

Continuing professional development for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities within the school workforce

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Continuing professional development for special educational needs and disabilities within the school workforce: The results of a national survey in England

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Abstract

Continuing professional development (CPD) is considered an important part of improving professional practice and its importance has been highlighted in Department of Education policies in England. However, very little research has explored what CPD school staff access and consider as effective for their roles. This research addressed this gap by conducting an online survey of child-facing school staff in England. The survey was completed by 637 participants. The results indicate that there is a mismatch between what the staff consider as impactful CPD and the CPD to which they have most access. School leaders and SENCOs are key people in delivering CPD in schools, and the findings of this study show that it is important to provide them with appropriate skills and knowledge to ensure that the most accessible CPD is also the most effective for the school workforce.

KEYWORDS

continuing professional development, school staff, special educational needs and disabilities

Key Points

- Continuing professional development (CPD) to support the teaching of children and young people with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is important for both individuals and schools across England.
- There is often a difference between what the staff consider as impactful CPD to enable them to support children and young people with SEND and the CPD to which they have most access.
- SENCOs and school leaders are highly likely to provide school-based CPD for SEND. It is important that they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to be able to fulfil this role effectively.

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to understand the ways in which the child-facing school workforce in England accesses special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) continuing professional development (CPD). It reports on selected findings from a large national survey which asked participants to reflect on access to differing types

of CPD, their preferences for these and their perception of impact. Participants were also asked about sources of school-based training and support and whether CPD for SEND was a priority for their own CPD and school development. The research was conducted between October 2021 and February 2022, as part of the wider schools' contract with nasen and Whole School SEND, with the aim of informing the direction of future SEND

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CPD provision in English schools. (For a full description of the project and its findings, please see the project report: Dobson et al., 2022).

BACKGROUND

Keegan (2019, p. 110) describes CPD as ‘the means by which teachers develop the knowledge and skills to enhance the teaching and learning experience of their students’, adding that the potential of CPD extends to the development of implementing pedagogies and content. Leonardi et al. (2021, p. 5) define CPD as ‘intentional processes and activities which aim to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers in order to improve students’ outcomes. This includes activities delivered by and/or organised by the teacher, colleagues, their school, another school or an external provider’. Makopoulou et al. (2019) suggest that CPD is broadly considered to be professional learning, and a formal activity. The consensus across all of this research is that CPD needs to have an impact; specifically, with a focus on improving teaching and learning and therefore outcomes for pupils (DfE, 2016). Certainly, the activities that fall into the category of enhancing professional learning are vastly wide-ranging, with Kennedy (2014) arguing that there is still much to be done in the sphere of understanding CPD research.

Reviews and guidance have been published to determine what constitutes effective CPD. Cordingley et al. (2015) argue that effective CPD should be clearly focused on developing pupil outcomes. They regard time as another important factor, with prolonged and planned programmes of CPD being more effective than those delivered in a single instance. In a similar manner, the Education Endowment Foundation (2021) also emphasises that effective CPD is not just an isolated occurrence. Rather, once knowledge is built, teachers should be motivated and be provided with the opportunity to use their newly acquired knowledge in a supported manner over time. Only then will they be able to develop approaches to teaching and embed the CPD within their practice.

However, determining the impact of specific CPD activities is more nuanced. In a reflective account, Bates and Watt (2016) explore the positive impact of CPD on school attainment and note specific types of CPD which they consider to be impactful. These include coaching and mentoring between staff, forming networks and partnerships across both primary and secondary schools within a community, team teaching and peer review, both within the schools and with other schools, and a process of self-reflection. Developing CPD within distinct communities of practice (see Wenger et al., 2002) is considered in other literature. For example, Lelling and Allwell (2022) assert that whole-school CPD should be synonymous with active learning, sharing work, collaborative teaching and collegial feedback within communities of practice. This

breadth of approaches closely align with how other professional bodies understand the notion of professional learning, with the Health and Care Professions Council (2023) categorising CPD activities under the themes of work-based learning, professional activities, formal and education, self-directed and ‘other’.

