

Devising Professional Learning Policies According to Principles

A policy for professional learning should address all of the following.

1. Inclusion and fairness

In any organisation or institution professional learning is not confined to teachers. There should be no question of, for example, withholding resource for professional learning from a colleague who is not a teacher. Schools and colleges that have met the standard for Investors in People will recognise this. Nevertheless, a professional learning policy needs to make this clear. An issue, however, is that when public money is designated for specific initiatives, such as Gifted and Talented, it can cut across plans to work collaboratively across a whole school or college. How will you address this?

2. Rigorous, critical and continuous analysis of professional learning needs

It is important to demonstrate how the professional learning needs of individuals, groups, the school or college and any network or federation of which a school or college is a part are discovered. Needs are derived from a number of sources not all of which are imposed by government. They can be very imperfectly understood at the outset. They can change in the light of professional learning and events. And they are not always the same as 'wants'.

If analysis of needs is conducted badly individuals and a whole school or college may be setting themselves up for failure. Rigorous analysis of need establishes a sound baseline for professional learning and critical reflection.

Another way of putting this is that before you can describe the circumstances in which an individual, group or whole school or college begins to learn professionally it is necessary to show how you decided what you or it needed to learn. Look at [Section One of the Critical Professional Learning Framework](#) to read more on how to set about doing this. Make sure that your policy shows how you propose to analyse professional learning needs.

Any claims made by a school or college that are based upon professional learning must be capable of being tracked back to how it and the individuals working there set about discovering the needs to be addressed.

Although there are going to be specific points in a year where analysis of need is likely to be addressed for the whole school or college and for individuals the word 'continuous' above has been chosen as a reminder that understanding of need changes while the process of professional learning is taking place.

3. Consensus

Achieving consensus does not mean that the majority is always right. The process of planning professional learning should take into account difference, disagreement and misunderstandings; and it is not wise to hide away from those expressing contrary views as they will only find you later at an awkward moment. At the same time it may not be a good idea to suppress them with a louder voice. A good way of dealing with disagreement is to decide that all views may be listened to, challenged and changed but also to clearly articulate a set of purposes that most people, most of the time, can live with. Establishing points at which major policy review takes place (possibly once a year for a major review) can also provide a degree of discipline that helps to control dispute so that fundamental differences are discussed when you are ready for them. You certainly don't want them popping up immediately after you thought they had been dealt with.

A phrase that was once in widespread use was 'remove the person from the problem'. In other words, respect the person by not getting personal; if you can.

Another thing to remember is that anyone or any group that becomes responsible for professional learning will have to combine leadership, management, co-ordination and administration with a full set of diplomatic skills. You may be judged by your ability to lead but this is dependent upon a number of factors, including the composition of the group you are required to lead.

4. Part of a school's or college's overall strategy and self evaluation

Clearly there is a relationship between the professional learning of the individual and the whole institution but individuals have sometimes felt that their professional development was disconnected from where they worked: that no matter how useful their learning the institution had no interest in it. This is not to suggest that individual professional learning is only any good when it serves the interests of the place of work but rather that there should be a 'relationship' between institution and individual. For a start, the school or college should wish to be informed by individual professional learning and the individual should have a good knowledge of the context in which they work.

In terms of school or college self evaluation it makes sense to see the connections between overall institutional policy, including the claims it wishes to make for itself, and the professional learning taking place among and between its staff. It also makes sense for a school or college to see that critical professional learning can bring into question assumptions it has made in the past. Individuals often think ahead of a whole institution: that is why they go on to become leaders.

5. Supported by senior leader/managers

As part of the connection between professional learning and institutional strategy it is crucial that it carries a high value. In other words, that professional learning is 'on the agenda' and resourced. It follows that the leadership of professional learning should not be a poor relation, tacked on to a long list of responsibilities for an already over burdened person who struggles to get a hearing for professional learning. Its crucial importance for self-evaluation prior to inspection should ensure this.

