

# Chapter 10

## Professional Learning Communities and Teachers' Professional Development

Ray Bolam

### Introduction

This chapter takes the overall purposes of this collection as its starting point. It addresses the question of how the quality of teaching might be improved by considering selected theoretical and empirical work on effective approaches to the professional development of teachers and on schools as professional learning communities. In so doing, it also considers issues related to the changing nature of the teacher profession and those patterns of school leadership and management that create conditions for effective teaching while balancing internal and external constraints.

Policies and practices affecting teachers' work, learning and development are necessarily rooted in the particular context of a single educational system and, indeed, are often the product of unique, and changing, sets of circumstances – political, economic, social, cultural, historical, professional and technical – in that system. Nevertheless, many recent changes have much in common across countries in their substance and impact. Thus, there is considerable evidence that national reforms directed at school improvement have resulted in substantial changes in the roles of school teachers and principals. For example, in an OECD survey of school management in nine countries – Belgium, Greece, Hungary, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Sweden, the UK and the USA – the writers argued that

*Schools everywhere are being asked to do more than ever before. They face a complex world and a seemingly endless set of pressures. Those who manage schools must take responsibility for an arduous task.*

(CERI, 2001: 13)

Of course, the nature and impact of such changes also varies between countries. Drawing upon evidence from two European studies – one of primary teachers in England and the other of secondary teachers in England, France and Denmark, McNess et al. (2003), found that

*Evidence from both projects suggested that teachers in England were concerned that externally imposed educational change had not only increased their workload but also created a growing tension between the requirements of government and the needs of the pupils. A perceived demand for a delivery of performance, for themselves and their pupils, had*

*created a policy focus that emphasized the managerially effective in the interest of accountability, while ignoring teachers' deeply rooted commitment to the affective aspects of teaching and learning.* (p. 243)

Some commentators (e.g. Olsen, 2002) have argued that these policies were adopted across the public sector as a whole: reforms in health, social services and housing, as well as education, were said to have a common technical/ideological core, and were often referred to as managerialism, rational management or new public management. Within a broad new public management framework, many countries adopted 'steering' strategies, often based on dedicated or categorical funding, to couple professional development tightly to the implementation of their reform policies, an approach that, according to Halasz (2000), has probably become the dominant one in OECD member countries. Good examples in England were the introduction of the national literacy and numeracy strategies. The curricula and pedagogical content of these innovations were specified very tightly by central government agencies as, too, was the associated training, and the outcomes were reported to have been very successful ([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk)).

In short, school teachers and leaders in many countries have increasingly found themselves working in a political context in which external, 'restructuring' changes, initiated by national, state or local authorities to raise standards of achievement, take priority over their own vision of desirable improvements. These contextual factors pose difficult practical dilemmas for them, perhaps the most significant being that of how to implement an onerous external change agenda while simultaneously promoting school-initiated improvements. Paradoxically, one major conclusion of research on school effectiveness and improvement has been to stress the importance of capacity building and collective learning at the school level. According to Teddlie and Reynolds (2000), teachers in effective schools reportedly work collaboratively to achieve shared goals; they have high expectations of their students, teach purposively, monitor student work and give positive feedback. Similarly, in their historical overview, Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) argued that school improvement research emphasised the need for schools to create an infrastructure, especially collaborative patterns of staff development, to enable knowledge of best practice and research findings to be shared and utilised. However, schools also vary significantly, both within and between countries, along several important dimensions – context, funding, size, structure, functions, staffing and teaching models. For example, Southworth and Weindling (2002) concluded from a study of 26 large (with 401–600 pupils) primary schools in England that, compared to smaller schools, they were characterised by more staff expertise, more opportunity for peer support, more internal communication difficulties, more delegation, more reliance on middle managers and more frequent use of teams.

Against this background, this chapter's central argument is that, where circumstances and constraints permit, it makes sense for school leaders and managers to aim for promoting a professional learning community, using some form of distributed leadership, as the foundation for sustained improvements in student learning, whether the latter are initiated by external authorities or within the school. However, it is also the case that the situations in which they find themselves are distinctive, even unique and that these situations change over time. Hence, given the unavoidably contingent

and unpredictable nature of their work, they must necessarily adopt strategies and methods consistent with their own knowledge and skills and appropriate to their particular organisations, tasks, staff and contexts – institutional, local and national.

