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National Foundation for Educational Research

How teachers approach practice improvement

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Executive Summary

When teachers are seeking to improve their teaching, how do they identify their strengths and weaknesses, and who do they turn to for support and ideas? This summary presents the key findings relating to this topic from a qualitative study based on the evidence of interviews with 39 teachers from different phases of education. The sample included a mix of teachers in terms of gender, age, length of service and geography. The interviews took place in June and July 2010. The study, carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), was commissioned by the General Teaching Council for England (GTC) in 2010.

The aims of the study were to identify what motivates teachers to identify and act on areas for improvement in their practice, how teachers then decide what to do to address areas for improvement and the factors that affect how teachers go about this. The study was an accompanying piece to the 2010 Survey of Teachers, also carried out by the NFER for the GTC, and reported separately.

Key findings

Motivators to improving teaching practice

Teachers of all levels of experience and length of service said that they were motivated in terms of continuing to improve their teaching practice. Most commonly they were motivated by an intrinsic desire to do the best job they could and to become a better teacher. The needs of their pupils and the aim of contributing towards school improvement were also strong motivators.

In terms of the areas they wished to work on, many teachers talked about improving how they worked with and for the children in their class, particularly related to different approaches to teaching and learning. This included learning about ways of presenting information to children, including the use of technology in the classroom. Improvement of subject knowledge and keeping up to date with developments in their field were also areas in which teachers wanted to develop. Some teachers talked about seeking to better meet the needs of specific groups of learners, such as children with special educational needs, or with English as an additional language.

How teachers go about improving their practice

On the whole, teachers tended to prefer approaches perceived to be 'informal', such as self reflection and peer support, over more formal approaches (typically characterised by an element of assessment such as performance management and external observation). All interviewees reported using at least some self reflection fairly regularly, usually as an informal, personal exercise to review a particular lesson. Teachers who had experienced observation felt it was helpful if the feedback was constructive, specific and at a sufficient level of detail, although some felt that it could turn into an artificial, and in the case of external observations, stressful, exercise which devalued it slightly. Collaboration with colleagues was also valued by teachers, and for some, the performance management process had supported them to identify areas for improvement.

Teachers most commonly acted on areas for development, once identified, either by discussing suitable approaches with colleagues (including their line manager) or by looking for ways to address these independently – for example by looking for information on the internet. Teachers felt that it was easier to access courses and other 'formal' support for areas for development identified by or with the school, such as topics identified by the school development plan.

Impact of professional development activities

Teachers from all phases reported positive benefits from involvement in professional development activities. Impacts had been seen at personal, school and pupil level. The process of review and other means of improving their practice had given teachers the opportunity to develop their teaching activities. This was the case for both informal and formal professional development activities.

Support for improving practice

Most teachers felt well supported by their school and their teaching colleagues when trying to improve their practice. Teachers' immediate colleagues provided first-hand support and inspiration. Factors such as the ethos of the school and the style of approach of senior managers and their line manager were felt to have an impact on the type and level of support available.

On the whole, teachers had mixed views about how, and the extent to which, the performance management process supported them to improve their teaching. The most helpful aspect of performance management in this respect was deemed to be the process of setting and working towards objectives.

More than half of the teacher interviewees were not aware of the professional standards or their purpose. The teachers that knew about the professional standards tended to be those who had either worked towards one of the thresholds themselves, or supported another teacher to do so. It appeared that the professional standards were not widely used by teachers seeking to improve their practice, unless they needed to meet a particular level specified within the standards.

Barriers to practice improvement

A lack of time was the biggest barrier teachers faced when trying to improve. This was not only related to attendance at courses or participation in activities such as observation, but limited time also meant that some teachers could not carry out as much self reflection on lessons as they would like. A lack of time was typically due to full timetables and limited opportunities to be released from lessons, as well as a high level of paperwork.

Other barriers to improving practice included limited funding, the school culture and the attitudes of their colleagues in terms of openness to change, and demands on teachers' individual energy levels.

Conclusions

Overall, teachers were very committed and motivated to improving their teaching and used a variety of approaches to identify and act on areas for development. Teachers particularly valued:

- a positive working relationship with their line manager and other colleagues within school
- time to reflect on their own practice
- performance management objectives that were relevant to their individual development, in addition to objectives related to school aims
- support, access and opportunity to be involved in 'formal' CPD (such as courses) to supplement the more informal means of development, such as self-led information gathering
- useful information and shared ideas from other teachers both online and within school.

Individuals and organisations involved in teacher training and development, as well as schools and local authorities, may wish to consider how they can ensure continuing and maximising the provision of these kinds of support for teachers seeking to improve their practice.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This project was commissioned by the General Teaching Council for England (GTC) in May 2010. It is an accompanying piece to the 2010 Survey of Teachers, also carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on behalf of the GTC. The research was commissioned to inform the policy advice that the GTC provides on the drivers of quality in teaching.

The 2010 Survey of Teachers, developed by the NFER in conjunction with the GTC, focused on different types of support teachers receive to maintain and develop their practice, including, participation in Continuing Professional Development (CPD), use of feedback and research, the professional standards framework, and support to meet performance management objectives. The qualitative work described here focuses on teachers' motivations for engaging in practice improvement, the influences behind their choices regarding development activities, and what facilitates and impedes improvement. Specifically, the aims of the research were to identify:

- what motivates teachers to identify and act on areas for improvement in their practice, including:
  - ➢ what teachers draw on to identify areas for improvement and what influences them to act
  - ➢ who other than the teacher might identify areas for the teacher's improvement

- how teachers decide what action to take to bring about change
  - ➢ the motivations behind their choices and behaviours
  - ➢ who else influences this, and how
  - ➢ how teachers' perceptions of the impact of different actions, resources and support on their teaching practice and pupil outcomes influence their decisions

- the contextual factors that facilitate how teachers improve their practice
  - ➢ such as the opportunities, access, choice, quality, perceived relevance to own practice, confidence in skills, culture within school
  - ➢ and if certain factors determine teachers' choices and actions more than others.

Understanding how teachers maintain and improve the quality of their teaching practice is important in order to be able to best provide support and opportunities for teachers. The survey of teachers mentioned above showed that almost all teachers (95 per cent) agreed that they had a professional responsibility to maintain and improve their practice, however it was not possible to delve into *how* teachers go about meeting this responsibility using a survey. When teachers are seeking to improve their practice, who do they turn to and how do they implement the improvement? How can their desire for improved teaching best be supported? This study attempts to make

sense of the complexities and motivations behind teachers' actions to improve their practice.

1.2   Methodology

The research was carried out in June and July 2010 and is based on **39** interviews with individual teachers conducted by telephone.

Teachers were recruited using a sample selected from the GTC Register of Teachers, and from the NFER Register of Schools. The sample used for this study was different to the samples selected for the survey. Further interviewees were recruited from a panel of teachers available to the NFER.

The teachers that participated represented a good mix of teacher characteristics, particularly in terms of gender, school phase and length of service, as shown in Table 1.1. The achieved sample included teachers from all levels of seniority and a good mix in terms of geographical spread across England.

Table 1.1   Profile of interviewees (N=39 teachers)

Gender						
Male	6		Female	33		
School Type						
Primary	21		Secondary	13		Special	5
Length of Service						
10 years or fewer	13	11-20 years	17	21-30 years	6	31 years or more	3

The nature of qualitative research means that the achieved sample is subject to the self selection of participants, and as a result, it is possible that the group of teachers interviewed were more interested in practice improvement than the teachers contacted but who chose not to participate.

Informed consent was sought from all research participants. All data was treated confidentially and stored in a secure place and all quotes obtained from participants have been anonymised in this report.

