# Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities

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## Introduction

Interest in the concept of a professional learning community, and its perceived importance, stem from the belief that when teachers work collaboratively the quality of learning and teaching in the organisation improves (Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993; Barth, 1990). The underpinning rationale for this belief has several inter-connecting strands.

The importance of teacher professional development for individual teacher development, school improvement and raising standards has been widely accepted for some time. Indeed, the progress of educational reform is claimed to depend on teachers' capacity, both individually and collectively (Elmore, 1995; Lieberman, 1995; Newmann and Associates, 1996; Little, 1999) and how this links with school capacity (Stoll, 1999; Geijsel, van den Berg and Sleegers, 1999). The broader concepts of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and professional learning community are relatively new but are also thought to have promise for enhancing the capacity of both schools and individual teachers. The need to investigate the practical utility of professional learning community in England is made more urgent by the current major policy issues of teacher retention and an ageing workforce. One important contribution to their resolution may be to invest in creating a rewarding and satisfying working environment. In such settings, teachers and headteachers[1], in collaboration with and supported by their non-teaching colleagues, would exercise professional judgements, for example about the best use of evidence and research for improving teaching and learning, in an agreed accountability framework. The strategic role of school leaders in creating and sustaining these conditions as part of their overall strategy of capacity building for school improvement is also seen as crucial in these various processes and activities, evidenced, for example, in our National College for School Leadership's (NCSL) focus on networked learning communities (NCSL, 2001).

There also appears to be a strong belief that professional learning communities have a positive impact on pupils (students), although at this point the evidence is still limited (for examples, see Rosenholtz, 1989; Lee and Smith, 1996; Louis and Marks, 1998; Wiley, 2001).

To investigate the potential of professional learning communities, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and General Teaching Council (GTC) funded a research team based at the Universities of Bristol and Bath to carry out a longitudinal mixed methodological study, exploring professional learning communities as they go through different stages of their development.

In this paper we describe the aims, design and early stages of the study. Our initial but evolving literature review is discussed, a draft process framework for effective professional learning communities is outlined, the process of developing a school questionnaire is described, and results given relating to the definition and factors that facilitate and inhibit professional learning communities, and plans for case studies and

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[1] School principals/directors.

the dissemination strategy are outlined. Some issues emerging from the research are noted in the concluding section.


**Aims of the Project**

The purpose of the Project - known informally as the *Thriving Learning Communities* (TLC) Project - is to generate credible, accessible and practically useful findings for those within and outside schools interested in creating, developing, supporting and sustaining effective professional learning communities – school leaders, coordinators/providers of professional development, teachers, support staff, policy makers, Local Education Authority (LEA)[2] advisors and other external change agents.

Our broad aims are to
- a. identify and convey:
  - the characteristics of effective professional learning communities and what these look like in different kinds of school setting;
  - the key enabling and inhibiting factors – at national, local, institutional, departmental/team and individual levels– which seem to be implicated in the initial creation, ongoing management and longer-term sustaining of such communities;
  - innovative and effective practice in managing human and financial resources to create time and opportunity for professional learning and development and optimise its impact;
- b. generate models which illuminate the principles of effective professional learning communities and assess the generalisability and transferability of such models;
- c. produce and disseminate findings sufficiently compelling to practitioners to mobilise further their practice around effective professional learning communities;
- d. inform leadership preparation and development programmes, and initial, induction and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes, including those for subject leaders and those coordinating special educational needs.


**Project Methodology**

In this section we present our working definition and describe the initial draft framework, the literature review and the evolving framework, and the survey design and planned analysis. We also discuss case study methodology and our dissemination strategy.

<u>Working definition</u>

While definitions of what constitutes a professional learning community vary, international research suggests that they are characterised by: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; reflective professional inquiry; collaboration; and the promotion of group as well as individual learning (eg Louis,

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[2] School district

Kruse and associates, 1995; King and Newmann, 2001). Our initial working definition was:

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

It is problematic for several reasons and will probably be amended in the light of the research findings (see later sections).

Initial Draft Framework

To prepare the Project bid, an initial literature search was carried out which led to the development of a draft framework of characteristics and outcome indicators (see Diagram 1), which served as an initial model for organising our thinking about the broad factors likely to influence the creation, development and sustenance of an effective professional learning community.

