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## **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the role of self-regulating quality assurance in the development of *Professional Learning Communities* and the model of professionalism necessary to support its effective implementation. The research that informs the paper focused on the development, implementation and evaluation of quality standards for continuing professional development providers in the area of physical education and school sport. The standards were designed by the physical education community because of concerns about the quality of provision and of providers and are intended to be used as a developmental, awareness-raising tool. The research process has been informed by the recent work of Stephen Kemmis, which emphasises that the aim of practitioners who engage with genuinely critical Action Research must be the transformation of practice.

The model of self-regulation emerging from this work and its impact on the professional community concerned has interesting implications for other groups of professionals and their learning. Using the results of the research the paper explores:

- Models of quality assurance and their implications for models of professionalism
- Developmental models of self regulation and their impact on professional communities and their learning
- The role of professional communities in developing and implementing their own quality assurance procedures

The findings of the research indicate that developmental models of self-regulatory quality assurance have the potential to impact positively on the development of *Professional Learning Communities* and can lead to a *democratic* model of professionalism but that they require, and indeed depend upon, the voluntary engagement of the professionals themselves. The paper raises questions for further research and investigation about what incentives can be used to encourage professionals to engage with self regulating quality assurance and to recognise the benefits of developing and belonging to a *Professional Learning Community*.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of quality assurance in education in England has increasingly been seen as the responsibility of external agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). A model of monitoring and accountability has emerged which has come to be seen as quality control rather than quality assurance with the roles of professionals and their self assessment and evaluation minimised and indeed marginalised. Their involvement has been so reduced that they have come to regard themselves as the victims of, or passive participants in, inspection and monitoring procedures (Chapman, 2002; MacBeath, 1999). Recent changes to the Ofsted inspection process and a shift in the focus of the QAA from quality assurance to quality enhancement, place far more emphasis on self assessment and evaluation, suggesting dissatisfaction with the model described above and recognition of the need for professionals to engage more actively with the process of quality assurance. Indeed, Peter Williams, Chief Executive of the QAA, recently wrote about the QAA's evolving approach to its tasks:

“...an evolution that views quality assurance as a professional attitude of mind, embedded deeply in the individual academic and institutional consciousness, rather than as a response to demands for bureaucratic procedures and compliance” (2007, p.1)

However, although the expressed aim of inspection or review, in official documentation and government policy for education is improvement, the experience of such processes is rarely seen to be developmental by those on the receiving end of them. There is a sense amongst the professionals being inspected or reviewed that their role is to be reactive rather than pro-active participants, actively engaging in a process of development and improvement. Chapman (2002), reflecting on the role of Ofsted in school improvement, points out that:

“The contemporary literature base states that 20-30% of teachers intend to change their practice as a result of inspection (Brimblecombe et al. 1996; Chapman, 2001). Analysis of the interview data in this study compounds this view of limited change. At one level teachers appear to view the inspection process as an inevitable cyclical ‘hoop to jump through’. Perhaps they are increasingly ambivalent to the process and over time have become ‘inspection fatigued’ or ‘hardened’ to the regime. If this is the case, now is the time to be developing a new model for external evaluation/improvement that can initiate and sustain classroom change more effectively.” (p 260)

In his discussion about the ten case studies of schools in challenging circumstances which he carried out to investigate the potential of Ofsted inspection to genuinely change, develop and improve practice, Chapman identifies that while there was a recognition that the changes to the inspection process provided a more acceptable approach, teachers continue to identify inspection with high levels of stress and increased workload. They regarded the process of inspection as something to react to rather than a process with which they could actively engage.

Similarly, in a report on the cost benefits of external review of quality assurance in Higher Education,

published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2005) this criticism was also levelled:

“...while Institutional Audit is greatly welcomed, it is ‘still a regulatory process with risks associated’, and institutions regret that it is not a more developmental and supportive process. Many of those we met would like to see a ‘much more developmental’ approach in which quality enhancement was a much higher priority.” (HEFCE, 2005 p.18)

Blackmore (2004), in a critical evaluation of academic internal audit, points out that the process she observed in her research was: “...closer to inspection and quality control than it is to quality assurance....despite assurances from QAA that they are more interested in auditing processes than outcomes” (p 134). She concludes that ‘old habits die hard’ in Higher Education and that there remains a concentration on static rather than dynamic and proactive approaches to audit. It would seem, then that efforts to include more self-evaluation and assessment have failed to produce a model of inspection or review which genuinely has the potential to impact positively on education.

Chapman (2002) points out that:

“Much has been written about the possible alternatives to the current inspection system that may do more to promote school improvement ... Most of these highlight the importance of self-evaluation.” (p270)

He goes on to propose that a really effective model of inspection would recognise the importance of the balance between internal and external elements and that a revised framework for inspection should be flexible and should recognise the role of all stakeholders in the process. It should be concerned with the development of effective relationships and good communication and should be supportive of practitioners recognising their crucial role if genuine change and development are to take place as a result of the inspection process.

It is easy to blame external agencies such as the QAA and Ofsted for processes that cause a reactive response to quality assurance but education professionals themselves must take some responsibility for the situation. Literature on this subject suggests that teachers have to accept some of the blame for the limiting effects of government legislation with regard to inspection and quality assurance and that they need to look to the future and take action (Bottery and Wright, 1999; Bottery, 1998; Helsby, 1995):

“It is easy for professionals to blame governments for the state they find themselves in, but the full truth is stronger and perhaps less pleasant tasting medicine. Teachers, like doctors, nurses, and other professionals, must heal themselves before they can heal others.” (Bottery and Wright, 1999, p.9)

This paper is concerned with identifying the characteristics of a model of professionalism that will support the implementation of quality assurance processes, which are designed to have a really positive impact on practice in education. This is a model where development and change take place not as responses to inspection but rather they are seen as a continuous process of engagement and an expectation of professionalism and of professionals, by professionals in professional learning communities.

