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**Creating and Sustaining  
Effective Professional Learning Communities  
Some Interim findings**

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This paper will report on selected findings from work in progress from the *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* (eplc) project, funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) from January 2002 to October 2004. The research team, who are based at the universities of Bristol, Bath and London, are carrying out a longitudinal mixed methodological study, exploring professional learning communities as they go through different stages of their development.

Our current working definition of an eplc is that:

*An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning.*

Currently, there is no clear consensus on what precisely constitutes a professional learning community. However, international research and summaries of the literature suggest that they are characterised by: shared values and vision (Louis, Kruse and Associates, 1995; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Hord, 1997; Hipp and Huffman, 2003); collective responsibility for pupils’ learning (Kruse et al, 1995; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Leithwood and Louis, 1998; King and Newmann, 2001; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001); reflective professional inquiry (Louis, Kruse and Associates, 1995; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; Hord, 1997; Fullan, 2001; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001); collaboration (Louis, Kruse and Associates, 1995; Newmann and Wehlage, 1995; McLaughlin and Talbert ; 2001; Hipp and Huffman, 2003;); and the promotion of group, as well as individual learning (Rosenholtz, 1989; Louis, Kruse and Associates, 1995; Hipp and Huffman, 2003). We hypothesised that schools might be at one of three stages of development as an eplc: starter, developer or mature. These characteristics and hypothetical stages are being investigated in the project.

In summary, the broad aims of the project are to identify and provide practical examples of:

- the characteristics of effective professional learning communities in different types of school setting;
- key factors inside and outside schools which seem to help or hinder the development of these communities;
- innovative practices for ongoing professional learning and development.

These aims are being explored through a range of research methods which include:

- conducting a literature survey
- developing a framework of characteristics and outcome indicators of effective professional learning communities
- surveying headteachers or continuing professional development (CPD) coordinators of a national sample of nursery, primary, secondary and special schools and providing them with feedback;
- examining links between characteristics of effective professional learning communities and pupil progress through detailed statistical analysis;
- carrying out detailed case studies in 16 different types of school settings or clusters;
- bringing representatives from our case study schools together for workshops to share experiences and research findings;
- disseminating our findings in ways to support those involved in creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities.

In a paper presented at the 2002 BERA Conference we discussed the aims, design and early stages of the study. This paper is a further report on work in progress and draws primarily on our preliminary analysis of the survey data.

### **Questionnaire survey**

A survey questionnaire was designed, discussed with the Steering Group and with international colleagues, and piloted with a sample of schools – the instrument was revised in the light of feedback obtained at different stages throughout this process. The questionnaire has three parts: items in part one are designed to gather opinions about professional learning in the school; part two explores perceptions of the features of a professional learning community in a school and the facilitating and inhibiting factors for such communities; part three contains factual items about the range and extent of professional development and school self evaluation activities in the school. A revised questionnaire was administered to a sample of 800 nursery, primary, secondary and special schools (one questionnaire per school) in the summer term 2002 and to a second sample of 1500 primary and secondary schools in January 2003.

Data analysis is focusing upon four key areas/tasks:

(1) Overview

First, we are seeking to establish basic descriptive data on the characteristics of professional learning communities.

(2) Identification of key process factors

Factor analysis techniques<sup>1</sup> will be employed to identify and examine a finite set of key factors related to the processes of CPD and more broadly to the development of professional learning communities.

(3) Comparison of key indicators with key pupil and teacher outcome data

There is sparse evidence about the impact of CPD, and especially of professional learning communities, on student outcomes. We, therefore, propose to take the opportunity presented by the collection of questionnaire survey data to produce some relatively 'hard' data. The key indicators identified in (2), as well as the individual questionnaire item responses, will be compared and contrasted with key pupil outcome data. This will involve using Multilevel analysis to model pupil progress data in relation to the reported processes and activities of PLC's (see Thomas, 2001).

**Selected findings**

To date, the results for primary/nursery and secondary schools have been analysed separately. Special schools are included as appropriate in either the nursery/primary or secondary analyses. The overall survey response rate was 17% (final sample size: primary/nursery n=226 and secondary n=164). While this is a low response rate, preliminary analyses indicate that this is a representative sample of all primary and secondary schools in terms of socio-economic disadvantage (measured in terms of percentage of school pupils entitled to free school meals). However, the results should be treated cautiously prior to further examination of the representativeness of the sample via analysis of DfES/PLASC datasets.