Content and analysis of the interviews

The main topic areas covered by the semi-structured schedule of questions were as follows:

- teachers' personal and professional contexts
- how teachers identify areas within their teaching practice that need improvement, and how they act on them
- teachers' motivations for improving their practice
- barriers to practice improvement
- the support they felt they had in such endeavours
- the perceived impact of engaging in professional learning and development activities.

An analytical framework was constructed based on the interview schedule. The analysis was completed using a thematic outline and a software package (Maxqda) was used to code and sort interview responses.

2. Motivators to improving teaching practice

Key findings

- Pupil needs and school improvement were strong motivators for teachers to seek opportunities for professional development. These were related to both external pressure for schools to improve and, more commonly, to teachers' professional desire to improve and develop their practice.

- There was a strong focus on ensuring that children were able to succeed and that teaching and learning activities were appropriate. Assessment for Learning had been explored as a means of achieving these aims in some cases.

- Teachers wanted to strengthen their ability to meet the needs of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and to develop their skills in working with learners from specific backgrounds, such as those with English as an Additional Language (EAL).

- Some interviewees also wished to develop their subject knowledge and expertise.

- The use of ICT and keeping abreast with its application and potential to contribute to work in the classroom was another important focus for seeking professional development opportunities.

2.1 Why teachers want to improve their practice

During the interviews teachers cited a range of motivating factors which led them to seek opportunities for professional development, most of which were related to a desire to improve practice and develop their pedagogy.

The desire to improve as a teacher was the reason cited most often by teachers from all phases. This was true both for teachers who were new to the profession and for others who had over 20 years of teaching experience. A typical comment was:

> *'I would be concerned if I felt I was so complacent that I thought I could teach so well that I didn't need to improve because you are not perfect, no one is perfect, and everyone always needs to work on something'.*

Others who referred to the desire to improve practice were driven by a need to avoid complacency and to be the best they could be. Specific reasons cited by teachers were usually directly related to meeting the needs of their pupils. For instance, references were made to:

- a desire to be the best in order for children to succeed

- wanting to inspire children

- wanting to bring the best out of the children.

Typical of the comments made by these teachers was that they wanted to ensure that children would both enjoy and understand what they did in class. One teacher said *'you always have to think about how you can make things accessible'*. As noted above, quality was another important motivator and was reflected in the comment of a teacher who said:

> *Personal and professional development is to improve for the school, improve for the pupils, for the delivery in terms of teaching, and more understanding of what the job is about, and therefore you are able to deliver the service to the kids, and the pupils and families that you deal with in a better way, … the service you put in to the community.*

Other motivators to which teachers referred were a desire to keep in touch with developments within their particular subject or subject area. For example, a secondary school science teacher explained that professional development activities were:

> … [a way of keeping] *up to date with the physics, the A level, cutting edge. The kids that come up to us could end up anywhere … doing astro physics or engineering, nuclear power plants, a lot end up as doctors and vets and lawyers … it's just keeping at the top level to make sure you give them the best chance.*

Career progression was another factor mentioned by interviewees. This was mainly mentioned by secondary teachers but also by a small number of primary school practitioners. The types of motivators to which they referred included a desire to better themselves and advance their careers, and they viewed professional development as a means to achieve a personal goal to develop as a school leader.

Specific school improvement needs were also cited by teachers as a motivating factor although this was more prominent among secondary school teachers than their primary school colleagues. It was also more likely that teachers who referred to this factor as a motivator had been teaching for up to twelve years. For example, one primary school teacher referred to a climate in which schools were expected to achieve and raise standards, where good teaching was an expectation. This had led teachers to seek opportunities to develop skills in order to fulfil their school's ambition of raising standards.

School improvement as a motivating factor was apparent among teachers across the different sectors. For example, the secondary school teachers concerned referred to the need to meet departmental or whole-school performance targets and believed that the professional development opportunities they had pursued would equip them to ensure that those targets were met. Staff teaching core subjects (in particular mathematics and English) were particularly aware of the impact their work had on pupil success across the whole school and for the school's overall performance. This was reflected in the comment:

> *If children do not do well in English I know that the school's reputation will either sink or rise on their performance and the pressure I'm under is also about literacy. If students are competent in reading and writing they are more likely to do well across the curriculum.*

The primary school teachers who highlighted the need for school improvement as their main motivating factor referred to the need to achieve targets and to provide individualised support for children who were under-attaining. The teachers concerned (in both primary and secondary schools) believed that there was more value in the activities which they had pursued to address specific needs than in more general activities focusing on school improvement in a broader sense.

A desire to become more aware of 'cultural sensitivities' was also important, for instance when teaching children from certain backgrounds, including minority ethnic groups. This was particularly the case in schools which had large numbers of learners from EAL backgrounds where teachers were keen to engage and communicate with them as much as possible. This was described by a teacher in the following terms:

> *If you have a child who comes in with perhaps no English language, then to throw them into a purely English environment … isn't professionally acceptable, you need to have their language as well, even if it's just saying hello and a couple of words in their own language it will settle them quicker.*

When thinking about what motivated them to improve their practice, teachers mentioned personal or school factors. Very few teachers referred to the performance management system as a motivating factor, and this was usually in response to a prompt, rather than a spontaneous answer. None of the teachers mentioned that the professional standards motivated them to improve their teaching – as will be discussed in Chapter 5 they tended to be used as a reference point rather than being more integral to practice improvement.

2.2   Areas for improvement

The areas in which teachers wanted to develop their professional expertise varied. However, they fell into several broad categories of which the most common were:

- developing new pedagogic approaches and responding to teaching and learning needs
- subject-specific issues or curriculum areas
- knowledge of assessment approaches including Assessment for Learning
- use of technology in the classroom
- aspects such as inclusion and cultural sensitivity
- responding to the needs of learners with SEN
- behaviour management and emotional support

- leadership and management skills
- time and workload management.

Some of the most common areas which were identified were those that related to children's needs. Teachers recognised that every child was an individual and that each class comprised personalities which were unique and had different needs. As one noted '*the clientele is constantly changing and we have a reasonably high turnover'*. This was reflected in the focus of the professional development activities. Primary school teachers in particular wanted to use their professional development to look at ways in which they could develop a pedagogic approach which allowed each child to enjoy and to derive maximum benefit from what they did in class. This was related to communication and a constant '*search for new and different ways of conveying a message. Looking at how to communicate with children in innovative ways'*. Allied to this, some teachers had also sought opportunities to consider how pupils could be supported to develop a particular aspect of their work which had proved challenging in the past. Finding different and effective ways to engage children in learning was another area for development that was identified by teachers interviewed.

Teachers also sought to develop their pedagogy by harnessing new technology for learning, and by identifying how this could be applied in the classroom. This included using new aspects of ICT and keeping up to date with developments: teachers recognised that the technology never stood still and required teachers to update their skills.

Some teachers, mainly in primary schools, had undertaken work to develop their subject knowledge. For example, two such teachers said that they were required to teach aspects of subjects which were not their own areas of strength and had used professional development activities to address those as areas for development. Others had looked for ways of changing their teaching and learning styles, for example by introducing more practical ways of teaching a subject. A smaller number of secondary school teachers referred to developing subject knowledge. In their case, they referred to a desire to strengthen their knowledge of a particular subject and to keep abreast with 'the cutting edge' in terms of curriculum content and teaching skills. A typical comment was: '*There is a lot of change happening at the moment and I think it's important to continue to work on areas that we know are stable* [and] *as new things come into place I would work on those as well'*.

In addition to the curriculum and pedagogical approaches, teachers sought to use professional development opportunities to focus on changes in assessment, particularly the development of Assessment for Learning and how it might be used to benefit learners. This included using opportunities to see how data could be analysed and used in a way which benefited learners. For example, how it could be used to meet pupils' needs in terms of identifying the support they required and also setting targets for the future.