### INSERT DIAGRAM 1

The assumptions or hypotheses underpinning this draft framework were as follows:
- an effective professional learning community (Box B) is influenced by, and reciprocally influences, school-wide factors (eg capacity, leadership and organisation) (Box A);
- this professional learning community (Box B) is also influenced by, and reciprocally influences, formal professional development procedures, programmes and activities (Box C) and work-based, learning (ie *'continuous/embedded learning directly from and with other teachers'*) (Box D);
- these formal professional development procedures, programmes and activities (Box C) are influenced by, and reciprocally influence, work-based learning (Box D);
- the 'outcomes' (eg for teachers, students and other staff) (Box E) are impacted upon, and reciprocally influence, the professional learning community (Box B), formal professional development programmes and activities (Box C) and work-based learning (Box D);
- the school itself is influenced by, and reciprocally influences, agencies and factors in the external environment (eg LEAs, HEI[3]s and other schools) (Box F)and these may also influence the professional learning community (Box B), directly or indirectly.

This draft framework generated several broad research questions, to be asked in relation to schools (nursery[4], primary[5], secondary and special) at one of three putative stages (ie 'starters', 'developers', 'mature') as an effective professional learning community.

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[3] Higher education institutions
[4] Kindergarten
[5] Elementary

We formulated these broad questions as follows:
   a. What are their (Boxes A - F) characteristics and inter-relationships?
   b. What impact do the professional learning community, CPD and work-based learning have on teachers and pupils?
   c. What do the schools do to initiate, develop and sustain an effective professional learning community?
   d. What are the factors which enable/facilitate or hinder/create barriers?
   e. What works well, what goes wrong and how can this be remedied?
   f. Are these findings transferable to and learnable by other schools?
   g. How can the transfer of such knowledge and expertise be supported?

<u>Detailed research questions</u>

The following indicative detailed questions have been selectively operationalised in the questionnaire and will inform the case studies.

*General*
- What do we already know from previous research about effective professional learning communities and their impact on:
  - individual teachers' learning of knowledge and skills?
  - their attitudes and behaviour?
  - school leadership, organisation and culture?
  - pupil outcomes?
  - What are the best models for understanding and identifying 'what works' in effective professional learning communities to make teaching and learning more effective?

*School-level Factors: Leadership, Organisation and Culture*
- What models can be identified for the way different schools create time and opportunity for CPD procedures, programmes and activities and for work-based learning?
- What are the key inter-dependencies and how do they operate in effective professional learning communities, for example: school/team leadership; school/team culture; governor (school council member) commitment and resource management.
- What sort of climate/culture is most conducive to effective professional learning?
- How do schools find the right balance between the long-tem sustainability and embedding of professional development and a commitment to innovation, autonomy, creativity and risk-taking?
- How do schools find the right balance between institutional development/school improvement and teachers' individual development/ career progression?
- To what extent do ICT facilities and e-learning help in the creation of time, opportunity and collective learning?

*An Effective Professional Learning Community*
- What are different schools' prevailing conceptions of 'professional learning and development' and how far do these affect the way schools approach its management?

- What does an inclusive framework for professional learning and development look like in different institutions in practice?
- What can be said about the pedagogical impetus, challenge or problems, which impel schools to focus on the issue of professional development?
- What can be said about the assessment impetus, challenge or problems, which impel schools to focus on the issue of professional development?
- What are the other key 'drivers', if any, for CPD at school level? Are they extrinsic, intrinsic or a mixture?
- What seem to be the key resource needs for the start up, early development and mature periods of creating and sustaining schools as learning communities?
- What do schools that are starting to develop as effective professional learning communities actually do? Is this process transferable? If so, how can more schools develop in this way?
- How do such schools develop overtime and what are the key factors assisting or hindering this development? Is this process transferable? If so, how can more schools develop in this way?
- What do schools that have established themselves as mature effective professional learning communities actually do to sustain the right cultures and structures?
- What are key factors assisting or hindering the protection of this level of effectiveness? Is the process transferable? If so, how can more schools develop in this way?
- How does evaluation and feedback contribute to longer term changes in professional culture?
- What impact do the professional learning community, CPD and work-based learning have on teachers and pupils?

