

SCEL Fellowship Programme

Area of Enquiry

# Developing Professional Learning Communities in a Network of Urban Scottish Schools

**Carol Turnbull**

January 2017



**SCEL**

Scottish College for  
Educational Leadership

A report on the features of a Professional Learning Community that provide a sustainable model of school improvement for staff to progress, enrich and enhance their professional practices within a school and across a network group of schools in an urban Scottish environment.

## Focus Question

What features of a Professional Learning Community provide a sustainable model of school improvement for staff to progress enrich and enhance their professional practices within a school and across a network group of schools in an urban Scottish environment?

## Introduction

“The most successful education systems invest in developing their teachers as reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who are able, not simply to teach successfully in relation to current external expectations, but who have the capacity to fully engage with the complexities of education and to be key actors in shaping and leading educational change” (Teaching Scotland’s Future, Scottish Government, 2011, P4).

There is a need to ensure that teachers have the confidence, knowledge and skills to engage successfully in developing pedagogy, curriculum and the current issues in educational thinking. It can be argued that, for a number of reasons to be explored within this enquiry, they currently do not. As the system aims to have high quality teachers who deliver excellent teaching, we must ensure that there are high quality professional learning opportunities planned for teachers and leaders within our schools. Research has shown (Benziane 2016; Darling – Hammond et al 2009; SEED, 2001; Drew and Fox 2006) that collegial and collaborative working is consistent with successful teacher professional learning through the model of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

Evidence suggests that, in order to embed sustainable continuous improvement in the quality of teachers, the PLC is a suitable model to promote research-engaged schools and increase teacher agency within schools (Watson, 2012; Dimmock, 2013). This approach to planned professional learning requires relatively few external resources to become successful and it can readily capitalise on the unique context of each individual school community. The focus of the professional learning can accurately be driven by school improvement needs, while taking account of local authority and national priorities as appropriate. The PLC offers school-based organisation of professional learning able to hone in on what a particular school and group of teachers requires to develop in order to improve the quality of learning and teaching en situ, and thereby improve outcomes for learners

within that individual establishment and then more widely across a group or cluster of schools.

This is particularly relevant in Scottish schools currently as many local authorities focus on the development of a self-improving schools' model at a time when raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap is a national priority (Ellis and Sosu, 2014; Scottish Government, 2016; OECD, 2015). At a time of diminishing resources and where there is a clear need for systematic teacher professional learning, a robust manageable and sustainable model is crucial to ensure that there is an increasing focus on the continuing professional development of teachers.

This enquiry investigates the key drivers, critical and desirable, which make the PLC an effective and sustainable model to facilitate robust and successful teacher learning in order that Scotland's teaching profession is equipped for the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments. Potential and actual factors that interrupt or cause tension in the success of PLCs - thereby reducing and diluting their impact - will also be discussed.

## Key themes from the Literature – the concept of PLCs

The concept of the PLC is widely used as a valuable method for teachers to engage in professional development. Much of the literature around PLCs confirms they have considerable promise for capacity building in a sustainable way for school improvement (Stoll et al, 2006). International evidence suggests that progress depends on teachers' individual and collective capacity and its link with school-wide capacity for promoting pupils' learning. Stoll et al (2006) argue that, as capacity building is critical, learning can no longer be left to individuals in order to sustain improvements over time and scale them up across systems. PLCs have been widely established in many countries as a means to give individuals, groups, whole school communities and school systems the power to significantly impact school improvement.

## What are the key characteristics of effective PLCs?

For brevity, the following characteristics are listed. Bolam et al (2005) carried out an extensive literature review and identified five key characteristics of the effective PLC:-

- Shared values and vision
- Collective responsibility for pupils' learning
- Reflective professional inquiry

- Collaboration focused on learning
- Group as well as individual professional learning is promoted

Three further attributes were identified by Bolam et al (2005) and these relate directly to the notion of community (Watson, 2012).