While we recognise that a great deal has been written about models of quality assurance and control and their impact on education and education professionals over the last twenty or thirty years, we believe that the results of the research relating to the role of providers in the quality assurance of continuing professional development (CPD), discussed in the paper below, demonstrate that these issues continue to be of current importance and concern. What is clear is that while a great deal of theorising and critique has taken place about the role of quality assurance agencies and the way in which the processes of inspection have impacted on education and its practice, little of it seems to have affected the way in which professionals themselves see their own role in those processes. In the main, they adopt a passive, reactive role to quality assurance, accepting that it is a requirement and not something they would consider to be an issue for the development of good practice.

We are firmly committed to a model of critically reflective practice which demands that professionals take responsibility for actively engaging with a continuing process of development and improvement by researching, enquiring, assessing and evaluating all aspects of their practice. We are also committed to the view expressed by Kemmis (2005) that Action Research, which has the potential to genuinely change and develop practice, must be collaborative, requires the sharing and dissemination of good practice and must take on important issues which have wider implications for the whole profession. Thus, inevitably, we are committed to a model of professional development underpinned by the view that the processes of quality assurance and enhancement are themselves developmental and integral to critically reflective practice and that responsibility for them lies squarely with the professionals themselves. However we believe that these processes of quality assurance should not take the form of introspective self-evaluation and critical analysis aimed at improving one's own practice alone but rather to improvement, development and enhancement of the whole profession through the collaborative engagement and efforts of professional learning communities.

Elliott (2007), looking at how we can assess the quality of practitioner research, discusses the importance of developing "a networked professional learning community" (p. 240) and provides quality criteria against which to measure good collaborative Action Research. In summary, it should:

- Exemplify a democratic process – where actions are held up to rational scrutiny of professional peers and modification is a potential outcome of this process;
- Foster the development of experimental work across the network;
- Assist with the identification of discernable common features which are practically relevant;
- Enable the collective construction of knowledge;
- Enable the development of shared understanding;
- Make a significant contribution to the development of understanding of theory;
- Enable the systematic presentation of shared understandings and insights in a publicly accessible form.

This notion of a 'community of practice' dedicated collaboratively to the development and improvement of practice, working together to meet these quality criteria in this process, is, we believe, a vitally important factor in the development of a genuinely professional model of quality assurance and will be discussed further in later sections of this paper. While it is not our intention to enter into a discussion about the nature of professions in this paper, it is necessary to consider models of professionalism and how they affect a

response to quality assurance or indeed how a response to quality assurance requirements affects the nature of the model professionalism.

### **Models of professionalism and their relationship to quality assurance**

It is important to examine the notion of professionalism and its relationship to quality assurance as it can be viewed in different ways. For example, Kennedy (2007) states that: “Increasingly the term professionalism is being used to empower or control (teachers)” (p.96), whereas Smyth et al (2000) see professionalism as principally an ideology linked to matters of control.

Traditionally, a taxonomic approach to defining professionalism has been adopted and such analyses have revealed characteristics consistently attributed to ideal type professions such as law and medicine. An analysis of the literature in this area reveals references to core traits found in professions and there is an assumption that these are the standards against which all other occupations must be measured (Hoyle, 1969). While Eraut (1994) states that these traits are the subjective interpretations of each writer and culturally specific and therefore are not particularly helpful in defining professions, there are similarities to be found in the literature on this subject. Writers in education have narrowed down definitions to a small number of traits describing professional status, and knowledge, autonomy and responsibility are repeatedly identified as central to a traditional notion of professionalism (Furlong et al, 2000; Sachs, 2001; Bottery, 1994; Hoyle and John, 1995). Other traits appearing less consistently are status, authority, responsibility, self-governing, professional organisation and professional development expectations. Furlong and colleagues (2000) suggest that any change in these concepts can alter the nature of teacher professionalism itself and therefore could affect a response to quality assurance. For example, removing autonomy would necessarily suggest a lack of confidence and the result may be the adoption of a defensive and reactive position. In the context of this paper it is particularly important to recognise the importance of the traits of autonomy, self-governing, professional organisation and professional development as expectations of professionalism as we examine a subject community’s response to the quality assurance of CPD for its members.

In attempting to unpack the forms of professionalism that teachers may adopt, Hargreaves and Goodson (1996) identify six possible discourses, focusing on shared technical cultures; the first five, classical, flexible, practical, extended and complex professionalisms are seen as different, but often overlapping. However, the final part of their discussion proposes a *post-modern professionalism* and they propose characteristics of professionalism in this model as:

- Discretionary judgement over issues of teaching and the curriculum;
- engagement with moral and social purposes (of teaching);
- evolving collaborative cultures;
- occupational heteronomy;
- commitment to care and not just service;
- self-directed continuous learning;
- recognition of, and reward for, task complexity.

(pp.20-21)

These characteristics are similar to Sachs’ (2003) ‘new’ professionalism. She presents two versions of

professionalism, which she states have emerged in response to particular social, political, economic and cultural conditions. She calls 'new' professionalism, '*transformative*' (or *democratic*) professionalism and maintains that both 'old' and 'new' forms exist in a context of struggle for dominance. Characteristics of her 'old' professionalism, in the left hand column, can clearly be contrasted with the characteristics of *transformative* professionalism (pp. 11-16):

exclusive membership	-	inclusive membership
conservative practices	-	public ethical code of practice
self interest	-	collaborative and collegial
external regulation	-	self regulatory
slow to change	-	policy active
reactive	-	enquiry driven, knowledge building

At the centre of *transformative* professionalism is the need for an inward and outward focus with teachers understanding themselves and the society in which they teach. Kennedy (2007) summarises writing in this area and identifies two contrasting models of professionalism, *managerial* and *democratic*. A *managerial* conception of professionalism values effectiveness, efficiency and compliance with policy, indeed, all the attributes necessary for 'passing' inspection or meeting a set of standards. In explaining *democratic* professionalism, she draws on Sachs' (2001) work but emphasises the importance of collaborative action in achieving this form of professionalism.