Teachers also wanted to be able to meet the needs of specific groups of learners. For example, practitioners in both primary and secondary schools referred to the need to be able to address the needs of children with autism and those with dyslexia. Similarly special school teachers looked for opportunities to develop an expertise in teaching older children. Teachers, particularly in primary schools, also said that they would like to develop their behaviour management skills.

The motivation to improve their teaching practice was present in all of the teachers interviewed, and between them they had identified a range of areas they would like to develop. How teachers act on their desire to improve is discussed in the following chapter.

3. How do teachers go about improving their teaching?

> **Key findings**
>
> - Self reflection was carried out frequently by all teachers interviewed in order to identify areas of their teaching in need of improvement.
>
> - There were mixed views about the usefulness of observation – internal observation was generally preferred to being observed by an external person.
>
> - Informal approaches were favoured by teachers, for example self reflection, discussion with colleagues and searching for information independently, typically on the internet.
>
> - Opportunities to have formal CPD appeared to be limited to areas of development identified by the school, or linked to the school development plan, rather than self identified.

3.1 Identifying areas for improvement

The first step in making a change to teaching practice is identifying what needs to be changed. Teachers used a variety of ways to establish where they needed to improve, including self reflection, observation and the performance review process.

3.1.1 Self reflection

All interviewees said that they carried out at least some self reflection on their teaching and their lessons on a regular basis. In most cases this was an informal, personal exercise carried out quite soon after a lesson was completed, and this tended to be in relation to how that particular lesson went, rather than about their teaching practice as a whole. A primary school teacher with over 20 years experience explained that:

> [Self reflection] *is my main way of identifying areas for improvement. After lessons I will routinely ask myself what went well, what didn't go so well, and plan* [and] *think about improvements to create a better lesson.*

Not all teachers reported compiling written notes based on what they thought about the lesson – sometimes mental notes were deemed to be sufficient. However some teachers said that reflection on lessons and lesson plans was encouraged by their school and the feedback was collated centrally:

> *…we are encouraged on our lesson plans, after the lesson to write a note about how the lesson went… our lesson plans go on a system in the school, and on the lesson plan there is an assessment notes section, so you are encouraged to reflect on the lessons.*

Several teachers, particularly those new to teaching, mentioned that self reflection was an approach that had been developed as part of their teacher training and they had carried on doing it since completing their training. A recently qualified primary school teacher said:

> *I use that* [self reflection] *a lot, it's something that I think about, it's something when you are doing your PGCE, it's ingrained a lot and it's something that's carried through because it's automatic almost because you do it so much.*

Overall, reflecting on their own teaching was seen as a non-threatening method of assessing where they were going right, and where there were gaps. That all of the interviewees reported using this approach suggests that the teachers felt it was important to constantly work on their teaching, and to avoid becoming complacent about their teaching ability, in line with the reported motivations for improving their teaching, as outlined in Chapter 2.

3.1.2 Observation

Observation can be internal (by and of peers and other colleagues within the same school) or external (for example by Ofsted inspectors, other schools, local authority (LA) staff or other organisations). Observations are a two-way process, providing potential for both teachers involved to benefit from the experience, and so this section includes comments on teachers' experiences of both sides of the observation process.

Internal observation

Internal observation was more common than external observations, which tended to be restricted to Ofsted inspections. Most teachers said that they had experienced internal observation from a peer, line manager or senior leader in their school fairly recently. Often this had formed part of the performance review process. A minority of teachers had observed their colleagues teaching – again sometimes this was an informal arrangement between peers and in other cases it was part of the review process. Arrangements for observations did not appear to be any more or less common in different school phases; whether it was a favoured approach or not depended upon the format and structure of management within individual schools.

On the whole, internal observation was perceived to be useful; however this depended on the type and amount of feedback received. It was important to teachers that the feedback was constructive, specific and at a sufficient level of detail. It also depended on who the other person involved in the activity was, and to what extent the teacher valued their input. If teachers were observed by someone they did not respect, they placed little value on the feedback provided. This was the case whether the person observing was their line manager completing the observation as part of the performance management process, or if the observer was another colleague.

Teachers found internal observation a useful approach which could highlight areas for them to improve, but also areas in which they were doing well. The feedback from an

observer was particularly helpful in identifying areas that the teacher was not aware of, as highlighted by a primary school teacher:

> *…it was useful for them to point out things I hadn't noticed or even things that had gone well which I hadn't realised, it's interesting to know if there is something I'm doing that I hadn't realised - that I'm not targeting a child, or it's better if I did something differently, anything useful - especially if it allows you to adapt and support the children's learning.*

Teachers who had been able to observe a colleague teaching were positive about the experience. This was particularly the case where teachers were able to observe teachers giving similar lessons to those they teach themselves:

> *I have recently done an internal observation for the first time and I think it was quite helpful because I got to see how someone else would work on a topic that I was doing.*

Interviewees said that it was important to share experiences and ideas and to discuss the approaches with the observer to get the most benefit from the exercise. For example, one teacher described how one of their lessons was recorded and then they watched it back with colleagues, after which they discussed strengths and weaknesses.

A common criticism of being observed was that it could become a slightly artificial exercise because the observed teacher '…*puts on a show*'. As one teacher with 35 years experience summarised: *'I don't find it particularly valuable because we know when people are coming in [to the lesson] so you make that more effort and that could not be sustained every day.'* In such cases teachers felt that flaws were masked, consequently some teachers felt that it was not always an accurate reflection of their teaching which in turn affected how useful the exercise is. This could be a particular issue when teachers were observed as part of the performance review process. This criticism was levelled at internal observations, but it could equally be true of external observations.

Time and opportunity to be involved in internal observations appeared to vary from school to school. Although teachers who had experienced internal observations had, on the whole, found the experience a useful one, it appeared that not all schools used internal observation regularly. Furthermore, some teachers, particularly line managers, said that they would like to have more opportunities to use peer observation, but finding the time to allow teachers to be involved in it was '…*logistically quite tough'*.

External observation

Teachers' experience of external observation was predominantly limited to being observed as part of an Ofsted inspection, although there were a handful of instances where staff from the local authority had carried out some observations. External observations tended to be much more infrequent than internal observations –

particularly in schools where Ofsted was the only form of external observation, because inspections only occur sporadically depending on the performance of the school.

Views were mixed about the usefulness of external observations to improve teaching. Due to the nature of Ofsted inspections, although the school as a whole is visited, not all teachers are observed. Some interviewees felt that the added stress and pressure of an impending visit outweighed the benefits of receiving feedback from an external person, as cited by a secondary school teacher:

> *Of minimum use to be honest, because I think the pressure that it puts you under negates the benefits of it, so you're jumping through hoops really. I mean I think you can learn something from it but I've only ever had one experience of Ofsted and I only got a very brief bit of feedback as I was teaching a class.*

Furthermore, several of the teachers who had experienced being observed by an external person felt that the feedback they received was limited, and thus not very helpful. For example one teacher said that although they received helpful feedback about what they were doing wrong, this was not accompanied by an indication of how it could be better: '*…they're often very good at telling where you're wrong but without telling you how to fix it.*'

However a few teachers remarked that a forthcoming Ofsted inspection could trigger a bigger self review of their teaching to try and make sure they were doing their best in advance of an inspection. So although the inspection might not result in all teachers being observed, the fact that they *might* be assessed prompted some teachers to review where they might need to improve.

Internal or external observation?