Two working definitions are adopted although, as we shall see, they are far from being unproblematic:

*... I take 'educational leadership' to have at its core the responsibility for policy formulation and, where appropriate, organisational transformation; I take 'educational management' to refer to an executive function for carrying out agreed policy; finally, I assume that leaders normally also have some management responsibilities....*

(Bolam, 1999)

*...professional development is the process by which teachers and headteachers learn, enhance and use appropriate knowledge, skills and values. The notion of appropriateness must itself be based on shared and public value judgements about the needs and best interests of their clients. Thus, although this perspective certainly includes staff, management and human resource development directed at raising standards and the improvement of teaching and learning, it recognises that, because these are essentially employer- and organisation-oriented concepts, they should be seen as only a part of professional development, albeit a fundamentally important part. The essence of professional development for educators must surely involve the learning of an independent, evidence-informed and constructively critical approach to practice within a public framework of professional values and accountability, which are also open to critical scrutiny.*

(Bolam, 2000: 272)

Although the chapter draws on selected international literature, its principal focus is on experience in England, partly because this is the system with which I am most familiar but mainly because it is so relevant to the chapter's themes. The findings from two recently completed empirical studies<sup>1</sup> are used as running illustrations. The first is the *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* study (Bolam et al., 2005), referred to throughout as the EPLC project. Its overall purposes were to identify the main features of a professional learning community (PLC) and to draw out practically useful findings for those wishing to adopt this approach in schools. The second study (Bolam and Weindling, 2006) is referred to throughout as the SRS project. It involved a systematic review and synthesis of 20 research studies of CPD for teachers in England, published from 2002 to 2006, and aimed to contribute to the development of CPD policy by providing a trustworthy overview of what the studies collectively showed (or failed to show) that could inform the policy environment in a time of change.

Following this introduction, the chapter is organised in seven sections.

1. Introduction
2. Teachers' learning and CPD
3. Schools as professional learning communities
4. Reflective professional enquiry and evidence-informed practice
5. Openness, partnerships, networking and external support

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<sup>1</sup>I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to colleagues on both projects for allowing me to draw on the work we did together.

6. Leadership and management
7. Teachers as professionals in a changing policy context
8. Discussion and conclusions

## Teachers' Learning and CPD

It is widely accepted by policy makers and practitioners that ongoing professional learning by teachers is a necessary condition for school improvement. In a sample of OECD countries, professional development was said to be

*... central to the way principals manage schools, in at least two respects: first, as instructional leaders, principals may be expected to coordinate professional progression of their staff; second, they need to manage the learning community as a whole, using development as part of school change.*

(CERI, 2001: 27)

However, it is also apparent from the literature there are many different models of professional development in operation (Bolam and McMahon, 2004; McMahon, this volume).

The SRS findings provided evidence confirming that the majority of teachers in England held a traditional view of CPD, largely equating it with short, external, in-service training courses but also that CPD must be much broader than such short courses to be effective; about the value of offering CPD programmes designed for teachers at different career stages; that the more influence teachers have over their own CPD the more likely they are to consider it effective and more generally, about the importance of teachers' professionalism and agency as key components of effective CPD; and about the importance of including support staff, not just teachers, in CPD and in other aspects of professional learning communities. They also provided evidence about the need to focus CPD on teaching and learning; demonstrating that it was actually happening in the schools studied; about the importance of good needs identification; confirming that striking a balance between national, school development and individual needs was problematic; about the value of award bearing courses and other higher education contributions to CPD; about the value of coaching and mentoring as key components of CPD; about the value of sharing of knowledge and practice both within and between schools, of collaborative CPD and of reflective practice. An important feature of these findings concerning CPD processes is that they are likely to apply across all CPD settings – for example, in school-based, course-based and national dissemination activities – regardless of whether they are aimed at all teachers, subject specialists, department heads, headteachers or support staff. Finally, with respect to CPD outcomes and impact, they provided evidence that well-structured and implemented CPD is likely to improve teacher motivation and morale; can have a positive impact on teachers' attitudes, knowledge and skills; can lead to successful changes in teachers' practice, to school improvement; can improve pupils' learning and achievement. However, the synthesis provided only weak evidence that CPD will improve teacher retention.

The EPLC project distinguished between individual and collective learning, and also between external courses and work-based learning opportunities, including those that occur incidentally rather than deliberately. In the survey, although 73% of primary respondents said that teachers *systematically feedback the outcomes of external courses to colleagues*, this was true of only 59% of secondary respondents. The majority (74%+) of all respondents said that most/nearly all teachers in their schools *learn together with colleagues, take responsibility for their own learning and use performance management to enhance professional learning*. Over 80% gave these responses in nursery, primary and special, deemed primary, schools. All 16 case study schools used the available external CPD opportunities, but to varying extents. This variation was sometimes for financial reasons (e.g. how much of its own resources a school was prepared to put into supporting staff on external, award-bearing courses: one school was able to fund virtually anyone who made a serious request, while another was unable to provide any such support). Successful practice to promote learning often involved the more focused use of time and internal arrangements: for example, by ensuring that staff meetings dealt with student and staff learning (e.g. discussing a piece of writing or photos of an activity in a primary school); by holding three-weekly meetings of the key staff to review the progress of their common students in a special school; by encouraging staff to teach each other (e.g. ICT skills in a secondary school).