- Inclusive membership
- Mutual trust, respect and support
- Openness, networks and partnerships

For the research included within this enquiry I have clustered the critical and desirable characteristics into four groups with a number of sub-themes. Further information is included in Appendix 1.

- Influence on professional practices
- Climate
- Organisation
- Drivers

These groups provide a useful basis for the organisation of the research questions and themes in the examination of Qualitative Data, Evaluations and Analysis sections of the inquiry.

## What can create tension within a PLC?

PLCs are not without their challenges. The following tensions are identified in the literature:

Teachers can be reluctant to engage with literature (Drew and Fox, 2006)

Teachers lack an educational language with which to engage critically with policy and with which to develop their practice (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015)

High teacher workloads (Hairon and Dimmock, 2012)

Hierarchical system and workplaces (Hairon and Dimmock, 2012) such as within the education system in Singapore.

## Why is it essential to plan for sustainable career-long professional learning in the current climate within Scottish schools?

The importance of a highly professionalised teacher force is accepted overwhelmingly by all researchers. In this regard, the following findings are axiomatic:

Teachers are the most significant within-school influence on school improvement (OECD, 2005; McKinsey & Co, 2007).

Several decades of policies have de-professionalised teachers through highly prescriptive curricula (Priestley & Biesta, 2013).

There is a need to improve the quality of teachers through programmes of continuous professional formation (Stoll et al, 2005; Daly et al, 2010). For a sense of ownership, teachers themselves must be agents of change.

The PLC concept establishes the ‘ideal’ conditions for schools to become research-engaged. In research-engaged schools teaching is underpinned by evidence – informed ideas and practices drawn from research evidence and tacit knowledge from teachers’ practical experience (Dimmock, 2013).

Local authorities are increasingly developing networks of ‘self-improving schools’ at a time of diminishing resources and there is a requirement to ensure schools are prepared and equipped to support this.

## Qualitative Data and Evaluations

During the inquiry phase, a number of sources and methods were used to gather qualitative data. Six schools were sampled in detail. These are referred to as schools A-F. Information regarding staff numbers who participated in the inquiry is included in Appendix 2. Schools A, B and C operate successful examples of professional learning communities. These schools were identified as successful examples of PLCs through information gathering at professional meetings within North Lanarkshire Council and through highly professional practices being identified during the inspection process. Schools D, E and F reported that they currently did not have a successful model of a PLC in operation. These three schools were selected from responses to a request for information which was sent to the Head Teachers of a group of schools within one high school ‘cluster’. From wider consultation it was apparent that there is a variety of approaches to PLCs currently in operation. Some schools reported that the PLC approach to professional learning was embedded within

practice. Other schools reported that barriers to this approach existed within their schools. Responses showed that ‘scaling up’ and networking of PLCs was variable also.

A variety of meetings and semi-structured interviews with Head Teachers, groups of teachers and individual staff from the sample schools took place. I led meetings which were forums to test in the field theoretical evidence which informed this enquiry. My system leadership role was to structure discussion and encourage personal and group professional dialogue. Field notes were also taken from observations of the PLC in operation in School C, the aim being to identify the key themes which are likely to have the most impact on the success or failure of the PLC model for teacher professional development within the urban context of a sample group of primary schools of North Lanarkshire. Appendix 1 provides detail of the key themes and subheadings which were arranged to structure discussion with all staff. This engagement provided me with the opportunity to investigate how colleagues across the sampled schools were thinking and to examine their views of the impact that their model of professional learning was having on them as individuals and also on the learning and teaching within their school community as a whole. Qualitative data collected were grouped to reflect the responses gathered from the three schools which reported success and then subsequently from the three schools which reported limited success with this model of professional learning.

Appendix 3 provides the detail of the research design.

## What key themes indicated success?

In schools A, B and C, in all cases, staff were enthusiastic in participating in discussions and were confident in explaining the benefits of the PLC model operating within their school. Each of the successful schools, A, B and C had certain themes identified from the responses collated which were common to all.