Generally the concept of observation was perceived as useful by teachers from all levels of experience. While newer teachers found it useful for improving their practice and learning new ways to approach problems, more experienced teachers still found the experience helpful because of the feedback they received. As highlighted in Chapter 2, teachers at all stages of their career recognised the importance of continuous development. It should be noted that not all teachers had experienced one or both types of observation and consequently some teachers were not able to comment on how helpful it had been.

More teachers seemed to feel that internal observation was helpful compared with external observation, partly because external observation was usually part of school assessment, which, as explained above, meant that it was a more stressful experience, and that the feedback was not always very helpful. The informal nature of internal observation appealed to several teachers, as one teacher explained:

It doesn't happen enough for it to be of value. I think any observation has to be someone you trust and someone who sees you more than once for 20 minutes. That's why I think in-house observation is much better.

Another teacher, however, felt that taking teachers out of their comfort zone could be powerful because the external observer provided a neutral presence. As a head of department, this teacher explained how it could be difficult for him to observe more experienced members of staff, and his belief that observation by external people could help mitigate against this:

I think sometimes teachers become insular and if the teacher has been at a school for too long I often feel they don't see the broader picture… for me [it's] *a deep concern, people get to know people and become loyal with each other so to speak … I believe the more external observations that can be done* [provide] *criticism from elsewhere, you know it would be helpful to some of my staff, because often it can be really awkward when you are observing someone with 30 years experience, and you know, I was well, a little boy when they started teaching, sometimes that can be a sticking point.*

This also highlights that it is important that teachers who are observing others, particularly in a performance management capacity and who need to provide meaningful feedback to the teacher, have the skills and confidence to do so. Furthermore, in order for the process to benefit the teacher being observed, the observed teacher needs to be open to receiving constructive feedback.

3.1.3 The Performance Management process and dialogue with line manager/head of department

Interviewees were asked about their experiences of performance management. Schools are required to have a performance management policy in place. Performance management in schools should take place on an annual basis, and be carried out by line managers for each of their staff. In addition to monitoring the performance of teachers against their job description, the performance management process is also a platform for teachers to identify and access ways of maintaining and improving their practice. Classroom observation can form part of the performance management process as a way of providing evidence for a teacher's review.

Overall, where the performance management process had been experienced, teachers tended to rate it as being somewhat helpful, but less useful than self reflection and observation as a way of identifying areas for improvement. However some teachers said that they had no experience of the performance management process in the last year. Others said that review meetings only took place once a year and this reduced the value of the process. Several of the teachers interviewed reported that observation by their line manager or other senior member of staff formed part of the performance management process. Teachers in secondary schools and special schools appeared to have a slightly better awareness of how the performance management process could help them to identify areas for improvement than primary school teachers.

The helpful aspects of the performance management process were related to the objective setting process. This reflects the finding that almost two-thirds of teachers in the 2010 survey of teachers felt that the objective setting process was useful. Teachers saw the review meetings as a useful prompt to reflect on their practice, and found that having targets could provide direction. Having mutually recognised areas for improvement that had been recorded was particularly helpful for some teachers in terms of improving their access to support in improving their teaching. As a primary school teacher explained:

> *What it does do is put it down officially as an area for development. So you can use that as a way to get onto courses. If it is not in your performance management, it's harder to justify it for a £150 course. If it's there as an area, it helps.*

Dialogue and reviews with line managers tended to happen as part of the performance management process. Some teachers also reported informal discussions with their line manager as being helpful in terms of practice improvement, particularly the teachers who only had formal performance management reviews annually:

> *We have talked about it and identified what needs to be done and I think it's quite useful in some ways to be able to have communication because otherwise, if it's one thing and then you don't speak about it until the review happens, then there could be something I need support in and it's better to have a constant dialogue going on so I know I can go there for other help and ideas.*

It appears that a positive and open relationship between the teacher and their line manager is important for teachers to be able to benefit from the exercise. The value of working with line managers and more senior staff could vary, depending on the relationship between the two teachers as highlighted by one secondary school teacher: *'head of department is useful, line management is not so useful, but that depends on who your line manager is'*. In addition to a good working relationship, both the teacher and their line manager need to have the motivation and desire to make improvement happen, but also the line manager needs to have the confidence and skills to conduct performance reviews and observations where appropriate.

3.1.4 Other approaches

Other commonly mentioned approaches to identifying areas for improvement included collaborating with colleagues. This included methods such as reflection and (informal or formal) discussion with peers, team teaching, mentoring and coaching. In particular, reflecting on practice and discussing it with colleagues was highlighted as a useful tool by several teachers, and as described here by a secondary school teacher:

> *You do bounce quite a lot of things off each other and you do get new ideas from that and think about what you've done and how you could adapt it and all those sorts of things. So I do think that's quite an important one, it's quite an organic one.*

In addition, teachers who had worked with a colleague as part of a coaching and mentoring approach said that this had been a useful exercise, although not many teachers mentioned that they had received this type of support in terms of improving their practice. (Just under a quarter of teachers who responded to the survey said they had experienced this in the past 12 months). The teachers who had a coach or mentor felt it was valuable, not only in terms of providing directed support, but also in encouraging self reflection:

> *Coaching and mentoring is better than one lesson observation by a line manager because the person sees all of your teaching strategies - for example how you integrate literacy and numeracy - over a period of time, rather than trying to cram everything into one lesson which is being observed.*

Using data was also mentioned as a helpful tool for indentifying areas to improve teaching. An example of this was that reviewing the results of the pupils they taught helped them to identify areas for future focus, and areas that had not been understood by pupils. By looking at student progress, teachers identified ways to adapt their lessons to support students to achieve the level the teacher felt the pupils were capable of. This is one example of how teacher improvement can overlap with school improvement.

3.1.5 Review of different approaches

Overall, teachers talked about two broad groups of approaches to improvement: *formal* approaches which tended to included processes that involved assessment of their teaching – such as performance management or observation by Ofsted; and *informal* approaches which were self led or involved working with their peers. Teachers tended to favour approaches that were perceived as more *informal*, as discussed below.

Self reflection and discussion with colleagues tended to be the approaches that teachers said they used the most often to identify where they needed to make changes to their teaching practice. In some cases teachers said that they reviewed every lesson more or less immediately, at least on an informal level. Informal discussions with colleagues were also common because they could take place every day - for example during coffee breaks and in between lessons – it is not an activity that requires extensive organisation or resources. It does, however, still require time, and this was an issue identified by some interviewees.

In contrast, teachers' views about the most effective way of identifying areas for improvement were much more diverse. Opinions about what worked best for each individual were very much a personal choice, however a common combination was self reflection and some form of observation and discussion with peers about teaching practice. A minority of teachers found external observation and performance management the most effective approaches for identifying areas to improve; most teachers appeared to favour more informal techniques:

> *For me personally, self reflection and actually you get ideas looking at other people. I think informal observation can be the most effective because people feel more relaxed about it and have a good dialogue about it afterwards.*

The informal approaches were favoured by some teachers because it removed the external pressure and stress. Furthermore several teachers mentioned that working towards their improvement by themselves suited the way they worked.

Those that favoured the more structured and formal processes explained that they appreciated the targets and direction associated with them, and also felt that these were approaches that could highlight things they had not identified themselves:

> *When you're reflecting on your own practice purely by yourself or just have an informal chat you have a set vision of how you are as a teacher. When somebody else comes in from outside of that to watch you they do notice things that you're not necessarily aware of and they can highlight things that you didn't realise were strengths or weaknesses. So I think it's useful having another pair of eyes.*

> [In] *performance management… you have the formal agreement that this is something you will work on and there are support systems as part of the performance management in our school, … I think that helps and it's effective because I can cross check what my target is and look at the overall target and see within that what support there will be from the school, and what I need to put in myself, and I can then work on the stages as appropriate.*

Time and the availability of approaches seemed to influence which approaches were used the most often and which were perceived to be most effective. The informal nature of some of the approaches means they will always be more accessible to teachers (self reflection, discussions with colleagues). In contrast, other approaches not only require more resources, but in their very nature are carried out less frequently (observations and performance management reviews).