These conclusions were, broadly speaking, confirmed by a recent HMI survey which, in addition, found that:

*In about one third of the primary schools visited by subject inspectors, the arrangements for CPD in the subject they were inspecting were inadequate. This was partly due to the emphasis on literacy and numeracy and partly due to managers' failure to detect important subject-related issues.*

(Ofsted, 2006: 5)

and that

*in secondary schools too much emphasis had been placed by some subject leaders on using examination awarding bodies for staff development. The drive in these departments to improve examination results by learning about new course specifications and assessment arrangements had deflected attention from improving the quality of teaching and from developing Key Stage 3.*

(Ofsted, 2006: 10)

Several of the findings indicated that most teachers still see CPD largely in terms of short, external courses and training days. As Bierema and Eraut (2004) pointed out, there is an unhelpful prevailing assumption that learning and working are separate activities yet, they argue, most workplace learning takes place independently of CPD. Interestingly, when teachers interviewed for the EPLC case studies were asked questions using the terminology *CPD*, they responded along traditional lines. But when they were asked '*How do you learn?*' they were much more likely to respond in terms of a broader set of experiences that included work-based learning, and learning from their own initiatives outside work, for instance in learning how to use IT. The approach adopted in the *Transfer of Good Practice* project was also illuminating in this context:

*... .. we are interested not only in the nature of practice itself but also in the ways in which it is acquired. When one examines transfer as a learning process, then the question of what a teacher has to learn in order to competently perform a new practice becomes critical. The focus has to shift from practice as an observable performance to practice as the overt result of experientially acquired understandings and capabilities which remain largely tacit. Understanding the receiving teachers' learning needs and processes is essential for understanding successful or less successful attempts to transfer practice between teachers and between contexts.*

(Fielding et al., 2005: 5)

In the same vein, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) offered a framework for teacher learning in the USA which suggested that teachers learn to teach in a community that enables them to develop a *vision* for their practice; a set of *understandings* about teaching, learning, and children; *dispositions* about how to use this knowledge; *practices* that allow them to act on their intentions and beliefs; and *tools* that support their efforts.

## Schools as PLCs

For some writers and researchers, these ideas have coalesced around the concept of the school as a learning community, the underpinning rationale for which has several inter-relating strands. Historically, it relates to notions of inquiry, reflection and self-evaluating schools and certain key features were evident in the work of education writers in the early part of the last century. For example John Dewey was committed to the view that:

*...educational practices provide the data, the subject matter, which forms the problems of inquiry.*  
(Dewey, 1929)

A generation or so ago, Stenhouse (1975) argued that teachers ought to be school and classroom researchers and play an active part in the process of curriculum development, while Schön (1983) was influential in advocating the notion of the 'reflective practitioner'. From the school-based curriculum development movement of the 1970s there emerged a series of projects and activities on the 'thinking school', the 'problem-solving school' (Bolam, 1977) and, perhaps most notably, the 'Creative School' (CERI, 1978; Hoyle, 1974). Later, in the 1980s came the shift to the self-reviewing or self-evaluating school (e.g. McMahan et al., 1984). More recent interest stems 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 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). There also appears to be considerable expectation, although at this point the evidence is still limited (see Louis and Marks, 1998; Wiley, 2001), that schools operating as learning communities will have a positive impact on pupil outcomes.

In the broader context of adult and work-based learning, the idea of a learning community links directly with the concept of community of practice (COP), for which Wenger (1999) proposed the following indicators: sustained mutual relationships, whether harmonious or conflictual; shared ways of doing things together; rapid flow of information; the absence of introductory preambles in conversations because they are assumed to be continuations; knowing what others know and what they can do. He also argued that a whole organisation may be too large a social configuration both for individuals to relate to as a COP and also for analytic purposes. Treating them as a single COP would gloss over discontinuities, which are integral to their structure; they are better viewed as constellations of interconnected practices. Constellations share historical roots, have related enterprises, belong to the same institution, face similar conditions and have members in common. The potential applications to schools and to their departments, teams and groups are self-evident.

The EPLC project (Stoll et al., 2003) suggested that a professional learning community (PLC) is likely to exhibit five broad sets of overlapping characteristics: *shared values and vision* directed towards the learning of all pupils (students); *collective responsibility* for pupil learning, helping to sustain staff commitment through peer pressure and holding to account those who don't do their fair share; *reflective professional inquiry* as an integral part of work including ongoing conversations about educational issues, frequent scrutiny of practice with colleagues, mutual observation, joint planning and applying new ideas and information to problem-solving to meet pupils' needs; *collaboration* in developmental activities directed towards achieving shared purposes, thus easing teachers' sense of isolation and generating mutual professional learning; *group, as well as individual, learning* in that professional learning is more frequently communal rather than solitary, all teachers are learners with their colleagues and, through frequent interaction, individual unspoken, or tacit, knowledge is converted into shared knowledge.

In the light of the literature review, the following working definition was adopted:

*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.*

Practitioners in the survey and case study schools generally responded positively to the idea of a PLC and to the working definition. Even though few were familiar with the term and none used it in their everyday professional conversations most appeared to find it helpful and, apparently, unproblematic. The findings confirmed the existence and importance of the five characteristics identified in the literature review and, in addition, highlighted three more as being important: openness, networking and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support.