*Formal CPD and Related Management Procedures*
- What are the key inter-dependencies and how do they operate in effective professional learning communities, for example: development planning, forms of delivery and evaluation.
- Is it possible to detect how programmes of early professional development (eg for newly qualified teachers and those in the first three years of teaching) have acted as a stimulus to the growth of professional development across the whole institution? Is this knowledge transferable? If so, how can more schools develop in this way?
- How do different schools use performance management systems and quality systems, such as *Investors in People*, to support and extend every teacher a learner and engage the collective agency of all staff?
- How is in-service day activity related to the broader range of professional learning and development activity?
- How are discrete and ongoing learning and development opportunities integrated into a coherent directional plan for the individual and the school?
- How do schools and teachers, LEAs and HEIs go about the task of evaluating professional learning and development? What criteria and instruments do they use? What do these reveal?

*Work-based Learning*

- How do different schools engage in evidence-informed practice? How do they use available data (eg the Autumn Package[6] and OfSTED[7] reports) to promote professional learning aimed at improved teaching and learning?
- How do schools engage in school-wide research? How do they use available support (eg Best Practice Scholarships and HEI-based projects) to promote professional learning aimed at improved teaching and learning?
- How do individual teachers engage in evidence-informed practice? How do they use available data (eg appraisal, and national assessment scores) to promote their own professional learning aimed at improved teaching and learning?
- How do individual teachers engage in classroom-based research? What methods (eg action research and mentor support) do they use to promote their own professional learning aimed at improved teaching and learning?
- What role do virtual communities play in the creation/re-creation of CPD practice?
- What is the balance between learning and development gained through teaching activity and that gained by activity outside the classroom and how is this achieved?
- How do schools and teachers engaged in initial training collaborate with HEIs and student teachers to promote professional learning aimed at improved teaching and learning?

*External Factors*

- What roles are played by LEAs, HEIs and/or subject/specialist associations in creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities, what difference do they make and how crucial are they? What works well and what can go wrong?
- What forms of networking and partnership work well in creating and sustaining learning communities (eg. Beacon Schools[8], HEI-based clusters)?
- What impact have the DfES's regional networks had on the development of schools?

Literature Review

An initial, but also ongoing, task was to review the literature. The broad aims of the literature review were to:

- identify models and characteristics of effective professional learning communities (EPLCs);
- take account of different disciplinary perspectives for understanding professional development and learning; and
- take account of experience and models in other professions.

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[6] Results and other statistical information sent to schools
[7] The Office for Standards in Education: a government agency that carries out external inspections of schools.
[8] Schools that have received national recognition for excellence in a particular area and who receive funding to work with other local schools, supporting their development.

In carrying out the review, the research team has been working towards achieving two of the project's main purposes:

- to draw out credible, accessible and practically useful findings; and
- to inform the Draft Framework and the design of the questionnaire and case-studies.

The review this far concentrates on material in English from the UK, the USA, Europe (especially Scandinavia and the Netherlands) and current and former Commonwealth countries. Significant material from other sources has been included when accessible. The normal search procedures (eg ERIC, and BEI) have been used and other relevant activities (eg the EPPI[9] systematic review of CPD) have been taken into account. With respect to experience in other professions, and in addition to the normal literature review process, the professional bodies of selected professional groups (eg the General Medical Council and the Law Society) have been consulted. In certain places, we chose to go beyond the literature bases traditionally cited in relation to professional learning communities because we believed they were relevant to exploring professional learning communities in England starting in the year 2002. In these cases, however, there are clear links between these bodies of literature and the professional learning community literature and we made these explicit in the review.

The review is being up-dated on an ongoing basis. It is deliberately intended to be an evolving review to ensure that we take account of new literature and other connected literature and ideas that are drawn to our attention through our dialogue with our Project Steering Group and other colleagues nationally and internationally, as well as through our research.

Six broad questions have been used to structure the review:

i. Why are effective professional learning communities considered to be important and how has the concept developed?
ii. What characteristics and models of effective professional learning communities have been identified?
iii. What kinds of learning appear to be found in effective professional learning communities?
iv. What factors affecting whether effective professional learning communities can be created, developed and sustained have been identified?
v. What processes within and outside schools have been identified in relation to creating, developing and sustaining effective professional learning communities?
vi. How rigorous, robust and reliable are the conceptual underpinning and the research evidence for identified characteristics, models, factors and processes and for any consequential prescriptions for practice and policy?