In considering such models of professionalism and their relationship to quality assurance, it is possible to take this analysis a stage further and to propose that adopting *managerial* professionalism would provoke a reactive approach to quality assurance, which would result in fulfilling requirements, meeting targets and providing evidence. While adopting a *democratic* model of professionalism would necessitate a much more proactive approach in which we would see professionals setting their own standards and targets and seeking evidence for themselves that they have been fulfilled.

### ***Professionalisation***

As suggested in the first section of this paper, the public sector has increasingly experienced a culture of control and there has been a definite emphasis on professionalizing teachers in particular, which has now expanded into all areas of education with the drive to ensure that the school workforce as a whole is professionalized. This process has been interpreted in different ways, for example, Mahony and Hextall, (2000) propose two versions of the changes, de-professionalisation and re-professionalisation. In the de-professionalisation version the professional status of teachers is seen as being eroded by the removal of bargaining rights, changes in working conditions, increasing regimes of control and surveillance and decline in respect and trust. In the re-professionalisation version changes in social, economic and political contexts are seen as leading to a redefinition of the nature of contemporary professionalism through the changing nature of institutional structures and the internal reshaping of those structures (ibid). Definition and application of the term professional are being reworked by the impact of state activities. Englund (1996) provides a positive view of the process and states that professionalisation is the symbolic strength of the profession, suggesting that it is a process emanating from within the profession. This would reflect a



proactive approach to professionalism, which claims professional status and does not allow autonomy to be eroded.

### *A collective response*

As suggested earlier in the paper, education professionals need to adopt a more proactive stance in asserting their professionalism but agency does not necessarily have to be on an individual basis; the notion of collective agency may serve to fulfil the task identified in the previous paragraphs. Indeed, Hargreaves, D. (1994) claimed that a new professionalism based on collaboration rather than individualism could be seen to be emerging during the early part of the 1990's.

Outside the UK there are examples of how workers in education have formed groups to combat the issues of state control. In Australia, the National Schools Network and the Innovative Links Project are examples of school-based initiatives designed to reconceptualise teacher professionalism, working on the assumption that it needs to be reclaimed at the level of the whole profession (Sachs, 1997). Darling-Hammond (2000) explains how the National Commission on Teaching has worked with partner states, districts and stakeholder organisations to improve the quality of teaching in the USA. However, she issues a plea to the teaching profession, and in particular teacher educators, to take responsibility for self-regulation. In Australia, as Sachs (1997) explains, the professional associations have led the reform, seeking to have more control rather than be dictated to through government reforms; teachers' professionalism has been redefined from within the profession rather than from the outside.

Bourdoncle and Robert (2000) highlight the importance of what they term a 'unified corps' that, through the professional associations, can effectively socialise new members of the profession. Unfortunately, there is a somewhat fragmented model of the education profession in England characterised by the number of bodies claiming to represent education professionals; these groups range from the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) to the unions to subject associations. Mortimore and Mortimore (1998) highlight the results of a situation where, historically, teachers are not represented by one body:

“Since no single body can speak for the profession, teachers, thus far, have been unable to resist successive governments' imposition of policies which they believed to be inherently damaging to the education system. Unlike the members of the medical and legal professions, teachers have no collective voice.” (p. 215)

Some of the criteria cited for distinguishing a profession reflect the need for a professional association, for example: organisation; adherence to a professional code; control over qualifications and entry procedures (Frost, 2001). The following sections explain how such an organisation, the Professional Development Board – Physical Education (PDB-PE), linked to a professional subject association, Association for Physical Education (AfPE), has started to promote a system of quality assurance to improve the professional development opportunities for its members and promote a community of professional learners.

## **QUALITY STANDARDS FOR CPD**

## ***A case study of the approach adopted by the PDB-PE***

### **Background**

The PDB-PE was established in 2001, financed by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and developed within the context of government strategy and Code of Practice for CPD, it was the first of the subject development boards, developed in line with Government policy to: “encourage subject professionals to establish procedures to monitor and enhance the quality of CPD” (Whitehead, 2002, p.24). At that time, members of the Board represented both subject associations, the Physical Education Association of the United Kingdom (PEAUK) and the British Association for Advisors and Lecturers in Physical Education (BAALPE), and the Youth Sports Trust (YST). In 2006 a new subject association, AfPE, was launched and PEAUK and BAALPE disbanded to ensure that the subject spoke with one voice and was thus more influential. The PDB-PE now sits within the subject association and is concerned with the quality of CPD for all involved in the delivery of Physical Education (PE) and school sport.

From 2001, the Board developed a dual system through which to quality assure CPD provision; providers of CPD could apply for Kite Marking or Licensing for their provision but the uptake for the system was poor and applicants felt that the processes of application were confusing and time consuming. Driven by concerns about the wide variety of providers and the quality of provision of CPD for PE and school sport, and by the desire to implement a developmental, user friendly, accessible, evidence based, system of quality assurance and enhancement for CPD providers, the PDB-PE commissioned research to provide information about:

- The accessibility and usefulness of the existing Kite Marking and Licensing processes;
- To test out categories of quality standards, previously identified by the PDB-PE, with providers to see if they were appropriate, relevant and user friendly;
- To provide data which would enable the PDB-PE to review and redefine its processes of application for quality ‘badging’ (Kite Marking and Licensing);
- After the implementation of a reviewed and redefined process, to identify with the providers how useful and developmental the new process was and what impact it had on their practice and provision;
- To provide exemplars of good practice to be shared, disseminated and used as case study material to assist with and support the process of application.

