belfast, Northern Ireland; [2]Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland

This paper considers an innovative model of continuing professional development in addressing the needs of children with literacy difficulties, namely the Special Educational Needs Continuing Professional Development Literacy Project. Stranmillis University College, in partnership with St Marys University College, Belfast secured £4.06 million over 3 years to enable primary school teachers in Northern Ireland to participate in an online course held in their own school, and for two teachers from each school to attend specialist face-to-face seminars taught at Masters level. One teacher from each school had the opportunity to complete two Masters modules and to be assessed for the award of Approved Teacher Status from the British Dyslexia Association. This project is one of the largest professional development projects to be undertaken in Northern Ireland. The project is aligned to two key Department strategies: one is to address the provision for special educational needs in mainstream schools within an inclusive school environment, and the second is to improve outcomes in literacy; a key focus is on early identification of individual needs and appropriately matched intervention. This paper discusses the design and delivery of this continuing professional development programme using this novel integrated model. It considers how this model has facilitated stronger theory-practice links among practitioners leading to increased confidence and competence in meeting the needs of children with literacy difficulties.

## Introduction

The international literature consistently reports that teachers' professional development (PD) is an essential component of school-level change and development (Day, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994). As a result, there has been a drive towards raising teaching standards, with PD for teachers' subsequently receiving considerable attention both from policy-makers and the research literature.

In Northern Ireland, PD for teachers is presently being reviewed with the aim of developing a framework for career-long PD from induction to early professional development and continued professional development (CPD). It is envisaged that future CPD will include some type of accreditation (General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI), 2013).

## CPD in the UK

Goodall, Day, Lindsay, et al. (2005) identified three types of CPD providers: higher education institutions (HEI), local education authorities (LEA) and private consultants. HEI typically delivered CPD via higher education courses, school-university partnerships and action research, although LEA and consultants delivered single workshops, short training programmes, INSET days and conferences/lectures.

A range of factors for successful evaluation of CPD have been identified across the literature. In terms of teachers' perceptions as to what makes 'good' CPD, Goodall, Day, Lindsay, et al. (2005) found the following: (1) alignment between theory and practice with practical-based demonstrations; (2) collaborative learning; (3) opportunities to reflect on the training; and (4) a supportive organisational culture where teachers feel valued and respected. A focus on being able to link theory to practice in enhancing teaching in the classroom was especially important to teachers.

With regard to delivery of CPD, the teachers in the Goodall study revealed that the best CPD programmes were by colleagues from their own school. In-school training was perceived as the most efficient type due to its cost effectiveness, the potential to benefit a greater number of staff and its limited disruption for the pupils. The least useful CPD programmes were those that used outside consultants, with criticisms that they were too theory focused, with little practical-based demonstrations, and for being top-heavy in the amount of materials provided (Caena, 2011).

A literature review carried out as part of the European Commission's Working Group into the PD of teachers (Caena, 2011) also supported teachers' preference for 'in-house CPD' with peer observation and sharing practice. Additionally, this review highlighted a number of factors regarding the most effective CPD. As well as preferring the 'hands-on' approach, the following characteristics were identified: (1) CPD that took place over a consider-

able duration; (2) had a clear theoretical rationale grounded in research, and a strong knowledge base; (3) collaborative, and involving active learning and teaching (not on a one-shot lecture or a 'drive-by' workshop); (4) is delivered to a team of teachers (same age group, subject, school, etc.) and (5) is focused on specific content knowledge/strategies (not general), helping teachers develop the pedagogical skills to teach specific content, with strong positive effects on practice.

Another review of the research (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009) examined factors that are conducive to creating positive CPD experiences for teachers. This revealed that content needs to be relevant to the classroom. Learning also needs to be hands-on, practical, collaborative, applicable and supported by a whole-school ethos and that teachers should be able to reflect on it with their colleagues. The Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) review also highlighted the properties of ineffective CPD. This, they argued, was isolated (i.e., a 'one-shot workshop' model), non-specific, fragmented, non-supported by the school and non-continuous in nature.

### The impact of CPD on outcomes for learners
Mitchell (2013) and Ofsted (2010) have argued that while it appears that CPD may satisfy teachers, its actual contribution to impacting student learning and improving schools is open to criticism. O'Brien (2011) emphasised the importance of making sure that CPD provision actually linked with improved teacher quality and student attainment. This focus on evaluating CPD led Earley and Porritt (2014) to propose that all CPD programmes initially need to be clear about their aims and outcomes, and even clearer about the proposed 'impact' of the training in terms of its effect on student learning.

### Modes of delivery
Face-to-face conventional models of higher education are still favoured in the UK and viewed as superior, despite the growing evidence that are no significant differences between face-to-face and online courses (Fleck, 2012). Online courses are increasingly being used within the educational context (Galley, 2002) and for teacher training (Seal, 2003). Moreover, recent policy in the US actively promotes online teacher learning programmes (US Department of Education (US DoE), 2010).