Our rationale for answering these six broad questions, and for achieving the overall purposes of the project, has two dimensions:

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[9] Evidence for Policy and Practice Institute.

a. in making judgements about 'rigour,' 'robustness' and 'reliability', we have tried to use accepted research criteria, indicating the strengths and limitations of the literature as appropriate;

b. in making decisions about the research framework and the research instruments we use informed professional judgements based on the best available evidence, bearing in mind its strengths and limitations.

It is still too early to make firm judgements about the literature as a whole, as it is an area that appears to be developing rapidly. Literature that most explicitly and directly relates to professional learning communities in schools suggests that conceptions of professional learning communities in schools and research into their existence, operation, and effectiveness are at a relatively early stage of development. Moreover, the bulk of the theorising and research has not been conducted in England. The applicability of the theoretical ideas and prescriptions based on the related evidence to the current English schools context may be limited insofar as professional learning communities are affected by contingent national contextual differences. Our empirical research will be informed by this literature but will also test its applicability to the English context and investigate the possibility that additional factors and processes will prove significant in this context.

Drawing on the classification offered by Bolam (1999), Wallace and Poulson (in press) have distinguished between five different ways of studying the social world affecting the nature of the knowledge claims and associated literature that is produced: 'knowledge-for-understanding'; 'knowledge-for-critical evaluation'; 'knowledge-for-action'; 'instrumentalism'; and 'reflexive action'. Some research on professional learning communities focuses on 'knowledge for understanding', and much of the work lies within the 'knowledge-for-action' orientation, with the 'instrumentalist' orientation underpinning the most practically oriented literature. The dominant action orientation of many of the authors may affect the likelihood that professional learning communities will be positively valued a priori. Consequently, factors delimiting the potential for effective professional learning communities and their promotion and sustainability may be given less consideration compared with determining the processes, including external interventions, which may promote the achievement of potential. The limited 'knowledge-for-critical-evaluation' literature on professional learning communities (eg Westheimer, 1999) is probably a consequence of their novelty and it is to be expected that critiques from this orientation will emerge in the near future.

At present, the overall extent of generalisation from this base may reach beyond the extent of its empirical backing. It is especially apparent where generalisations have been made without qualification as to the range of contexts to which they might apply. If the nature and effectiveness of professional learning communities are at least partly contingent on contextual factors, then the applicability of these generalisations to the current schools context in England should treated as more hypothetical than proven, and to be tested in the present empirical research. Given some of the limitations of the literature we have already tackled, implications for practice and policy that we may be in a position to draw from the review at present have to be based on our 'best available literature-informed judgement'. We note, however, the extent to which it all points in the same direction, even if some of it of it is not highly robust.

The Evolving Conceptual Framework

As a result of our literature review, we have revised our initial framework (see Diagram 2). This framework is likely to develop further as we gain insights from new literature examined and our survey and case study analysis.

***Insert Diagram 2***

Questionnaire Survey

The survey process has fallen into several stages:

- A long list of approximately 800 schools was identified using the revised draft framework and research questions as guides and the following selection frame:
    - nursery, primary, secondary and special schools;
    - reputationally at one of three stages: 'early starters', 'developers' and 'mature'
    This long list was compiled in consultation with our project Steering Group, drawing on information from a number of different sources including LEAs, HEIs, the Beacon Schools initiative and the Training Schools initiative.

- 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 opinion 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 activities in the school.

- A revised questionnaire was administered to the sample of schools (one questionnaire per school) in the summer term 2002.

Data collection is not yet complete although the analysis of survey data has started. This analysis will focus upon four key areas/tasks:

*(1) Overview*
First, we are seeking to establish basic descriptive data on the characteristics of professional learning communities, on how professional development is conceived, developed, managed and resourced, how the impact of CPD is evaluated at the school level and on other important aspects, such as schools use of data. The mean scores and variability of responses to individual questionnaire items will be examined to establish the extent of similarities or differences in CDP provision/impact across the schools surveyed. Contextual and other characteristics of schools such as type, size, LEA etc will also be examined in relation to professional learning communities, CPD provision/impact etc. In addition, we have started to explore the open-ended responses to questions about the definition, facilitation of and constraining factors in relation to professional learning communities (see below).