The following sections provide an overview of the methods used in the research and a justification for the selected methodology.

### **The Research Paradigm**

The intention of the research was to collect qualitative, developmental data and examples of good practice, from and with the providers themselves, to be used to inform the ongoing development of the quality standards and their use. This, in turn, was intended to improve their practice and the quality of the provision, and therefore Action Research, which engaged actively with the ‘community of practice’ and which could



meet Elliott's (2007) criteria for good collaborative Action Research, discussed earlier, was, in our view, the most appropriate paradigm for the research. We were mindful also in this choice of the importance of *collective agency*, discussed in the previous section and of adopting a *democratic* model of professionalism in order to achieve a proactive, dynamic response to improvement and change. Altrinchter (1992) proposes six quality criteria for carrying out Action Research:

- The collection of data from a variety of sources/perspectives.
- A cyclical approach interlinking thinking and action.
- Recognition that the Action Research process is value laden and is not about a search for objectivity.
- Recognition that the process is about gaining deeper understanding rather than finding solutions.
- The development of professional competence, collaboration and the use of peer evaluation are key elements of the Action Research process.
- Interactive dissemination of findings for critical scrutiny and professional debate is essential.

These criteria have informed the development of the research process at all stages. Data has been collected from literature and policy searches; from investigation of current practice; from the PDB-PE and from a wide range of providers in order to provide a range of perspectives and views. The research was carried out in three cyclical stages, each linked to the next. For example the feedback obtained from interviews with providers in Stage 1, together with the examples they provided of good practice in each of the categories of quality standards was used to assist the PDB-PE to reframe and refine those categories and, in turn, the quality standards themselves before they were implemented as a new process of application in Stage 2. While we recognise that any discussion about what counts as 'good practice' is inevitably subjective and value laden, we regard that as a strength of the research. Since the aim was to encourage practitioners to engage actively with the development of the quality standards and their use, it was very important to use their examples of 'good' practice as a starting point for critical discussion and interrogation so that they engaged with us in the research and in the development of the quality assurance processes themselves. These examples are also used to assist others with the process of using the quality standards and will be evaluated as part of that process and the intention is that they will continue to be developed and changed as the process develops. If providers are to 'buy into', and take ownership, for the process of using the quality standards it is essential that they are involved at every stage in their development.

The research has been designed with the importance of working together with providers at each stage in mind and is in this sense deliberately collaborative. The collaborative development of case studies and exemplar materials and their dissemination is a key element of the research:

“and (a) powerful tool for bringing about change and developing professional practice.....  
Carr and Kemmis (1986) point to genuine critical Action Research as empowering practitioners to change, and indeed take control, of the development of educational practice themselves.” (Lloyd, 2002, p.113)

The longer term aim of the research is that these materials will be disseminated and used across the whole PE and school sport community and the outcomes are therefore intended to have wide scale implications for the development and improvement of professional practice. At a recent conference on Action Research (PRAR

November 2005 – paper unpublished at the time of writing) Stephen Kemmis presented a stinging critique of practitioner research which purports to be Action Research but which, in his view, does not meet essential quality criteria. For him genuinely critical and excellent educational Action Research is:

“..... a matter of addressing important problems in thought and action, in theory and practice – problems worth addressing and for our times, in and for our communities, in and for our shared world.”

For Kemmis, and indeed for the PDB-PE in this particular research, the aim for practitioners who engage with genuinely critical educational Action Research must be the transformation of practice:

“They will engage themselves in communicative action to inform themselves about the perennial practical question “what is to be done ?” and their answers will be in the form of transformed practice, transformed practitioners, and transformed settings in which their practice occurs...”

The implementation of developmental quality standards by the PE profession itself, against which CPD providers can measure their provision, can certainly be seen to have the potential to transform practice, practitioners and the settings in which they work. Decisions about what those standards should be, how they should be evidenced and their implementation *by* practitioners *for* practitioners, is essential if there is to be genuine ownership for their use and development. The design of this research is, therefore, deliberately collaborative and participatory and involves the collection of rich data which can be and will be used with and by providers and by the PDB-PE to inform the development of a system of quality assurance which is intended to have genuinely transformative implications for the CPD of PE and school sport practitioners.

## **The Research**

As mentioned above the research was carried out in three cyclical stages.

### **Stage 1**

A document search was carried out on all existing applications for Kite Marking and Licensing using categories of quality standards which had previously been identified by the PDB-PE (Management; Design, Development and Preparation; Delivery and Provision; Quality Assurance; and Outcomes and Impact), in order to find out if they were ‘fit for use’. Six follow up interviews then took place with a range of applicants, and with a range of providers who had not applied. The intention of the interviews was twofold, firstly to test out the categories in discussion with providers and secondly to raise awareness about the PDB-PE and the quality standards.

The categories of quality standards, with a series of questions used to expand each category, were used again during these interviews to promote discussion and collect more informative data about their appropriateness and as the framework for discussion about current practice, provision and the quality assurance procedures they currently used. The qualitative data gathered from these interviews was then fed back to the PDB-PE so that the categories could be modified and the application process improved.

Examination of the existing applications for Kite Marking and Licensing identified some evidenced good practice in the areas of marketing; staff suitability; context; identification of learning needs; and inclusivity. However weaknesses were apparent in the identification of clear aims and learning outcomes for provision and there was little evidence of links back to aims and outcomes in the evaluation that took place. The evidence provided in relation to outcomes and impact was the weakest and there was no evidence of any quality assurance of the design of the provision and indeed the only quality assurance instrument used by providers was a client feedback form. There was little evidence provided of good practice in learning and teaching and little attention paid to the impact of the provision on practice. Children were not recognised as stakeholders and there was little awareness of current policy agendas.