While expertise is not listed as a CPD activity, when this is considered in light of the purpose of undertaking CPD, specifically improving outcomes for pupils (Keegan, 2019; Leonardi et al., 2021), it is understandable that a link between CPD and access to SEND expertise can be made. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DOH, 2015) is clear regarding the importance of access to professionals as part of the graduated approach to supporting children with SEND, referring to the necessity of ‘draw[ing] on more specialist assessments from external agencies and professionals’ (DfE & DoH, 2015, p. 99), with the key aim of ensuring that pupils with SEND receive the support and provision that they need, alongside high-quality teaching. Equally, the Chartered College of Teaching draws our attention to the potential impact that accessing external expertise, specifically speech and language therapists, can have on teaching practice, noting an increased awareness of difficulties and potential responses to support difficulties (Scutt & Harrison, 2019).

Although there may be ongoing discussions regarding the breadth and impact of CPD, there is agreement that CPD should be a priority for schools. The Standard for Teachers' Professional Development states that the professional development of teachers must be prioritised by school leaders (DfE, 2016). The SEND Code of Practice echoes the need to prioritise CPD, noting that ‘the quality of teaching for pupils with SEN should be a core part of the school's performance management arrangements and its approach to professional development for all teaching and support staff’ (DfE & DoH, 2015, p. 93). However, despite such calls to prioritise access to SEND CPD and expertise, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, SEND-related CPD was not typically considered a priority in schools (Wall et al., 2019) but was often regarded as a priority for individuals, especially those working in a SEND-related role (Dobson & Douglas, 2020).

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, evidence suggests that more school staff are seeking forms of SEND-related CPD to help understand how to adapt teaching to meet the needs of learners with SEND (Ofsted, 2023). This is understandable, as the advent of the pandemic had an adverse effect on access to CPD and expertise. Leonardi et al. (2021) found that CPD in general was de-prioritised due to the pandemic, and for teachers this was particularly acute during the period that immediately followed the lockdown of schools in March 2020. Yet conversely, they found that the pandemic also provided some teachers with greater autonomy to develop their own CPD interests due to the growth in online communications.

Against a rapidly changing educational landscape, the present research sought to build on previous work focused on access to SEND CPD by Wall et al. (2019) through specifically exploring the types of SEND CPD accessed, with specific consideration of priority, preference and impact. This research, therefore, considers what has changed in the interim period in a post-Covid-19 era. Specifically, the research aimed to:

- understand access to different forms of SEND-related CPD;
- understand what constitutes most SEND-focused CPD in schools;
- understand the preferences of the school workforce for different forms of CPD;
- understand the perceived impact of CPD;
- understand who delivers CPD during in-service training.

METHODS

After ethical approval was granted by host institutions, a self-report survey was conducted between 18 October and 26 November 2021 across schools and settings in England using the online tool Qualtrics. Information about the purposes of the survey was presented, after which active consent was sought. Respondents were asked to complete further short sections that included questions relating to:

- their school or setting – including type of school, English region and Ofsted grade;
- CPD – including questions focused on types of CPD and courses. Further questions were asked about impact, preference and frequency of these different types of CPD opportunities;
- SEND CPD in the school or setting – questions probed whether SEND CPD was a personal and/or institutional priority;
- how training was delivered within each setting.

The draft survey was presented to relevant stakeholders and funding bodies, after which changes were made to improve the clarity of some of the survey items. The final version was piloted with members of the school workforce, including those who were students in universities in England. After this stage, no further changes were made.

Sampling

The targeted population of the national survey was the entire school workforce in England. The sampling was opportunistic in nature and was promoted through a variety of different methods, as follows:

- cohorts of students on the National Award for SEN Coordination (NA SENCo) programme at a self-selecting group of higher education providers;
- groups of schools within teacher education and general networks within a self-selecting group of higher education providers;
- Twitter feeds by the report authors, their institutions, and a variety of other providers;
- communications by Whole School SEND and nasen to members.

Schools and institutions in all eight regional school commissioner areas were represented in the survey, with the vast majority originating within the West Midlands (46.0%), South-West of England (12.6%) and Lancashire and West Yorkshire (10.4%). Most respondents worked in primary schools (50.1%) or secondary schools (23.2%) with a large proportion also working in all-through special schools (8.6%). Most respondents worked in a maintained (local authority) school (41.3%) or an academy (48.8%). Most academies (81.6%) were part of a multi-academy trust. Most schools had been rated good by Ofsted (64.5%).

