

Leading Learning for School Effectiveness¹

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Abstract

This article outlines the progress and impact of the development of professional learning communities within, between and across schools, as part of the wider implementation of the School Effectiveness Framework in Wales. It outlines the background to this development and describes the way in which professional learning communities have been developed to support school improvement. The article outlines the progress to date, highlights some of the challenges faced and concludes by arguing that professional learning communities offer a powerful way of building the capacity for school and system transformation.

Key words- School Reform - School Improvement - School Effectiveness, -Professional Learning Communities, - Distributed Leadership

Introduction

In education circles, the term *professional learning community* has become commonplace, yet meanings and interpretations of the term vary. In this article we define professional learning communities (PLCs) as they are characterized and understood within the school effectiveness and school improvement research traditions. These fields view the professional learning community as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school and system improvement (Hopkins, 2008; Harris and Chrispeels, 2008; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007). The idea of a professional learning community is grounded in the knowledge and experience that had been gained over many years from encouraging teachers to work together more collaboratively (Darling Hammond, 1996; Guskey, 1986; Louis and Kruse, 1996). It has been informed by the literature surrounding learning organizations or learning communities that access, circulate and distribute knowledge as a way to achieve continuous improvement (Fullan, 1994; 1991; Segiovanni, 1994; Leithwood et al, 1997).

Foundational work by Rosenholtz (1989) showed that professional support through teacher networks, professional collaboration and expanded professional roles improved teacher efficacy and enhanced

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teacher effectiveness. Research has also shown that teachers with a high sense of their own efficacy are more likely to adopt new classroom behaviors and are also more likely to stay in the profession. Little (1982) found that when teachers had the opportunity for collaborative inquiry and the learning related to it, they were able to develop and share a body of wisdom gleaned from their experience. More recently, distributed leadership and shared decision making have been associated with the transformation of teaching performance (Stoll and Louis, 2008; Harris, 2008; 2009).

Within our work we define a professional learning community, as a group of connected and engaged educators who are responsible for driving change that will directly benefit learners. The basic argument is that by cultivating professional learning communities it is possible for schools to improve teaching practices and student achievement. The professional learning communities model in Wales is one that endorses networking and collaboration as a main lever for change (Hopkins, 2008; Egan and Hopkins, 2009; Egan, Harris and Hopkins, 2009). It reinforces that networks of schools can stimulate and spread innovation as well as collaborate to raise collective and individual performance (Hopkins, 2006).

The idea of professional learning communities is also underpinned by the concept of distributed leadership (Harris, 2008). This form of leadership is primarily concerned with the reciprocal interdependencies that shape leadership practice. A distributed perspective on leadership recognises that leadership involves multiple individuals and crosses organisational boundaries. Distributed leadership encompasses both formal and the informal forms of leadership practice. Consequently within professional learning communities, distributed leadership is fundamentally concerned with teachers working together on a shared area of enquiry (Harris, 2009). Distributed leadership provides the infrastructure that holds the community together, as it is the collective work of educators, at multiple levels who are leading innovative work that creates and sustains successful professional learning communities.

This article focuses on the ways in which professional learning communities, located within, between and across schools can contribute to system level improvement. It will look at the conditions that need to be in place for such groups to continuously seek and share learning; and to subsequently act on what they learn. The article reflects upon progress made and the challenges of sustaining professional learning communities as part of a process of national reform.

Professional Learning Communities within the School Effectiveness (SEF) Framework

In Wales there is a currently a major reform effort underway targeted at improving educational performance. This basis for this reform is set out in two strategic documents: The Learning Country, and its successor The Learning Country: Vision into Action (Welsh Assembly Government, 2001; 2006b). Both documents make a commitment to using the school effectiveness and improvement research evidence to secure improved learning and teaching outcomes. This commitment is part of a wider strategy that is adopting tri-level approaches to the systemic reform of the education and training system in Wales. Although there is a strong tradition of school improvement and effectiveness activity in Wales, it has not always been reflected in policy formulations or universally adopted by schools and local education authorities (Egan and Marshall forthcoming). Consequently, in 2006/07 the Welsh Assembly Government introduced a national school effectiveness framework (SEF) as a way of achieving system level reform and improved student outcomes for all students. The SEF⁴ is based on robust research evidence and is intended to drive significant tri-level reform and system level improvement in Wales over the next few years.

