

SCEL Fellowship Programme
Area of Enquiry

Professional Learning Communities

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SCEL

Scottish College for
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Introduction

The Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) Fellowship Programme appeared at just the right time for me in January 2014. As Head of my second school, two years into post, I was looking for a challenge that would allow me to network beyond my school and Local Authority. On moving to my current post, I also entered a different Local Authority. It was fascinating to experience a significant change in perspective having worked within a neighbouring Local Authority for 17 years. I recognised that the next stage of professional development for me was to explore wider aspects of leadership at a National level, whilst engaging with the complex role of leading a school from day to day, putting theory into practice on the front line.

Discussions within education leadership and management frequently orbit how to improve teaching and learning, but how can we help teachers engage more effectively with children's needs to achieve this? My director and I discussed the SCEL project outline, and agreed that exploring effective models of professional learning would be a valuable area of enquiry.

My background includes a period as an Assessment Development Officer and I am passionately committed to the effective use of assessment and feedback in learning. How could I use this to drive the learning and informed practice of teaching staff? John Hattie's work on Visible Learning, and his description of the development of learning communities, resonated with me. He describes visible learning for both teacher and pupil as "deliberate practice aimed at attaining mastery of the goal, when there is feedback given and sought, and when there are active, passionate, and engaging people (teacher, student, peers, and so on) participating in the act of teaching as the key to their ongoing learning" (Hattie, 2009:22). The goal for our school and local authority is to create a culture of learning for all.

Hattie has been criticised for not including factors such as poverty, health, family circumstances or nutrition within Visible Learning (2009: preface), however he very clearly focuses on the things that teachers *can* directly influence. I wanted to explore this further with my staff and to engage in development with other school leaders in the Local Authority.

As a member of the Local Authority Leadership Strategy Group, I was aware of the potential to embed Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). These were proposed as a strand of potential investigation and development. The Authority's Leadership Strategy describes professional learning as a "self-evaluation process for learning and teaching [which] can be carried out on an individual basis by teachers or in collaboration with others: for example, a

critical friend, coach, mentor or line manager; or in groups: for example, whole school, associated schools group or learning communities” (DCC,2014:17).

It was apparent, within this group that the strategy must support the development of system wide “lasting new collaborative cultures” or PLCs. Fullan describes PLCs as fundamental to “building the capacity for continuous improvement and [they] are intended to be a new way of working and learning. They are meant to be enduring capacities, not just another program innovation” (Fullan, 2006: online). It is essential that PLC development within the Local Authority supports a system-wide change of practice, focused on sustained and deep professional learning and not just as another initiative to be “done” for a few years.

Fullan describes this approach to development as schools and authorities learning from each other through “lateral capacity building” and that this should be reflected within a development program (Fullan, 2006:online). My PLC development has a school PLC, a Head Teacher PLC, and will feed into an authority-wide PLC in the future. This may prove to be a model for staff development at all levels, where staff create their professional learning opportunities by shaping and evolving their own learning, based on their own needs. This would be a powerful approach to targeting meaningful, focused learning goals generated by the staff involved.

My first step in developing this project was an evaluation of professional learning within the school. This included a review of previous CPD activity, discussions with staff members, and feedback from awareness raising activities. This defined the school context. Feedback from staff indicates that many appreciate allocated time to work together to better understand emerging issues. Staff are open to supporting each other through Professional Support Visits as a development of this work. They clearly appreciate the opportunity to collaborate to create and develop their own professional learning programme.

Next was to undertake a mapping exercise of related Local Authority initiatives. I discovered a project on PLCs in the early stages of discussion; however, this focused solely on embedding Cooperative Learning - an authority-wide initiative introduced to all teaching staff over the previous 12 months.

Another group is investigating the development of PLCs to clarify what they are and, more crucially, what they are not. Its aim is to disseminate a descriptor to schools and encourage engagement with this approach.

My project sits in the gap between these initiatives - the practical application of PLCs. It crosses cluster boundaries, involves a mix of school types, and aims to explore the potential of PLCs as a powerful staff development tool in collaboration with Head Teachers with the capacity to embed PLCs into individual School Improvement Plans.