We begin with a note of caution. Schools were asked to assess their current stage of development as a plc. A majority of respondents, 57% from nursery and primary schools and 67% from secondary schools, reported that their school was a "developing" professional learning community, therefore the findings will reflect the features of this self reported group of schools more than any other.

Stage	Primary %	Secondary %
Mature /established	25	15
Developer	57	67
Starter	14	15
Working to re-establish plc	2	1
No response	2	1

**A. Teacher support for pupil learning**

Seven items explored perceptions of teacher support for pupil learning, although the results of only four items are reported here. A clear majority of respondents from primary and nursery schools, 70% and above, reported that 'nearly all' their staff *created conditions for pupils to feel the confidence to learn, set individual learning targets for pupils and regularly monitored pupil learning and progress*. At least 35% of the respondents reported an increase in all aspects of active teacher support for pupil learning over the last two years.

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<sup>1</sup> This approach only employs those questionnaire items where an order of magnitude can be justified in relation to the categories of response. For an example of similar work see Thomas et al (2000) Valuing Pupils Views in Scottish Schools, *Educational Research & Evaluation*. 6 (4): 281-316.

Most dramatically, 56% of respondents in primary and nursery schools had noticed a significant rise in the use of setting of learning targets for individual pupils by teachers in the last two years. In contrast, less than half (47%) of secondary school respondents reported that 'nearly all' staff *created conditions for pupils to feel the confidence to learn* and, 53% reported that 'nearly all' staff *set individual learning targets for pupils* and that this practice was increasing; 50% reported that 'nearly all' *regularly monitored the learning and progress of individual pupils* and this practice was also increasing. Greater use of ICT data bases to monitor pupil progress was reported from secondary than primary schools, (ie. 'nearly all' 47% secondary, 26% primary/nursery) but use was reported to have increased in both sectors.

What percentage of teachers in this school :	Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss-ing
create conditions for pupils to feel the confidence to learn [A.1]	77	19	3	0	0	35	61	1	3
set learning targets for individual pupils [A.3]	70	19	7	3	0	56	40	0	4
regularly monitor the learning and progress of individual pupils [A.7]	73	20	5	1	1	42	54	0	4
use ICT data bases to monitor pupil progress [A.4]	26	20	24	26	4	52	43	0	5

What percentage of teachers in this school :	Percentage of responses from Secondary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from Secondary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss-ing
create conditions for pupils to feel the confidence to learn [A.1]	47	46	7	0	1	52	42	2	4
set learning targets for individual pupils [A.3]	53	29	14	2	1	77	19	1	3
regularly monitor the learning and progress of individual pupils [A.7]	50	40	9	1	0	61	35	0	4
use ICT data bases to monitor pupil progress [A.4]	47	24	21	7	1	77	19	0	4

## B. Professional learning

Twelve items were designed to explore perceptions of the nature and extent of teacher learning, the results of three of these items are reported here. 'Nearly all' teaching staff were reported to be *learning with colleagues* and *learning from each other* in over 72% of primary and nursery schools but the position in secondary schools was more variable. 'Nearly all' *learning with colleagues* was reported by 43% of secondary respondents and *learning from each other* from 45% however, a majority of secondary respondents reported an increase in these activities over the past two years. Just under half, (48%) of primary/nursery respondents but only 27% of secondary respondents reported that 'nearly all' staff *take responsibility for their own professional learning* although nearly a half (49%) of secondary school respondents reported that 'most' teachers did this.

Additional items focused upon perceptions of the role and professional learning of teaching assistants. A majority of primary/nursery and secondary respondents reported that teaching assistants were *valued by teachers*, *had opportunities for professional development* and *actively contributed to the school as a professional learning community*. Respondents reported a dramatic increase in the recognised value and general professional role of teaching assistants in schools in the last two years. However, perceptions of their role differed with almost three quarters (74%) of primary/nursery respondents but only 42% of secondary respondents reporting that nearly all teaching assistants shared responsibility for pupil learning.