It was assumed that being a PLC is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means to an end and, hence, its 'effectiveness' should be judged in relation to two main outcomes: impact on the professional learning and morale of the staff – teachers, school leaders and other adult workers – and impact on pupils. Some survey findings

demonstrated a positive, though weak, link between full expression of PLC characteristics and pupil outcomes – in particular value-added performance. The case study findings supported the conclusion that the more fully a PLC expressed the eight characteristics, the more they impacted positively on pupils' attendance, pupils' interest in learning and actual learning, and on the individual and collective professional learning, practice and morale of teaching and support staff. Thus, it was concluded that *effective* PLCs fully exhibit eight key characteristics: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and collective professional learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networking and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support.

## Teachers as Professionals in a Changing Policy Context

Issues to do with the nature of the teaching profession are manifestly culture bound (Le Metais, 1997) and there can be little doubt that recent policy developments in England have significant implications for the idea of teaching as a profession. These developments include the 'Every Child Matters' agenda (DfES, 2004b) which required schools to work with providers of other children's services and thus for school staffs to collaborate with people from different professions and backgrounds; the implementation of the Workforce Agreement with its far-reaching implications for the roles, responsibilities and professional development of *all* school staff, not just teachers (School Workforce Development Board, 2005); the Five Year Strategy (DfES, 2004a) which heralded the introduction of a dedicated, three-year Schools Budget to cover, *inter alia*, CPD costs; a refocusing of teacher appraisals to become teaching and learning reviews in order to build up teachers' demand for high quality training, and encourage them to drive their own development; and a considerable emphasis on the so-called *new professionalism*.

A key element of the Workforce Agreement concerned the use of teaching assistants, the number of whom has risen dramatically from 35,500 in 1997 to almost 100,000 in 2005 whereas in the same period the number of full-time equivalent teachers in the maintained sector rose by about 4,000 to 430,000 (DfES, 2005a). This was accompanied by a shift in teaching assistants' roles and responsibilities towards greater involvement in the actual processes of teaching and learning – including, for example, in the assessment of pupils' learning. Thus, there has been a blurring of the distinction between teachers and teaching assistants which the government argued was part of a legitimate process of different professional groups playing complementary roles in the interests of children (Morris, 2001). Most teacher unions accepted this development as helping teachers to focus on teaching rather than administration or behaviour control but the National Union of Teachers did not, seeing it rather as diluting teacher professionalism.

Against this background, one key issue in the EPLC project was, inevitably, to do with who in a school was, or should be, thought of as a member of the professional



community. There were few direct references to support staff in the literature review since most earlier studies assumed, explicitly or implicitly, that membership of the learning community was restricted to teachers. Yet it became apparent that the situation in English schools was changing: in the survey, over half of all respondents said that learning support assistants (LSAs) were *valued by teachers* and *had opportunities for professional development*; 74% of primary and 42% of secondary respondents said 'nearly all' LSAs *share responsibility for pupil learning*; 77% of primary and 57% of secondary respondents reported that 'nearly all' LSAs *actively contribute to the school as a professional learning community*; and more than half of all respondents reported an overall increase in the last two years. In addition, 47% of primary and 35% of secondary respondents said support staff were involved in reviewing pupil outcome and progress data while more than three quarters of all respondents reported that temporary and supply staff were included in CPD activities. Moreover, in all 16 case study schools, the overall PLC was seen as including teachers and those support staff working most closely with them (e.g. LSAs, nursery nurses, technicians) to promote pupil learning. The teachers always led the teaching and learning and may be regarded as constituting the 'core' of the PLC with the most highly trained support staff (e.g. nursery nurses) being generally close to this 'core' and, sometimes actually part of it, especially in nursery, special and primary schools where support staff typically worked most closely with teachers. The demarcation between teaching and support staff was most apparent in secondary schools. Other support staff, parents or governors were sometimes perceived as members of the learning community where they contributed to educational activity. Administrative, cleaning, care-taking and school meals staff were more likely to be regarded as part of an extended school community, often with some pastoral responsibility for pupil welfare and behaviour, though particular, enthusiastic individuals were sometimes closely involved in the plc, especially in the smallest schools. External 'professionals', like educational psychologists or those in higher education, generally made inputs into their sphere of responsibility rather than into the PLC as a whole.

None of the twenty SRS studies directly investigated the *new professionalism*, largely because the idea came to prominence after they had started their work. Since 2001, several policy documents have used the term but with different emphases. Most notably, the Five Year Strategy proposed

*a new professionalism for teachers, in which career progression and financial rewards will go to those who are making the biggest contributions to improving pupil attainment, those who are continually developing their own expertise, and those who help to develop expertise in other teachers.*

(DfES, 2004, para 39)

The Rewards and Incentives Group (RIG) (2005), which advises the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB), explicitly linked it to CPD and teachers' day-to-day work:

*Underlying the new teacher professionalism is the aim that professional development is an ongoing part of the everyday activities of a teacher rather than a separate activity which adds to the work load of teachers. The new teacher professionalism espouses a culture of greater openness where all teachers are engaged in effective professional development*

*which enhances pupil attainment and teachers' job satisfaction, and supports school improvement and teachers' career progression.*

(RIG, 2005, para 9.2)

