GTC General Teaching Council for England

Action

A

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

Bringing about change: Starting out, developing and sustaining

Louise Stoll, Ray Bolam, Agnes McMahon, Sally Thomas, Mike Wallace,
Angela Greenwood and Kate Hawkey

department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

innovation

eplc

Purpose of this activity

Everyone has stories to tell about change. When considering professional learning communities (PLCs), stories of change are valuable to help you think about what change looks like, consider how others have gone about the challenge of developing PLCs, and think about whether you would have followed the same paths or done things differently.

At the start of the Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities project, we asked representatives from the schools to tell us which of three broad stages – starting out, developing, or mature and established – best reflected their school currently in relation to our project definition.

In this activity, we present six stories for you to read, analyse and discuss. There are two stories of a secondary school and a primary school starting out on the journey of developing PLCs; two of a primary school and a special school further along in their development; and two of a nursery and a secondary school that were already thriving as mature and established PLCs that were building on and sustaining what they had already achieved.

> *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[1].*

How you might use 'Bringing about change'

First, you will want to decide who might benefit most from engaging in the activity. You might think this would be appropriate for the whole staff, the whole school community, or you may think it better to use it with the senior leadership team or middle leaders. You may also want to note this down on your route map provided with the *User guide: getting started and thinking about your journey* in the introductory source materials.

Next, you will want to decide how many stories to read and discuss. Depending on where you are currently in your PLC's development (the *Audit* activities booklets 6-8 may be helpful to you in thinking about this), you may want to pick the pair of stories that relate most

closely to that stage or to another stage. You can either read both of the stories or divide them and have some colleagues read the first story and others the second story, sharing what they have read. An alternative strategy is to divide people into three groups and for each group to read two stories which they then share. You will need to allow extra time for sharing the three sets of stories. Each story is on a different page and can be photocopied with the questions.

As you are reading the stories, reflect on and discuss the following questions which you will discuss after you have read and shared the stories. You may find it helpful to highlight or underline phrases that provide answers to the questions, or jot notes in the margins, or on the questions page.

Questions for reflection and dialogue – add your notes here as you are reading

Reflecting on these schools' stories of change, what appear to be the:
• most critical leadership and management actions, and why?
• other critical factors, and why?

(For those reading the Building and sustaining PLC stories) What do you think may have been key to their success thus far?

(For those reading all three pairs of stories) What seem to be the key differences, if any, in actions taken at different stages of the journey?

What might you have done differently and why?

How might you apply any learning from these stories to your own context?

What is your story of PLC development?

Poplar Secondary School
Starting out PLC

When a new head started in 2002 at this 550-student, 11–16, multicultural, inner-city school, she found tension and antagonism between staff and governing body as a result of the school failing an external inspection. Just before her arrival, inspectors had finally judged the school to be providing acceptable educational standards, although teaching and learning were identified as requiring attention. The senior leadership team was not unified, heads of department didn't meet, and there was little cross-school activity, although some staff within departments and learning support staff collaborated closely to develop their practice in *"little bubbles of activity"*, as the head described them. One of the new head's aims was to have a much stronger focus on teaching, learning and achievement and another was to link up staff groups, developing a feeling of collectiveness and working together.

Initially, she spent time listening to people, seeking their views. She explored values with the leadership team, whole staff and governing body, working to raise expectations about teaching and learning and promote mutual respect:

"It's about people. Develop them in the way they work with colleagues and expectations of colleagues."

She also introduced a firm focus on teaching and learning:

"Throughout the year I've almost got a mantra: we're about a good lesson, how can I help you in this, etc."

The number of in-house training days was increased, some involving staff sharing expertise with colleagues, and highlighting cross-curricular collaborations. Opportunities were found to celebrate success.

To involve staff in leadership, the head observed people, giving responsibilities to staff with particular skills. Those keen to be involved, including new young teachers, were invited to join small, cross-curricular groups. Time was provided to enable them to discuss ways of collaborating, and to facilitate peer observation, emphasising that its purpose was to be *"constructive, not critical"*. A group of effective teachers was taken for an away-day by the senior leader with responsibility for continuing professional development (CPD). These staff subsequently started taking more ownership for teaching and learning. The literacy co-ordinator was given time to provide support to colleagues in all departments. The head also began to take a *"harder-nosed approach"* to staff resistance and competence, using the performance management process.

A senior leader took responsibility for increasing data analysis and its effective use. This appeared to help staff identify development needs. The head also believed it was important for the school to be part of a collective, wider community, viewing parents and governors as members. An unsuccessful bid was made to participate in a networking initiative. Relationships with feeder primary schools were worked on and had begun improving.