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Missing
learn together with colleagues [B.1]	75	21	3	0	1	38	58	0	4
learn from each other [B.3]	72	20	7	0	1	32	64	0	4
take responsibility for their own professional learning [B.4]	48	29	19	3	1	31	64	0	5

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from Secondary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from Secondary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Missing
learn together with colleagues [B.1]	43	45	10	2	0	65	30	1	4
learn from each other [B.3]	45	37	17	0	1	55	41	0	4
take responsibility for their own professional learning [B.4]	27	49	19	3	1	59	38	0	3

### C. Support for professional learning

Professionals cannot easily learn with and from each other during school hours unless time is made available yet, the survey results showed that school level support in terms of dedicated time for professional learning and development was perceived to be variable. Forty two per cent of the secondary school respondents but under a quarter (24%) of the primary respondents reported that 'nearly all' teachers *had some protected time for joint planning and development*, while a third (32%) of secondary and a fifth (20%) of primary respondents reported that 'nearly all' teachers had *dedicated time for classroom observation* however, 40% or more of primary and secondary respondents reported that this had increased in the last two years.

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss-ing
have dedicated time for classroom observation [C.1]	32	15	19	32	2	40	52	3	5
have some protected time for joint planning and development [C.8]	42	8	11	36	3	29	61	4	6

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from Secondary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from Secondary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss-ing
have dedicated time for classroom observation [C.1]	20	20	27	31	2	54	41	1	4
have some protected time for joint planning and development [C.8]	24	19	23	33	1	43	49	2	6

### D. Collaboration and culture

Two characteristics of professional learning communities regularly cited in the literature are, shared values and vision and professionals taking collective responsibility for pupil learning, and these were two of the thirteen items that we used to explore issues about school culture. Eighty one per cent of primary/nursery respondents said that 'nearly all' teachers *took collective responsibility for pupil learning* while three quarters said that 'nearly all' teachers *shared a common core of educational values*. Two thirds (65%) of respondents reported that 'nearly all' teachers *share their professional experiences and successes* and are *members of at least one professional team* (68%), and that this culture has noticeably increased in a quarter or more of respondents' primary and nursery schools over the last two years. Secondary respondents reported lower percentages in the 'nearly all' category, (ie. that 66% *took collective responsibility for pupil learning* and 43% *shared a common core of educational values*) but reported sharp increases in these characteristics in the last two years. As might be expected, 84% of secondary respondents reported

that 'nearly all' staff were *members of at least one professional team*. In contrast, only a third (34%) of secondary respondents said that 'nearly all' of the teaching staff *shared their professional experiences and successes*. However, a further 47% of respondents said that 'most' of their teaching staff *shared their professional experiences and successes* and that this aspect of reflective professional enquiry had risen amongst teaching staff in 54% of schools over the last two years.

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools in each category					Percentage of nursery and primary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss- ing
take collective responsibility for pupil learning [D.1]	81	14	3	1	1	38	59	0	3
share a common core of educational values [D.2]	75	22	3	0	0	35	60	1	4
are members of at least one professional team [D.7]	68	15	6	3	8	25	66	0	9
share their professional experiences and successes [D.9]	65	28	5	1	1	32	64	0	4

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from Secondary schools in each category					Percentage of Secondary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss- ing
take collective responsibility for pupil learning [D.1]	66	30	3	0	1	58	38	1	4
share a common core of educational values [D.2]	43	46	8	1	2	47	45	1	7
are members of at least one professional team [D.7]	84	7	5	1	3	23	71	0	6
share their professional experiences and successes [D.9]	34	47	16	1	2	54	41	1	4

## E. Research and professional enquiry

Both primary/nursery and secondary respondents reported that the number of staff who were *informing their practice through the routine collection, analysis and use of data* had increased in the last two years. Seventy nine per cent of primary /nursery and 68% of secondary respondents reported that 50% or more of staff did this.

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from nursery and primary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss- ing
routinely collect, analyse and use data and evidence to inform their practice [E.3]	46	33	13	6	2	53	42	0	5

What percentage of teachers in the school :	Percentage of responses from Secondary schools in each category					Percentage of responses from Secondary schools reporting a change in the last two years			
	Nearly all (80 to 100 %)	Most (50 to 79 %)	Some (20 to 49 %)	A few (0 to 19 %)	Don't know Or missing	Yes : gone up	No change	Yes : gone down	Miss- ing
routinely collect, analyse and use data and evidence to inform their practice [E.3]	29	39	22	9	1	66	31	0	3

### Case studies

The survey has provided us with some very rich data but these are snapshots of perceptions at a particular point. These data are being supplemented by case studies conducted in 16 school sites. Our target was to identify 16 case study sites in the categories 'early starter', 'developer', 'mature'.