*(2) Identification of key process factors*

Factor analysis techniques[10] will be employed to identify and examine and identify a finite set of key factors related to the processes of CDP and more broadly to the development of professional learning communities. Where appropriate, this approach will be employed to create a set of new indicators for each school by combining the weighted responses of relevant questionnaire items. On the basis of previous research it is anticipated that key indicators are likely to fall under the headings indicated in the Implementation Profile. This supposition will be tested as part of the analyses.

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

As indicated in the research issues section, there is sparse evidence about the impact of CPD, and especially of professional learning communities, on teacher and 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 and teacher outcome data. Here we have in mind data that can be drawn from OFSTED reports and examination and assessment data sets available at the national level. Where possible, value-added measures of school effectiveness will also be national level. Where possible, value-added measures of school effectiveness will also be employed. Also where possible, multiple regression techniques will be employed to model particular pupil and teacher outcomes in relation to professional learning communities and CDP provision/impact. This will provide relatively 'hard' evidence of the link between CDP provision, its impact of CDP in terms of self-evaluation activities and collaboration within professional learning communities and pupil and teacher outcomes (such as examination results and teacher satisfaction/mobility etc).

*(4) Selection of case study school settings*

The early data has been used as part of the criteria for selecting the 16 case study school settings, as indicated below, in consultation with the Steering Group.

*The definition of an effective professional learning community*

Having presented our working definition, we asked respondents 'How would you change the working definition? What is your definition?' Of those responding to our initial survey, only a relatively small number (39) suggested changes or refinements. Of these, 41 per cent felt that the concept needed to be more inclusive, to include all staff and, sometimes, parents, governors and pupils:

> An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and
> sustain the learning of teachers and support staff, governors and parents in the

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[10] 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.

> school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning.
> (Secondary school)
>
> I would include the phrase 'sustain the learning of adult educators in the
> school community including parents and carers with the collective purpose …
> (Nursery school)
>
> Within the context of our school we would have to add something about
> parents working and learning with us (Infant school)

Other proposed changes were much smaller in number. There was, however, a slight indication that those respondents who were 'starting out' tended to highlight the importance of collaboration and commitment, those who reported themselves as 'developing' emphasised the learning of adults and self evaluation, as well as a trusting environment, and those who felt they were already in 'mature' professional learning communities offered more focused and sharper definitions about further striving. These emerging themes can be explored through our case studies.

In general, respondents reported that they found the idea of a professional learning community very useful. Inevitably, it is more likely that those who completed the survey were more interested in the concept. Those 'starting out' were more likely to note that they aspired to this, while those in 'developing' and 'mature' professional learning communities were more likely to report: "It's what we are" (special school - developer); "It's central to how this school operates" (nursery school – developer); "It encapsulates our current philosophy" (secondary school - developer);"It underpins our philosophy" (primary school – mature); "It's what we are" (special school – mature).

*The main facilitators to becoming and sustaining a professional learning community*

When asked to identify the main facilitators to becoming a professional learning community, 111 survey respondents offered a range of factors. The most frequently mentioned facilitators were:

| *Facilitator* | *% citing this* |
|---|---|
| Funding – staff and facilities | 29 |
| Ongoing, useful learning opportunities | 26 |
| Ethos of valuing all individuals and learning/ supportive culture | 24 |
| Time – reflections, evaluation, discussing, working together, release time | 22 |
| Leadership – of headteacher, key staff/ grassroots/governors | 22 |
| Working on vision/discussing purpose | 18 |
| Staff willingness/commitment/dedication/ motivation, wanting to learn | 16 |
| Team spirit/working together/joint discussion | 13 |

Comments included:

Motivation and interest- need a core group of staff who are committed to their own learning to get things started. Head must be a role model in this. Interesting, relevant learning opportunities which are the catalyst for creative thinking. (Infant school – starter)

Giving everyone status – making them feel valued by giving them confidence to take responsibility ad act independently – but knowing that they will always be supported when necessary. (Primary school – developer)

Staff willing to share, be involved in research, be willing to be observed and work/ideas scrutinised. (Primary school – developer)

Identification of need through clearly defined structures. Senior management priority for all staff though institution. Funding. Access to quality training. (Secondary school- mature)

Adequate resourcing to enable staff release for: further professional development, to support each other, to act as mentors/trainers, to have time to reflect, evaluate and disseminate. (Nursery school – mature)

One hundred and twelve respondents highlighted facilitators that, in their view, sustain a professional learning community. Again, continued financial commitment (22%) was the most frequently mentioned facilitator, followed by time (17%), ongoing useful internal and external learning opportunities (16%), the commitment, willingness and positive attitude of teachers (13%) and leadership at all levels (13%). Smaller numbers noted taking on new ideas, taking risks and finding new ways to improve; others identified constant review or linking in the school development planning process, and a few gave examples of looking outwards, such as bringing in outsiders to learn from and share with them.