A year and a half into the project, the school was still not a whole-school PLC, but many smaller PLCs were developing. Some groups of staff also began to influence colleagues with related interests. The senior leadership team now shared a unity of purpose. After initial suspicion, trust and confidence had been built. Staff felt the school had a greater focus, some seeing it as being *"in charge of its own destiny"*, rather than responding with crisis management and knee-jerk reactions. Some staff were pushing forward their own learning and teaching ideas, and many willingly took on initiatives.

A senior leader was appointed with responsibility for teaching and learning. This was seen as key to the school's whole development and as distinct support for developing the PLC. Early effects were seen in the formalisation of staff development processes. Middle-level leadership changes also began to have an effect on learning and professional development training. Data were used more constructively to support effective professional learning. Overall, there was a feeling that they were beginning to work together more as a whole staff.

While overt PLC development was not the highest priority – *"it would be a distraction from other, more pressing issues"* – much informal PLC development was now taking place.

Highdown Primary School
Starting out PLC

Highdown is a maintained primary school for 300 boys and girls aged 3–11, 35 per cent of whom have free school meals, almost twice the national average. Its spacious 1950s buildings are set in an outlying area of a large city on a council housing estate in an area of high unemployment.

The previous head had been in the school, initially as deputy head, for over 25 years. Staff had supported each other through an earlier, disappointing external inspection that the school had failed. The new head had been in post for just under two years, having been deputy head in a multi-cultural, inner-city school in the same local authority. She saw the school as an early starter in transition.

"I came into a school that is ripe. The staff are lovely but there's no fire. There's massive potential."

At that time, she thought there was no overall community feeling, although some sub-groups demonstrated mutual respect and trust.

"I want all of us to be a learning community. I am head learner. I want teachers really engaging in professional learning and to be part of the network of support staff. I want to grow my own classroom assistants. I want 'my' parents to be involved as part of the community."

"Collective responsibility is not school wide. For children's behaviour and attitudes they have [to have a] sense of caring for all. They are getting the ethos right but not the learning. They had not done target-setting before. I asked them to do it for reading, writing and maths. There were great results for Key Stage 2 but they set low targets – they had low expectations – they didn't have understanding of what level 1, 2, or 3 looked like or where children should be at the end."

She saw herself as *"lighting fires with lots of initiatives and opportunities"* but wanted more initiatives to come from the staff. The senior management team was *"taking some initiative"* and the staff did *"come on board but do not initiate things of their own"*.

A PLC was now being consciously promoted by, for example, the allocation of changed responsibilities to the new deputy; an enhanced role for teaching assistants; improving the school environment; making strategic staff appointments; working with the governing body; coaching and mentoring of staff by the head; performance management and pupil targets linked into the school improvement plan and CPD.

Some staff were critical of insufficient delegation. One teacher however, thought that the school seemed more of a PLC than some of the other local schools, and staff in one department said they were all friends and that was one reason they worked together so well. The Key Stage 2 co-ordinator described the staff in general as:

"…fantastic and having the same philosophy about children. It made the meetings very easy. We're all singing from the same hymn sheet. The classroom assistants are as good as any teacher. They really do take on board all the ideas that have come along."

The new deputy head also noted:

"It's a very relaxed atmosphere in the school. Parents are welcome. We've got the home-school partnership."

The school seemed to be developing fast from a starter to a developer PLC. A follow-up inspection concluded that it had demonstrated dramatic improvement, with inspirational leadership, clarity of purpose and high expectations shared by other members of staff:

"This results in a very good ethos in which the children's interests and their quality of learning are central to the school's work and purpose."

Castle Rise Primary School
Developing PLC

Castle Rise was a small, urban primary school on a 1950s estate where there was high unemployment, an ageing population and falling rolls. There were good physical facilities and small classes but pupils had poor language skills and weak parental support for academic work. An external inspection found that the literacy hour and grouping pupils by ability from ages 7–11 had had a positive effect and that standards in English, mathematics and science were rising.

It was apparent that the school displayed the characteristics of a developing PLC. Teachers, especially the younger ones, teaching assistants, administrative staff and the head all focused on children and their learning as the core professional act. This perception was endorsed by the chair of governors. One teacher saw the PLC as all-encompassing:

"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."*

The early years co-ordinator saw reflective enquiry as integral to their work:

"Well, we plan, we do, we look, and we review. And that's just routine. The planning objectives for the week are the checking tool. We know what our termly objectives are and weekly objectives."

Examples of planned professional learning included:

- a staff meeting led by the head to trigger and guide shared professional learning on pupils' achievement targets
- a new deputy head coaching a newly qualified teacher, using special software, their laptops and whiteboards to collaborate on lesson planning
- observation of teachers in neighbouring schools

Although the school had developed as a PLC, this was not in an explicit way. The head said:

"I simply set out to promote excellent teaching and learning."

