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Questions Arising from the Literature and how they are being addressed in the Project

A belief that the quality of learning and teaching can be enhanced by teachers working and learning together has led to increased interest in the potential of *professional learning communities* for school improvement. A team from the Universities of Bristol, Bath and London Institute of Education has been funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the General Teaching Council for England (GTC) to carry out a project on *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities*. From January 2002 to October 2004, the project is examining what professional learning communities are, what makes them effective, and how effective professional learning communities are created, developed and sustained over time.

The *Effective Professional Learning Communities* Project

Our aim is to identify and provide practical examples of:

- the characteristics of effective professional learning communities in different kinds of schools;
- 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.

Through:

- conducting a literature survey;
- developing a framework of characteristics and outcome indicators of effective professional learning communities;
- surveying headteachers or continuing professional development (CPD) co-ordinators 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.

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Understanding of effective professional learning communities in schools is still at a relatively early stage, although the evidence seems to suggest that they have a positive impact on school improvement. Most research has also taken place in North America, which is why it is important for us to test its applicability to the UK context. As a user of research, it is also important to know you are using 'good' evidence. The literature we have examined is of different types. Some of it is based on careful research that aims to understand professional communities, often also trying to develop knowledge that can subsequently be applied to improve practice and policy. Some, however, provides recommendations for improving practice with limited evidence to back these up. Given these limitations, it is important to be cautious about implications for practice and policy, which is why this study is needed.

The seven guiding questions in this paper are based on our reading of relevant international literature¹, and are helping to guide our research and development activities.

1. Why is there so much interest in professional learning communities?

It is widely accepted that teacher professional development opportunities can promote individual teacher development, school improvement and higher standards of pupil learning. Indeed, the progress of educational reform is claimed to depend on teachers' individual and collective capacity, and its link with school-wide capacity for promoting pupil learning. The claims for *professional learning communities* are even more inclusive. The notion of a 'community' draws attention to the potential that a broad range of people based inside and outside a school could mutually enhance each other's learning and school development.

Thus, strategies and processes could be identified which help school communities to work together to promote individual, collective and organisational learning. While pupils' learning would be the ultimate goal, a thriving professional learning community would offer school staff the opportunity of a rewarding and satisfying work environment and could, therefore, contribute to resolving issues of teacher recruitment and retention. It is also suggested that learning through professional learning communities would enhance staff practice and increase leaders' repertoire of responses for dealing with complex issues.

Our project's working definition

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.

2. What are professional learning communities?

Every word in the idea of *professional learning communities* is important, but the potential power of this idea comes from combining the words because it helps us to consider how all the disparate aspects – *professional*, *learning* and *community* – may mutually reinforce each other in building more effective practice. Research on 'professional community' started in the USA in the 1980s, looking at schools and departments as contexts for teaching. Studies in several countries, however, show that strongly cohesive professional communities are not necessarily positively oriented towards change or concerned with school improvement. It is significant that the word 'learning' has been inserted between 'professional' and 'communities'. 'Learning' highlights the importance of a focus on career-long professional learning to improve educational practice. It is also linked with 'community' so the

Follow-up Questions for Reflection and Discussion

In the spirit of our project, we have included some questions for you, the readers, to discuss with a group of colleagues or your school's staff.

- What does the idea of 'effective professional learning communities' mean to you?
- How effective is your professional learning community? What evidence do you have for your view?
- What does it enable you to accomplish professionally? How has it changed your practice?
- Who is part of your professional learning community? Who is not?
- What are the processes you use to create, develop or sustain your effective professional learning community?
- What factors in your school and beyond the school appear to help you develop your professional learning community?
- What factors appear to get in the way? What are you doing to reduce these factors?

Further Reading

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¹ A more comprehensive literature review will be made available in due course. We will be updating the review during the course of the project, and hope the project will feed in valuable information for future reviews.

² Hipp, K. and Huffman, J. (2003) *Professional Learning Communities: Assessment – Development – Effects*. Paper presented at the Sixteenth Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Sydney, Australia, January.

