

Familiarisation and deepening understanding



Professional Learning Communities:
source materials for school leaders and
other leaders of professional learning

Setting professional learning communities in an international context

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Over the last 25 years, we have learnt a tremendous amount about improving individual schools. Educators internationally, however, face major challenges in trying to sustain improvement over time, and being able to spread improvements beyond individual schools throughout whole systems. The impact of globalisation and rapid change has made us realise that we need new ways of approaching learning.

Learning can't just be left to individuals. To succeed in a changing and increasingly complex world, whole school communities need to grow, develop, deal with and take charge of change so they can create a future of their own choosing and prepare students to play their own role as effective agents of change. It's vital to find the best possible ways to enhance young people's learning – through the actions of professionals – by enquiring into practice, learning new strategies, developing deeper understanding, sharing good practice and creating new knowledge about effective learning and teaching.

Learning therefore, has to be at the heart of school improvement – for everyone. To this end, many countries are looking at the potential of professional learning communities (PLCs) to help focus this agenda. For example, in Hong Kong's *Towards a Learning Profession*¹, it is stated that; “schools should be developed as professional learning communities, teachers’ professional development should be regarded as an important force in school development,” and “teachers as professionals also have a responsibility to facilitate the professional growth and development of their colleagues”, while the *Professional Standards for Teachers in South Australia*² are infused with notions of collaborative professional learning.

What's in this think piece?

In this think piece we explore what is known internationally about professional learning communities and how they develop. We draw on recent projects carried out by colleagues involved in the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement³ who are trying to understand and help create, develop and sustain professional learning communities, often in relation to their own unique contexts.

We then focus on five emerging issues:

- 1 expanding understanding of who 'counts' as a professional
- 2 greater clarity about the impact of PLCs
- 3 the need to go deeper into the processes of developing PLCs
- 4 relating the parts to the whole
- 5 the challenge of sustainability

Questions to reflect on as you are reading

You may want to reflect on the following questions as you are reading, highlighting the text if it helps. There are sheets at the end of the think piece for you to make notes about your follow-up dialogue.

- How inclusive is your professional learning community? Who counts as a professional? Who's 'in' and who's 'out'?
- Should pupils or students, parents and governors or school council members be active members of the professional learning community? Why or why not?
- What impact does your professional learning community have? On whom? How do you know?
- How has your professional learning community evolved and developed over time? How did it start out? How are you trying to sustain it?
- If you are a member of more than one professional learning community, how do they differ? Do they interconnect? How?



What do we know about professional learning communities?

The term professional learning community has shades of interpretation in different contexts. There is however, broad international consensus that the phrase suggests a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way⁴, and operating as a collective enterprise⁵. This notion draws attention to the potential that a range of people based inside and outside a school have to mutually enhance each other's and pupils' learning and school development.

Summarising the international literature, professional learning communities are seen as sharing five key characteristics:

- 1 **Shared values and vision** directed towards all pupils' learning, relying more on collective power to reinforce objectives, rather than individual autonomy.
- 2 **Collective responsibility** for pupil learning, helping to sustain staff commitment, putting peer pressure on those who don't do their fair share and holding them to account, and easing teachers' sense of isolation.
- 3 **Reflective professional enquiry** as an integral part of work, including ongoing conversations about educational issues, frequent examination of practice with colleagues, mutual observation, and joint planning and curriculum development.
- 4 **Collaboration** in developmental activities directed towards achieving a shared purpose which generates mutual professional learning, reaching beyond superficial exchanges of help, support, or assistance.
- 5 **Group, as well as individual, learning** in that professional learning is more frequently communal rather than solitary, and all teachers are learners with their colleagues.

How do they develop?

Identifying the characteristics of professional learning communities is a good start, but understanding strategies and processes that help school communities work together to promote individual, collective and organisational learning is more challenging. While there are some contextual nuances, the processes as found in the international literature can broadly be divided into five groups:

- 1 **Culture-building**, including activities promoting a culture of learning and 'inquiry mindedness'⁶, as well as a culture of support where trust and respect prevail and people feel comfortable to take risks.
- 2 **Ensuring supportive structures**, including time and physical space for people to plan and work together, co-ordination, effective use of meetings, and appropriate funding.
- 3 **Encouraging professional learning opportunities**, including opportunities for mutual observation and feedback, critical enquiry related to pupil and other data and evidence, such as looking at pupils' work together, action research, teams developing school-wide learning policies, networking with colleagues in other schools etc.
- 4 **Leadership committed** to creating, developing and sustaining such communities that becomes shared as members generate ideas and new knowledge, identify high-quality learning and teaching practice, take professional responsibility and lead in sharing and continually deepening pedagogical understanding and enhancing practice.
- 5 **Drawing on and nurturing facilitators**, internally and externally, who can act as critical friends, providing feedback, support and encouragement and, sometimes, offer an extra stimulus to get started or when the going gets tough.