The survey returns were used as the starting point for selection. We prioritised those returns where the respondent had indicated willingness for the school to be included as a case study site. We also checked that the responses to individual items in these survey returns were consistent with the respondent's identification of the school as being at a particular stage of development as a PLC. The main criteria for selection were:

- a. school type: nursery, primary, secondary, special
- b. stage of development as a PLC: 'starter', 'developer', 'mature'

We also attempted to ensure that the 16 sites selected would, between them, display diversity according to the following criteria:

- c. location (eg urban/rural)
- d. demography (geographical region of England)
- e. school size (eg small primary/large secondary)
- f. socioeconomic status of pupils (indicated by percentage receiving free school meals)
- g. ethnic background of pupils (indicated by percentage from minority ethnic groups)
- h. governance (eg county school, church school)
- i. status/involvement in relevant initiatives (eg Beacon, Early Excellence, Education Action Zone (EAZ), member of the School Centred Initial Teacher Training scheme (SCITT))

One school in each phase of schooling (nursery, primary, secondary, special) was selected which had been identified as being at each of the three stages of development (ie early starter, developer, mature), giving 12 sites. Two additional



sites were then selected from the primary and two from the secondary phase according to criteria c-i, to maximise the diversity of contextual factors relevant to the development of PLCs. The profile of selected case study sites according to criteria a. and b. is:

<i>School type</i>	'early starter'	'developer'	'mature'	'additional'	Total
<i>Nursery</i>	1	1	1	0	3
<i>Primary</i>	1	1	1	1 early starter, 1 developer	5
<i>Secondary</i>	1	1	1	2 developers	5
<i>Special</i>	1	1	1	0	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	4	4	4	4	16

Fifteen of the sites selected were included in the final sample. Senior staff from one special school with a 'mature' PLC in the original selection declined to be involved. This school was replaced with another special school in the final sample.

### **Focus of data collection**

The first site visit to each school was conducted between December 2002 and January 2003 and each school will be visited on at least five occasions in order to gain a time perspective on the processes of creating and sustaining an eplc. The methodology involves the use of interviews, observation, documentary analysis etc. The focus of the data collection is on:

- baseline data - perceptions of the nature and extent of the membership of the plc and its characteristics as well as the distinctive features of the differing school settings and contexts;
- the understanding and experience of the school as a plc as perceived by samples of teachers, support staff, governors and students;
- key processes and practices which feature in the work of the school as a plc, both the conscious (eg the management of CPD, uses of pupil learning outcome data) and less conscious processes (eg development of trust, incidental peer learning). Factors affecting these processes of PLC operation, whether by facilitating or hindering them, are also being investigated.

All interviews are being treated in confidence. Our aim is to interview school staff in the same range of roles (as far as is possible) and other key protagonists across all 16 sites. We are investigating the extent to which there may be a number of smaller professional learning communities within the constellation of individuals and groups that constitutes a whole school professional learning community. It is possible that staff in, say, secondary school subject departments may interact more closely with each other to promote pupil learning than with staff throughout the school, and so may identify more with their department than with the staff as a whole. Where appropriate, we have selected one department where staff have been reported to us as working together particularly closely for that school, and one where the degree of cooperation is perceived as more typical.

We are also organizing a series of four workshops for the 16 case study schools to contribute to data collection, promote systematic sharing of practical experience about effective professional learning communities, and contribute to the development of the case studies. The first of these took place in July 2003.

### **Discussion: some emerging research issues**

Our research has highlighted a number of issues that we will be exploring further. Some of these were presented in an earlier paper (Stoll et al, 2003). Examples of the substantive issues we are grappling with are:

- site specific (eg a combination of gender and ethnicity issues connected with status and professional learning opportunities, threat of closure);
- phase specific (eg in nursery and special schools there may be multiple sources of funding so that PLCs include staff funded by different agencies on a variety of contracts with diverse specialist contributions to the work of the school);
- PLC stage specific (eg the range of activities and the coherence of their management in 'mature' PLCs );
- demographically-related (eg rural deprivation and dispersed population giving impetus to attempts to extend the PLC beyond the school).

Here we elaborate on four issues.

