

Beyond the need for external facilitation: Rethinking a core assumption of effective professional development

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Worldwide, teacher professional development (PD) is estimated to cost billions of dollars while teachers, on average, spend 10.5 days per year engaged in professional development activities such as facilitated workshops or programs. While an external facilitator is frequently touted as key to effective PD, it is well documented that the activity often ceases once the facilitator is withdrawn. Nonetheless, the need for a facilitator is so taken for granted that it is rarely questioned. For example, how does the reliance on an external facilitator affect teachers' confidence in their capacity to enhance practice? Are the extra costs involved in engaging an external facilitator warranted? By contrast, little research has focused on the effects or longevity of PD programs that proceed without a facilitator. In this paper, we explore the effectiveness of PD that proceeds without the support of an external facilitator, drawing on interviews with teachers ($n = 192$) and school leaders ($n = 24$) conducted during a 2014-2015 randomised controlled trial on the effects of a form of PD known as Quality Teaching Rounds (QTR). QTR was designed to support teachers in collaboratively analysing and refining practice without ongoing external support. Participants reported that the processes associated with QTR built trust with their colleagues. Furthermore, the Quality Teaching Model (QTM), at the core of QTR, provided a shared language and conceptual standards which facilitated their deep and supportive conversations about practice. In this way, QTR does the heavy lifting of facilitation, allowing for effective and ongoing implementation without the ongoing support of external facilitators. We argue, where possible, for professional development that empowers teachers to do it for themselves. PD without external facilitation is not only more scalable and less costly, but also more likely to fortify teachers' confidence in their own capacities and strengthen teachers' professional relationships.