³ Little, J. (2001) *Locating Learning in Teachers' Communities of Practice: Opening up Problems of Analysis in Records of Everyday Work*. University of California. Unpublished paper.

- *External contextual* factors are also key, including: attitudes and actions of people in the local and broader community; the degree of autonomy accorded to those in school; and government political action, including the extent of pressure for change leading, in some cases, to workload and stress problems. External professional development opportunities are also influenced by geography: many schools in rural areas have been disadvantaged because of comparatively little in-service training support available from their LEA and limited access to higher education institutions, yet there are also examples of excellent CPD provision in rural areas where LEAs have worked hard to overcome problems and isolation.

We are:

- examining the nature and range of internal and external factors that affect our schools over time and how members of the professional learning communities in the schools work to increase positive factors and reduce negative factors;
- looking at the triggers that might start members of a school community on the journey: for example, whether a PLC starts from a practical problem to be solved rather than from general commitment to create a professional learning community.

7. How long is it before an effective professional learning community is 'sustainable'?

Research on change suggests that implementation doesn't happen overnight: it is a slow process. Achieving sustainability – once new ideas and practices have become embedded – takes even longer and can be disrupted by changes of staff, competing initiatives and other factors. The existing evidence on the sustainability of professional learning communities is extremely limited.

Our research is taking place over two and a half years. We will be able to follow the evolution of professional learning communities in our case study schools during this period. For those schools already at a 'mature' stage when our case studies start, we hope to be able to explore whether and how a professional learning community may be sustained.

Conclusion

An eminent American researcher³ argues that previous research has not gone far enough to explain how teachers learn through participating in professional learning communities on a daily basis, and the impact of this learning. Consequently, she suggests that 'this is a timely moment to unpack the meaning and consequences of professional community at the level of practice'.

We hope our project will be able to deepen understanding of professional learning communities in the English context. Through systematic and rigorous research design and analysis as well as seeking input and feedback from teachers and school leaders, we also hope to draw out credible, accessible and practically useful findings to help those in and working with schools create, develop and sustain effective professional learning communities.

focus is not just on individual teachers' professional learning but their collective learning within a supportive community context.

The organisation of many schools makes it likely that professional learning communities may be operating at a number of different levels. For example, several studies have shown that the structure of secondary schools sometimes results in members of departments having a stronger sense of belonging to a departmental community than a whole school community. A similar situation may emerge between staff in infant and junior departments, and in any school between different groups of staff. It is, therefore, likely that there may be more than one professional learning community in a school.

A key purpose of our study is to understand professional learning communities in English schools. As part of this we are:

- exploring the range of professional learning communities among groups in each school;
- investigating how the boundaries of professional learning communities may be extended, particularly through networks in which schools are involved.

3. What makes professional learning communities effective?

Effective professional learning communities, as described in the literature, appear to share five key characteristics or features:

- *Shared values and vision* directed towards the learning of all pupils, and greater reliance on the collectivity to reinforce objectives, rather than on individual autonomy.
- *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.
- *Reflective professional inquiry* as an integral part of work, including ongoing conversations about educational issues; frequent examining of practice with colleagues, mutual observation, joint planning and curriculum development. Through frequently interacting, staff convert individual unspoken, or tacit, knowledge into shared knowledge, applying new ideas and information to problem-solving to meet pupils' needs.
- *Collaboration* in developmental activities directed towards achieving a shared purpose which generates mutual professional learning, reaching beyond superficial exchanges of help, support, or assistance.
- *Group, as well as individual, learning is promoted* in that professional learning is more frequently communal rather than solitary, and all teachers are learners with their colleagues.

Fundamentally, it can be argued that effective professional learning communities have a positive impact on pupils' learning, although only a few studies have shown this link. Most often, benefits are found in positive impact on teachers' work lives, but improvements have also occurred in teachers' classroom practice, and improvement in practice across the organisation.

The existing literature does not offer many insights about the developmental nature of becoming an effective professional learning community, although this is the focus of one ongoing American study².