Some illustrative examples of facilitators of sustainability were:

Successful learning, enjoyment, sense of achievement with support to keeping improving. (Primary – starter)

An understanding that the job of sustaining a professional learning community is never finished – it will always be going. An optimistic view of change. (Junior school – mature).

Ongoing funding to provide TIM|E for collaboration and co-operation. Ongoing opportunities for study towards accredited qualifications. Support of senior managers. (Nursery school – developer)

Creating a climate where training/development is shared, where staffare naturally solving their own problems co-operatively and taking initiative for it. (Secondary school – developer)

Ongoing and useful leaning opportunities through external development opportunities (appropriate to pupil needs), personally undertaken activities to

extend knowledge and understanding, good quality internal development opportunities – through staff discussion . . . (Special school – mature)

*The main barriers to becoming and sustaining a professional learning community*

One hundred and twenty-one respondents identified barriers to becoming a professional learning community. Of these, the most frequently cited barriers were lack of finance (36%) – generally for staffing and release – and lack of time (33%) – mainly for shared reflection, professional development, and working together. Other relatively frequently mentioned barriers were workload, stress and general 'overload' (20%) and resistance (17%). Poor relationships, communication, a lack of trust or openness were cited by smaller numbers of respondents (10%), as was a lack of shared vision or purpose or a lack of involvement (9%). The following examples illustrate these points:

A poor school ethos. Staff who are not valued for the work they do. (Nursery school – developer)

Exhaustion, unnecessary paperwork, lack of clarity as to school purposes, lack of trust, and underfunding (Secondary school – developer)

Fear of change, unwillingness to take risks. (Primary school – starter)

The old issues of time, workload and resources. We will not be able to develop or sustain a professional learning community if it requires considerable extra effort by individual groups or staff. Requires significant additional resources. (Special school – starter)

Some staff need longer periods of time to adjust to the inherent responsibilities when committing to professional development and self review. (Secondary school – mature).

Not having shared vision and purpose. Joint ownership of targets, interpersonal support structures. (Primary school – mature)

Financial issues and time were also the main barriers to sustaining a professional learning community, reported by just over a third (36%) and just under a quarter (24%) of the 86 survey respondents who chose to comment on this issue. The other more commonly mentioned barriers were having no sense of achievement, not seeing benefits or teachers not valuing what they have learnt (13%), workload and stress (12%) and lack of commitment or drive on the part of leaders (10%). Illustrative comments include:

No strong experience of success that can provide a boost when challenges to development make the going tough . . . (Secondary school – developer)

Continued professional development time given to staff and commitment of senior management to sustain systems. (Secondary – mature)

No sense of achievement or enjoyment. (Primary – starter)

<u>Case studies</u>

We selected 16 case study sites, drawing on the quantitative data as part of the selection criteria. A 'site' refers to a school or cluster of schools, together with associated LEA, HEI (s) and, where appropriate, business links. Basic descriptive data and key indicators were used to create a profile of professional learning community and CDP provision/impact for each school. These were then mapped onto the categories 'starters', 'developers' and 'mature'. These profiles/ categories were employed to select 16 sites along with other criteria: school-type: primary, secondary, special, nursery; stage: 'starter', 'developer' 'mature'; location (eg urban/rural); school size; status (eg Beacon, Early Excellence, and EAZ[11]); reputation of LEA support for professional learning communities.

The general aim of the focused, interpretive case studies (Merriam 1988) is to complement and enrich the data gained from the survey. This will permit exploration in greater depth of the practices and views of those in the schools, triangulated with other stakeholders and protagonists. More specifically, the aim is to gather data about the creation, development and sustenance of professional learning communities over time, ie a five-term period, especially regarding issues of internal capacity, leadership and organisation and external support and networking. In addition the data collected will be used with the findings from the other research strands to compile case study accounts of the each of the 16 school settings.