It is also worth emphasising that what teachers found to be an effective approach varied from teacher to teacher, therefore, a range of support needs to be available to meet the different needs of individual teachers. It should be acknowledged that not all teachers had experienced all of the approaches explored in the interviews, and so they were unable to comment on the effectiveness of some techniques such as coaching, mentoring and observation work. Furthermore, it appeared that not all interviewees had experienced a high standard of some of the approaches (such as observation and performance management) which is likely to influence their views about the effectiveness of such methods.

3.2 Making the improvement happen

Once an area for improvement had been identified, teachers said they would typically approach acting on this in one of two ways: discussion with other teachers or self-directed research in terms of information seeking.

Discussion with other teachers was not confined to colleagues within their school – teachers reported consulting with friends and family members also in the teaching profession, and looking at experiences of other teachers posted online. Within school it was not restricted to discussion with their peers; many would discuss it with their line manager or other senior members of staff. What was important for teachers was to gather the views and ideas of people they felt could help them the most in terms of improving their practice; those who might have experienced a similar challenge, teachers with more experience or those with more access to professional support systems such as professional associations or networks with other schools: '*I probably internally talk to people that I feel comfortable with and who I respect professionally*.'

The other favoured approach was to look for information and advice – most commonly use of the internet to look for ideas about how they could work on the area they had identified for improvement. This varied from looking for sources of information and guidance on the issue (for example searching for courses that might be suitable) or consulting forums to see if other teachers had suggestions. Specific websites were infrequently mentioned, but the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Times Educational Supplement (TES) websites were highlighted as examples of websites that teachers had used in the past.

Professional bodies and the local authority were less frequently mentioned, and when asked directly, few teachers said they would draw on them to find ways of improving their practice. One teacher explained that their reason for not contacting the LA was because they felt they should go through their school as a first step, rather than bypassing the school and potentially causing friction between the school and LA.

Teachers were asked about examples of addressing a particular area of their practice. Their responses tended to fall into two groups: either working informally on an area for development they had identified themselves; or being involved in a course or other professional development activity that had been identified by someone in their school.

In most of the cases where teachers spoke about addressing an area that they had identified themselves, and that they personally wanted to address, they tended to go about doing this through informal, independent means. There could be a number of reasons for this; one suggestion is that they prefer to work on self-identified areas for improvement independently, in line with the preference for 'less threatening' and more informal approaches to practice improvement outlined in Section 3.1. The following quotation provides an example of how a primary school teacher addressed an area for improvement they had identified themselves:

> *I have thought a lot about the pace of my lessons and the activities I choose to use in lessons that affect the pace. I addressed it through self-directed research and peer advice,* [such as looking at] *teaching magazines and talking to teaching colleagues at this school informally.*

It was interesting that many teachers chose to talk about involvement in a formal CPD activity such as attending a course, given the prevalence of self-led approaches earlier in the interviews, but in most cases teachers said they had attended that course because their school had sent them on it. It appears that in practice, when teachers were involved in formal CPD activities, in many cases it was to address a need identified at the whole-school level, or by a line manager, rather than being led by the individual. Such courses were often about a new initiative or policy that applied to the whole teaching staff and consequently all staff were required to attend. Although in such cases these courses were not necessarily addressing a need they had identified at an individual level as discussed above, teachers reported benefits of attending the training as described by one interviewee: '*Everybody in the school was sent on it, at some point. It was a school need, and I suppose from that I did change my practice*'.

There appeared to be a difference between how the areas for improvement identified by the individual and by the school were acted upon. Some teachers explained that they would only receive funding, or be released from lessons for formal professional development activities which were related to the school's development or strategic plan. As one teacher highlighted:

[Interviewer:] Is the professional development you have engaged in, in the last 12 months, more or less than you would have liked?

[Teacher:] *Less, because it's only been linked to what the school's strategic plan says.*

[I:] What would you have liked above what you achieved?

[T:] *I would like* [to be involved in] *things from my own interest and not just from what I should be interested in.*

[I:] Could you give me some examples?

[T:] *I was asked to go on different conferences that are laid on by our LA but you can't go on them unless it's an issue in the strategic plan.*

All of this suggests that, while school and individual teacher development needs may overlap considerably, there can sometimes also be differences in their needs. Of course, teacher improvement contributes to whole school improvement and consequently teachers' objectives identified as part of performance management should be aligned to the school development plan. However, as highlighted earlier, many teachers also *independently* identify areas that they feel they need to work on, even if not explicitly related to the school strategy. Line managers and teachers need to be aware of the balance between individual and whole school needs. Although formal professional development and learning activities aimed at improving school

needs are likely to take precedence when resources and time are limited, there may be informal, within school, ways of supporting teachers to improve areas of their individual practice in need of development.

4. Impact of professional learning and development activities

> **Key findings**
>
> - Teachers almost universally held the view that the professional development activities in which they had been involved had been beneficial to them and their schools. Several pointed to examples where they had also been of benefit to learners.
>
> - Professional development activities had enabled teachers to refine their pedagogy in ways which kept abreast of recent and ongoing changes and which were designed to meet learners' needs.
>
> - There was evidence of examples where classroom organisation and practice had changed as a result of improvement or development activities.

Impact of professional learning and development activities

Almost all teachers believed that the professional development activities in which they had been involved had been of benefit. This was true of the primary, secondary and special school teachers interviewed.

The benefits that had been derived included:

- benefits in terms of developing pedagogy
- benefits in terms of meeting learners' needs (including those with SEN)
- implementing new systems in a school (such as new assessment systems and schemes of work)
- gaining new ideas, including changes to classroom organisation
- developing subject-specific areas
- helping achieve the wider mission of the school.

Acquiring new ways of teaching and learning was referred to regularly in relation to the impact of the professional development activities on pedagogy. This was a feature which was commented upon by teachers from all phases, including some who were long-serving teachers and others who had entered the profession more recently. For example, a teacher with over 30 years' experience noted that the opportunities had been a chance to reflect and overcome a tendency to follow the same pattern continually, '*The trouble is I've been teaching for so long it* [the usual way of working] *just becomes part of how you deliver a lesson*'. The teacher concerned felt that the activity had '*provided me with something I brought back to class that was a good addition to my practice*'. Likewise, a teacher with five years' experience noted '*You get new ideas and get inspired, you think carefully about what you are doing again*'.

Particular examples of where teachers' professional development experience had an impact included:

- an example where a school had introduced Assessment for Learning
- the impact of a primary school teacher's activities aimed at developing understanding of emotional behaviour, which had influenced the teacher's response to certain types of behaviour, and the impact of a secondary school teacher's understanding of when students become frustrated and its link to behaviour
- the way a group of teachers from different schools had considered the links between gender and learning in order to identify what appealed to learners
- the impact of considering learners' preferred styles of learning, in particular the needs of those who preferred kinaesthetic approaches
- the way the professional development activities had encouraged a teacher to develop opportunities for different types of play.

And more broadly:

- changes in classroom management
- the development of new schemes of work.

There were also a number of examples where teachers had seen an impact from professional development activities aimed to help them support pupils with special educational needs. For example, primary school teachers described how they had implemented revised methods of meeting the needs of learners with dyslexia, while another had used the techniques learned in order to develop a different approach to teaching spelling with pupils with SEN. This type of activity was also specifically mentioned by teachers from special schools. They felt that they had been given new insights into the work of other professionals such as speech and language therapists and that this had opened their eyes to new ways of working.