Perhaps the most important finding that emerged from the follow up interviews was that in all cases the participants said that they found the process of reviewing their provision against the categories of quality standards in preparation for the interviews and during the interviews themselves, useful, informative and awareness raising. They felt strongly that the process of application should be developmental and should impact on and improve provision and practice. However, there was confusion about the existing dual processes of Kite Marking and Licensing, and also a strong feeling that it was too time consuming and that it should not be a 'one off' process if it was intended to be genuinely to be developmental.

During the interviews, discussion took place about what counts as 'good practice' and some useful examples were identified. Interviewees expressed the need for dissemination of these as they felt that it would assist them greatly with their applications and provide useful feedback into their practice. There was also interesting discussion about how to evidence good practice and about what counts as evidence and the idea of case study material and exemplars to support the process of application met with strong approval. It was felt that the demand to provide evidence of what counts as good practice in the application process requires providers to adopt an approach to quality assurance, which is critical, reflective and developmental and is in itself a model of good practice. The exciting notion of a 'professional learning community' sharing and disseminating good practice and learning from and with each other, was raised by one participant during the interviews and clearly found great support when we discussed it as an idea with others, as did the idea of a 'buddy' system for providers who felt isolated or alone.

The following recommendations resulted from Stage 1 of the research:

- The PDB-PE should adopt the set of categories, with minor modification, as the basis for future applications and the provision of case study examples of *acceptable* and *good* practice;
- The distinction between Kite Marking and Licensing should be removed and one process adopted through which providers can gain PDB-PE recognition;
- This process should invite providers to join a 'club' where the members agree to meet, at least, the *acceptable* standards of quality in their provision and are required to provide periodic (biannual) updates to the Board on developments, and annual updates of any changes in provision in order to renew and retain membership;
- A 'buddy' system should be set up between providers to provide support and to facilitate the process

of collaboration;

- Providers should be assisted to disseminate good practice, tools / approaches to quality assurance;
- The importance of children as stakeholders of provision should be recognised;
- Outcomes and impact of provision should be more closely considered in relation to children's learning.

Clearly there are wider implications of the findings of this stage of the research. The positive response of the interviewees to the developmental process of assessing provision against the categories and to providing examples of good practice as evidence of meeting quality standards indicates that the procedures are welcomed by the profession. The demand to provide evidence, and the identification of what counts as evidence of good practice, requires that providers adopt an approach to quality assurance, which is critically reflective, developmental and is in itself a model of good practice. The adoption of a 'buddy' system, as suggested above, assists in adding support and also rigour to the self-assessment and will ensure that the profession engages more collaboratively with a continuous process of self-development.

## **Stage 2**

Following the report back to the PDB-PE from Stage 1 of the research the recommendations were adopted and a new single process of application for recognition, using the categories of quality standards was implemented. Having allowed time for the implementation of this new system a questionnaire was sent out to a wide range of providers to gather information about how they had reacted to the new process and to assist in identifying a sample of users and non-users of the application process for follow up interviews. The following sections provide an overview of the questionnaire results.

### ***The CPD providers:***

Postal questionnaires were sent to 255 CPD providers comprising Local Authorities (118); Dance companies (7); National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs) (30); private companies including Higher Education (100). A search of websites provided contact details for groups and individuals most likely to provide CPD for PE and school sport professionals, including current holders of PDB-PE recognised status. We received 52 returns, a response rate of 20%, 12 of which were from previous applicants to the PDB-PE. Interestingly we also received responses from some providers indicating that they would not be completing the questionnaire, increasing the response rate to 30%. The reasons given were that the questionnaire was irrelevant or that they were too busy (this number included four NGBs). It should be noted that some questionnaires had been sent to organisations (mostly Local Authorities and Higher Education Institutions) that did not offer PE CPD provision and therefore this was a reasonable response rate. However, the responses indicating that they were too busy to participate are of concern because the questionnaire only took 15 minutes at the most to complete, possibly suggesting that quality assurance was not of importance or that is already taken care of by the external quality assurance processes to which they are subject or they saw no link between what they were providing and the PDB-PE. <sup>1</sup>The returns can be grouped as follows: Local Authorities (60%), Private

<sup>1</sup> We recognise that numbers indicated above represent a small sample and note that when translated into percentages

individuals and companies (21%), NGBs (9.5%), Others (9.5%) (Consortium, School Sport Partnerships, Charity). This gives a broad indication of the spread, proportion and type of CPD providers for PE and school sport professionals. They indicated that their CPD provision was mainly aimed at people who work with children, all providers targeted teachers and some made provision for sports coaches (73%), adult helpers (79%), tutors (62%) and other groups (25%).

### ***Involvement in CPD provision***

Most providers stated that they were concerned with delivery (94%), management (81%) and design (79%). A smaller proportion (69%) stated that they were concerned with quality assurance, meaning that almost one third of respondents did not consider themselves to be concerned with the quality assurance of their provision. Again this raises issues about the passive acceptance by providers that quality assurance is done *to* them by external bodies rather than *by* them as an integral part of the provision they make.

### ***Applying for PDB-PE recognition***

#### *The applicants:*

Twelve providers had applied (five through the new process) and had mainly found out about the process through the subject association. Eleven were successful and one provider was waiting for the result. They applied because they wanted formal recognition (75%) and to support the drive to improve standards (92%). Interestingly only one provider had been required to apply, a point that will be discussed later in relation to where the drive comes from to ensure that this process works. While some of the providers found the process time consuming (58%), it was also found to be developmental (75%) and useful (33%). Interestingly all five of the providers using the revised application process found it to be developmental. The majority of respondents felt that the process of application improved their practice, having a positive impact (75%), improving understanding of quality assurance (75%), increasing awareness of quality issues (75%), facilitating engagement in a professional learning community (50%), and improving CPD provision (50%).