Each of the 16 sites will be visited for a two to three-day period each term, in each of five terms, ie a total of from 10-15 days per site, depending on school type and size and the nature and extent of any associated network. There will be in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation of professional development and network events and workplace learning activities, including classrooms and meetings. There will also be document analysis and ICT networking will be examined. Subject to permission, we will use a digital camera to collect photographic evidence, for example about staff rooms, schools and classrooms, following Prosser's (1999) suggestion about the contribution of visual representations to understanding school culture.

First visits to these case study schools are taking place in December 2002 and January 2003.The starting point is feeding back data from the survey stage and gaining basic information about perceptions of professional learning community within each school. Beyond this, as the case studies progress, particular themes related to effective professional learning communities will emerge as significant. Thus, the precise nature and focus of the case studies will vary.

In addition, we will organise ongoing workshops for the 16 case study schools to contribute to data collection, help develop the draft framework, promote systematic sharing of practical experience about effective professional learning communities, and contribute to the preparation of the case studies

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[11] Education Action Zone: a network of schools in challenging areas, funded to work on specific projects to raise standards.

Data collection and analysis will be informed by rigorous qualitative techniques, originally devised by Miles and Huberman (1994). The integrated approach to data collection and analysis will be computerised, employing a software package such as NVIVO, to facilitate progressive focusing throughout the study. Photographic evidence will be analysed using visual imagery analysis (Prosser, 1999).

Dissemination

Our aim is that the project and its findings will have maximum impact on practice. Dissemination and involvement of practitioners are, therefore, key. Team members are experienced in, and enjoy developing and offering, interactive training based on adult learning principles taking place over time and involving participants in workplace learning. This particular study lends itself to the design of creative modes of dissemination. Some of these will evolve over time as the characteristics and processes of professional learning communities are better understood. Two school leaders are being seconded from their schools part-time to join the research team and will be involved fully in developing the dissemination strategy. We have also used discussions with groups of practitioners to gain input as we designed the survey and will involve them in considering our findings. Survey data findings will be fed back in writing to each participating school with a general summary section and a section specific to each school, and case study schools/clusters will receive more detailed accounts of their individual findings *via* dissemination workshops (see above). Other dissemination methods will include contributions to and development of web sites, and the production of a cd-rom and video designed to portray the essence of effective learning communities in action.

**Emerging research issues**

Our research thus far has highlighted a number of issues that we will be exploring further. Here, we highlight five.

Defining 'effectiveness' of professional learning communities

'Effectiveness' can be viewed in a range of ways: impact on the school as an organisation and the learning of that organisation; impact on teachers; and, most fundamentally, impact on pupils. Effectiveness can also be looked at in terms of evolution over time, such that some schools are at a very early stage of development (early starters), others are further along the process (developers), while some are established (mature). This project will enable us to explore the change and development of professional learning communities over time.

What are the features of a professional learning community?

On what basis can judgements be made about whether or not a school is working towards becoming a professional learning community and about the stage of development it has reached towards becoming a "mature" community? What indicators can be used? Our working assumption, based upon the model, is that they will include factors such as: how learning and development opportunities are integrated into a coherent directional plan for the individual and the school; how

schools and individual teachers use available data (eg. autumn package, OFSTED reports; appraisal and test scores) to promote professional learning aimed at improved teaching and learning; how external factors including arrangements for networking and partnership have worked in creating and sustaining communities.

Who is included as 'professional' within the professional learning community?

Our survey responses, early visits to case study schools and discussions with practitioners in a wide variety of settings, have highlighted that, while virtually all of the literature only considers teachers (including school leaders) to be members of professional learning communities, for many schools, especially those in certain contexts and those with younger children or large numbers of pupils with special needs, the role of other staff employed by the school is equally critical. We, therefore, are now distinguishing between four groups: internal professionals – teachers and other staff; internal non-professionals – parents and governors (non-employee members of the school organisation); external professionals – LEA and university staff and consultants; and external non-professionals – wider community representatives, business and industry etc. Pupils, of course, might be considered as part of the internal non-professional group, but can also be seen as a unique group or, as a number of respondents have told us, they are "in the centre". In terms of our exploration, therefore, we will be taking the internal professionals (shaded in Diagram 3) as our starting point in exploring how they create and sustain effective professional learning communities, but will be looking at the role of all of the other groups in relation to this key group. It is possible, of course, that our research will lead us to a redefinition.