Data collected at the end of the survey revealed that the sample mostly consisted of those identifying as women (85.8%), with 73.7% of the whole sample working full time. The highest qualification held was an undergraduate degree (23.5%) or postgraduate qualification (61.1%). Most qualifications did not specialise in SEND. Teachers formed the majority of respondents, with those on the leadership scale forming 20.9% of the sample and class teachers or subject teachers forming 37.4% of the sample. Teaching assistants formed 16.1% of the sample. Within the entire sample ($n=637$), 239 respondents were SENCos or had experience in this role. This suggests that on the whole, given the high proportion of SENCos, the sample was not fully reflective of the wider population presented in official statistics (see DfE, 2021).

Survey analysis

The national survey had 977 initial responses. The dataset was further cleaned through the removal of participants who consented but provided no further data or did not answer the full set of questions about CPD. An additional set of respondents who did not work in England were removed. This resulted in 637 responses. The resultant data were organised using SPSS v.28.

RESULTS

SEND as an individual and institutional priority

To gain an understanding of the importance of access to SEND CPD, the respondents were asked whether developing effective practice for children with SEND was

a priority for both themselves, and their school or setting. These data are presented in [Table 1](#). Overall, 83.8% of respondents suggested that developing their practice to support learners with SEND was a high or essential priority. Institutionally, 70.6% of respondents also suggested developing effective practice for children with SEND was a priority for whole-school CPD.

Access to different types of CPD

Respondents were asked to respond 'yes or no' as to whether they had accessed different forms of CPD within a five-year period leading up to the survey. [Table 2](#) provides an overview of these data. Face-to-face formal school-based in-service training (that is, staff meetings or training days run by the SENCo or other school staff) was still the most accessed form of CPD. However, there was also evidence of increased access to more self-directed forms of training, including reading articles and accessing specialist websites. Interactive forms of CPD such as coaching and mentoring were accessed by a large proportion of respondents; however, the opportunity to observe others was accessed by less than half of respondents. Formal, award-bearing courses such as those offered by higher education institutions (for example, an MA in Inclusion) were the least accessed by the school workforce.

Quantity, preference for and perceived impact of CPD

Those who answered in the affirmative to indicate that they have access to different forms of CPD were asked three supplementary questions to which they had to respond using a five-point Likert scale of strongly agree (1); somewhat agree (2); neither agree nor disagree (3); somewhat disagree (4); and strongly disagree (5).

[Table 3](#) presents the responses from the first of these set of questions to probe whether the type of CPD accessed formed most of their own CPD. Those who had accessed face-to-face formal school-based in-service training ($n=547$) suggested that this formed most of their CPD (72.4% strongly or somewhat agreeing). Formal awarding-bearing courses such as accessing higher education formed most CPD for the minority that had accessed it. For example, of those respondents who had accessed an online higher education course ($n=127$) in the five-year period, 63.8% suggested that this formed

most of their CPD. This contrasts with those who had accessed self-directed CPD such as specialist websites (for example, the Autism Education Trust and nasen websites) ($n=462$), with 44.8% strongly or somewhat agreeing that this formed most of their CPD. This suggests that ease of access does not necessarily align with engagement or that ease of access allows teachers to engage in varying forms of CPD, whereas face-to-face sessions reduce the options available.

The second question probed preference for different forms of CPD. These data are presented in [Table 4](#). Again, there was evidence that, once more, access to CPD did not align with preference. For example, 72.5% ($n=462$) of respondents had accessed specialist websites such as the Autism Education Trust and nasen websites but only 41.3% responded that they strongly or somewhat agreed that this was a preferred form of CPD. This contrasts with face-to-face courses which were the most preferred of all. Indeed, despite the rigours of this type of qualification, for the 31.4% ($n=200$) of respondents who had accessed face-to-face higher education courses, 70% agreed that this was their most preferred form of CPD. An alternative analysis relates to the social and collaborative nature of CPD, with the five most preferred forms of CPD being in face-to-face settings or situations, while the five least preferred were often experienced at a distance or in isolation.

The final question probed the perceived effectiveness of each of the different forms of CPD. The data are presented in [Table 5](#). Overall, respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that all of the different forms of CPD were effective in helping their practice. Despite this, the most effective forms of CPD were still sometimes the least accessed, such as higher education courses, while the most accessed or most accessible, such as reading books or journals, school-based in-service training and social media, were perceived as the least impactful. Opportunities for working alongside or having a consultation with a professional about SEND (that is, a specialist teacher or educational psychologist) were often accessed ($n=442$), with 94.3% strongly or somewhat agreeing that this is an effective form of CPD.