Online courses are acknowledged as a convenient means of communication and sharing information (Kleiman, 2004). Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, et al. (2009) discussed the advantages of online courses in terms of accommodating teachers' busy schedules, being available across geographical areas, and providing access to experts and valuable resources. In terms of disadvantages, they suggest that there is a lack of hands-on experiences available and a decrease in teachers' opportunities to collectively share experiences, resulting in a reduction in occasions for collegiality.

However, it appears that there are a number of types of online courses available, providing a range of different experiences. Video broadcast formats allow teachers to view lectures and materials online. This method enables lessons to be broadcast to multiple sites, across a wide geographical area, but participants need to have access to relevant technology and be able to schedule specific times for viewing. Individualised self-paced instruction, where teachers' progress through activities at their own pace, is acknowledged as the most flexible due to the self-pacing element, but does not enable interactions with other learners. Online professional learning community approaches enable groups of teachers to participate collaboratively, led by an instructor (Kleiman, 2004). A recent trend in higher education is the use of hybrid models that combines online and classroom instruction (Kleiman, 2004; Singh, Mangalaraj and Taneja, 2010).

Concerns, however, have been raised that online teaching will provide participants with a sub-par experience (Fishman, Konstantopoulos, Kubitskey, et al., 2013). As a consequence, research has begun to compare the difference between face-to-face and online programmes. Clark (1983) argued that there should be no difference in the outcomes if only the medium of delivery is changed.

Unfortunately, much of this research has been criticised for limiting the evaluations of many online programmes to simply collecting self-reports at the end of a programme or shortly after in the form of teachers' perspectives on the impact on their own practice (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, et al., 2009). While both are acknowledged as important in the evaluative process, additional measures need to be considered, especially the impact of teachers' PD on student learning and the impact on classroom practice over time (Desimone, 2009; Fishman, Marx, Best, et al., 2003).

Acknowledging these shortcomings, there has been a recent increase in the number of empirical studies examining the impact of online training on teacher learning, classroom practice and student learning outcomes (Fishman, Konstantopoulos, Kubitskey, et al., 2013; Garet, Cronen, Eaton, et al., 2008; Santagata, Kersting, Givvin, et al., 2011). Encouragingly, the majority of this research indicates that fears of sub-par experiences with online delivery appear to be unfounded, there being no significant difference between face-to-face and online programmes (Fisher, Schumaker, Culbertson, et al., 2010; Fishman, Konstantopoulos, Kubitskey, et al., 2013; Masters, Magidin deKramer, O'Dwyer, et al., 2010; Powell, Diamond, Burchinal, et al., 2010; Sujo de Montes and Gonzales, 2000). It is possible that this lack of difference is the result of advantages and disadvantages balancing out the reported outcomes. For example, the positives of the online method, such as teachers being allowed to work at their own pace, are balanced by positives of the face-to-face method, such as the ability for teachers to

collaborate (Fishman, Konstantopoulos, Kubitskey, et al., 2013).

While research is still not clear regarding effects of specific factors within each medium of delivery, the recent trend in offering hybrid courses may combine the best of both methods (Singh, Mangalaraj, and Taneja, 2010). Hybrid formats provide interactions with both an instructor and other participants, reduce the need to travel to class on a regular basis as a large percentage of the lessons are completed online, potentially facilitate a broader range of teaching methods (Poirier, 2010), and enable time management, self-directed learning and critical thinking skills (Cole and Kritzer, 2009). Research comparing hybrid and face-to-face formats appears to support no difference on student learning in university courses (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, et al., 2012). Koory (2003) argued that it is the quality of the course content and design, and the nature of the interactions with the instructor that are strong determinants of learning irrespective of the type of delivery (face-to-face, online or hybrid).

Kleiman (2004) suggested that any teacher learning programme should incorporate the principles of effective PD. The use of technology to deliver the programme simply offers flexibility in how the programme may be presented (face-to-face, online and hybrid). Effective and successful online and hybrid courses must also ensure the goals of course match the needs of the participants, provide opportunities for quality, content-rich interactions with instructors and other learners and make sure that the technology used is reliable and that technical support is provided. To achieve this, recent literature supports hybrid programmes that blend e-learning with face-to-face meetings, study groups, coaching and other activities (Kleiman, 2004).

## The SEN literacy CPD model
The model of CPD designed for the SEN Project drew on the author's experience of CPD over her 26-year teaching career in primary schools in NI, from 1980 to 2006, and as a university lecturer from 2007 onwards (McMurray, 2011). The main concern arising from this experience was that there was no process in place in schools for teachers who undertake post-graduate study to disseminate the implications of theory for professional practice beyond their own classroom. Another concern was that when opportunities for dissemination occur, even on an informal basis, and issues are raised and discussed, staff engagement may be limited due to a lack of awareness of relevant research evidence and other factors which may impact on learning.

