

## *What PLD is best for me? How can I decide?*

Just like the children we teach, we too are on a learning journey, one that will continue throughout our teaching careers. We add new skills, we update our knowledge, we take on different responsibilities, we broaden our experience with different groups of children and different teaching situations. We respond to changing community expectations and to evolving Ministry requirements and priorities.

How can we navigate a journey which has so many diverse “ports of call”? That’s where *professional learning development* (or “PLD”) has its role. But when, where, which of the various PLD opportunities on offer will best meet our needs? This short paper looks at some of the factors that can help us make our choice.

### **What PLD do I actually need?**

Some people enthusiastically sign up for every course that comes along, while others participate reluctantly only when the principal books it for the whole staff. Neither option guarantees an effective outcome. If we’re going to undertake the extra work and the demand on our time, then we’ve got to feel it’s something that meets a real need for us, something we can genuinely commit to.

Sometimes that real need arises from our recognition of significant events or changes within our teaching situation, changes that really do make it essential for us to undertake at least some PLD. Developments in technology were an example of this. Not all of us embarked with joy on learning skills far removed from those we’d regarded as basic to our work. But as time went on and we saw more of the possibilities opened up by technology, most of us found ourselves becoming more and more “technology savvy” and even reaching out to embrace more of this in our planning. Now it’s hard to imagine teaching without some use of technology, and it’s always evolving.

A different and powerful prompt comes from our recognition of a need in those we teach, a need we cannot fully meet. That’s a prompt that helps us maintain our commitment and supports our sense of making a worthwhile difference for that child or children.

For example, many of us feel uncertain about recognising when a child is gifted (let alone providing adequately for them). Equally, we may recognise a major cultural gap between ourselves and some of the children we teach: how do we bridge that? Then there’s the child whose family is desperately poor and free school breakfasts aren’t enough to overcome that child’s low energy and related lack of self-belief – how do we help?

We might call on the Learning Support Coordinator, the school counsellor or the RTLB for guidance, but ultimately we feel compelled to build our own ability to support that child. Or, of course, we may *be* the Learning Support Coordinator, the school counsellor or the RTLB and recognise our need to upskill in a particular area.

Thus at this point we start to look for the PLD best suited to the need we’ve identified.

### **What PLD is available? Where can it be found?**

In New Zealand, firstly there are the official sources of information. One is the Ministry’s Te Kete Ipurangi website ([www.tki.org.nz](http://www.tki.org.nz)). A large number of “communities” covering virtually every aspect of the education system are listed there, and some of these will from time to time list any PLD they are currently offering. The Ministry’s *Education Gazette* also carries

notices about forthcoming PLD opportunities (<https://gazette.education.govt.nz>). Other countries are likely to have similar official publications.

Outside these sources, it can be useful to Google your PLD topic. For example, if you type “teaching maths” into Google, you currently get a raft of possible choices of information, such as teaching maths online, teaching maths in secondary schools, free online courses for maths teachers, how to teaching maths in an interesting way, and so on, each with attached websites for you to explore.

Most providers will have their own website, and reading this can help you, not only to see what they might be offering, but also to gauge their experience in the field. A good website should tell you something about the provider’s history – how long they have been in the field, perhaps something about any publications or resources they’ve produced, major conference presentations they’ve made, key positions they may have held, such as advisory roles or being on Ministry panels, and so on.

Journals produced by organisations such as curriculum associations, professional bodies and even parent groups may carry notices or ads about courses and workshops. Facebook pages are increasingly used both by formal organisations and less formal groups as discussion forums, and these too can carry PLD announcements.

Lastly – ask around! The old saying about word of mouth being the best recommendation remains true. Who amongst your colleagues has ever undertaken any PLD in the field you’re interested in? That can be your best starting point.

### **What level of PLD or study are you looking for?**

If, for you, this is an area of need you’ve only just realised, then you are probably going to be looking for an introductory course of some kind.

One point to bear in mind here is that sometimes what you’re looking for is primarily a skill update – for example, learning how to make a website – while for other areas, there are significant conceptual issues involved. For example, learning how to help gifted learners should *begin* with some discussion around what giftedness is and how it affects a child’s needs *before* it’s sensible to look at specific teaching strategies designed to meet those needs. Even a short introductory course or workshop on a topic like this needs to have this kind of basis. The way the course or workshop is described should help you to see whether this is the case.

But it’s also useful to think about what opportunities there are for your further learning if you find you need more knowledge or skill or become particularly interested and want to develop some real expertise in this area. Then you might want to look for longer courses, lasting for several months or a year, offered by specialist providers in the field you are interested in or through universities or polytechs. More in-depth university study at both under-graduate and post-graduate study might be available further down the track. Who knows – you might well find yourself doing a Masters or even a PhD once you get really involved!