Most of the teachers talked about impact they had seen in their classroom, although there were also some descriptions of wider impact in schools. For example, a primary school teacher with 18 years' experience described how one of her colleagues had introduced a more consistent way of marking which had reduced the amount of time it took and thereby released time for other aspects of their work. Other staff had been trained in the new approach and across the school they had seen the improvement.

Subject-specific issues had also impacted on schools. For example, a teacher with 37 years' experience, teaching in a primary school, referred to the way that the scheme of work had been revised to include more examples of everyday applications of mathematics, as a result of the professional development activities undertaken. Likewise, another teacher with 30 years' experience had introduced new ways of presenting writing tasks for children. A similar range of outcomes were mentioned by secondary school teachers. For example, it was noted that the activities had enabled

teachers to develop their own understanding of aspects of their subjects which had influenced the way those elements had been taught.

Teachers also valued the way that engaging in professional development activities had provided them with opportunities to reflect on their own practice which would not have been possible otherwise. For example, a secondary school teacher with six years experience stated that:

> *It gives you experience of situations and scenarios, and actually more than anything, time to reflect on it, so it's not often what you get from the course, but having the time away from school and your classes and the time to think about things and focus on things. Usually that's the benefit of going in a course, not the course itself.*

This echoed another teacher's comment who felt 'refreshed' as a result of taking part. Teachers reported that they had more confidence in their teaching having seen other examples and had opportunities to observe and learn from others.

As described in Section 3.2, most of the examples provided by teachers in relation to where they had improved their practice and seen an impact were as a result of involvement in formal CPD activities such as courses, as outlined above. It appeared that a tangible impact was easier to discern from attending formal CPD rather than informal, self-led approaches – possibly because courses often tell participants what they will learn by the end of the session, and because they provide an opportunity to reflect and review. It is worth noting, however, that there were some instances where teachers described how informal development activities had also had a positive impact:

- a primary school teacher did some self-led research to find different and interesting ways of teaching French to pupils, which the children enjoyed
- a secondary school teacher worked informally with an AST in her school to improve how she worked with sixth form students to push the higher-achieving students further
- a teacher from a special school improved how they managed behaviour in their classes by observing a colleague.

5.   Support for improving practice

> **Key findings**
>
> - In terms of sources of support for improving their practice, most respondents felt well supported by their school and their teaching colleagues. Teachers' immediate colleagues were clearly a key day-to-day source of ideas and support for improving teaching practice.
>
> - Other sources of support – for example, other schools, the local authority, and professional bodies – were less frequently used, but could nonetheless be important for the requirements of individual teachers.
>
> - Interviewee responses indicated that the ethos of the school, the style of approach of senior managers and line managers and the funding available for professional development activities affected the level of support available.
>
> - Teachers felt that performance management contributed towards practice improvement to some extent. The objective setting process provided support and opportunity for teachers to access formal professional development activities.
>
> - More than half of the interviewees were not aware of, or did not use the professional standards framework to improve their teaching. Teachers who had used the framework to progress said it had contributed to their practice improvement – for example Newly Qualified Teachers or teachers working towards Excellent Teacher or Advanced Skills Teacher status.

5.1   Support available to improve practice

Interviewees were asked about the extent to which they felt well supported in improving their teaching practice. This question was then followed up with a number of probes about where they accessed their support from.

Responses about the extent of support ranged from 'not at all' to 'totally' or 'phenomenal', with around three-quarters taking a positive view about the support received. Typical positive comments included the following:

> *I do feel well supported in improving my approach.*

> *Very well supported from my line manager and head – it's a very supportive school.*

> *Well supported with a lot of opportunities.*

> *I am very well supported actually. It's very unusual for a request for training to be turned down.*

> *The school is very supportive, and individuals within it too. Everyone has been helpful.*

The overall view, then, was positive. There were a few respondents, however, who were slightly less positive, making comments such as: '*I would say about seven or eight out of ten*' (primary teacher) and '*sort of average to good*' (secondary teacher). There were also four individuals who were overtly negative about the extent to which they had been supported. The small number of negative responses seemed to focus on a lack of funding and time for professional development activities. One example of this came from an experienced female primary school teacher who, when asked how well supported she had been, said:

> *Not particularly well. And that comes down to money. Our school hasn't enough money for me to do the training that I would like to do. We haven't enough money to provide staff with the INSET courses they would want to go on, that's a shame.*

When respondents were asked to identify their main sources of support, the most common response was to say that their colleagues (or peers) or their school were the most important source of support. One primary teacher, for example, reflected the views of many respondents, when she said that support came '*primarily from my teaching colleagues… the headteacher does support me but my colleagues are more available everyday*'. This is linked to the finding described in Chapter 3 that peers were particularly valued as a source of support and advice about how to improve practice. A secondary respondent identified various sources of support, from across the school: '*From my SENCO, from well, the staff, the senior management… and I get support from the subject teachers as well, the pupils I work with, I liaise with them a lot*'.

Several respondents mentioned their headteacher, though opinions differed on the extent and usefulness of headteacher support, ranging from '*The headteacher is very supportive of us attending training*' through to '*the senior management said they can't afford the time*' and '*I don't feel supported by the management*'. Rather fewer mentioned other schools, the local authority and professional associations.

The LA, for example, was mentioned by only a minority of respondents and views were mixed on LA support. At the positive end, one respondent said that '*If I do have any questions I contact the borough where there is good support. We have cluster meetings and things like that*' and another commented that: '*I think that the city council is very good at offering you opportunities… There seems to be quite a lot of support comes from the city, quite a lot of different professional development courses on offer and funding for different projects*'. Others suggested that LA support was '*sporadic*' (primary teacher): '*they support and take away in the hope you are going to carry on, but it doesn't work*' (primary teacher): and '*I wouldn't say their support was overwhelming*' (secondary teacher).

It was rare for a primary teacher to mention support from other schools, though school partnerships and subject networks were mentioned by some secondary and special school respondents. Professional bodies were only mentioned by three interviewees.

Teachers felt that the extent and nature of support available depended upon a variety of factors, such as the quality of line management and the culture within the school. This links back to the finding highlighted in Chapter 3 about the apparent variety of quality of line management and performance management experienced by teachers. For example, a senior primary teacher stressed that the extent of support depended upon the structure of the school and the approach taken by the headteacher. The importance of line management and the dynamics of such relationships was also stressed, as in this comment from a secondary teacher:

> *It also depends on line management. This year I haven't felt well supported at all, but I have felt supported by the head of science. It is individual, there is basically no line management training in school, and so that's a massive flaw. You get people who are just experienced line managing other people but there are others who are only experienced in teaching and haven't a clue how to line manage. That's a massive welfare issue in schools.*

Analysis of the interview responses suggested that there may be historical patterns, common across the primary and secondary sectors, in the use of different sources of support used by teachers to improve their practice. For example, one theme was that direct LA support for improving teaching practice had declined:

- *'I think the authority generally have less training that they deliver themselves than when I first joined the authority'* (primary teacher).
- *'Within the school* [I am] *well supported, the county, less so now, we used to be much better supported than we are now'* (primary teacher).

One primary teacher with 30 years experience also suggested that support for improving teaching practice had declined *in general*: when asked 'How far would you say you have been supported in improving your practice?', she replied: '*Of recent years, not very: previously, a lot!'*

Perceptions about who is more 'deserving' of improvement support seem to exist. An experienced primary teacher said that she did not apply for courses for two reasons: firstly, because her subject was languages and improvement was concentrated in literacy and mathematics, and, secondly, because '*the focus is on NQTs and I dare say I'm an old timer'*. A young secondary teacher took the view that: '*The onus is put on the younger teachers to change practice and bring ideas*'. Another interviewee who had been teaching for 18 years felt that their school invested more CPD in younger teachers.