The STRB itself, which has a national remit for teachers' pay and conditions in England, clearly saw CPD and the new system of performance management as being integrally linked to each other, and by extension to the new professionalism, as succinctly summarised in its explication of an illustration:

*Figure 7.1 illustrates this outcomes-based approach, the mutual responsibilities of teachers and managers, and the links between CPD, performance and pay progression. Its purpose is to clarify these relationships, not to prescribe a specific system for direct application in schools. It highlights the importance of a continuous cycle of performance, development and reflection, within which teachers systematically apply their learning to their teaching practice. Teachers' decisions on their CPD will also be influenced by factors including the school's staff development and improvement plans and by the forthcoming framework of professional standards. As teachers undertake and learn from CPD, its benefits should be seen in aspects of their performance. Performance will be assessed through appraisal and linked with pay progression through the school's pay policy... ..*

(STRB, 2005, para 7.33)

Since the new professionalism is such a central new policy idea, it will be important to clarify its operational meaning and its implications for teachers, school leaders and, of course, for CPD policy and practice. For example, The School Teachers' Review Body struck a somewhat sceptical note about

*... suggestions that the STPCD include references to teachers' having an 'entitlement' to CPD. It is more helpful to view CPD from the viewpoint of mutual responsibilities.*

(STRB, 2005, para 7.29)

and the government saw clear links with the proposed national standards:

*A clear framework of national standards is essential to our plans for a new teacher professionalism and to stimulate demand for CPD.*

(Secretary of State, DfES, 2005b: 3.1)

## **Reflective Professional Enquiry and Evidence-Informed Practice**

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on reflective enquiry or enquiry-based practice and on evidence-informed practice. A major part of the latter's rationale is the belief that teaching should emulate medicine, aiming to be a research-informed profession (Hargreaves, 1996). Three broad, inter-connected approaches are open to school leaders and teachers wishing to promote evidence-informed practice: to engage in systematic research and evaluation in the school, in departments and individual classrooms; to adopt a more systematic approach to the collection, analysis and use of 'routine' data, for example, students' examination results, value-added data and external school inspection reports; to search for and use externally generated research (Stoll et al., 2002). The first mode is well established in action research, but the second is becoming more common, as schools use value-added data to plan specific follow-up action and school improvement projects

involving teachers as action researchers. The rationale for the third mode is the belief that practitioners should have access to high quality research, using it to inform their decisions and actions.

Leithwood et al. (1999) saw such approaches as '*creating the conditions for growth in teachers' professional knowledge*' (p. 149). They argued that this is best accomplished by embedding professional development in practical activities, what they called "situated cognition" (p. 151). According to several writers a new form of professionalism is emerging in which teachers work more closely and collaboratively with colleagues, students and parents, linking teacher and school development (e.g. Hargreaves, 1994) while King and Newmann (2001) concluded that teacher learning is most likely to occur when teachers can concentrate on instruction and student outcomes in the specific contexts in which they teach; have sustained opportunities to study, to experiment with and to receive helpful feedback on specific innovations; and have opportunities to collaborate with professional peers, both within and outside their schools, along with access to the expertise of researchers. Similarly, Smylie (1995) drew upon a range of adult learning theories to identify conditions of effective workplace learning, including opportunities for teachers to learn from peer colleagues in collaborative group work settings, together with open communication, experimentation and feedback.

The evaluation of the Best Practice Research Scholarships (Furlong et al., 2003) concluded that in all the sampled 100 schools there was a strong consensus from the 'Research Scholars' (i.e. participating teachers) and their senior colleagues that the Scholarships were a particularly valuable form of professional development. They reported many examples of perceived significant improvements in teachers' confidence in their own professional judgement; much greater use of reading which made teachers more knowledgeable and informed in their discussions of classroom practices; the systematic collection of evidence. These in turn were seen as contributing to changes in the nature of teachers' reflection and a growing understanding, on the part of many teachers, of their own professional learning. Impact on practice was widely reported but the robustness of the evidence varied considerably. There were significant claims that their projects had had a major impact on their teaching; in many cases these claims were corroborated by their senior colleagues. Where projects were undertaken by more senior teachers, there were many examples of a wider impact in the school. In the *Research Engaged School* project (Sharp et al., 2005), which involved fifteen schools, four features were found to be highly inter-related: a research orientation; a concern with investigating pedagogy; the promotion of research communities; a commitment to putting research at the heart of policy and practice. Comments on the initiative's impact emphasised the benefits of the enquiry process which enabled them to develop a 'learning community', with staff taking an active interest in addressing their own priorities for improvement. In particular, staff talked about the benefits of collaborative learning and that the initiative had offered them CPD which was both motivating and relevant.