A further concern arose from issues regarding 'training' in an 'intervention' by, for example, educational consultants, who may or may not provide established research evidence which would highlight potential problems which may arise for certain groups of children. It is essential that teachers have knowledge of all research evidence, in any given area, to allow them to properly evaluate interventions which claim to bring about progress. Indeed, the BERA-RSA Inquiry (2014) highlights the need for teachers to become research literate so that they could assess the weight to assign to various sources of evidence. Only CPD at the higher education level can develop this essential level of criticality for teachers in, what is acknowledged to be, a research-based profession (BERA-RSA Inquiry, 2014).

The model of CPD used in this project seeks to maximise the potential of CPD to effect change in practice in schools, at a province-wide level, by engaging all staff in substantive learning. This was done via a whole-school online course undertaken in the participants' own campus. This online course draws on research evidence to increase teachers' confidence and competence to make informed professional judgements. The teacher is seen as the most valuable resource in the school and the vehicle for meeting individual needs and raising standards (BERA-RSA Inquiry, 2014).

In pursuit of this goal, the model was designed with the purpose of developing the necessary specialism within schools to adequately provide for children with a range of difficulties in literacy development. All of the available teachers in each of the participating schools attended the whole-school online course. In addition to the whole-school online course, two teachers from each school attended 'specialist seminars' to develop more in-depth knowledge of literacy difficulties, in particular dyslexic-type difficulties, and were classed as 'specialist teachers'. One of these two teachers undertook the submission of work for the award of Master's modules. This provided the opportunity for these teachers to meet with teachers from other schools to share their experiences and to take a broader perspective back to the staff in their own school.

The role of the specialist teachers within this model is seen as critical. The specialist teachers led the whole-school online course in their own school, and provided further explanation and guidance gleaned from attendance at the specialist seminars and the associated master's level study. With all of the available teachers within each school developing their understanding of difficulties in literacy development and the underpinning theory and research via the online course, the work and support of the 'specialist teacher' can take place in a fertile environment. The specialist teacher, who undertook the Master's level study, was also required to work with a child with dyslexic-type difficulties on a one-to-one basis for the award of Approved Teacher Status from the British Dyslexia Association.

Within this model of CPD, the role of the specialist teacher is: (1) to provide one-to-one or small-group specialist support for children with more extensive literacy

difficulties; (2) to provide advice and support for classroom teachers; (3) to provide ongoing CPD at a whole-school level to continue to develop the expertise of classroom teachers; (4) to develop a team approach to meeting the needs of children with SEN; (5) to sustain and further develop knowledge and understanding of difficulties in literacy development after the SEN CPD project's closure in March 2015; and (6) to engage in ongoing CPD and maintain their experience of working one-to-one with children so that they keep abreast of work in the field.

One of the aims of this model is, therefore, to build a province-wide system with highly qualified practitioners within each participating school, who can sustain and develop the work that had begun with the SEN CPD Literacy Project. The incidence of literacy difficulties in primary education requires a skilled teaching profession who are able to reduce the effects of dyslexic-type difficulties in the longer term.

The review of teacher education commissioned by DEL (2014) reviewed international trends, analysed strategic and policy frameworks for teacher education in Northern Ireland and consulted with the teacher education community and key stakeholders. The report stressed the importance of university-run courses and teachers' engagement with and experience of educational research (DEL, 2014: 3.14). The report raises the concern that teacher education is undermined because CPD is not the responsibility of universities and the university colleges (4.20). Universities can provide courses which allow participants to obtain professional qualifications which are quality assured.

It is vitally important that any course provides the opportunity for participants to discuss common issues in their classroom practice and school. However, it is also essential to widen the lens and consider issues beyond school. This model of CPD makes provision for teachers from the full range of education sectors in Northern Ireland (Controlled, CCMS Integrated, Irish medium and special schools and support services) to learn together in the 'specialist seminars,' through mixed classes hosted in schools from each of the sectors. In addition to this, there was shared teaching, with university lecturers and classroom teachers working together in leading seminars. The partnership developed between the university colleges, schools and teachers is a further strength of the model. This engagement of teachers from different schools and sectors is vitally important because it allows discussion of a wider range of issues and perspectives than might be the case in individual schools. The horizons of the specialist teacher are widened and in turn this learning and wider perspective is fed back to his/her school. This brings learning to a province-wide level and results in a strengthened system.

### Conflicts of interest
No conflict of interest.

*Address for correspondence*
Dr Sharon McMurray
Stranmillis University College, Stranmillis Road, Belfast, N. Ireland
Email: s.mcmurray@stran.ac.uk.

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