The attitudes of teachers in this study, and in the accompanying survey, showed that on the whole teachers at all stages of their career wanted to continue to improve, and felt a responsibility to do so. It is important that all teachers, irrespective of their length of service and career stage are not only given the opportunities to engage in professional development activities, but also act on them and develop change in their practice.

5.2 The role of performance management and the professional standards

Performance management and the professional standards can be used to support and inform teacher development. Interviewees were asked about the extent to which these contributed to improving their teaching practice.

Performance Management

Views on how performance management contributed to improvement in teaching practice varied. Although some teachers were quite positive about the contribution performance management could make, in some schools teachers felt that the review process was not returned to frequently enough to help them improve their practice. Indeed, as highlighted in Chapter 3, some teachers reported no experience of performance management within the last year.

As identified earlier in this report (Section 3.1) most teachers did not find that performance management was a particularly useful tool in terms of *identifying* which aspects of their teaching practice they needed to improve. However, some teachers felt that the process of setting objectives was helpful because it provided specific areas to focus on, as one primary interviewee highlighted: '*it helps you to focus on a particular area of teaching that you try to improve*'. That is not to say however that ideas for objectives in terms of areas of their pedagogy that they felt they needed to develop were necessarily formulated as part of performance management review meetings, and indeed it seemed that in many cases teachers identified areas for improvement independently of the performance management process.

In fact teachers felt the process could give them access to formal professional development activities such as courses to address a need. For example when asked if the performance management process had helped them to improve their practice, a primary school teacher replied: '*No, to be honest I wouldn't have said so. It's helped me to get on courses because it's on paper and its part of a formalised system... otherwise I'd have said not particularly*'.

A number of teachers recognised the potential for the performance management process to contribute to their attempts to improve their practice, however for many there was a short fall between how it could help them, and the role performance management actually occupied in their work. One issue was around the objective setting process. As highlighted in Section 3.2, many teachers found the process of setting targets helpful; however, the targets or objectives given to teachers were mainly related to the school development plan. Although teachers could see some value in this, several would have liked more of an opportunity to identify their own areas for improvement to work towards. Furthermore, teachers were sometimes unclear about how objectives were related to improving teaching, as one secondary school teacher explained: '*I don't know how much it would affect my teaching practice. One of my targets was to look at data analysis and stuff like that; it's more about the monitoring*'. Perhaps teachers and their line managers need to be clearer

about how their particular objectives are aimed to help them to become a better teacher.

Some of the teachers interviewed did not feel that the performance management process helped them to improve their teaching practice at all. For example one primary school teacher felt that performance management was '*more a monitoring rather than a development* [tool]'.

Other concerns about the performance management process were related to how it was carried out, and who by. Personality and the relationship between the teacher and the line manager was identified as a key factor in whether or not performance management contributed to improving a teacher's practice. This reflected the issues raised earlier in relation to the support available more widely within their school; good working relationships are key:

> *It depends on how it's done and who does it. In our school it's taken seriously, but it depends, I have someone I respect doing my performance management, if I didn't it wouldn't benefit me whatsoever.*
>
> (Secondary school teacher)

> *It's just a paperwork exercise - it's very subjective and not very fair. It's there to catch you out; it's designed to make you fail. It's very deconstructive it's very de-motivating and makes it demoralising….I think the actual thing itself is quite a good idea - obviously I'm not being very objective because I'm talking about my own personal experience. I'm sure the actual thing of reflecting on your teaching and not just doing the same thing day in day out year in year out is good. But again it's a personality issue.*
>
> (Primary school teacher)

The professional standards

More than half of the teachers interviewed were not aware of the professional standards or their purpose (interestingly this was quite different to the survey in which almost eight in ten teachers said they had a good understanding of the professional standards). The teachers in this study who did not know about the professional standards tended to be more experienced, without any line management responsibility, and teachers who had not been expected to use them as part of their progression.

The teachers who did know about the professional standards were those who were newer to the profession and who had worked through the framework, or teachers who had progressed to become a teacher with additional responsibilities, such as an Excellent Teacher or Advanced Skills Teacher. The more experienced teachers who were aware of the professional standards were typically teachers who had supported NQTs (Newly Qualified Teachers), or were senior leaders. There were examples where the professional standards were used as part of the performance management process, although this was not widespread.

Some teachers found the professional standards helpful in terms of providing a benchmark to meet and to work towards: '*I think it does help because it does what it says on the tin. It gives people a standard to work to. And also exemplars about this is what you expect people to be doing when they're working to this standard*'. Another teacher said that their school had used the professional standards to help define job descriptions which had helped make more teachers in their school aware of them.

One teacher who had used the professional standards as part of their NQT year, however, felt that it had been a box-ticking exercise, rather than providing added value. Another who was aware of, and had used the framework, felt that in theory it was a good idea, however it did not translate into practical use very well.

A typical comment from teachers who were aware of the professional standards but who had since progressed from the stage in their career where they had to regularly refer to them and provide evidence against them was: '*I haven't looked at anything like that since I was a NQT*'. Without an ongoing need to refer to them, and knowing that they would no longer be measured against them, teachers stopped using them. This suggests that although the professional standards were useful initially when joining the teaching profession, or while pursuing progression through the thresholds, teachers found them less helpful in their day-to-day work. A comment from a secondary school teacher who had been teaching for seven years illustrates this point:

> *I think it's useful for trainee teachers and NQTs particularly but in all honesty the only time I've really looked at it is was when I did my threshold application. And I think it's very useful for identifying for trainee teachers what it is what they should be doing, what they need to be working on but once you're in the profession those things are kind of in-built into the way the school works anyway - that they're almost there - more sort of subconscious.*

Overall, then, at the time of the interviews, the professional standards were not a major influence on teachers seeking to improve their practice. They did provide a benchmark that could be used, and they were useful for NQTs, but they were not part of the fabric of self-improvement for teachers.

6. Barriers to practice improvement

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Key findings

- Respondents felt that time was the biggest barrier to improvement because of full timetables and limited opportunities to be released from lessons. Time was also a barrier to sufficient opportunity to reflect on lessons.

- Interviewees also expressed a view that CPD needs to take place at a time proximate to the need for the learning to be applied.

- Funding was also identified as a limiting factor, but less so than time.

- Other barriers to improvement highlighted by interviewees included the school culture, attitudes of colleagues and teachers' individual energy levels.

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Time was perceived to be the biggest barrier to practice improvement by most of the teachers. Participation in formal professional development activities, such as attending a course, or mentoring and coaching, were approaches that teachers found difficult to get involved in because of both time and opportunity. Full timetables and the demands of paperwork and administrative duties were all cited as reasons for limited time for CPD. Finance was an issue to some extent – both in terms of funding a course and funding suitable supply cover. Although financial reasons were quite frequently mentioned, funding was seen as less of a barrier than time by many, and as one senior leader explained, one of the main problems was that of being released from the classroom, and the limited availability of suitable cover: '*Funding in itself isn't often a barrier; it's time that's the main one. What we can't afford is for people to be out of the building because we need to keep it pretty tight*'.

This was a particular concern for teachers with classes with behaviour management issues, and teachers who worked in small schools. This also links to the earlier finding (in Section 3.2) that teaching staff felt they had difficulty finding the support to participate in formal CPD in order to work on areas of their teaching that they had identified themselves, rather than those which had been identified or mandated by the school.

