

Familiarisation and deepening understanding

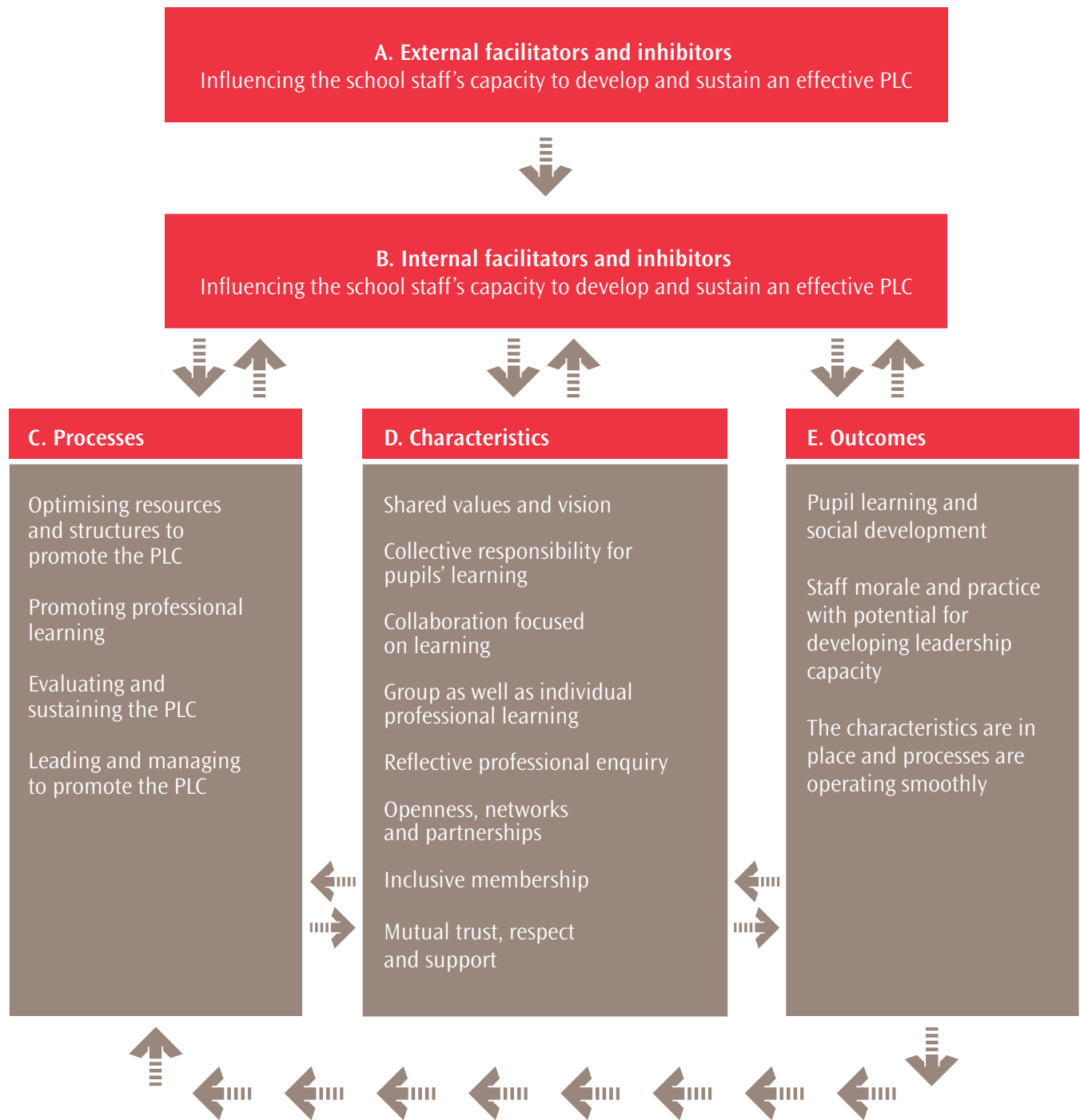


Professional Learning Communities:  
source materials for school leaders and  
other leaders of professional learning

# Creating and sustaining an effective professional learning community

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# Model of a school operating as an effective professional learning community (PLC)



A belief that the quality of learning and teaching can be enhanced by teachers working and learning together has led to increased interest in the potential of professional learning communities (PLCs) for school improvement. But what exactly is a professional learning community? How would we recognise that a school was a learning community? More importantly, if staff decide that they want to develop and sustain their school as a learning community, what can they do to achieve this?