It seems clear that school leaders and teachers in England are becoming increasingly confident in using these approaches. In the EPLC survey, 50% of all

respondents said 'most' teachers were informing their practice through the routine collection, analysis and use of data while 79% of primary and 68% of secondary school respondents reported that these numbers had increased in the past two years. All respondents said they used at least one form of review of pupil outcome and progress data; almost 90% said that pupil outcome and progress data were reviewed by the headteacher and individual class teachers; and over 80% of all respondents said that the SMT and governors reviewed pupil outcome and progress data. Reflective professional enquiry was judged to be high in three of the 16 case study schools, medium in 11 and low in two schools, both 'early starters'. Over the course of one year, the expression of this characteristic was judged to be increasing in six schools and diminishing in none. In over a fifth (22%) of nursery and primary schools half or more of the teachers were reported to be carrying out classroom-based research and in a third of these schools, half or more were seeking out and using external evidence that is relevant and practical to inform their work. This compares with 11% of secondary schools where half or more of the teachers were reported to be carrying out classroom-based research and 16% of these schools where half or more were seeking out and using external evidence that is relevant and practical to inform their work. Some of the case study nursery and special schools had mechanisms for gathering and using data. Early assessment of all children with two weeks of their arrival at one special school set a baseline on which to build. Records (including anecdotal records) were kept on each child's progress file and targets set. One teacher had made videos of children both as a record of their progress over a year, as well as being a source for teachers to review in identifying pupil needs and progress. In a secondary school, reflective enquiry was a common feature and three different types could be identified: first, an assistant head analysed pupil achievement data, which was seen by all staff and used widely across the school to set individual pupil targets, monitor student progress, and agree performance management targets with teachers; second, teachers had opportunities to observe each other teach, including through a so-called Learning Walk; third, internally funded research projects, focused on teaching and learning, were reported back to a Learning Forum. This was a sophisticated programme, developed over a number of years.

## **Openness, Partnerships, Networking and External Support**

The importance of high quality external support and of shared learning opportunities for school leaders and teachers finds support from the international literature and from the SRS and EPLC findings. The SRS studies demonstrated that this can take a variety of forms, including supporting schools' own provision and activities, LEA support for CPD and for partnerships with other schools and external agencies, networking between schools, award-bearing courses and other contributions from universities.

The most familiar form of support is that provided at the district or local authority level. Fullan et al. (2002) argued

*that to get large scale reform, you need to establish and coordinate ongoing accountability and capacity-building efforts at three levels – the schools, the district, and the state.*  
(p. 3)

The SRS evidence confirmed that, in England, Local Authorities (LAs) ought to make a significant contribution to CPD and school improvement, that the best LAs do so but that the support available from advisers varied within and between LEAs. The value of high quality external CPD provision and expertise was also confirmed although, in practice, the quality was variable. Similarly, the EPLC literature review concluded that schools look beyond the school boundaries – to external support, networking and other partnerships – in order to promote, sustain and extend their PLC. In the survey, 96% of primary and 98% of secondary respondents said they had at least one formal working link with other schools and 83% of primary and 95% of secondary respondents had at least one teacher involved one or more of nine listed national initiatives.

Given the emphasis on promoting competition between schools that characterised policy in several countries during the 1990s it comes as something of a surprise to find that there has recently been a shift towards collaboration between schools in the form of networking and partnerships. According to Cordingley and Temperley (2006)

*.....government departments and agencies are all promoting networks as a means of counteracting the negative effects of competition....* (p. 1)

Several writers have offered a rationale for the networking approach. Lieberman (2000) argued that schools are being asked to educate a growing and diverse population yet school systems that are organised bureaucratically and function traditionally have difficulty adapting to change whereas networks are well suited to making use of new technology and institutional arrangements. They are flexible, borderless and innovative, are able to create collaborative environments, and to develop agendas that grow and change with participants. Jackson (2002) argued that they give teachers the opportunity to create as well as receive knowledge and Hargreaves (2003) that they enable small scale improvements to spread through the system more quickly than top-down initiatives. In England, the National College for School Leadership has actively promoted networked learning communities (<http://www.ncsl.org.uk/networked/index.cfm>).

That schools look externally for ideas is also consistent with a reflective and enquiring approach. In the EPLC case study schools, *the range of external networks and partnerships* was judged to be high or increasingly high in five schools and low throughout in two schools – both so-called *early starters*. Another key aspect of this characteristic is an open, outward looking and flexible orientation. Evidence for this came from all sources. Significantly more *mature* PLC respondents than *early starter* respondents in both primary and secondary surveys reported that a higher percentage of their teachers *experiment and innovate in their work* and the same was true in relation to *see the school as stimulating and professionally challeng-*

ing. This openness of more *mature* PLCs also appeared to be a sign of confidence about being able to deal with external change. One headteacher said this was connected with:

*“being able to respond when you have to and being flexible”, “standing up to external change – we’ll do this when we think the time is right”, “taking control” and “connecting with ‘the great outdoors’”.*

While many secondary schools had external connections, only just over a third of the respondents (35%) reported that nearly all/most of their teachers *actively seek ideas from colleagues in other schools*. This contrasted with nursery/primary school peers who also identified a very high level of involvement with other schools (96%), most of which were within or cross phase clusters or both), and where nearly two thirds (62%) reported that nearly all/most of their teachers *actively seek ideas from colleagues in other schools*. Isolation was often cited as a key reason for involvement in networks. The head of a rural secondary school said that e-learning was critical to connect their school with outside ideas. In some cases small, isolated schools made use of links, while others didn’t. In one school, staff observed teachers in neighbouring primary schools, while in another school, the travel time between schools make these networks difficult to maintain.