The following four themes were indicative of successful operation of PLCs in the three schools A, B, and C.

## Climate and Ethos

This was critical at the stage when the PLC was forming. In each of schools A, B and C, setting the climate was carefully planned for. In School A the head teacher arranged individual conversations with staff regarding his vision for the school and the professional commitment involved in being a member of a school PLC. There was a clear sense of team spirit when staff spoke about this. In School B a clearly “planned approach” from the head

teacher was reported, sharing the vision and the aim for shared responsibility for school improvement. This fostered a clear sense of collective ownership. In School C, the head teacher referred to the “priority status” which had been afforded to all aspects of the establishment of a PLC. Staff in each of these three schools spoke about inclusive membership mutual trust and respect of colleagues, support and openness. Staff referred to networks of colleagues and partnerships which had been established within their school and beyond. Staff in School C spoke about “confidence to try things out” and that they were always encouraged to “bring things to the table”. In School A staff were keen to say that they knew the value of their contribution and that of other staff members. There had been a “heavy investment of time and energy at the early stages” (School C) and all agreed that this had led to a clear impact on approaches to professional learning. It could be argued that the climate within these schools was already conducive to increased teacher engagement in professional learning from the outset. Teachers reported that these climate factors continued to improve over time.

## Organisation

Organisation of the PLC was another critical factor that was identified by staff in each of these three schools. Consultation and consideration was key in planning the timing of meetings to avoid workload issues, budget allocations, and protected time within the school’s working time agreement. These were common themes reported by school staff. Other common organisational factors such as the provision of an appropriately resourced room for meetings and an agreed clear focus for each meeting which was agreed with all staff in advance were also important. Resources were requested and provided as required and this commitment was sustained over time.

## Influencing Professional Practice

In schools A, B and C, it was generally agreed that the model of a PLC was an ideal vehicle for staff to plan systematically for professional learning around school, local and national priorities. Pace of change is managed appropriately through the PLC. In all three schools staff reported that there was an expectation of professional freedom and creativity within the group. Staff reported that they were “increasingly confident in leadership roles” and that “permission did not have to be sought from the leadership team”. Teachers were encouraged to “come with a solution”. Staff reported a sense of empowerment with support at appropriate times (School B). In School C the head teacher wished to encourage the school to be research-engaged. Each member of staff was provided with their own copy of a book to encourage professional reading and discussion. This began a process whereby staff increasingly took part in research-based learning. Staff reported that this was an

effective way to engage the group. Professional practices had been further developed, in each of these schools, through increased confidence in professional development over time and evidence gathered indicated that teachers judged this to be directly related to their involvement in the PLC. Staff reported that through collaboration with colleagues and reflective professional discussion classroom practice had improved.

## Drivers

A number of key 'drivers' were common to schools A, B and C. Leaders – principal teachers in the three schools - were described as staff members who demonstrated the skills of professional interest beyond their own professional development (School C). Leaders were described as “highly motivated”, “enthusiastic” and “organized.” Their highly developed skills in managing and engaging others were also key drivers which related to the success of the PLC. Sustainability was significantly boosted by each of these schools reportedly having a “stable” staff with low turnover. Head teachers also commented on the fact that, in each case, they had personally been involved in the recruitment of their staff team over time. Initiating PLCs within Schools A, B and C was successful as staff saw the value in planning a coherent structure for professional learning and reported that the PLC increased capacity for improving learning and teaching over time.