During the pilot phase, SEF associates were appointed to work regionally with clusters of schools to generate innovation and activity in line with the SEF framework. Different approaches and models of implementation emerged in various parts of the country. Within one region, an approach to building professional learning communities was piloted as a way of generating local improvement capacity for the implementation of SEF priorities. The project involved six schools, two secondary, two primary and two special schools. Each school was committed to becoming part of year long project that was primarily aimed at securing change and improvement through the development of professional learning communities *within, between and across* schools. The 'Leading Learning for School Effectiveness' (LLSE) project involved a partnership between ⁵academics, SEF associates, the Welsh Assembly Government and schools.

⁴ Following initial development work undertaken in the summer of 2007, a pilot phase of the SEF was trialled in over 100 schools and many of the local authorities in Wales during 2008/09. Following the pilot phase, the SEF Framework is to be extended to all schools in Wales in 2009/10.

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As highlighted earlier, there are many different definitions of professional learning communities and indeed many different ways to construct them. The model we adopted was based on an action enquiry approach that has been utilized successfully by many school improvement programmes including 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (Hopkins et al, 1997). The core idea is that school-based action enquiry becomes the driver for change and innovation within, between and across schools. The prime purpose of the professional learning community therefore is to collectively enquire and innovate with a clear focus upon the benefits for learners.

The 'Leading Learning for School Effectiveness (LLSE)' project, as the project became known, was premised upon a number of principles. Firstly, it was premised on a view that school improvement is internally generated and externally supported through collaboration and networking. Secondly, at the heart of the programme was the central and non-negotiable focus of pedagogical improvement as a route to reducing within school variation and improving learning outcomes. Thirdly, the model utilized action enquiry approaches, as a driver for change that allowed teachers to focus on developmental issues in depth but also to work across schools and sectors. The main rationale for the LLSE model was one of generating within school, between school and across school collaboration and improvement that would directly benefit learners.

The design features of the LLSE programme were as follows:

- a PLC group comprising teachers, from different levels within the school and with different expertise/ experience and perspectives.
- the collegial and facilitative participation of the head but not necessarily as the leader of the PLC group
- an action enquiry orientation - in order to identify a development of benefit learners and linked to the SEF framework
- a 100% focus on improving learner outcomes and maximizing the impact of the change or development to positively affect student learning.

The work commenced with schools early in 2009 with a launch event and an introduction to collaborative ways of working. Schools identified an issue for enquiry and worked as a team back in their schools to collect data and to prepare information for presentation to other schools. Following the

sharing of progress, each school decided upon development or an innovation and spent the next six months working to implement this with the support of a critical friend and the other schools in the group. In September 2009, schools shared their progress to date and outlined their next steps. While rates of progress varied, all schools had established new practices and had clear plans for moving the development to the next stage. Most importantly the schools had started to function as a collective network with clear plans for sustaining their activity beyond the life of the project.

The LLSE model draws upon the theory of change implicit in Wenger's (2002) notion of *communities of practice*. Within such communities practice is developed and refined through the collaboration of 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger, 2002). In communities of practice, learning is viewed as a social activity that occurs as new collaborations form and the group moves collectively toward greater expertise (Bielaczyc, and Collins, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). New members of the group gain access to the community's professional knowledge in authentic contexts through encounters with people, tools, tasks, and social norms. New professional behaviours are adopted by the community of practice through the evolution of practice over time. Thus the collaborative group can help professionals gain access to ideas, methods, content, and experiences that can shift and refine practice (Argyris, 1992).