#### *Non-applicants:*

Forty providers had not applied and many had not heard of the process of application (23%) or had not looked at it (38%). Those who had looked at it felt: it was too confusing, too time consuming, not relevant or not worth it.

#### *Future applications:*

All respondents were asked what would motivate them and encourage them to apply in the future and what benefits they would like to gain from application. Their responses can be summarised as follows, in order of perceived importance:

- To be seen as good providers – they want the recognition that approval by the PDB-PE can bring (77%), for clients to know that their provision is quality assured (69%) and to be listed on the website (50%).
- Practical help to make a successful application – they want support to complete the application

this should be taken into account.

(60%) and for the process to be a single, simple one (69%).

- Improved CPD provision – they saw value in being a member of a professional learning community (35%) to improve all provision (50%)

These responses give an indication of what is important to providers of CPD, with high responses for recognition by the subject association and clients knowing that their provision is quality assured suggesting that they value being seen as ‘good’ providers. Positive responses about the simple process and help to complete the application support the newly implemented process. The relatively lower response rates for improvement in CPD provision through looking at the examples on the web site and the opportunity to share practice may be indicative of the commercial and possibly competitive nature of the market or maybe they just do not value working as part of a professional community.

## Interviews

The follow up interviews were intended to provide rich qualitative data about the following issues:

- Factual information about what sort of provision the providers make, how they provide it, who their clients are and how they are funded;
- What they think their clients are looking for in their CPD provision and what they regard as the most important elements of that provision themselves;
- Who is responsible for the quality assurance of their provision, what processes they employ and who carries them out;
- How important they think it is as a CPD provider to be a member of a ‘professional learning community’ and what they define as such a community;
- What they identify as ‘good practice’ in quality assurance of their provision and their views about how to share and disseminate it;
- Exemplars of ‘good practice’ which can be used by the PDB-PE as case study material to support applicants;
- Examples/evidence of how the application process it has improved and impacted on practice and provision, where it has been used;

Where the application process had not been used:

- What needs to be done to make the application process more accessible and to raise awareness so that they would use it.

Twelve providers were selected for interview, representing applicants to the PDB-PE (three through the old process and two through the new process) and providers who had not applied for approval. They were a representative sample of providers currently offering CPD opportunities to PE and School Sport professionals:

Approved providers: Charity (1), Local Delivery Agent (LDA) (2), private company (2)

Other providers: Independent consultant (1), private company (1), LDA (2), NGB (1)  
School Sport partnership (1), community sport partnership (1)

The interviews were undertaken in the providers’ workplace unless they indicated that this was not appropriate and were all recorded, transcribed and then analysed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis



package. The following themes were identified through the analysis process:

### Clients' preferences

Unsurprisingly, all providers identified that clients were looking for 'high quality training', but they also stated that attendees at CPD events wanted ideas they could take away, indicating a narrow 'tips for teachers' definition of CPD. Some of the providers were happy to meet these expectations and offered 'off the shelf' provision, while others take a more developmental approach. In the main it was only the LDA providers that indicated that they used an audit mechanism to identify development needs in their schools. Contact following the CPD interaction was not offered by all providers and was not sought by clients to any great extent, thus perpetuating the 'one off event' definition of CPD that many teachers identify with (Armour and Yelling, 2004) and the lack of focus on impact identified in the earlier stages of the research.

### Important elements of provision

Most providers felt it was important that their provision was personalised and flexible and that participants were satisfied with the delivery but, as identified above, it was noticeable that how providers defined CPD affected what they perceived to be the important elements of their provision. For example, those with a broader view of provision mentioned the benefits of their provision for children, but the main emphasis throughout all interviews was on meeting the needs of the clients with phrases such as 'up-skilling', 'providing opportunity' and 'increasing confidence' used frequently.

### Processes of quality assurance

As identified in the first stages of this research, processes for quality assurance are identified mainly through the use of evaluation forms, which differ in complexity, use made of the information collected and follow-up. Other aspects of quality assurance vary according to what the CPD offering is and the type of provider, for example, larger organisations employ vigorous recruitment procedures and provide tutor support. Several of the providers mentioned using and being required to meet other external quality assurance systems such as 'Towards an Excellent Service', Sport England's quality benchmark system; and Investors in People.

### Professional learning communities

A community of practice was seen by most providers as a valuable networking opportunity that might alleviate feelings of isolation and have a positive impact on their work. However, there were some providers, who felt that there were enough opportunities in place through which they are able to share practice and some were a little sceptical anyway about the results of sharing good practice on their businesses.

### Good quality assurance practices

Larger organisations seem to employ fairly rigorous quality assurance procedures including shadowing and mentoring for tutors during training; focus groups with clients; email follow up; telephone interviews;

evaluation forms and the use of external standards such as Investors in People. However in the majority of cases there was a clear recognition that very little is done to discover and demonstrate impact of provision on practice or on the end users. Some providers, however, indicated that they are addressing this problem proactively;

“...we’re trying to put together a quality standards framework.....PDMs (Partnership Development Managers) are having an input, directors of sport, we’re having a shared input because we want shared ownership of it, so that really what we’re trying to identify is where there are great strengths, let’s celebrate them, and where there is perhaps a need for an early warning system, just to support people.”

#### Impact on practice through the PDB-PE process

Several positive outcomes were identified by successful applicants, for example, two providers had undertaken a full audit of practice as a result of the application and one provider had re-assessed his relationships with schools and changed his practice as a result of making the application. It would be interesting to know whether these providers felt an obligation to change or whether learning from other providers provided the impetus for improvement.