The impact of networks on the PLC generally appeared to be positive; respondents said they benefited from the CPD opportunities and pupils benefited from the wider range of learning opportunities that networks can bring. More generally, and following several research reviews Cordingley and Temperley (2006) concluded that effective networks

*...need to have a clear and compelling purpose around which ownership can be built...  
.....and to provide evidence that they are..... making a difference for adults and especially for young people.... (p. 3)*

and also that

*...CPD in school networks is more likely to be collaborative than individual and, therefore, more likely to offer learning gains for pupils as well as teachers. (p. 15)*

The *Transfer of Good Practice* Project (Fielding et al., 2005) concluded that the most important single aspects of the transfer process were that both parties should be mutually engaged for a significant period of time and that the process should be, if not learner-led then ‘learner-engaged’. The transfer of practice was more likely to be successful when the recipients had been involved from the beginning in the process of agreeing and planning the transfer activity. Certain kinds of trusting relationships were fundamental to the transfer of good practice. They were not an extra or a pleasant accompaniment, but the necessary foundation of the complex, demanding and potentially rewarding process of professional learning across institutional boundaries. Networks were judged to be excellent for distributing and exchanging ideas, and for general intelligence seeking. However, transfer of practice is more intrusive than transfer of information or ideas; and therefore more demanding on the quality of the relationships between those involved in the process.

## Leadership and Management

The SSR findings provided evidence: about the important roles of heads, senior staff and CPD coordinators in promoting and supporting CPD; that CPD coordinators need specific training and support, especially in how to evaluate the impact of CPD; that both time and specific funding are needed for effective CPD; about the importance of school culture in the improvement of CPD and, more specifically, about its importance in promoting a research orientation and a professional learning community. There was strong evidence that school staff found it difficult to evaluate the impact of CPD and that cost effectiveness and value-for-money were rarely taken into account when CPD is evaluated either within schools or by external evaluators, findings endorsed by the HMI survey (Ofsted, 2006). The problematic nature of CPD evaluation for researchers is well known (Guskey, 2000); fortunately, at least some policy makers recognise this:

*Assessments of the impact of professional development need to take into account that it takes time for the benefits of professional development to be realised fully and reflected in improved classroom practice. They should not focus only on immediate results.*

(Rewards and Incentive Group, 2005, 9.3)

In the EPLC study, the idea that schools might be at one of three hypothetical stages of development as a PLC – starter, developer or mature – was investigated. The survey and case study respondents accepted them as common-sense, pragmatic distinctions but, although there was some empirical support for their validity, it was concluded that the 'stages of development' concept should be used with caution. Four key processes for promoting and sustaining an effective PLC were identified: optimising resources and structures; promoting individual and collective learning; specifically promoting and sustaining the PLC; and strategic leadership and management. The effectiveness of these processes, for example in terms of their impact on the teaching-related practice of individuals and on leadership and management practice, varied between schools and over time in the same school. Accordingly, as well as the impact of the PLC on the professional learning and morale of the staff and on pupils, the extent to which these four processes are themselves carried out effectively was judged to be a third measure of overall PLC effectiveness.

A different mix of facilitating and inhibiting factors, both internal and external, was identified in each of the 16 case study schools, indicating the important influence of both external and site-level contextual factors and underlining both the opportunities and the limitations of headteachers' and staff's capacity to exercise control over factors that were often complex and dynamic. Facilitators included high individual staff commitment and motivation, strong links with other cluster-group schools, focused coordination of CPD and site facilities, like staff meeting rooms, which helped collaborative work and professional dialogue. Inhibitors included high staff resistance to change, high staff turnover, central and local policies that negatively affected resources and budgets and changes in key staff, especially at senior level. Survey evidence also indicated the importance of related inhibiting contextual factors in primary schools, notably the presence in the school of *a high percentage*

*of free school meals and a high percentage of students with English as a second language.*

In more developed PLCs, staff adopted a range of innovative practices to deal with the inhibiting and facilitating factors in their setting. For example, innovative methods for making best use of human and physical resources included a competitive 'Learning Leaders' scheme in a secondary school, ensuring that all staff in a nursery school had non-contact time, using regular staff meetings to promote collaborative work and professional learning in a primary school and three-weekly case conferences for all staff working with individual children in a special school. A widely used national human resource development scheme – *Investors in People* – was found to be especially helpful in starting the process of promoting a PLC, but less helpful once a school was quite far along its process of development.