#### *What are professional learning communities?*

In our exploration of the literature, we separated the phrase 'professional learning communities' into its constituent parts eg. 'professional', 'learning', 'communities', 'professional learning', 'professional communities', 'learning communities'. Participants from the case study schools at our first workshop emphasised the need to be clear about what an eplc was for, and especially what its underlying values were. Participants stressed the importance of the caring 'community' aspect, perhaps underplayed in the overall 'professional learning communities' and 'professional communities' literatures. However, they also argued that a professional learning community should be conceptualised as something empowering and professionally challenging as well as supportive. Studies in several countries show that strongly cohesive professional communities are not necessarily positively orientated towards change or concerned with school improvement. Westheimer (1999) explores the social theory of community, highlighting five features most commonly identified by contemporary theorists: shared beliefs and understandings; interaction and participation; interdependence; concern for individual and minority views ("Members of a community, while sharing interests and a commitment to one another, don't always agree", p.75); and meaningful relationships. Central to the notion of school community is an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of teachers, students and school leaders (Louis et al, 1995). The community focus puts emphasis on mutually supportive relationships. Research has highlighted that positive trust levels are significantly related to school improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002) and that trust and respect appear to be important norms of improvement (Stoll and Fink, 1996). We are exploring further the factors that constitute the social side of community and how these appear to influence group and collective professional learning of the community.

#### *What makes professional learning communities effective?*

If we take the characteristics of professional learning communities as those identified in the literature (an objective of our research is to test these out), we might hypothesise from our questionnaire results that the professional learning communities within secondary schools are less developed than those within primary and nursery schools because the results indicate that a smaller percentage of staff are perceived to be engaging in the behaviours cited in the literature (eg. sharing a common core of educational values). Such a response pattern is not uncommon in questionnaires of this type (eg McCall et al, 2001), and achieving secondary school improvement is generally notoriously more difficult than that in primary schools (Louis and Miles, 1990). However, the range of questionnaire responses, as well as case study data, highlight that some secondary schools do appear to demonstrate characteristics of effective professional learning communities. Clearly, school size may be a key variable, in a large school the professional learning community may be much more evident at group/departmental level than across the whole school. This

is one issue that we will be investigating as we look for the distinctive features of learning communities in different school settings.

#### *Who is included as "professional" within professional learning communities?*

Definitions of who belongs to the professional learning community are likely to vary from one school to another. A key point made by participants at the first workshop conference was that, although there are core members of a community, membership and boundaries are fuzzy - people move in and out depending upon their roles and over time. Nevertheless, it is clear that the involvement of support staff in pupils' learning has increased over the last few years and with new workload agreements, this is continuing to increase. While American studies of professional learning communities have focused entirely on teaching staff, our research includes other support staff (Stoll et al, 2003). Three quarters (75%) of the primary and nursery respondents reported that nearly all learning support assistants (LSAs) *share responsibility for pupil learning*, while a slightly larger percentage (78%) reported that *they actively contribute to the school as a professional learning community*. The corresponding percentages for secondary school learning support assistants were considerably lower, with 58% reporting that nearly all *actively contribute to the school as a professional learning community* and only 43% thinking that nearly all *share responsibility for pupil learning*. Our case studies suggest that LSAs play a major role in some schools, particularly those working in nursery and special schools. Although the teaching staff may have a greater responsibility for planning the learning activities, the differences in role between teacher and teaching assistant may be difficult to spot in the classroom. For example, in one nursery school, all staff are assigned a number of children for whom they have overall responsibility. The only apparent difference between the teachers and the nursery support staff is that the latter are assigned slightly fewer children. Nonetheless, the assistants attend all meetings at the end of the school day, twice-weekly planning meetings, and meetings to review children's progress. Furthermore, they share responsibility for making notes about their own and other pupils' progress and difficulties.

#### *What processes do professional learning communities use?*

In our working definition of a professional learning community, learning is central, and through items in the survey and case study visits we are trying to investigate how professional learning is promoted and supported. Generally, the survey findings showed that support for professional learning was not perceived to be especially strong in either primary/nursery or secondary schools, this was particularly evident in the reported time available to support classroom observation or joint planning and development (eg. 32% of primary/nursery respondents and 20% of secondary respondents reported that 'nearly all' had dedicated time for classroom observation). Although the informal learning opportunities that can occur (eg. when a group of staff share a work room) can be very productive, it may be hard to capitalise upon learning ideas and suggestions unless some dedicated time can be found. Participants at the first workshop conference commented that there was a potential tension in a plc between structure and organic growth, appropriate organisational structures were essential but so were values such as trust and mutuality.

### **Conclusion**

This paper is a report on work in progress and at this stage in the research we probably have more questions than answers. The questionnaire data are being further analysed and the case studies are ongoing - the third stage visits are underway. The potency and value of the central concepts – professional, learning and community – seem clear although the ways in which they are interpreted and operationalised in particular settings remains to be further investigated and clarified.

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