## What key themes were barriers to success?

In the three sample schools (D, E and F) which reported not having a successful model of a PLC in operation, there were a number of common “barriers” identified. Staff workload issues were identified in each case, with some staff having the perception that their involvement in a PLC would increase bureaucracy. Regular changes to the staff team, particularly in the smallest school were reported to have had a negative impact on the sustainability of this model of professional development. Arranging appropriate and proportionate times for meetings agreeable to all, also created a barrier to success. In each of these schools, not everyone agreed to participate and therefore protected collegiate time had not been allocated within the school’s working time agreement. Head teachers agreed that past experience led them to conclude that their longer-term aim was to re-establish a PLC model that would include every member of staff. Senior staff had identified a series of planned learning opportunities for staff to opt into throughout the session. It should be noted that those factors which indicated success in Schools A,B and C were the same factors which presented barriers to the initiating of a PLC model within schools D,E and F these being - organisation, climate, drivers and attitude to professional practice. Findings suggest that when these are positive, a PLC will be successful. When they are negative, they prevent and obstruct the implementation of a PLC.



## Networking Across a Group of Schools

In transforming our schools into 21<sup>st</sup> century innovative learning environments fit to ‘meet growing and increasingly diverse expectations and demands of society, students, parents and employers’ (Dimmock, 2016), it is increasingly important that the building blocks which allow for transformational change are solidly embedded within the organisational structures of schools. Teacher professional development is critical to this; the PLC provides such a building block that is potentially powerful in its transformative effects. Moreover, this enquiry has identified the critical features of a PLC that make it either a successful or unsuccessful building block.

Professional learning communities within schools encourage teachers to develop as researchers through collegial and collaborative working with their colleagues. PLCs can be organised within a school and then networked across a school system. In order to build capacity outwards across the system, networking across a group of schools will scale-up the positive impact of school improvement and facilitate the sharing of expertise and resources within and between schools. System networked community leadership can be a major driver for school improvement (Dimmock, 2016). The linking together of schools can build a shared, group culture whereby teachers and leaders can, in a systematic way, provide learning opportunities to participate in professional learning. Such activities help embed the skills required to develop pedagogical practice and to afford teachers the confidence to discuss current issues in educational thinking, and to share research on their own practices. Schools, and indeed staff teams, may be grouped together in a variety of different ways to capitalise on the opportunities to improve the wider system. In the current climate whereby schools are being encouraged to be self-improving, looking inwards to inform refreshed professional practice, but also looking increasingly outwards to other schools in the system, much can be gained from a network approach. The ultimate aim of PLCs are research-engaged teachers who through improved teaching quality achieve better learning outcomes for all. The PLC enables teachers to achieve this through working collaboratively and researching their own and each others’ practices through curriculum and lesson study.

## Conclusions

Evidence from previous literature plus that from this Enquiry show that Professional Learning Communities have the potential to address the need for improved professional practices for 21<sup>st</sup> century schools including –

- Teacher agency based on high levels of professionalism
- Research-engaged schools, with teachers researching their own and colleagues' practices and adopting improved teaching and learning practices
- Focusing on what is happening within classrooms and then within the wider context
- Supporting the self-improving schools model
- Responding to the individual context/need of the school
- Promoting consistency of good practice
- Promoting staff as professionals, showing an openness to learning and improvement
- Championing the building of confidence, trust and respect over time with a fairly stable staff team
- Sustainability when school communities see the impact and benefits for all
- whole staff and school community buy-in
- Addressing issues around workload, tackling bureaucracy, priority status (including time, space and budgets)
- Greatest positive impact when the leaders build climate, win support of key personnel, are good organisers, and focus on key drivers

## Professional Learning in relation to System Leadership

Participation in the SCEL Fellowship Programme has provided an opportunity to establish effective strategic partnerships and networks beyond the local context and across the wider system. Professional dialogue among colleagues at network meetings, plus the sign-posted professional reading has deepened the shared sense of mission and responsibility I now have to improve the larger educational system. Individual access to an academic adviser and a coach throughout the programme have been invaluable for me to develop the skills and knowledge which have challenged my educational thinking. As a member of a collegial group of head teachers, I have been supported and challenged to further develop my understanding of the key drivers which affect change and improvement across the education

system as a whole. Throughout the programme I have engaged with national and international research which has encouraged me to critically reflect on my own practice and that of others. It has also made me more aware of the need to justify my practices with evidence and data where practicable.