It is clear when reading the GTCS Professional Standards that PLCs have an important part to play at all levels and will benefit leaders within and across all roles in education. Throughout the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning document, there are numerous references to collegiate, collaborative working practices that “develop and apply expertise, knowledge, understanding and skills to engage in practitioner enquiry to inform pedagogy, learning and subject knowledge” (GTCS, 2012:10). The suite of Professional Standards reflects this: from newly qualified staff to experienced Head teachers. There is a clear expectation that professional learning through enquiry be embedded to enhance and extend the skills of staff to better engage with all learners – children and adults alike.

Key Questions

A number of key questions arose at the early stages of the project. Why focus on building PLCs and not another strategy? How will we structure a sustainable approach to establishing PLCs? How will we know what we are doing impacts on children’s learning?

John Hattie’s work on Visible Learning clearly identified for me what needed to be a focus for school improvement. His unrelenting focus on seeking and providing feedback to impact powerfully on learning has a strong evidence base supporting the work of many others. Black and William’s work on the necessity of effective, high quality feedback stimulated my own teaching over 10 years ago, alongside Shirley Clarke’s series of books highlighting effective approaches to formative feedback.

What Hattie clarifies is that feedback is necessary for everyone’s growth and learning. Teachers need systems that enable them to give and receive feedback about what they do – to “know thy impact”. He identifies that teachers must “gather defensible and dependable evidence from many sources, and hold collaborative discussions with colleagues and students about this evidence, thus making the effect of their teaching visible to themselves and to others” (Hattie, 2012:23).

I found links with Carol Dweck’s work on mindsets sat alongside Hattie’s findings, reinforcing the power of the teacher who loves to learn alongside his or her students: “Teaching is a

wonderful way to learn. About people and how they tick. About what you teach. About yourself” (Dweck, 2006:201). These elements combine to challenge us about our beliefs in how we approach learning; whether as children or as adults. Developing growth mindsets amongst staff about their ability to improve and change was as important as building the belief in children of the power of their effort - “It is some teachers with certain mindframes that make the difference” (Hattie, 2012:21).

The development of PLCs requires that everyone is clear about the goal. All need to be aware that the purpose is for teachers to “meet to discuss, evaluate, and plan their teaching in light of the feedback evidence.” As Hattie points out, “this is not critical reflection, but *critical reflection in light of evidence* about their teaching” (Hattie, 2012:22).

These elements come together to create a cohesive pathway towards learner engagement and improvement, and by learner I mean everyone within a school – children and adults alike. My office door says “Head Learner”, not “Head Teacher” – a souvenir from my previous post. At the outset, I faced new and unfamiliar challenges affecting school improvements. I realise that I must continually reflect on my own mindset, and adjust accordingly, to enable me to respond effectively while holding firmly to my values and beliefs within different cultures – the school and the Local Authority. I must learn to thrive as a leader to influence others whilst also being open to the influence of new learning. This was harder than expected. Not only to understand the existing culture but to influence it positively, bringing about change and improvement. Participating in the SCEL Fellowship programme has enabled me to delve more deeply into each of these areas. The coaching experience offered throughout this year has been invaluable to me as I adapt and confirm my own thinking to prepare for the challenges to come. The experience has reaffirmed and reinforced my values in my current context and given me tools to adapt and improve.

System change is required and the task is to find a way forward. It was clear that it was essential to understand the culture of my new school and Authority, and the pre-existing beliefs and behaviour of staff at all levels. Building trust with staff and Head teacher colleagues is fundamental to establishing momentum and positive culture change.

Stoll describes the “moving” school where staff work to boost pupils’ progress through developing collaborative practice for improvement. Establishing a supportive structure, which creates space for staff to work together, will help to create the culture of inquiry necessary to enhance professional practice and to engage learners – “collaboration does not just happen, and it is through structures ... that cultures can be modified” (Stoll, 1998:12).

It is crucial, therefore, that staff have protected time to develop PLCs and to collaborate on areas of inquiry that are relevant, meaningful and will directly influence children's learning. As part of this project, before the start of the session each school created the time and space for staff to meet. The Head teacher PLC shared reading material and resources in support of developing practice and built a shared understanding of how each would operate. It was quickly evident that a belief in effective learning and teaching approaches using formative assessment and feedback would drive each school's improvement agenda forward. It was also clear that each school would achieve this in different ways. On reflection, I appreciate that this was due to each Head Teacher's tacit understanding of their school's culture. Just as teaching staff recognise and seek creative input with their own professional learning, so too do my colleagues within the Head Teacher PLC. PLC members are well placed to identify their own learning needs and in this respect; the groups operate in similar ways. We look for stimulus for our learning and shape the learning journey ahead, each member contributing to the process for the mutual benefit of the group. The learning improves through the questioning of others, the demand for evidence of impact, and a trusting relationship where mistakes are welcomed. In this way a systems leadership role develops as each member invests in the success of the other school leaders and subsequently the success of their schools.