Delivery of in-service CPD

Respondents were asked to report the likelihood of a range of providers who would provide in-service CPD for SEND using a five-point scale of almost always (1); often (2); sometimes (3); seldom (4); and never (5).

TABLE 1 The importance of CPD in SEND for both individuals and schools and settings.

	Essential	High priority	Medium priority	Low priority	Not a priority
Whole-school CPD	45.5%	25.1%	15.6%	10.8%	3.1%
Own CPD	59.3%	24.4%	12.0%	2.9%	1.3%

TABLE 2 Access to different types of CPD within the five-year period leading up to the survey (listed in order of access – high to low).

Type of CPD	<i>n</i>	Yes (<i>N</i>)	Yes (%)
School-based in-service training (i.e. staff meetings or training days run by the SENCo or other school staff)	637	547	85.9
Reading journals or articles	637	480	75.4
Coaching and/or discussions with others	637	476	74.7
Specialist websites such as the Autism Education Trust and 'nasen'	637	462	72.5
A consultation with a professional about SEND (i.e. specialist teacher, educational psychologist)	637	442	69.4
Reading books or chapters	637	418	65.6
Face-to-face courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	637	403	63.3
Distance/online courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	637	359	56.4
Distance/online courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	637	336	52.7
The use of social media	637	311	48.8
Face-to-face courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	637	299	46.9
Observation of colleagues	637	285	44.7
Distance/online courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	637	202	31.9
Face-to-face higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	637	200	31.4
Face-to-face courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	637	185	29.0
Face-to-face further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	637	146	22.9
Distance/online higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	637	127	19.9
Distance/online further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	637	74	11.6

TABLE 3 Most accessed forms of CPD within the five-year period leading up to the survey (listed in order of those who strongly or somewhat agreed – high to low).

Type of CPD	<i>n</i> ^a	M (SD)	MDN	% agree ^b
School-based in-service training (i.e. staff meetings or training days run by the SENCo or other school staff)	547	2.10 (1.13)	2	72.4
Face-to-face higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	200	2.25 (1.18)	2	65.5
Distance/online higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	127	2.22 (1.05)	2	63.8
Distance/online further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	74	2.30 (1.06)	2	60.8
Face-to-face further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	146	2.32 (1.12)	2	59.6
Coaching and/or discussions with others	476	2.55 (1.08)	2	54.0
Face-to-face courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	403	2.59 (0.93)	2	52.9
Distance/online courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	336	2.57 (1.06)	2	52.7
Distance/online courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	202	2.51 (0.99)	2	52.5
Distance/online courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	359	2.59 (0.93)	2	51.3
Reading journals or articles	480	2.77 (1.14)	3	45.9
Consultation with a professional about SEND (i.e. specialist teacher, educational psychologist)	442	2.78 (1.19)	3	45.7
Face-to-face courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	299	2.71 (1.10)	3	45.5
Specialist websites such as the Autism Education Trust and nasen	462	2.77 (1.09)	3	44.8
Observation of colleagues	285	2.81 (1.14)	3	44.2
Reading books or chapters	418	2.85 (1.08)	3	42.3
Face-to-face courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	185	2.77 (1.17)	3	42.2
The use of social media	311	2.86 (1.11)	3	40.5

^aNumber of participants who were filtered to respond to the question based on response to whether CPD had been accessed in the past five years.^bCumulative percentage of participants who strongly or somewhat agreed.

TABLE 4 Preference for different forms of CPD (listed in order of those who strongly or somewhat agreed – high to low).