In this piece we discuss these questions by drawing on the findings of a study, *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities*, funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and General Teaching Council for England (GTCE), which was carried out between January 2002 and October 2004. The aims of the study were to identify and provide practical examples of:

- the characteristics of effective professional learning communities and what these look like in different school settings
- key factors inside and outside schools that seem to help or hinder the initial creation, ongoing development and longer term sustaining of these communities
- innovative practices in managing human and financial resources to create time and opportunity for professional learning and development and optimise its impact

During the life of the project, we carried out four main research activities:

- 1 A review of the national and international literature on PLCs.
- 2 A questionnaire survey administered to a sample of nursery, primary, secondary and special schools across England.
- 3 Case studies in 16 schools around the country – 3 nursery (pre-school), 5 primary, 5 secondary and 3 special schools – at different stages of development as professional learning communities.
- 4 Workshops with representatives from case study schools.

Further details of the methods and our analysis can be found in the project report<sup>1</sup>.

## What's in this think piece?

In this think piece, we explore four questions.

- 1 What is a professional learning community and how would you recognise one?
- 2 How do you create and develop a professional learning community?

- 3 Do PLCs go through different stages of development?
- 4 How can you assess the effectiveness of a professional learning community?

We also present a model of how we think it all fits together.

<sup>1</sup> Bolam, R, McMahon, A, Stoll, L, Thomas, S, & Wallace, M, with Greenwood, A, Hawkey, K, Ingram, M, Atkinson, A, & Smith, M, 2005, *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities*, DfES Research Report RR637, University of Bristol. Available at [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR637.pdf](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR637.pdf)

## Questions to reflect on as you are reading

You may want to reflect on the following questions as you are reading, highlighting the text if it helps. There are sheets at the end of the think piece for you to make notes about your follow-up dialogue.

- Is the idea of a PLC one that you and colleagues want to buy into? Why or why not?
- Is it one that will appeal to staff as a whole? Why or why not?
- Does it fit with your school development strategy and your approach to self-evaluation?
- What are the broad implications for planning and implementation?
- How might you introduce these ideas to other people?
- How helpful is the model of an effective PLC?
- Can you come up with a more appropriate model for your PLC?



## 1 What is a professional learning community and how would you recognise one?

This was our working definition of a PLC:

*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.*

Although PLCs don't look exactly the same in all schools, we found they display eight characteristics which, irrespective of phase or context, they exhibit to a greater or lesser degree:

- 1 shared values and vision
- 2 collective responsibility for pupils' learning
- 3 reflective professional enquiry
- 4 collaboration focused on learning
- 5 group as well as individual professional learning
- 6 openness, networks and partnerships
- 7 inclusive membership
- 8 mutual trust, respect and support

### Shared values and vision

Shared values and vision directed to the learning of all pupils and shared across the whole staff is a key characteristic of a PLC. Nursery, primary and special schools were more likely than secondary schools to report

that nearly all staff shared a common core of educational values. In the much larger secondary schools, shared values were typically reported from the department or a smaller group of staff rather than being school-wide. However, there were exceptions: in one secondary school where efforts had been made to break down boundaries between staff teaching different subjects, the culture was described as:

*"...not one of a hierarchy of subjects but it is one that says learning... is a priority and will be celebrated whatever its form is and everybody has a part to play in that."*

This school's senior leadership team was encouraging staff to take a whole-school view of learning, and tried to ensure that every policy emphasised teaching and learning. We found that staff were more likely to hold shared educational values and vision than shared leadership and management values, implying that, although staff agreed about the aims and purposes of the school, there could sometimes be disagreement about how best to achieve the learning goals.

### Collective responsibility for pupils' learning

Staff sharing a sense of responsibility for the learning of all pupils in the school is also a key characteristic. Again, we found this most evident in the nursery and special schools where teachers and support staff worked closely together, monitoring and supporting groups of students. The picture was rather different in some primary schools and the larger secondary schools where collective responsibility was more evident among staff teaching a particular subject or age group. One secondary headteacher commented that it was easier for staff to take collective responsibility for learning when the school was successful than when it was experiencing difficulties. However, since the amount of data about pupil achievement available to staff has increased enormously in recent years, it is now much easier to share information about the learning of all pupils. Typically, pupils are set individual learning targets which are regularly monitored, and all staff are involved in discussions about how to better promote learning and raise achievement. This in turn encourages a sense of collective responsibility.