But meanwhile, make sure you’re clear about what you want from the course you’re considering right now – whether it will meet your current need for skill and understanding, or will be better for you when you need to advance further.

### **How will your course support you in acquiring the knowledge you seek?**

We are using the word “course” here as a generic term, but obviously there is more than one way in which PLD can be delivered.

Perhaps the most common way, certainly one with which we are all very familiar, is through the use of *workshops*. These are often delivered on a one-off basis, sometimes to a whole staff or group of staff and sometimes with several schools sending one or two teachers to hear a particular presenter. This can be a useful way of bringing in someone who is a high-level expert in some field. The question that has to be asked here, however, is how the knowledge that is shared in that one-off workshop will be transferred back into what happens in the classroom. Research into effective teacher education suggests that workshop carry-over into actual practice tends to be minimal. But what such workshops *can* do, and sometimes very effectively, is to alert teachers to the possibilities for different approaches and inspire interest in following these up.

Sometimes a *series* of workshops is organised, sometimes with a connecting thread. If you are contemplating enrolling for such a series, look especially to see whether there genuinely is any cumulative component. In other words, does each successive workshop build on what has gone before, and in particular, what opportunity will you have for practice and feedback? A workshop series where you have different tutors each time is unlikely to provide such continuity, but having the same tutor throughout should make this more probable.

A *longer course* is generally specifically designed to provide those kinds of opportunities. Each segment of the course should build on what went before. Between segments, there should be opportunities for you to trial strategies demonstrated in the previous segment and for you to feedback to your tutor on how these strategies went in practice and to receive some guiding comment back from him or her. Ideally, there should also be opportunities for you to reflect on the content of the segment – on the concepts that have been put forward, on the research quoted, and so on. You might have a required text, and you are likely to be given links to websites or other material of ongoing relevance for you.

University papers will have similar requirements, but, speaking generally, where longer courses may have a greater focus on practical work, university work is likely to have a greater theoretical content, taking you to a yet further level.

### **How will your course be delivered? Should you choose online or face-to-face?**

Nowadays there is often a choice – but which is best? Each, in fact, has its advantages.

Face-to-face courses make for easier and more personal interaction between course participants. They allow for immediate questions, discussion and clarification. They provide better for shared practice and group activities during the class. They could create more opportunity for people from different schools to meet and perhaps work together outside the course.

On the other hand, face-to-face courses have fixed time slots which may well require schools to pay for relievers as well as the course fee so a teacher can attend, or they might be held after school when a teacher has already done a day's teaching and is accordingly tired. They can involve travel across town or city at busy times. They often are physically simply out of reach for teachers in smaller towns or on the far side of a city – let alone the difficulties for teachers in rural areas.

Online courses overcome many of these difficulties. They are accessible regardless of where a teacher lives, limited only by the availability of the internet (and that's rarely an issue now). They don't require schools to pay for relievers or teachers to travel at difficult times or when they're tired. They can provide for very direct and individual contact between tutor and participant. They are not limited by the clock – a participant can continue reading or working

on practical material for however long he or she wishes and is able to do so. The growth of technology such as Zoom meetings can partly overcome the lack of group meetings.

On the other hand, because they involve written modules or segments, they require considerably more reading than does a workshop delivered face-to-face. They are more dependent on people being good at monitoring their own time than is a workshop where a teacher simply has to be at a certain place at a certain time. For some people, not physically seeing the tutor and other group members can be disconcerting.

So, if you have the opportunity to choose, these are the kinds of factors you need to weigh up.

### **What does this course require from you?**

Before committing yourself to a series of workshops or to a longer course or university paper, it makes good sense to check on what's likely to be involved over and above simply turning up.

- Are there any prerequisites? Some courses may make a stipulation such as being open only to registered teachers or having completed a particular prior paper.
- Are there any costs over and above your registration fee? For instance, is there a set textbook (or books)?
- If yours is an online course, will there be an on-campus time? Is this compulsory or optional? What extra cost is involved? Where and when will it be held?
- What practical or theoretical assignments are involved? Will any of these have extra requirements, such as getting parental permission or organising a staff meeting?
- How much time should you expect to allocate for this course, (a) for face-to-face courses, over and above the actual delivery day to cover course work and assignments, or (b) for online courses, for reading the course segments plus course work and assignments?

### **What will this course give you?**

The course or workshop descriptor should give you a clear indication of the type and level of skill and knowledge you can expect to achieve as a result of your participation.