All schools had engaged in collaborative activities that had contributed to shifts in professional practice. For example, one secondary school focused upon the learning experience of young people in year 7 and found that many of the teaching activities were not engaging students. Consequently the teachers in the school primary to secondary school expanded their range of pedagogical approaches and are making much greater use of IT and practical activities in lessons with year 7. Another group of teachers was concerned to develop greater pupil voice within the school and investigated how greater co-construction and pupil involvement in decision making could be achieved. The school developed materials for teachers and pupils to use to support their learning conversations. It was clear from their enquiry that teachers dominated many learning conversations with pupils and therefore a different practice was required. The LSSE has allowed the school to develop pupil voice in a meaningful way and has engaged teachers in changing the style, content and nature of their interaction with pupils during a learning conversation.

In summary, the PLC work has been the catalyst for changing teaching and learning practices within and across schools. Changes resulting from the LLSE work have included:

- The introduction of Learning Walks involving staff, pupils and governors to gather evidence for each school to use as a baseline for their enquiry;
- The introduction of personalised learning journals for all pupils in the PLC;
- An increased number of assessment for learning strategies used consistently within each school;
- The development of an 'electronic skills profile' linked to pupils' peer and self assessment;
- The development of a continuum to assess the PLC within each school;
- The development of materials to promote learning conversations between staff and pupils.

As a group, the schools intend to focus on personalised learning in more depth and are planning the greater involvement of pupils in evaluating the impact of their ongoing PLC work next year.

The LLSE model aligns with the 'Pedagogy Strategy' in Wales which endorses a move from individual professionalism, to collective professionalism – where it becomes the norm for practitioners to support the development of others. It also aligns with the collaboration and networking component of system level change that is guiding national reform within Wales (Egan, Harris and Hopkins, 2009). While LLSE is a small scale intervention, the potential for professional learning communities to make an impact in schools across Wales is substantial. However it is important to look critically at the LLSE model and to consider the possibilities for the scaling up of PLC work.

Challenges and Possibilities

The literature is clear about the way in which successful professional learning communities function (Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007). Learning in the context of professional learning communities involves working together towards a common understanding of concepts and practices. The focus is not just on individual teachers' learning but on professional learning within the context of a cohesive group that focuses on collective knowledge and occurs with a context of mutual trust and learning. But the reality is rarely as neat or straightforward as the literature would suggest. Looking at the experience of LLSE and the data from the schools who participated, there are some challenges in building professional communities within, between and across schools.

Firstly, there were some structural challenges – particularly but not exclusively in the secondary schools. The PLC groups found that the organizational structures and strong subject boundaries often

constrained their efforts to build whole school learning communities. The PLC group is predicated on the ability to influence others and to affect whole school change. In some schools, this way of working was new and required constant negotiation and reinforcement with other teachers. Some PLC groups found it a challenge to link with other teachers in other schools and found that paperwork, classroom management tasks and lesson preparation often diminished the time available for enquiry and collaborative activity.

The next challenge was a cultural one. In all schools there is a dominant culture that can either support or undermine innovation and change. In some schools the PLC groups met with resistance from teachers who were not familiar with this way of working or who felt suspicious about the work of the group. It was here that the leadership of the Head was critically important. Where they championed and supported the PLC and underlined its centrality to school development, the PLC overcame initial resistance to change. Where this was not the case, the PLC group struggled to make progress. The core message is one reinforced in the research evidence, essentially that head-teachers need to create the structural and cultural conditions where professional learning communities can thrive and contribute to school improvement (Day et al, 2007). Without this support and drive from the top, professional learning communities, at best, will enhance the professional skills of the teachers within them but at worse, will have little impact and will lose momentum quickly. The discourse around professional learning communities, in such cases, becomes quickly associated with failure and there is a loss of faith in this way of working.

Thirdly, the external environment presented a constant challenge as schools faced external pressure from inspection, new initiatives and other strategies. Competing demands and priorities were a major challenge to the schools and, for some, this pressure proved to be too much and the work of the PLC group drifted. In other schools, there was a clearer alignment between the work of the PLC group and other strategies so energy and effort were doubled and the resulting impact was clearly evident. The central point here is that professional learning communities cannot be a bolt on or seen as just another or extra activity – they need to be carefully positioned within the school so that they link with other developments in an integral and coordinated way. If professional learning communities are to support SEF they need to be seen as an integral part of the delivery mechanism in the way that Hopkins (2008) outlines and endorses.