Type of CPD	n ^a	M (SD)	MDN	% agree ^b
Face-to-face higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	200	2.04 (0.91)	2	70.0
Face-to-face courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	403	2.08 (0.88)	2	69.2
Face-to-face further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	146	2.15 (0.90)	2	63.0
Face-to-face courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	185	2.27 (0.90)	2	61.1
Consultation with a professional about SEND (i.e. specialist teacher, educational psychologist)	442	2.29 (1.00)	2	58.6
Coaching and/or discussions with others	476	2.45 (0.94)	2	57.6
Distance/online higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	127	2.39 (1.04)	2	56.7
Distance/online further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	74	2.39 (1.04)	2	52.7
Face-to-face courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	299	2.55 (1.06)	2	51.8
Distance/online courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	203	2.52 (0.96)	2	51.0
Observation of colleagues	285	2.64 (1.01)	3	44.9
School-based in-service training (i.e. staff meetings or training days run by the SENCo or other school staff)	547	2.76 (1.10)	3	44.8
Specialist websites such as the Autism Education Trust and nasen	462	2.78 (0.99)	3	41.3
Distance/online courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	359	2.81 (1.00)	3	40.1
Distance/online courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	336	2.87 (1.07)	3	37.5
The use of social media	311	3.00 (1.06)	3	32.5
Reading books or chapters	418	3.09 (1.02)	3	28.7
Reading journals or articles	480	3.10 (0.99)	3	27.9

^aNumber of participants who were filtered to respond to the question based on response to whether CPD had been accessed in the past five years.

^bCumulative percentage of participants who strongly or somewhat agreed.

TABLE 5 Perceived impact of different forms of CPD (listed in order of those who strongly or somewhat agreed – high to low).

Type of CPD	n ^a	M (SD)	MDN	% agree ^b
Face-to-face higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	200	1.33 (0.57)	1	98.5
Distance/online higher education courses (i.e. MEd, PGCert, AMBDA)	127	1.43 (0.65)	1	94.5
Distance/online further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	74	1.46 (0.58)	1	95.9
Face-to-face further education courses (i.e. NVQ)	146	1.47 (0.63)	1	93.8
Consultation with a professional about SEND (i.e. specialist teacher, educational psychologist)	442	1.49 (0.69)	1	94.3
Face-to-face courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	185	1.55 (0.74)	1	94.1
Face-to-face courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	403	1.58 (0.67)	1	94.5
Coaching and/or discussions with others	476	1.63 (0.70)	2	92.9
Face-to-face courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	299	1.65 (0.63)	2	93.6
Distance/online courses delivered by a professional body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association, Autism Education Trust)	203	1.67 (0.67)	2	93.1
Observation of colleagues	285	1.69 (0.72)	2	90.5
Specialist websites such as the Autism Education Trust and nasen	462	1.82 (0.72)	2	89.6
Distance/online courses outside of school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	336	1.83 (0.70)	2	89.6
Reading books or chapters	418	1.86 (0.64)	2	89.5
Reading journals or articles	480	1.88 (0.72)	2	87.1
School-based in-service training (i.e. staff meetings or training days run by the SENCo or other school staff)	547	1.92 (0.87)	2	82.6
Distance/online courses in school time (i.e. by a local authority or private provider)	359	1.96 (0.74)	2	86.9
The use of social media	311	2.04 (0.80)	2	78.8

^aNumber of participants who were filtered to respond to the question based on response to whether CPD had been accessed in the past five years.

^bCumulative percentage of participants who strongly or somewhat agreed.

TABLE 6 Provider of in-service CPD (listed in order of those who almost always or often deliver this – high to low).

Provider	<i>n</i>	M	MDN	Mode	% always/often ^a
The school SENCo	585	2.00	2	1	72.1
A member of the school leadership team	585	2.40	2	1	59.0
Another member of school staff	585	3.33	3	3	23.8
A specialist (such as an educational psychologist/specialist teacher)	585	3.32	3	3	19.3
An outside provider from another school	585	3.70	4	3	11.6
An outside provider from a multi-academy trust	585	4.23	5	5	6.2
An outside provider from a charity or similar body (i.e. British Dyslexia Association)	585	4.02	4	5	6.3
An outside provider from a commercial organisation	585	4.15	4	5	4.8

^aCumulative percentage of participants who selected almost always/often.

The data are presented in Table 6. On the whole, in-service CPD in SEND in schools and other settings is most often delivered by the SENCo or a member of the school leadership team. This suggests that most CPD is only as good as the most knowledgeable person within the setting. Despite their expansion, it appears unlikely that an external provider from a multi-academy trust would provide CPD for SEND.

DISCUSSION

The data from the survey indicate that SEND CPD is a viewed as a priority for many individuals and schools, with over half of the online survey respondents stating that developing effective practice for children with SEND was an essential priority for their own SEND CPD. However, this should be viewed in light of the fact that this was a ‘self-selecting online survey’ and therefore may have attracted those who are already invested in this area. In addition, as with all surveys of this type, respondents are limited by the nature of the survey items presented. Further work is needed to understand the data in more depth and the meanings that the school workforce ascribes to and draws from different forms of CPD.