#### Raising awareness

There appears to be a real lack of clarity from non-applicants about whether the PDB-PE is relevant to them or indeed whether the approval process would be important. Many providers are unaware of the process and, more worryingly, some of these providers are heavily involved in the provision of school PE and yet are not even members of their subject association. Two of the approved providers talked about the award giving extra leverage in their professional community and this is clearly a great benefit but only if the communities in which the providers work are able to recognise the worth of accessing CPD that is approved by the subject association.

#### Relevance of PDB-PE process to providers

Both applicants and non-applicants recognised the positive aspects of the PDB-PE process, with the most positive aspect being seen as association with high quality provision, with one interviewee stating that he felt it should be a benchmark for all fitness and PE professionals offering CPD. The process itself was thought to be useful as was the opportunity to access a professional learning community. The negative aspects from all interviewees reflect the points made in the previous theme concerning whether this process is relevant to all providers but more importantly whether it is in fact worth doing. Aspects of this latter point include cost factors, time, lack of publicity and poor understanding of the process.

### ***Stage 3***

This stage consists of gathering exemplars of ‘good’ practice through a case study approach and the dissemination and setting up processes of feedback to ensure continuous development and review and is currently being undertaken as a follow up to the interviews.

## A 'PROFESSIONAL' MODEL OF QUALITY ASSURANCE?

### Models of quality assurance and their implications for models of professionalism

As discussed earlier, the types of quality assurance models currently experienced by education professionals in England are, for the most part, reactive. However, as also acknowledged earlier, there has recently been a change in inspection and review towards encouraging a more reflective, self-evaluative process. This is very encouraging but the processes themselves still require a reactive response to systems that are externally designed, controlled and monitored. This is inevitable if we acknowledge that as educators we fall short of the classical definition of profession, described earlier, in that the central regulatory bodies are external to the profession itself, i.e. Ofsted, and QAA, and inevitably therefore, the model of professionalism most often adopted is a reactive one. In an attempt to counter this approach the development of the PDB-PE model of quality assurance has been driven by the view that reactive professionalism is not good enough and that it is up to those in working within the PE profession themselves to ensure that all CPD is of high quality. The process has been deliberately developed, therefore, with, by and for professionals working in the field and is founded on a model of continuous self-evaluation.

Clearly in adopting this approach the PE profession can be seen to be striving to professionalize itself. Furlong and colleagues (2000) suggest that any change in the concepts of professionalism can alter the nature of teacher professionalism itself and this appears to be what the PDB-PE is aiming to do. As an internally driven system of quality control is promoted so autonomy and responsibility grow and a different model of professionalism is in evidence. Kennedy (2007) suggests that professionalisation, and by association professionalism, is not only a means to an end but is a continuous process through which identity is 'articulated, shared, shaped and renewed' (p.100). By being proactive in driving a developmental model of quality assurance in order to ensure that the CPD in PE and school sport is of a high standard, the PE professional association, and indeed the PE profession can be seen to be engaging in such a process, a process that has all the attributes of *democratic professionalism* (described and discussed earlier).

However, while the providers surveyed in the research recognised the value of the new process for recognition of their provision, not all of them identified the importance of their own involvement in ensuring quality. This is potentially a problem because unless they recognise the importance of taking responsibility themselves for continuously improving provision there is a danger that a model of *managerial professionalism*, discussed earlier, will be adopted through which quality assurance processes will be seen as an external responsibility rather than that of the professionals themselves.

In explaining *democratic professionalism*, Kennedy draws on Sachs' (2001) work and emphasises the importance of collaborative action in achieving this form of professionalism. This aspect of professionalism is in evidence in the revised PDB-PE process of application where providers are encouraged to access the PDB-PE website in order to learn from colleagues' quality assurance practices and experiences provided in the form of exemplars of good practice. This evidence on the website currently reflects acceptable or good practice but the intention is to provide two levels of evidence, acceptable/good and excellent, which will

continually be updated as new applications are received to provide better exemplars and also case studies for both levels. This is intended to motivate providers to improve and develop their practice in the field.

The questionnaire results demonstrated that some providers were keen to buy in to this shared professional community but the response was not overwhelming and therefore this will need to be promoted. It must be acknowledged that if providers do not buy into this proactive process the PDB-PE will need to make a decision about how to deal with the situation. Herein lies a dilemma since if the Board tries to force providers to participate in the process it will merely be reinventing an externally enforced quality control system, which will produce a reactive approach and lead to a *managerial* model of professionalism, which is not the aim of the process at all.

### **Developmental models of self-regulation and their impact on professional learning communities and their learning**

As mentioned earlier, the aim is rather to develop a proactive approach, which will lead to the development of a professional learning community of the sort advocated by Elliott (2007) and a *democratic* model of professionalism. Bolam and colleagues (2006) identify a number of characteristics necessary for the creation of a professional learning community: Shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; reflective professional enquiry; collaboration and group as well as individual learning; inclusive membership; networks; partnerships; openness and mutual trust, respect and support.

These have all been core considerations underpinning the development of the PDB-PE's quality standards and can be seen to be reflected throughout. However, the process of application and evaluation of provision against those standards requires voluntary buy in from the providers themselves if it is to contribute to the development of a genuine professional learning community, which demonstrates the characteristics listed above. Certainly the aim of the PDB-PE has been to introduce a developmental approach to quality assurance. However what is clear from the discussion above is that it is down to the providers themselves and how they engage with the implementation of the quality assurance process that is crucially important in ensuring that it is used to develop rather than control. One provider talking about making the application stated:

“I think it did (improve practice), because it makes you evaluate where you are at. Because we are an awarding body we are already very aware of quality issues and meeting standards, but from a CPD perspective it's helpful to review intention and outcome.”