Our experience with LLSE also highlighted a number of important considerations when initiating and sustaining professional learning communities. Firstly, it is important that time is allocated to staff to meet and talk. Time is clearly a resource and time, or more properly lack of it, is one of the most difficult problems faced by schools along with competing demands and priorities. Time is a significant issue for teachers who wish to work together collegially, and it has been cited as both a barrier (when it is not available) and a supportive factor (when it is available) by those engaging in school improvement.

One of the first characteristics cited by Louis and Kruse (1995) of a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and to work toward improvement. In LLSE there was dedicated time for sharing progress and for gaining critical feedback from other teachers in other schools. This process allowed a general sharing of the issues, challenges and successes that were being encountered but across all schools refined the network's ability to make judgments and to offer supportive feedback. The LLSE experience also highlighted that in successful professional learning communities the following qualities are needed:

- respect and trust among colleagues at the school and network level
- possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective pedagogy and leads to effective learning
- supportive leadership from those in key roles and shared leadership practices
- the norms of continuous critical inquiry and continuous improvement
- a widely shared vision or sense of purpose
- a norm of involvement in decision making;
- collegial relationships among teachers;
- a focus upon impact and outcomes for learners

Experience with LLSE also highlighted that it can be difficult to build and sustain professional learning communities. While organizing teachers into small collegial groups may improve school culture, it does not necessarily result in improved instruction and student achievement. It is clear that professional learning communities require certain forms of leadership to be successful.

Strong, supportive leadership is necessary to build and sustain professional learning communities. Even though heads roles may change as they redistribute and share leadership, their support is one of the resources necessary for schools to become a professional learning communities. Heads need to actively

build a context for professional learning communities work. Their support is required to distribute leadership among teachers, which may include teachers who are reluctant to take on leadership roles, and defining autonomy and authority for teacher leaders. It will involve securing fiscal and human resources to support teacher development and also modelling the vision and shared focus of the professional learning communities. Essentially their leadership role is in establishing a high-trust environment in which it is safe for teachers to innovate.

Final Thought

For professional learning communities to be effective they must be led effectively. As Hopkins (2008:19) argues 'effective networks require strong leadership by participating heads and clear objectives that add significant value to individual schools' own efforts. Without this networks wither and die, since the transaction costs outweigh the benefits they deliver'. Within the LSSE project this has been shown very clearly. Professional learning communities are unlikely to thrive and survive without strong leadership from the top that supports and facilitates widely distributed leadership. The whole point of a professional learning community is that the 'sum is greater than the parts' and that by distributing and sharing leadership more widely, the opportunities for releasing learning capacity within schools and across the system is maximised (Harris, 2008).

If we believe, only some of the evidence pertaining to the benefits of professional learning communities, then there is a compelling case to scale up the LSSE model as part of the delivery of SEF. The empirical evidence suggests that professional learning communities can reduce the isolation of teachers; they can secure a sense of shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success; they can drive powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice and that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners. Within professional learning communities there is a higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students (Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007). Where professional learning communities work best, there is evidence of more satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism among teachers and significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly than within individual schools. Finally there is evidence of teachers having a greater commitment to making significant and lasting changes that can contribute to systemic change.

As the SEF moves its next phase of implementation, building strong professional communities within, between and across schools will be a major component of its future success (Egan, Harris and Hopkins, 2009). Although evidence of the impact of professional learning communities within system level reform is still accumulating, as Hopkins (2008) notes 'it is becoming clear that networks that support improvement and innovation by enabling schools to collaborate well beyond individual school gates' is a powerful lever for system reform. While the LSSE and its model of professional learning communities is clearly not a panacea, in a scaled up form, it has the potential to secure significant and sustained educational improvement for young people in Wales.

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