The school workforce is accessing SEND CPD in a variety of formats, although typically when CPD was considered, this was often taken to mean formal training, which is synonymous with the individual occurrence of the traditional after-school ‘staff meeting’ or ‘training day’. However, this form of SEND CPD was not always considered, by the school workforce, as the most impactful. For example, many respondents to the online survey highlighted the potential benefit of consultations with specialist education professionals, which suggests that these bespoke opportunities should be strongly encouraged to enable practitioners to support children with SEND at the point of need. Despite this, over 30% of respondents had not accessed any of these within a five-year period. Indeed, those who had accessed such opportunities reported that this did not form most of their CPD. Given the self-selecting nature of the sample, the

routes through which recruitment was channelled and the disproportionate number of respondents who were SENCos, consultations may actually be fewer than the results of the survey suggest.

Preference for CPD is another important factor. In its recommendations, the Education Endowment Foundation (2021) suggests that CPD should be important in motivating teachers. This includes the need to present information from a credible source and provide some form of reinforcement. It is noteworthy that of the five most preferred forms of CPD, all involve gaining information from a credible source. For example, this may be a university/college lecturer, a specialist teacher, or a trainer with specialist knowledge. Meanwhile, sources such as social media are less preferred, which may be due to the potentially lower validity of the information provided. Another factor relates to time and approach. The Education Endowment Foundation (2021) suggests that the provision of opportunities to apply new learning is a factor that can motivate the school workforce. The results of the survey indicate that the most preferred form of CPD is structured face-to-face programmes that lead to formal qualifications, including higher and further education programmes and National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) – the latter being part of strategy in England to upskill the school workforce (see DfE, 2022a). By their nature, these longer programmes contain a range of different learning experiences, opportunities for the application of knowledge and opportunities for social interaction through activities including formal and informal tutorials and working alongside peers. It is noteworthy then that two of the top three most preferred forms of CPD are characterised by this longitudinal approach. Consequently, there appears to be a mismatch between preferred and accessible CPD. Schools may therefore be advised to consider CPD budgets that increase access to external training or higher education and other forms of formal learning.

Findings show that the role of SENCos and school leaders in the delivery of CPD for SEND is critical. Given that most people access CPD through in-service training, delivery of this inevitability forms part of the

SENCo's or a senior leader's responsibility. Here there are a range of issues to consider. These include the time allocated to the SENCo for their role (see Boddison et al., 2020) and whether they have enough authority in their school (Dobson, 2019). Another more recent issue, however, is the impact of the SEND reforms (DfE, 2022b) and the discussion on whether an NPQ will provide sufficient overview of enough needs to enable SENCos to deliver effective, evidence-based training (see Dobson, 2023; Done et al., 2023). Policy makers now need to ensure that the suggested reforms still enable effective forms of CPD that are targeted at key professionals such as SENCos, perhaps with an insistence that ongoing CPD forms a compulsory part of registration after award. This would align the role with others in similar professions who work in school settings to support children with SEND, such as educational psychologists or speech and language therapists (see Health and Care Professions Council, 2023).

Finally, while the recent Covid-19 pandemic has provided opportunities for increased engagement with on-line CPD, mitigating some of the previous issues related to time and finance, caution should be exercised regarding a complete move to this medium of CPD in the future. Survey respondents appeared to favour CPD with an opportunity to network, such as face-to-face learning or working with others. Equally, while there has been a move towards online CPD since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, this has not necessarily extended into social media, with less than half of online survey respondents stating that they accessed this form of CPD. Indeed, there is a need to be cautious about this medium if it is not accessed widely and some of the arguments presented are often unbalanced or little more than opinion and conjecture.

The data from this research has highlighted the myriad of ways in which the school workforce is accessing both SEND CPD and expertise and the perceived benefits that such engagement brings. However, the research has also highlighted scope for development particularly in relation to wider access, consistency, addressing known barriers and 'making the most' of the wider opportunities which present in settings, with the aim of improving provision for children and young people with SEND.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available on request from the corresponding author.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical permission was granted for the study by the University of Birmingham and Bath Spa University. All materials and research instruments were approved by the Department for Education and nasen.

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