6. Allowing risk taking and not frightened to fail

It is almost impossible to avoid hearing or seeing the phrase 'best practice'. The danger with this phrase is that it implies that we should all try to find out what seems to work best and then seek to copy it. But what works best for some does not always do the same for others. Circumstances are seldom identical and professionals have yet to become clones.

Another phrase heard a lot in the world of professional learning is 'there is no point in re-inventing the wheel'. But it is often the case that, having looked at another person's 'wheel', it is necessary to at least partially re-invent it in order to make sense of it. After all, simply copying the way another person works means that you miss out on all the mistakes that were part of the process they went through when making the original invention. Mistakes and learning go together.

It is important, therefore, that although a professional learning policy should encourage learning from others and their good ideas, it should also permit some risk taking, experimentation and mistakes. People often learn most from their 'cock ups' because they are driven to find out what went wrong. But they have to feel that they will not be punished for doing so. Yes we can learn from success but, somehow, we are less driven to do so.

7. Reaching out

Schools and colleges are seldom successful when isolated. They relate to other institutions, to local authorities and to communities. If you look at what I

have written on partnered and collaborative professional learning in [Essay Five of Critical Professional Voices in Education](#) you might see something that can help here. The major point, however, is that any policy for the professional learning of staff should make clear how it connects with the world outside the institution. One problem is that schools and colleges are encouraged to compete. Maybe reconciling collaboration with competition will have to be addressed in your policy for professional learning.

8. Subject to critical review

All policies should be subject to review. This is part of what we have been talking about: professional learning itself. Although to some extent this is a constant process that takes into account changing needs, events and changing understanding of needs it is sensible to set a time once a year for a major review. In order to do this well what follows is important. (See **3** above).

9. Critically examining all evidence, including any unexpected evidence for unintended outcomes

A policy for professional learning that fails to allow this to happen is making the fundamental mistake of only looking for evidence that fits the plan or target. This would be a huge mistake. Try to imagine a court case in which evidence that calls into question the charge laid against an accused is hidden from the jury. This would, if found out, definitely be 'grounds for appeal'. It is important, therefore, to demonstrate that the policy is really about learning rather than the simple attainment of targets. You might find it useful to look at [Section Seven of the Critical Professional Learning Framework](#).

10. Evaluation of impact

If you wish to be thorough about evaluation it is no good leaving it until the end. A policy needs to outline the steps that will be taken to ensure that the evaluation of impact is taken seriously from the beginning and throughout. The steps to be taken are those set out in the [Critical Professional Learning Framework](#).

11. Voice: professional voice or HMV?

Acquiring and developing professional voice is not the same as obtaining promotion. One thing to be careful about is that professional learning becomes so closely connected to National Professional Standards that what sounds like a professional voice is actually HMV (His Master's Voice). If you look at the national standards on their own you can see ways in which they can be used to help to make sense of professional learning. If, however, you think about their use in determining promotion and pay you could have a considerable problem. Introducing this aspect of the standards into the role of

the leader of professional learning is highly problematic and, you may think, runs counter to the way in which we have come to think of professional learning.

It becomes essential, therefore, to establish, in a way that is clear and acceptable to all, where, on the one hand, professional learning and, on the other hand, decisions about pay and promotion do and don't connect. This is not only an ethical issue: it is an issue that must be addressd if the leader of professional learning is to carry out their role with the minimum of unecessary stress.

12. Ethics

This follows on from the previous section but still merits a section to itself. The connection between national standards in England and pay, pay progression and career progression makes it essential to be clear about the part played by professional learning. If a leader of professional learning is likely to be perceived as influencing who gets paid what and who gets what job the role is likely to become somewhat problematic. A professional learning policy should address this. Where are the boundaries? Where are the grey areas?

This section echoes the first one (**Inclusion and fairness**) in that they both allow you to make clear some fundamental values.