Each establishment was required to undertake a number of key tasks. These tasks form a large element of the strategic plan for the project, which then sits within each school's improvement plan. Key elements of the plan include protecting time for staff to meet, meeting time to educate staff about what PLCs are, sharing the rationale for the approach, identifying and distributing reading materials and video clips to support discussion and reflection, and agreeing a format for each meeting and how they run. The HT PLC also continually reviews the format of each PLC, to create a sustainable programme that supports effective professional learning.

Reflection and Conclusion

The introduction of PLCs has generated a number of outcomes. Firstly, staff value and appreciate time to discuss what they do. It will take further investment to develop the confidence and reflective practice necessary to be comfortable with the challenging conversations necessary to question and explore practice on a deep and meaningful level. This is the work of changing the culture of the organisation described by Stoll.

As a staff group we are just beginning the journey. We will continue to explore the methods of enquiry learning, focusing on impact for learners and capturing quality evidence that demonstrates impact, thereby improving the quality of learning and teaching across the school. Giving and receiving feedback effectively are skills, which develop over time through giving and receiving feedback. The task is to support, engage and challenge staff to lift their skills in response to the evidence available in their classrooms.

The impact on the Senior Leadership Team has also been profound as it challenges our approach to Staff Development. The approach has required us to be learners alongside staff. Each of us is reading about, watching, practising or observing others' approaches to teaching and learning, and then reflecting on the outcome. In time, the focus will turn to gathering evidence of improvement with staff and gaining a better understanding of what makes a difference, and for whom.

Every member of the HT PLC frequently describes the benefits of a group that enables shared strategic thinking, supported by research and enquiry, where evidence of impact is gathered, questioned and analysed. The team have come together across cluster boundaries and have the success of the other members as a significant measure of effectiveness of the group. I already feel I would be poorer without them.

The approach to PLCs demands that reflection is embedded into the format - the feedback and self-evaluation loop is fundamental. The formality of meetings provides the structure to keep conversations tightly focussed on learning and teaching.

It is challenging to maintain momentum. There will always be pressure to divert to something else but protecting effective professional learning is the single most important thing we can do.

Beyond this pilot phase of the PLC project there is potential to reflect and share our learning more widely across our local authority, both at school level and across clusters. An evaluation of the projects in place will inform the development work for broader dissemination to those groups who are ready to evolve their approaches to professional learning through the creation of PLCs.

The current development work will inform Head teacher colleagues, have a strong connection to the Leadership for Learning Strategy (2014), and have clear links to the Standard for Career Long Professional Learning and the process of Professional Update.

Over the course of this project a number of key features have emerged which have proven to be important for successful implementation. Firstly, all staff must be clear about the purpose of a PLC. Each member must remain focused on the professional dialogue around what makes a difference and not be distracted by the desire to build new processes, systems or resource lists. This is critical because it is easy to go to what you know and have done before as opposed to working outwith a comfort zone. Maintaining the focus on talking about what works in classrooms is harder than it sounds.

Secondly, each PLC needs a clear context for the learning discussions to encourage all participants to stay on task. For example, our school PLC has a focus on how we give, receive and use feedback. This proved to be critical as it supported staff as they learned the process of working with colleagues in a different, yet targeted way.

Thirdly, I recommend those embarking on establishing PLCs use high quality stimulus for discussion. Materials need to be accessible but not burdensome and I found that video footage of teachers teaching worked well. The footage was meaningful, recognisable and realistic so staff were able to analyse strategies effectively. We also used a range of reading materials to support thinking and exemplify the practice of staff whenever appropriate.

It is essential to accept that it takes time to build the trust necessary to engage in challenging professional discussion about practice. It takes courage to question what it is we do openly with others when we have historically existed in an isolated classroom. Building trust takes time and the skills of effective questioning and support need to be developed and honed. There is scope for further study amongst professionals about how professionals develop - we still need to learn how to learn.

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