It's also valuable to check what evidence you will receive of having participated in this course, evidence you can show to school management when applying for a new position or perhaps using what you've learned to suggest some change or development in what your school is doing in this field.

A one-off workshop may simply give you a certificate of attendance. By itself this is of limited value – note the difference between “attendance” and “participation”. Nevertheless, it does at least show that you've taken an interest and it could support your request to go further. A connected series of workshops is possibly more likely to give you a certificate of participation, which is a little stronger, especially if it gives any indication that you've been required to undertake some practical work between workshops.

Longer more in-depth courses may result in a qualification at some level. There is an interesting challenge for such courses in reporting on their results and giving someone such a qualification. University-level papers are well understood by educators, and their successful completion is accepted by itself as a valid indication of what has been achieved. This is not necessarily the case for courses delivered by private providers. While the provider may be accepted as an expert in his or her field, schools still need some way of knowing what value to place on results from his or her courses. This is especially true when

a subject is new or relatively unfamiliar. Our earlier notes about accreditation of providers will help you to assess this, but it's also worth noting that some providers will also supply a detailed summary of the work the course has required the participant to undertake. For example, here's the wording of the basic certificate awarded to teachers completing one particular course in gifted education:

This is to confirm that

*Mary Smith*

has satisfactorily completed a one-semester course in Gifted Education requiring comprehensive reading in the field, an in-depth case study of an individual student incorporating the study and use of a range of identification tools and procedures, trialling of practical strategies for working with the gifted, and completion of an extended assignment on an aspect of catering for the gifted, and is therefore awarded the  
[Name of Certificate]

Participants in this course can also be awarded a Pass with Merit or a Pass with Distinction, with more detail on how they achieved the higher pass. Thus Mary Smith's school management has a clear idea of what she's covered and how they might be able to use her new skills. That takes us to the next point...

### **How will your school support you?**

Before you enrol in any course, one important point to check is whether your school will cover all or at least part of the cost involved.

All schools have, or should have, a PLD budget. It's understandable that there will be some restrictions or qualifications around what this can cover. Sensible school managements will keep some overview of who has – and who hasn't – applied for PLD money and will bear in mind too factors such as Ministry initiatives which might require upskilling for all or a particular group of staff. But most schools are keen to encourage staff to continue with their professional learning and will happily support applications for such funding.

However, occasionally a request for PLD funding is rejected because the topic isn't seen as warranting support. Gifted education is one area which has seen more than its fair share of this sort of reaction. One conference organiser, for example, found schools in low income areas refusing to send teachers on the grounds that gifted children didn't come from low income families. The decision by the Ministry some years ago to prioritise under-achievement also led to some schools refusing to fund PLD in this area on the grounds that gifted children didn't under-achieve. Both assumptions were completely false.

In this situation, you may need to prepare a case to persuade management to reconsider your application. Are there Ministry regulations or policies you could quote? That can be a very useful approach to take. Have other schools in your area sent staff to PLD on your chosen topic? Your school won't want to be the only one in your area left out. Is your provider distinguished in any way in his or her field? Pointing this out can sometimes swing the balance. It can be useful to check your school's vision and policy statements: they may include a statement of principle which supports your assertion that the school has some obligation to this particular area of need.

Apart from the question of cost, it's also relevant to think about how you will use the knowledge you gain from the course you are undertaking. It may be that, at least at first, it will only be important for your own classroom teaching, and that's perfectly fine. If you are taking a whole series of workshops or participating in a longer and more in-depth course, however, then at some stage you will hopefully feel ready to begin to share your new skills with your colleagues – indeed, your school may make this an expectation. If they don't, then put the suggestion forward yourself!

There are various ways in which this can be done. For example:

- you might act as a mentor for another colleague and guide him or her in developing similar skills
- you might undertake a review of some aspect of the school's provision in the field you've studied and report to management on your findings – eg you might review the school's resources in this particular area or you might look at how many and which children are identified as having needs in the area you've studied, and so on
- you might survey your colleagues' perceptions about needs in the area you've studied to see whether there should be more support for them in working in this area
- you might undertake a staff workshop to cover some of the skills you've learned
- you might survey a sample of parent views on how well the school is catering in the area of need that you've studied.

All of these steps will reinforce your own understanding and use of the PLD you have undertaken so carefully.

### **What next?**

Finally, hopefully your PLD experience, whether a single one-off workshop or a much more in-depth course of study, has been a positive one. Where to from here is then an inevitable question. Quality PLD will not leave you unchanged. In some way, great or small, it will continue to enhance your teaching. That in itself is sufficient to justify the time and thought and energy you have put into it. But there may also come a time when you feel you are ready to take another step. It is hoped the suggestions in this short paper will guide you in taking that step!