Professional dialogue and reflection around the qualities, dispositions and attributes of high performing leaders directed me to examine how school leaders can bring about real 'school transformation as opposed to piecemeal innovation' (Dimmock, 2016). The transformation required to ensure that our teachers and schools are equipped to become 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments became a focus for my professional enquiry. This included critical reflection upon factors which influence our ability as professionals to deliver improvement and successful outcomes within the current educational climate.

Teacher agency, research engaged schools and the organisation and delivery of professional learning have been key areas on which I have focused my reading and thinking throughout the Professional Enquiry phase of the Fellowship Programme. This has included collaborating with colleagues in other schools and also more widely within the Fellowship cohort. These relationships and networks have developed my system leadership capacity.

The inclusion of system leaders from outwith education in the Fellowship Programme has enriched my contextual understanding. I am encouraged to routinely look outwards beyond the boundaries of the school system in order to influence leadership and system level improvement. Professional dialogue during the enquiry phase was stimulating and led me to critically examine my practice. This in turn has affected positive change and reflection within and across a group of schools. The Fellowship Programme has significantly enhanced my ability to think as a system leader and contributor and I look forward to having the opportunity to share the expertise and knowledge gained locally, regionally and nationally.

## References

- Benziene, A., 2013. The potential of Teacher Learning Communities in education. *Seced*, 2013(3),pp1-3.
- Daly, A.J., Moolenaar, N.M., Bolivar, J.M. and Burke, P., 2010. Relationships in reform: The role of teachers' social networks. *Journal of educational administration*, 48(3), pp.359-391.
- Dimmock, C., 2013. Bridging the Research-Policy-Practice Divide: Emergence of the 'Research-Engaged' School of the Future Gateways to Leading Learning (3).
- Dimmock, C., 2016. Conceptualising the research–practice–professional development nexus: mobilising schools as 'research-engaged' professional learning communities. *Professional Development in Education*, 42(1), pp.36-53.
- Dimmock, C., 2011. *Leadership in Education: Concepts, Themes and Impact*. London: Routledge.
- Dimmock, C., 2016. *Transforming School as 21st Century Innovative Learning Environments : The School Design Model, Leadership and Challenges of Implementation*, Scottish College for Educational Leadership.
- Drew, V. and Fox, A., 2006 *The Complexity of Collegiality and Collaboration* *Scottish Educational Review*. 45(2)
- Drew, V., Priestley, M. and Michael, M.K., 2016. Curriculum development through critical collaborative professional enquiry. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 1(1), pp.92-106.
- Donaldson, G. 2010. *Teaching Scotland's Future: A Review of Teacher Education in Scotland*. Scottish Government. Retrieved from <http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/337626/0110852.pdf> 12th January 2017.
- DuFour, R., 2004. What is a " professional learning community?". *Educational leadership*, 61(8), pp.6-11.
- Easton, L. B. ,2015. *The 5 Habits of Effective PLCs*. Retrieved from [learningforward.org](http://learningforward.org) on 13 November 2016.
- Hairon, S. and Dimmock, C., 2012. Singapore schools and professional learning communities: Teacher professional development and school leadership in an Asian hierarchical system. *Educational Review*, 64(4), pp.405-424.
- Hairon, S., Goh, J.W.P. and Chua, C.S.K., 2015. Teacher leadership enactment in professional learning community contexts: towards a better understanding of the phenomenon. *School Leadership & Management*, 35(2), pp.163-182.