The inappropriate timeliness of some activities was another barrier. Teachers felt that the professional development activity needed to take place close to when the learning could be applied and when it would have the most benefit. One teacher provided an example where she was aware that a pupil with particular special needs would be joining her class in the following year. She was sent on a course to help her support this pupil, however she felt that she completed the training too far in advance of when the child would join her class, and by the time the child was in her care she had forgotten much of the training because she had not had the opportunity to practice in the interim. There are issues here in terms of the frequency of courses being held, and also enabling teachers to go on the right course at the most appropriate and helpful time.

Teaching is an occupation that requires high levels of stamina and commitment and a few teachers said that their level of professional development activity was limited by their own motivation and energy levels. Although they might want to work on a particular area, they found that they could go through a school year without pushing to do any additional development work, other than what was compulsory within the school. Existing commitments that formed part of their role such as a full timetable combined with high levels of paperwork prevented them from applying their efforts to practice improvement. It appears that some teachers see professional development activities as 'desirable' rather than 'essential', and something to be carried out on top of their day to day duties rather than being integrated into their work.

Despite many teachers reporting that they felt supported in improving their teaching practice, as described in Section 5.1, the culture or ethos of the school, and in some respects the attitudes of other teachers were sometimes barriers too. In particular, teachers found it difficult when other staff were reluctant or even unwilling to change or challenge the way they worked. This was an issue when trying to introduce improvements not only to their own practice but also when encouraging the school to adopt new approaches. For example one of the secondary school teachers felt that the attitudes of colleagues who had been teaching at that school for a long time could be a barrier to change and that this was impacting on pupils:

> *I do think that* [the SLT are] *taking steps in the right direction and they do want to push teaching and learning on and little by little it's happening. It's just the case of the dinosaurs that are there are getting phased out slowly but surely and the newer teachers are helping push the school in the right direction, because you can see the* [year] *7s and 8s are being taught in the right way and are engaged and willing to take a stab at certain things and they're willing to engage in the process far more than sort of the 9s upwards,* [years] *9, 10 and 11 are a little bit more "just tell me what I need to know to pass my exam".*

It is also worth mentioning here that a lack of support from colleagues, and in particular from line managers prevented some teachers from addressing areas they wished to improve.

Most of the barriers mentioned were barriers to 'formal' professional development activities such as attending a course; however some teachers said that they also had difficulty finding the time to reflect on their practice. As discussed in Section 3.1 teachers found self reflection an important aspect of their teaching practice and although it is not an activity that necessarily takes a long time, several teachers said that they did not always have the time to step back and reflect on how a lesson went, as evidenced by the comment of one of the primary school interviewees:

> *Time. There is an incredible amount of paperwork and planning and assessment and I think sometimes that can take up a lot of time, leaving me with less reflection time. Sometimes it's part of my development, but for things like environmental education, I need to have time to research and set up*

meetings with school council and sometimes that's not always possible because other things are going on.

Another concern in relation to the less formal ways of improving practice was that teachers using self-led approaches sometimes felt less confident about what they had learnt, rather than if the knowledge had been developed and verified by an 'expert'. Therefore, although self reflection is commonly used, teachers need to be supported to build on what emerges from the reflection on their teaching. As highlighted in Section 3.2, areas for improvement identified through self reflection tended to be followed up using informal and self-led approaches. Schools may wish to consider putting aside some resources to help support teachers meet personal areas for improvement, and not only to address the areas identified in the school development plan.

7. Conclusions

Overall, teachers were very committed to improving their teaching. The evidence showed that this was not restricted to newly qualified teachers, or teachers with career ambitions, but that all interviewed teachers (representing a mix of characteristics) felt it was important to continue to improve as a teacher.

Motivation to improve was present in all of the teachers interviewed. The most commonly cited reason for wanting to improve their teaching practice was an intrinsic motivation to be the best teacher they could be. This was linked to a desire to give the pupils in their school the best education they could by inspiring them and helping the children to achieve their potential. Other key motivators included to contribute to school improvement and to meet school and department targets.

How teachers then acted upon their desire to become a better teacher varied. Self reflection and discussion with colleagues were the approaches used most frequently to identify areas for their own improvement. Preferences regarding the most effective method of identifying gaps in teaching practice were a personal choice – this varied from informal approaches such as self reflection and peer discussion to observation, coaching and mentoring, or objective setting within the performance management process. However, not all of the interviewees had experienced approaches such as observation or coaching and mentoring activities and as a result might not have been able to comment on these approaches.

On the whole teachers felt well supported by their school and their colleagues; indeed, their peers were one of the main sources of support and inspiration for practice improvement.

School staff attitudes and relationships could have a big impact on the perceived effectiveness and success of teacher improvement. This was seen in teacher comments about the role of observation, performance management and the barriers experienced and support provided in their efforts to become a better teacher. The emerging message was that careful consideration when matching teachers and managers could help to make techniques such as observation even more effective. Of course, this is in addition to ensuring that teachers who conduct staff development activities such as performance management and observation have the skills and confidence to be able to carry out these tasks effectively. Individual teachers need to be open to having their practice being reviewed by others, but without supportive working relationships teachers are unlikely to get the most out of partnership-working development activities.

The performance management process was helpful to some teachers in improving their practice, particularly the objective setting process. Teachers would value more opportunities to work towards personal objectives as well as objectives filtered down

from the school development plan. The performance management process could be used to facilitate this. However some teachers reported that they had experienced infrequent, or in some cases no, review meetings over the previous year and as a result had not received any support to improve their practice via the performance management process. Although teachers tended to know about the role of performance management, awareness of the professional standards framework was limited. Teachers who had used the professional standards tended to be those working towards a threshold (QTS, Excellent Teacher or Advanced Skills teacher).

On the whole, teachers felt that they had better opportunities to access formal CPD for activities to address areas of improvement linked to the school development plan. Several reported that they had found it difficult to access formal support such as attending a course or coaching and mentoring to help them improve areas of the teaching they had identified themselves (for example through self-reflection). As a result, areas for improvement they had identified themselves which lay outside of the school development plan tended to be acted upon using more informal means such as informal collaboration with colleagues, or by looking for information independently, often drawing on the internet. This was illustrated by a primary teacher's comment: '*If it was a perfect world I would look for a course and go on it, but as that's not always available it would be to talk to colleagues and see what they do*.' It should be noted that in some cases teachers simply preferred working alone to develop their practice.

In addition to access, time was a big issue for teachers trying to improve their teaching practice – from the start of the process of identifying where improvements were needed, to trying to find time to act on this and then apply it back to their day-to-day practice. Furthermore, long gaps between the development activity and the point at which the learning needed to be applied reduced the benefits of the knowledge and skills gained. Although they felt a personal responsibility to improve their practice, some teachers felt that they also needed support to find the time to be able to reflect on their practice and engage in development work.

Overall, teachers felt that professional development and learning activities had been beneficial to their practice and to their schools. Teachers talked about changes to the way they worked as a result of engagement in CPD, and of positive impacts on learners. Many of the examples provided by interviewees were related to courses or other types of formal CPD they had been involved with, but many teachers also talked about small changes made as a result of their own investigation and search for information, discussions with colleagues and self-reflection.

The study showed that teachers were keen to continually better their teaching practice, and that they had seen positive impact as a result of practice development, although pursuing improvement was not always free of barriers. Interviewees highlighted a number of key supporting factors which helped them fulfil their commitment to becoming the best teacher they could be, including:

- a positive working relationship with their line manager and other colleagues within school

- time to reflect on their own practice

- performance management objectives that were relevant to their individual development, in addition to objectives related to school aims

- support, access and opportunity to be involved in 'formal' CPD (such as courses) to supplement the more informal means of development, such as self-led information gathering

- useful information and shared ideas from other teachers both online and within school.

Individuals and organisations involved in teacher training and development, as well as schools and LAs, may wish to consider how they can ensure continuing and maximising the provision of these kinds of support for teachers seeking to improve their practice.