Emerging issues

As colleagues engage in these international efforts to explore and, sometimes, help create professional learning communities, a number of issues is emerging. Five follow.

1. An expanded definition of who counts as 'professional'

Traditionally, those exploring PLCs focused only on teachers and school leaders. As Karen Seashore Louis and Molly Gordon in the United States point out, this “*ignores critical resources that lie fallow in most schools*”⁷. The roles of support staff and para-professionals can be extremely important; for example, in supporting pupils with special educational needs and very young children. Similarly, policy and other initiatives such as England’s workforce agreement between the government and educators, and a national standard – Investors in People – that schools and other organisations can choose to work towards, promote greater involvement of support staff in the life and learning of schools.

The *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* (EPLC) project⁸ found learning support staff and teachers’ roles and involvement in the school’s PLC were almost indistinguishable in a couple of schools. Support staff, many of whom live within the local community, provide an important extra learning resource if given opportunities to participate as active members of the PLC. Differential pay structures restrict the time they are able to give. Nonetheless, within some PLCs, their commitment is no less strong, and they participate actively and equally in collaborative planning of, and enquiry related to, enhancing the learning experiences of all pupils.

Implementing Arts for Academic Achievement, The Annenberg Challenge project in Minnesota⁹, also found that when outsiders such as artists work in partnership with teachers who are part of a PLC, teachers are more open to changing their practice and their practice is more enriched than in situations where the PLC is limited. This suggests there is considerable scope for widening definitions of who counts as ‘professional’.

Clearly, others within and closely connected with the school, most notably the pupils, parents and governors (or school council members), have a fundamental role to play in PLCs, and there are debates in several countries as to whether we are restricting our focus by using the word ‘professional’¹⁰.

2. Getting clearer about impact

The ultimate goal of school improvement strategies has to be pupil learning, but the international jury is still out regarding links between PLCs and pupils’ academic progress. Thus far evidence is relatively sparse, although studies in the United States¹¹ and Iceland¹² and the EPLC project have found a link. But should this be the only acceptable measure of impact? While international research on school effectiveness shows correlations between pupils’ academic progress as measured by standard assessments and certain features associated with professional learning communities – for example, shared beliefs and values, continuous professional learning etc – and a few studies also show links with pupils’ attitudes measured by surveys, there has been less attention paid to pupil engagement. Interviews with pupils in the *Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Schools* (IDEAS) project in Australia¹³ found pupils were increasingly enthusiastic about their learning as well as able to articulate the meaning of the principles underlying their school’s vision and what it meant for their learning.

Emerging issues

There are other valid indicators of success. At a time when teacher recruitment and retention is an international issue, a rewarding and satisfying work environment might reduce the problem and be considered a valid success indicator in its own right. The word ‘community’ suggests an ethic of caring that becomes all too easily forgotten in the name of raising standards. Working in communities of practice is about more than standards and instrumental aims¹⁴. Crucially, however, the key success indicator for teachers in a PLC is changed practice, and this is where most evidence currently exists. It is surely not by chance that the word ‘learning’ has been introduced between ‘professional’ and ‘communities’. Learning has to be central to everything we do in schools: an undeviating focus on learning, and learning at all levels for all people to support pupils’ learning. Learning can no longer be an adjunct to the word ‘teaching’: ‘teaching and learning’, suggesting learning is merely an outcome of teaching. Greater understanding about learners and learning has led to the realisation that it is important to turn around the phrase to ‘learning and teaching’. If it’s not about learning for everyone in schools, what should it be about?¹⁵

3. Going deeper into the processes of developing PLCs

After a marshalling call from Judith Warren Little¹⁶, greater attention is now being paid to trying to understand what developing a PLC means at the level of day-to-day practice. It is no surprise that trying to start to develop a PLC is different from working to sustain it or that the process can vary in different locations. Three projects are exploring how professional learning communities progress through different phases. For example, researchers connected with the *Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement Project*¹⁷ in the US looked at progression from initiating PLCs through implementing them to institutionalisation, as a means of reflecting the growth in schools seeking to become

professional learning communities. They found, for example, that during initiation, for shared values and vision the emphasis was on what teachers stated they valued. Moving into implementation, there was a shift to focusing on pupils and high expectations. In the less frequent cases of institutionalisation, shared vision actually guided teaching and learning.