Our study focuses on schools whose members may be at different possible 'stages of development' towards becoming effective professional learning communities: those at an early stage (*early starters*), those further along the process (*developers*), and those where the professional learning communities are operating at a more sophisticated level (*mature*), as self-identified through our survey. We are:

- looking to see if specific characteristics are identifiable at different stages of the process and to what extent the characteristics of effective professional learning communities are more fully reflected in schools at the mature stage, although the improvement journey is rarely straightforward so we may not find a neat development process;
- attempting to explore the extent to which *mature* professional learning communities are more effective because of their greater positive impact on pupils and on staff individually, in groups, and across the school, and because of more effective staff relationships with partners and networks beyond the school;
- examining the link between the characteristics of professional learning communities and pupil progress;
- exploring whether, especially in large schools, it is possible for an overall effective professional learning community to exist.

4. Who is included as 'professional' within professional learning communities?

Much of the literature considers only teachers (including school leaders) to be members of *professional* learning communities. In most schools, however, the role of other staff employed by the school is also critical. We are distinguishing between four groups:

- internal professionals – teachers and other staff;
- internal non-professionals – pupils, parents and governors (non-employee members of the school organisation);
- external professionals – LEA and university staff and consultants;
- external non-professionals – representatives from the wider community, social services, health professionals, business and industry etc.

We are beginning by trying to find out how internal professionals contribute to creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities. We are also looking at the other three groups in relation to this key group.

5. What processes do professional learning communities use? How do they contribute to the development of an effective professional learning community?

A number of processes inside and outside schools appear to promote the development of effective professional learning communities. Some are conscious processes; others less so.

- *School-based formal professional development opportunities* - a solid basis of expert knowledge and skills and practical tools for implementing CPD (eg professional development profiles, coaching and mentoring).

- *Work-based and incidental learning opportunities*, based on theories of adult learning (eg experimenting with and reflecting on pedagogical practices, experiential learning, problem-based learning and meta-learning).
- *Teamwork* at both group and whole-school level (eg problem solving and creative activities within departments, key stage and pastoral groups, strategic leadership groups, teams developing whole-school policies or leading school improvement activities).
- *Self-evaluation and inquiry*, action research, and using evidence to inform practice (eg Autumn package, OFSTED reports, pupil and teacher surveys, assessment of pupils' progress, eliciting feedback from parents).
- *Leadership, management and coordination* of professional activities (eg vision building and school development planning, performance management, orchestrating CPD, literacy and numeracy across the curriculum).
- *Partnerships* with people from LEAs, higher education, local businesses etc, involving a rethinking of the way each institution operates as well as how staff might work as part of this partnership.
- *External professional development opportunities*, including LEA- and other-run courses, higher degrees, membership of local working parties.
- *Networking* through teachers and other members of school communities linking up with each other to share ideas, disseminate good practice, discuss and resolve problems, challenge each other's thinking, and create new knowledge.
- *Critical friendships* involving external agents who play a role in promoting inquiry-mindedness in school communities by helping those in schools to interpret and use data, bringing an outsider's eye to school activities and supportively challenging assumptions.

We are investigating these and other processes in our 16 different case study settings to see how they evolve over time and interact with each other.

6. What other factors help or hinder the creation and development of effective professional learning communities?

It is important to understand the context in which effective professional learning communities are created, developed and sustained. Many factors can facilitate or constrain capacity for ongoing and sustainable learning. These operate in complex and interrelated ways, at different points in time, and are of different kinds – individual, group, school and external.

- *Individual* motivation and commitment to the community is likely to be key. Factors in people's lives facilitate or inhibit learning at different times. Age and gender influence teacher development. Teachers also go through different career stages that can affect their interest in change and learning.
- The *school's social context* also influences teachers' individual and collective learning. Cultural assumptions shared among particular groups and across the school and the use of power to achieve particular interests can have a positive or negative impact. Positive relationships, trust, respect and positive staff morale appear to be key facilitators. The school's organisational structures are also important: whether there is time and space for staff to develop close working relationships. Significant events – amalgamation, threatened closure, or a fire – or previous experience of change efforts can also have an influence, as can teacher retention, a particular issue in some areas.
- Any professional learning communities among *groups* within the school are also affected by many of the same social influences.