- Hord, S., 2015. What is an authentic professional learning community? *Journal of staff development*, Vol. 36, Issue 3.
- Lee, D. and Lee, W.O., 2013. A professional learning community for the new teacher professionalism: The case of a state-led initiative in Singapore schools. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61(4), pp.435-451.
- McKinsey, C. and McKinsey, M.M., 2007. How the world's best performing school systems come out on top. Recuperado de [http://www.mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/Como\\_hicieron\\_los\\_sistemas\\_educativos.pdf](http://www.mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/Como_hicieron_los_sistemas_educativos.pdf), 18.
- OECD, 2015. *Improving schools in Scotland (An OECD perspective)*, Paris: OECD).
- OECD, 2015. *Teachers Matter: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers*: Paris: OECD.
- Owen, S., 2016. Professional learning communities: building skills, reinvigorating the passion, and nurturing teacher wellbeing and “flourishing” within significantly innovative schooling contexts. *Educational Review*, 68(4), pp.403-419.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G. and Robinson, S., 2015. Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter?. *Flip the system: Changing education from the bottom up*, pp.1-11. London: Routledge.
- Priestley, M. and Drew, V., 2016, August. Teachers as agents of curriculum change: closing the gap between purpose and practice. In *European Conference for Educational Research*, Dublin, 23-26 September 2016.
- Reeves, J. and Drew, V., 2013. A productive relationship? Testing the connections between professional learning and practitioner research. *Scottish Educational Review*, 45(2), pp.36-49.
- Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M. and Thomas, S., 2006. Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of educational change*, 7(4), pp.221-258.
- Sosu, E. and Ellis, S., 2014. *Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.
- Watson, C., 2014. Effective professional learning communities? The possibilities for teachers as agents of change in schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(1), pp.18-29.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession*. Washington, DC: National Staff Development Council.

## Appendix 1

For the purposes of data collection key themes and subheadings were arranged to inform the semi-structured interviews carried out with key staff.

From the literature, these themes, critical or desirable were identified.

Influencing professional practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher effectiveness</li> <li>• Teacher leadership</li> <li>• Reflective practices</li> <li>• Collective / collaborative practice</li> <li>• Research-engaged schools</li> </ul>
Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusiveness</li> <li>• Openness</li> <li>• Trust / respect / support</li> <li>• Partnerships</li> <li>• Networks</li> </ul>
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content</li> <li>• Coherence</li> <li>• Duration</li> <li>• Resources – physical/finance</li> <li>• Participation</li> </ul>
Drivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Key people</li> <li>• Outside influences</li> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Impact</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2

Qualitative data from six North Lanarkshire Council primary schools is included in this enquiry.

Three schools which operate successful PLCs are sampled. They are referred to as Schools A, B and C. in these schools, a principal teacher leads the PLC.

Schools D, E and F were identified as having no formal PLC currently in operation.

<b>School</b>	<b>Teaching Staff</b>	<b>Promoted Staff</b>	<b>HT</b>
A	11	2	1
B	17	3	1
C	11	2	1
D	11	2	1
E	5	1	1
F	16	3	1

## Appendix 3

### Research Design

The research was guided by the following research questions:

How do we encourage PLCs within our schools?

Why are these in operation in some schools but not successful in others?

How do we shape CLPL for staff within our school and within clusters?

### Staff Group Discussions – Establishing Phase

Whose idea was it to create a PLC?

How are topics / themes selected?

Who plans for / prepares the materials for the PLC?

How often does the group meet and for how long?

How do you ensure buy-in from staff?

Were any staff members reluctant to participate?

If so, how did you deal with this?

Have you included parents, pupils or the wider school community in the work of the PLC?

### Key Features – Impact

Planned professional learning

Collaboration focused learning

Institutional change

Content

Duration

Inclusive membership – mutual trust, respect, support

Openness, networks, partnerships

### Focus for Discussion

Professional practices

Reflective practice

Coherence

Active learning



### Broad areas for discussion – Head Teachers

Leadership                      Sustainability                      Impact                      Issues/Barriers

Across a group of schools

Drivers – people / outside influences / current educational thinking

Top down model or organic school / groups of schools in context

A rich variety of qualitative data was generated during this enquiry

### Data included

Formal semi-structured interviews with individuals, groups of staff and school leaders

Field notes from observations of a PLC group

Feedback from participants

Questionnaire responses

No participants or schools are named. This was in agreement with those who took part.