### Reflective professional enquiry

Another key characteristic is reflective professional enquiry. All the schools collected data and monitored pupil progress, but they differed in how the data were used. Some had very sophisticated mechanisms to provide teachers with detailed information, while in others it was more informal. The data could highlight learning problems, and we were interested in how schools responded to this. We found numerous instances where staff were experimenting to find ways to improve learning and teaching. Examples included:

- conducting action research and other research projects within the school
- collaborating with staff in other schools
- setting and monitoring learning targets for individual pupils
- asking pupils' opinion, for example about what made a good lesson

Classroom observation was often cited as a powerful learning tool, and one secondary deputy headteacher commented:

*“The big leap that's been able to help us in the last two or three years is people are no longer defensive about being observed or intermingling with each other. There's a whole new culture.”*

### Collaboration focused on learning

There are many examples of staff collaboration in activities focused on pupil learning and mutual professional learning, another characteristic. These occur in all types of school. Examples include:

- teachers and support staff working together to plan teaching sessions or to discuss the progress of individual pupils
- teachers in subject departments sharing the preparation of curriculum materials and sharing learning resources by putting materials on the school intranet
- an ICT teacher in a special school running early morning sessions to teach colleagues how to use specific software programs that would help children with poor speech to communicate
- collaboration between staff in the care and education teams of a residential special school

### Group as well as individual professional learning

As you might expect, PLCs are characterised by a significant amount of planned and informal professional learning, both individual and collective. A majority of the survey respondents reported that most or nearly all teachers in their schools *“learn together with colleagues”*, *“take responsibility for their own learning”* and *“use performance management to enhance professional learning”*. In many schools, staff were doing higher degrees, working on projects, taking study visits or secondments and going on courses. A nursery headteacher gave an example of learning together:

*“We've just recently had a music course because there was a special grant for musical instruments in deprived areas. We all went on the course... about a month into next term we will all have a staff meeting when we talk about something that has gone well that we wouldn't have done before that course... if you do share ideas, someone will say, ‘This worked really well’ and*

*someone else will say, 'Oh yes, I remember that. I must try that with my group'.*"

### Openness, networks and partnerships

A key PLC characteristic is that staff are open to new ideas and ready to collaborate with the community and with staff in other schools; they are not inward looking or defensive. The vast majority of our schools reported formal working links with other schools. These links were often very productive. One primary headteacher described how:

*"We work together. We have a cluster improvement plan and a shared budget which we can put into a pot which we can use for training and venues."*

A nursery headteacher reflected:

*"Because we are small, we look for things outside to evaluate us and make us think... If you are good, you can still get better."*

Networks were used to share and generate ideas, for example, primary teachers in one school observed colleagues in a neighbouring school teaching pupils of the same age. Some staff in small secondary school departments were particularly grateful for external networks to combat isolation:

*"To develop your department you often have to go outside of the school. In my first year I learned a tremendous amount from being an examiner and working with teachers from other schools to moderate our pupils' work."*

Community partnerships through children's centres, youth services and other community agencies were being developed in several schools.

### Inclusive membership

An important finding is that PLCs do not just involve teachers; in many cases all adults working in the school are members. This includes teaching support staff, other support staff, the school governors or school council members etc. The implications of this are quite considerable, not least because all the

members of the community need to understand the school's values and goals. We found that teachers and learning assistants in nursery and special schools worked especially closely together, but examples of staff with different types of job working together to achieve the aims of a particular PLC were not hard to find. A primary school teacher describing her school said:

*"There's no real pecking order. The beauty of this place is that everybody works as a team. There is no one who would say, 'This job is far superior to that one', whether it be the headteacher or the cleaner. They are all part of the same team and it is a quality team."*

We found that secondary schools were rather less inclusive, although there were examples of support staff working very closely with particular subject departments.