**Diagram 3:**
**Membership of the**
**Professional Learning Community**
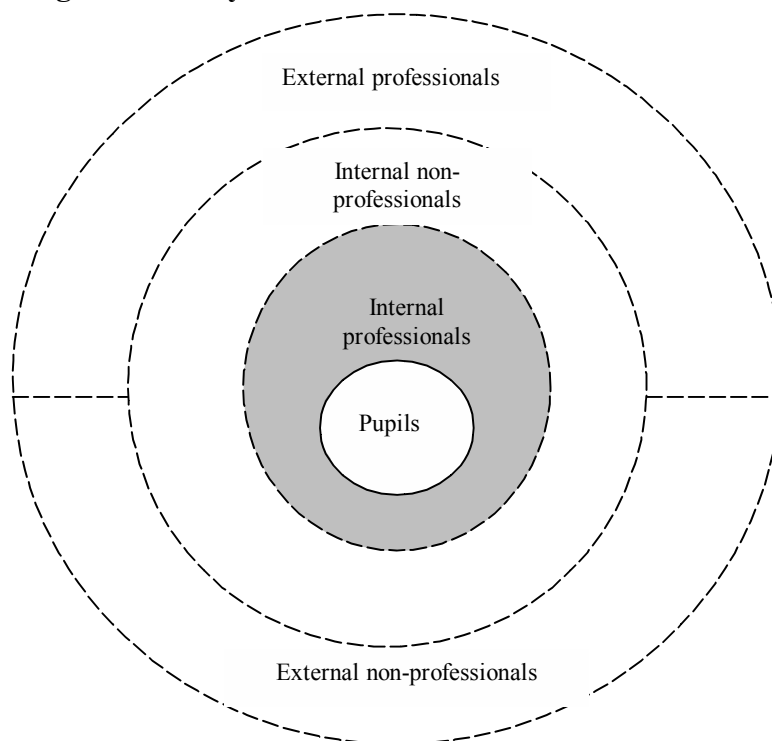
Can there be more than one professional learning community within a school?

Research on secondary schools suggests that the academic department-based structure may result in members of the department having a stronger sense of belonging to a departmental community than a whole school community (Siskin, 1994). Similarly, in large primary schools a similar situation may emerge between staff in infant (5-7 year olds) and junior (7-11 year olds) departments, and in any school between teaching and support staff. It is therefore plausible to imagine that there may be more than one professional learning community in a school. Our research will seek to explore this, as well as look at the boundaries between internal and external professional learning communities, particularly in relation to networks in which schools are involved.

How long is it before something is 'sustainable'?

Our research will take place over two and a half years. While this will give us the opportunity to follow schools over time, research on change suggests that implementation does not happen overnight: it is a slow process (see Fullan, 2001). This means that in a considerable number of our case studies, at least, we are unlikely to be able to ascertain whether the creation and development of an effective professional learning community is sustainable. For those schools that are identified as at a 'mature' point when our case studies start, we hope to be able to explore how professional learning community is maintained. Revisiting the schools some years after the end of the project might also give helpful insights, as a group of researchers found when they went back to schools that were successful 'against the adds' five years after initial visits (Maden, 2001; McMahon, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Little (2001) in a detailed study of interaction between teachers in their daily course of work:

> . . .starts from the premise that if we are to theorize about the significance of professional community, we must be able to demonstrate how communities achieve their effects. It [the study] is designed to build on – but also deepen and challenge – research of the last decade that has steadily converged on claims that strong professional communities are important contributors to instructional improvement and school reform. . .such typologies [based on previous research] do not go far enough to explain the nature of teacher learning resources made available (and not) through daily participation in professional communities. The urgency associated with contemporary reform movements, especially those targeted at persistent achievement disparities, has intensified pressures on teachers and fuelled policy interest in the collective capacity of schools for improvement. This is a timely moment to unpack the meaning and consequences of professional community at the level of practice.

We are hopeful that this project will be able to deepen understanding of professional learning communities within the English context, in order that we might draw out

credible, accessible and practically useful findings through systematic and rigorous research design and analysis.

As part of an international community, as represented at the ICSEI conference, it is also important for us to share and learn from the experiences of others around the world exploring the same ideas whether through research, policy or practice. In this way, we can all enhance and enrich our understanding of the common and diverse features of effective professional learning communities in different international contexts.

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