This view suggests that the PDB-PE process can be used in a developmental way, to review and continuously improve practice demonstrating that this provider clearly sees that this process is not one of control but enhancement. The PDB-PE's intention is to provide an ever improving set of indicators, which providers can use developmentally to monitor, benchmark, measure and improve the quality of their provision. It is also the intention of the PDB-PE that the providers themselves will engage with disseminating their good and increasingly excellent practice in the form of the case studies which can then be used by the whole community to improve and develop practice. The success of this model, in fact, depends on the

collaboration, sharing and dissemination of experience and learning amongst the providers. Indeed it is founded on the notion that the providers themselves will take ownership for it and participate fully in its development. However, if providers do not value this intention the Board will need to consider how standards can be improved without the introduction of a control mechanism.

As explained above, the intention is that through the PDB-PE process the standard of CPD provision will continuously improve through a voluntary engagement with continuous review by the participants. Application through the process provides membership of a sort of club where all the members are shareholders with a vested interest in ensuring that their provision is of the highest quality and is constantly improving and developing. This approach depends on the voluntary commitment of the providers and on active engagement in order to be successful. However, it is important to consider what might happen here if it does not work as envisaged and if providers see it as another set of standards to be met and because it is not compulsory they do not join in. In effect then the PDB-PE process might then be reduced to an external control mechanism but one that does not work unless it is enforced.

Some providers have applied because they want formal recognition and also because they want to support the drive to improve standards and interestingly only one provider had been required to apply, so some providers are able to see the benefits clearly enough to give up the time to apply. However, while the responses to the questionnaires demonstrate that the will is there for many providers to apply, most have not so far been sufficiently motivated to buy into the process. This is clearly a problem and one which will need to be addressed by the PDB-PE if it is to achieve its aim and engage the profession through a *democratic* model of professionalism in a developmental model of quality assurance of its CPD. Good practice in quality assurance clearly has a developmental drive and this does not only refer to the provision itself but also to the outcomes and impact of the CPD experienced.

### **The role of professional communities in developing and implementing their own quality assurance procedures**

PE has been leading the way in this area and has been funded by the Government to develop the PDB-PE, which has taken up the challenge to redefine professionalism from inside the profession through a developmental, self evaluative, collaborative approach to quality assurance. Of course, the quality assurance process which has been developed could be seen externally as the PDB-PE simply inventing yet another inspection system to be imposed on members. It is, therefore up to the members to demonstrate that this is not the case by buying in to the process and engaging fully. Current application rates are slow, which is worrying. One theme emerging strongly from the interviews was the perceived lack of relevance of the PDB-PE process for some providers. In particular, the views of one NGB demonstrated a lack of understanding in the nature of a provider taking responsibility for the quality assurance of their own CPD provision:

“I can’t really see as an NGB that we would get involved, because our CPD’s through UK Sport – Sports Coach UK ...you’ve now got the picture where they’re now setting the framework of how coaching courses should be across the country, therefore they’re controlling that on our

behalf.”

This statement suggests again that they see quality assurance as something external to their own responsibilities for running CPD. This is clearly of some concern given that this and other providers claim to target their CPD provision at teachers and other professionals working with children and yet they do not see the need to engage with the relevant professional learning community.

The responses to the questionnaires demonstrate that providers clearly want to be seen to provide good quality CPD and they stated that they were committed to a process of self review but they obviously need some further assistance or motivation in order to encourage them to fully buy into the process. The PDB-PE has taken the initiative and developed and implemented a process of quality assurance which now depends on the profession itself for its success. There is no doubt that providers and the subject association have a responsibility to ensure that they provide value for money and participants’ time; there must also be demonstrable impact and this must be based on continuous review (Ofsted, 2003). These are often missing elements in CPD (Ofsted, 2006). The motivation for providers to engage with the process is therefore clear as it offers them the means to ensure that their provision is of high, constantly improving quality; it provides evidence that they are engaging in a process of self review and evaluation; it enables them to engage with other professionals and their practice and it assists them with demonstrating impact.

While the professional association can be seen to have taken up the challenge of its quality assurance role it would seem that there is still some way to go in the process of encouraging and supporting the profession to take responsibility for its role in the process and to engage proactively. This may be because the dominant, externally imposed model has led to de-professionalisation so that a process of re-professionalisation as proposed by Mahony and Hextall (2000) and discussed earlier, may need to take place in order for full engagement to take place.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research and discussion above have resulted in some interesting and challenging findings. In order to encourage PE professionals to engage with a *democratic* model of professionalism, rather than depending on a *managerial* externally imposed approach to quality assurance for CPD, the PDB-PE will clearly need to promote awareness and understanding; provide support; inspire confidence; and engage in a dialogue with the professionals concerned in order to find out what they want and need from their quality assurance process. In addition to this, to encourage the professionals to have ownership and responsibility as proactive shareholders for the quality assurance process, the PDB-PE may need to take on an advocacy role and to promote the importance of high quality provision and recognition with clients and users of CPD, such as schools, so that there is a strong demand for continuous improvement and recognition coming from them. This will motivate providers to engage proactively with the process in order to provide the evidence that provision is of the highest quality.

The process itself is designed to encourage and support providers and is intended to offer guidance, build confidence and to provide a forum, through which good and excellent practice can be shared, disseminated



and improved. The development of a 'community of practice' with the potential to enable discussion and debate between peers; foster development and experimental ideas and projects; facilitate shared understanding; disseminate good practice and which will provide a strong public 'voice' for the profession on issues of quality and standards, as discussed earlier in this paper, is the underpinning aim. The challenge which now faces the PDB-PE is how to publicise and raise awareness and understanding of this aim and how to encourage PE professionals to move outside the safety zone and to take up the challenge of developing and engaging with their own quality assurance processes and practices rather than passively reacting to externally imposed control procedures.

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