### Mutual trust, respect and support

PLCs are also characterised by trust and respect between colleagues and mutual support. This does not mean that staff necessarily all have strong personal friendships, but if they are going to share classroom practice and experiences, they need to be confident that colleagues will respond professionally. Challenge is important, but challenge with support. As a headteacher commented:

*"Staff are our greatest resource. If you don't collaborate, co-operate, challenge and have rigorous expectations, they won't do their best... I have an official duty to care for them."*

A secondary teacher speaking about her school said:

*"You're encouraged to take risks and be a bit more creative and to work together and develop and share good practice."*

A primary teacher spoke of her colleagues in the following terms:

*"Everybody is very positive. There's nobody in the school I don't feel able to approach in a professional or personal capacity."*

## 2 How do you create and develop a professional learning community?

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We wanted to understand how staff were creating and developing their professional learning communities. Our evidence showed that this isn't easy, but takes hard, sustained work over a number of years. Progress isn't smooth and a crisis of some sort or changes in school personnel can mean that the PLC's development is halted or indeed even reversed. Our research suggests that four broad processes contribute to creating and developing PLCs:

- 1 optimising resources and structures to promote the PLC
- 2 promoting professional learning
- 3 evaluating and sustaining the professional learning community over time
- 4 leading and managing to promote PLC development

### Optimising resources and structures to promote the PLC

Decisions taken about how a school is organised or how resources are allocated can have a profound influence on PLC development. There may be factors over which staff have limited control, such as the quality of the buildings and the number of school sites, but others, such as the timetable and allocation of time for professional learning, reflect strategic decisions and opportunities recognised and seized to develop the PLC. The two main facilitators for developing a PLC were time and money, reported by staff in all types of school. When these factors were in short supply, the PLC's development was inhibited. There were numerous examples where staff collaboration was facilitated by the timetable: science lessons scheduled at the same time so staff could team-teach; or half an hour before the start of the teaching day; or a period at the day's end being allocated for joint planning or staff training.

Funding was often a key issue and some schools were proactive in seeking grants to help them improve the school as a learning environment or promote staff learning, for example through a teacher research scholarship. A primary school head employed a building project manager so

her time wouldn't be diverted from what she saw as her core task:

*"I couldn't concentrate on what I'm actually here to do which is to encourage the teaching and learning so we used money, and I've convinced the governors that if we really want the school to improve then we have to buy in expertise."*

Use of space was important. Whereas in small nursery schools staff work together in one large room, in a large secondary school they may rarely meet unless this is deliberately encouraged. Some secondary schools provided joint work areas for teachers, in particular subject groups or year teams. Making coffee available in a shared staffroom encouraged staff to use it at break times, and short briefing meetings at the start of the day brought people together. Some schools located their pastoral offices in the same area, facilitating exchange between heads of year. A secondary teacher described her experience:

*"Sharing is informal. It's all entirely chatting and informal stuff really. There's no getting together to discuss how best to teach our kids in a formal way... For us it works, but I think a lot of the reason why it works is because all the science labs are together and we've got that base room where we sit."*

One primary headteacher reorganised the physical space to encourage collaboration, making classrooms into subject specialist bases.

### Promoting professional learning

Professional learning is central to PLC development, and finding ways of promoting and organising learning opportunities was very important. Continuing professional development was often centrally co-ordinated, especially in larger schools, but practice varied between schools. Where it was planned strategically, professional development opportunities were informed by the school development plan and staff performance management systems. All of the project schools were making use of available external

opportunities for development, and encouraged staff to attend external courses, although within-school professional development was increasingly favoured in some schools. Provision within school was variable; there were examples of good induction programmes, and professional development days provided opportunities for shared learning. There were also interesting examples of attempts to support staff with transfer of learning (eg observation with feedback and linked coaching), but these were less common.

### Evaluating and sustaining the professional learning community over time

Our project was not long enough to see how PLC development was sustained over a long period of time. The concept of a professional learning community was discussed openly in some schools and deliberately developed, but in many cases the language of professional learning communities was not used, although senior staff were trying to promote its development. Steps taken to promote and sustain PLC development included:

- making strategic staff appointments
- coaching and mentoring individual teachers
- enhancing professional learning in staff meetings and INSET
- working to improve the school environment for learning

However, we found that schools rarely monitored and evaluated the impact of

professional learning or the process of PLC operation, which meant that follow-up action wasn't always taken to maximise good practice. Where this did happen, development was more sustained.