Contextual differences apply both within and between countries. The EPLC project involved 16 schools (3 nursery/pre-school, 5 primary, 5 secondary and 3 for pupils with special educational needs) which differed on a range of contextual measures as well as in self-reported perceptions that they were starting out, developing or mature as a professional learning community. Developing a learning culture can be just as much or sometimes more of a challenge in a ‘cruising’ school¹⁸ in a leafy suburb as in one struggling in an area of significant deprivation, because of different cultural norms. The cruising school, despite ‘acceptable’ raw scores on external pupil assessments, doesn’t add value to what pupils bring to the school (home support etc). It may well be an early starter as a PLC, but the complacency factor may mean that leadership actions necessary to create and develop the PLC are different from those necessary in a school in an area of poverty where there is a desire to change but a lack of know-how. This means a one-size-fits-all approach to the development of a school’s culture is inadequate, as any leader who has moved schools and tried something that worked in the first school with disastrous results in the second will know.

There are many ways in which the cultural context of countries differs when thinking about professional learning communities. For example, the school district’s role in stimulating or helping support development of professional learning communities varies. The potential role of school districts is highlighted within North America¹⁹. In a small study, a

school adviser from the Reykjavik school district in Iceland found a link between the characteristics of professional learning communities and pupils' progress. The research findings have been used with another school in a pilot intervention study. Victoria in Australia has no school districts, and local authorities (LAs) in England have considerably less power than their equivalents in the United States.

Cultural differences between countries can also affect PLC development. Collectivism is a strong cultural feature in the East, in contrast to the individualistic cultures of, say, England, the United States and Australia. That should give Eastern cultures a head-start in building a PLC. A cultural desire to avoid uncertain and ambiguous situations in some Eastern cultures, however, might mean that people generally find change relatively more disruptive than their Western counterparts do. So while they seek harmony, they might be more likely to resist a focus on changing learning practices²⁰. More than 70 per cent of primary and secondary school respondents to a survey, sent as part of the Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities project in Hong Kong²¹, thought that teachers took collective responsibility for pupils' learning. However, only 30 per cent of the primary respondents and 15 per cent of the secondary respondents said that nearly all of the teachers in their schools "*reported to be learning together with colleagues and learning from each other*".

4. Relating the parts to the whole

Those summarising the literature often talk in glowing terms of whole-school PLCs, yet much of the work on professional community in secondary schools focuses on departments²². While it is possible to have a culture of whole-school improvement in secondary schools, it is more challenging due to clearly defined subject boundaries. Even in small primary schools there can be more than one PLC even if there is a larger whole-school community. One English secondary deputy headteacher likened it in his school to a lava lamp, where smaller PLCs bubble up and break away from the main community for a while before moving back, often when a key person, such as the head of department, leaves. This becomes a continuous process. Smaller PLCs within schools could be considered just a stage in the process towards becoming a whole-school PLC, but they might also have a useful role in preventing groupthink.

Another relationship is that between the individual and the group and, particularly, between individual learning and collective learning. We are learning that dialogue and professional conversations are key means of sharing and co-creating knowledge. For example, in relation to trust, the Australian IDEAS project team uses the expression 'collaborative individualism' to denote that what individuals bring is valued, but that they are working in a community.

Emerging issues

5. Sustainability over time is a challenge

Bringing about change doesn't happen overnight. Achieving sustainability – embedding ideas and practices such that they become routine and lasting – takes even longer and can be disrupted by changes of staff, competing initiatives and other factors. Existing evidence on the sustainability of PLCs is limited, but examples from *The Introduction of Autonomous Learning in Secondary Schools* initiative in the Netherlands²³ and from Canada²⁴ indicate that sustaining a thriving PLC isn't easy, especially if key people leave and succession isn't planned, or the external policy environment puts pressure on the community to change focus. In one Dutch secondary school, the emerging pattern over 14 years was one where an ethos of innovation was

followed by increasing external pressure and changed demands, leading to the framing of innovation, and finally a period where efficiency became the top priority and silting up of innovation evolved. In the *Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities* project in Hong Kong, some teacher survey respondents felt that the development of their PLC was linked to the extent to which teachers were highly respected by the government and other members of society²⁵. Given what is known about the ebbs and flows of life in organisations, it is very important to get a much deeper understanding of the sustainability of PLCs. This appears to be key to promoting the capacity to take charge of change and promote continuous improvement.

Conclusion

Professional learning communities have considerable potential internationally. As colleagues work within their own countries and as an international learning community to understand and help others develop these communities, it is clear that there are a lot of common issues, as well as some notable cultural differences²⁶.

Questions for reflection and dialogue



How inclusive is your professional learning community?
Who counts as a professional? Who's 'in' and who's 'out'?

Should pupils, parents and governors (members of the school council) be active members of the professional learning community? Why or why not?

Pupils or students

Parents

Governors or school council members

Questions for reflection and dialogue



What impact does your professional learning community have? On whom?
How do you know?

How has your professional learning community evolved and developed over time?
How did it start out? How are you trying to sustain it?

If you are members of more than one professional learning community,
how do they differ? Do they interconnect? How?

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