Context and setting were crucial to understanding how the eight characteristics and four processes played out in practice. For example, the survey found that primary schools were generally more likely than secondary schools to exhibit the characteristics to a greater extent, differences broadly confirmed in the case studies. Thus, nursery, primary and special support staff typically worked very closely with teachers whereas the demarcation between teaching and support staff was most apparent in secondary schools where the subject and departmental structures often resulted in small (or sub-) PLCs, with their own distinctive ways of working together; however, one-teacher departments in smaller secondary schools faced quite different issues. Location could also be a crucial influence: for example, staff in relatively remote schools found it difficult to share experience beyond their own school. Accordingly, it was concluded that, although PLCs have common characteristics and adopt similar processes of leadership and management, the practical implications for developing a PLC can only be understood and worked out in the specific conditions – like phase, size and location – of particular contexts and settings.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The underlying question that has been addressed in this chapter is what approaches to teacher professional development appear to be effective in improving teaching and student learning. The main conclusion drawn is that these improvements are more likely to occur when school staff are working as a professional learning community and that it would be sensible for school leaders to encourage them in this endeavour. Research on CPD in England has revealed that many teachers still see CPD in terms of short, external courses and training days but that when asked how they learn, teachers are more likely to refer to examples of work based learning, collaboration with professional colleagues, analysis and use of data about student learning, involvement in research, etc. All these learning opportunities and more should exist within a professional learning community. The eight PLC characteristics identified in the EPLC project (Bolam et al., 2005) show the



power of the concept: professionals collaborating, learning together and taking collective responsibility for student learning. However, there is no easy formula for establishing a PLC. Although all schools in England have to implement changes arising from the extensive national reform agenda and operate within the regulatory frameworks, school leaders nonetheless work in distinctive contexts which change over time. Accordingly, school leaders will need to draw upon their individual knowledge and skills to select strategies and methods for developing a PLC that are appropriate for their own organisation and context. Implementing the four key processes for promoting and sustaining a PLC identified in the EPLC study: optimising resources and structures; promoting individual and collective learning; specifically promoting and sustaining the PLC and strategic leadership and management, will require leadership skills of a high order. As Hoyle and Wallace (2005) have argued, school leaders who encourage school improvement '... value teacher autonomy, display trust with acceptance of related risks, and sponsor innovations that emerge from communities of professional practice' (2005: 197). The task of developing a school as a PLC is challenging and difficult but worth tackling because of the potential benefits in terms of professional and student learning.

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## Appendix

The first study – the *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* (EPLC) project (Bolam et al., 2005) – was 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 2002–06 ([www.eplc.info](http://www.eplc.info)). Its overall purpose was to draw out credible, accessible and practically useful findings for policy makers, coordinators/providers of professional development and school leaders (managers) about schools as professional learning communities and also for teachers and other adults working in schools about the cultures, behaviours and structures that might enable them to play an active role in the creation and sustenance of learning communities. To achieve this purpose, a range of research methods was adopted: a literature review; a questionnaire survey of headteachers or continuing professional development (CPD) coordinators from a national sample of almost 400 nursery, primary (elementary), secondary and special schools in local authorities across England; examining links between characteristics of professional learning communities and student progress through factor analysis and multilevel models; case studies of sixteen different schools in each phase of schooling (nursery, primary, secondary, special) and at each of the three stages of development (i.e. early starter, developer, mature); workshop conferences to share experiences and research findings with representatives from the case study schools. The project concluded with the production of a set of dissemination and training resources (Stoll et al., 2006). The project's overall, general conclusion was that the idea of a plc was one well worth pursuing as a means of promoting school and system-wide capacity building for sustainable improvement and pupil learning.

The second study (Bolam and Weindling, 2006) was funded, from 2005–06, by the General Teaching Council for England (GTCe) and the Association for Teachers and Lecturers (ATL). It involved a systematic review and synthesis (SRS) of twenty research studies of CPD for teachers in England, published from 2002 to 2006. The review was intended to contribute to the development of CPD policy for capacity building in schools. The design of the study was quite different from a conventional systematic review in that the studies to be included were largely specified beforehand, on the grounds that they had been commissioned by, or for, a policy-maker audience. The sponsors wanted there to be a trustworthy overview of what the studies collectively showed (or failed to show) that could inform the policy environment in

a time of change. All the studies were funded by national agencies and all had been published within the previous four years. The twenty selected studies, fell into three broad, and not entirely discrete, methodological categories – five were systematic reviews of research, six used surveys and case studies and nine were evaluations. They differed widely in their focus, aims and scope covering such topics as the impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning; postgraduate professional development programmes; teachers' perceptions of CPD; teachers' work and lives and their effects on pupils; developing teacher leadership; schools as professional learning communities (summarised above); research-engaged schools; the transfer of good practice; inter-LEA collaboration on CPD; and several major CPD programmes (e.g. Induction; Best Practice Research Scholarships, teachers' sabbaticals, London Leadership Strategy). Each study was independently reviewed, analysed and assessed by two researchers, using a '*Weight of Evidence*' approach in making judgements about their quality ([www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.eppi.ioe.ac.uk)). The findings, grouped under twenty factors, were compared with policy and practice in 2001 and 2005, using three documents (DfEE, 2001; TTA, 2005 and DfES, 2005) as key indicators, together with some supplementary documents. The overall conclusion, based on the evidence from the synthesis of all twenty studies, was that the large majority of findings supported recent and current CPD policy and practice and offered a sound basis for developing future policy and practice in England.