### Leading and managing to promote PLC development

Creating, developing and sustaining a professional learning community is a major strategic leadership and management task; this was a clear finding. There were consistent messages across all our schools: the contribution of the head and senior staff was crucial, not least in achieving positive working relationships. It was important to engender respect and create a culture where staff felt valued. Leaders also needed to promote the focus on learning. Successful leaders had a clear sense of their own values and vision, and the confidence to model good practice. Distributed leadership in various forms was apparent in most schools, and several headteachers and senior staff provided mentoring and coaching support for leaders at different levels. In some schools this meant giving middle leaders a greater say in decision-making and promoting their responsibility for learning. In others there were many responsibilities for all staff, for example chairing meetings, leading learning projects, leading professional development of colleagues and overseeing ICT development across the school. All leaders sought to promote learning and, to varying degrees, they saw a PLC as the way forward.

## 3. Do PLCs go through different stages of development?

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At the outset of the project, we hypothesised that a school might be at one of three stages as a PLC; starter, developer and mature. Our survey respondents and staff interviewed in the case study schools accepted these common-sense distinctions and were able to say which stage they considered their school had reached as a PLC. From the case studies we found a loose positive association between the stage of development and the extent of expression of the eight characteristics identified above, although there were some exceptions to this pattern. We concluded from our data that PLCs in all types of English school are likely to exhibit the eight

characteristics, that they will do so to varying degrees, and that their profile on the eight characteristics will change over time as circumstances change in each school<sup>2</sup>. It became clear that the school context and setting had a profound influence on how the school developed as a PLC and we concluded that, although PLCs have common characteristics and adopt similar processes, the practical implications for developing a PLC can only be understood and worked out in the specific conditions – such as phase, size and location – of particular contexts and settings.



## 4. How can you assess the effectiveness of a PLC?

Our findings suggest that a PLC should be judged on three criteria.

The first criterion is *its ultimate impact on pupil learning and social development*. We view impact on pupils as the most important effectiveness indicator, although it is hard to measure. We found that a greater extent of reported staff involvement in professional and pupil learning was linked to higher levels of pupil performance and progress in both primary and secondary schools. Moreover, in secondary schools, where the extent of internal support for professional learning was reported to be greater, the level of pupil progress was also higher.

The second criterion is *its impact on staff practice and morale*. Morale improved in most of the schools with more vibrant professional learning communities. There were also many examples of an impact on teachers' learning arising from individual and group professional learning, and some professional learning opportunities clearly made teachers reflect much more deeply on their practice.

Summarising these first two measures of effectiveness, we suggest that impact cannot be considered separately from purpose. Professional learning communities are a means to an end; the goal is not just to be a professional learning community. A key purpose of PLCs is to enhance staff effectiveness as professionals, to the ultimate benefit of pupils. This is why our project's definition suggests that the ultimate outcome of PLCs has to be experienced by pupils, even though there is an intermediate capacity-level outcome of promoting and sustaining the learning of the professionals.

The third criterion is the extent to which the PLC is able to *develop the PLC characteristics and processes and sustain these over time*.

### Putting it all together: a model of an effective PLC

Professional learning communities are complex. Although the idea that PLCs might progress through three stages of development was initially useful to consider, our experience led us to conclude that the distinctions between PLCs are more subtle<sup>3</sup>. The provisional model on the introductory page builds on our findings and portrays a PLC operating within a school influenced by facilitators and inhibitors that operate both externally (Box A) and internally (Box B), while unbroken arrows linking the four processes (Box C) to the eight characteristics (Box D) and the three sets of outcomes (Box E) indicate a general direction of how a PLC operates and the impact it has. The arrows are not intended to imply a simplistic, one-way causal chain. The broken arrows indicate that the features in each of the five boxes are more likely to be influencing each other in reciprocal ways.

Reflecting back on our findings, we would reiterate that:

*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.*

We also would suggest that:

*A professional learning community is an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways, inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning<sup>4</sup>.*

<sup>2</sup> An *Audit* activity in these source materials – *Deciding where you are as a professional learning community*, the implementation rubric – has been designed to help you analyse your profile over time. See booklet 8.

<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere in these materials, we refer to 'phases' of PLC development which we view as less fixed than 'stages'.

<sup>4</sup> See also *User guide: getting started and thinking about your journey*, the introduction to these source materials, for further discussion.

### Questions for reflection and dialogue



Is the idea of a PLC one that you and colleagues want to buy into? Why or why not?

Is it one that will appeal to staff as a whole? Why or why not?

Does it fit with your school development strategy and your approach to self-evaluation?

What are the broad implications for planning and implementation?



**Questions for reflection and dialogue**



How might you introduce these ideas to other people?

How helpful is the model of an effective PLC? (See the introductory page.)

Can you come up with a more appropriate model for your PLC?



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