In her 15 years at the school she had adopted an evolving approach which included:

- in the early period of her headship, a deliberate policy of encouraging and supporting staff who did not share her values to leave and of then recruiting like-minded staff
- attaining the Investors in People award
- integrating an early years unit into the school
- working with outside agencies and seeking funds whenever she could
- giving staff professional space, support and trust
- ensuring that all staff felt included and valued
- intuitively enhancing professional learning in staff meetings and INSET
- using management points judiciously

It was clear that the headteacher's personal leadership style was of fundamental importance, as the school secretary explained:

"The head is a very good boss. She's very fair, not just in your professional life but also in your personal life. She's always there whatever the crisis. It could be something quite outside the school but she will do her utmost to help to get you where you want to be. She doesn't take sides. If two people have a problem she'll get them together and say, 'Lets sort this out'. *Staff are not afraid to come forward and say things like,* 'I've made a mistake'. *That's when the quality comes through because people feel comfortable. Yes she is the boss and she is the head. But you can also say,* 'Can I come in and shut the door and speak off the record?' *and you can. And I don't think there is a member of staff who wouldn't knock at her door and say this. Everybody is very open."*

Mulberry Residential Special School
Developing PLC

Mulberry is a residential, non-maintained special school for about 60 boys, aged 8–18, with emotional and behavioural difficulties, from a large number of local authorities. It is located in very attractive accommodation with large grounds, in a southern rural area. It had 13 teaching, 10 learning support and 15 care staff. A recent external inspection concluded that, since the arrival of a new principal, it:

"…is a good school that is rapidly improving… It promotes a school community with full inclusion of all staff and pupils."

It was apparent that the school displayed the characteristics of a developing PLC and was on the way to becoming a mature PLC.

Historically, the care and education sections had been separate largely because they operated on different timetables and in different physical locations within the school. The principal had made it a priority to integrate these two sections and this had evidently happened. Moreover, pupils and parents were also included in the broader community.

There was widespread agreement that the children and their learning were at the heart of everyone's concern. Professional expertise, based on a safe and secure environment, was seen as fundamental. Staff members were committed to the system of realistic and valued rewards for successful achievement and demonstrated detailed knowledge of each individual pupil. Data on each child was collected, stored, analysed and used to inform classroom teaching and learning. In addition, every three weeks, targets for each student were reviewed and revised by trios of staff, as a care team leader explained:

"It's done through the targets. On each target sheet there is a list of three targets and these are reviewed every three weeks. If the targets stay the same they're not learning. On the other hand, if they are learning them there will be new targets set. Every three weeks the education tutor and the care team worker get together and review the targets and set new ones."

High levels of mutual trust and respect between staff and a sense of belonging to a community were evident. Caring was at the heart of the school's philosophy for the children and this was manifestly extended towards staff in all areas of the school. At the same time there was also a tough attitude towards the maintenance of professional standards.

The leadership and management group consisted of the principal and two deputies (the heads of education and care respectively) and, latterly, the continuing professional developments (CPD) co-ordinator. They had adopted an explicit strategy for promoting a learning community which included:

- a clear mission statement focused on student learning, developed collaboratively
- more emphasis on learning for academic achievement
- integrating the residential and care functions and staff more closely into the school
- a policy of recruiting like-minded staff
- using management points judiciously
- using data analysis and application
- a coherent behaviour management policy
- a comprehensive and well-funded CPD strategy and policy for all staff
- deliberately working with outside agencies and seeking funds whenever possible
- enhancing professional learning in staff meetings and in-service training sessions
- ensuring all staff felt included and valued
- the planned introduction of Investors in People

Several staff changes, especially at senior level, slowed down progress and so a major focus was to ensure that the PLC was sustained. Thus, the induction day for new staff, including the new deputy head, concentrated exclusively on the school's mission and encouraged senior and experienced staff to clarify and develop this with new colleagues.

The principal's clear sense of values and vision, and the confidence to model good practice were apparent:

"The thing that you need to remember about the school is that it's run on a very simple philosophy: it's principles, process and practice. The principles are very simple. Those are 'Love one another' and 'Make sure we've got a safe, positive environment'. You could write lots about this, obviously. Those are the principles and we will not change those. You defend them. But you need a process for that, so the process is the how – and so you've got the why, how and what. Why do we do any of this? So we always refer back to those principles. With practice, I have a tendency to say, 'Can you do this? OK, I'll do it,' and gradually you're building people and people watch what you do. So you're modelling all the time."

Alongside this, a comment from a senior member of staff illustrated how distributed leadership worked out across the school:

"We all have input. What you saw today was quite typical when the head asked me for my ideas for the policy paper. He tends to kick off with some ideas and then he puts them out for discussion and he does respond. Everybody has got an input, from the cleaners and kitchen staff to the teachers. It's a great place to work – we've got strong leadership and staff get on pretty well. It's a nice community here."

Chestnut Nursery School
Building and sustaining PLC

This 1920s, urban nursery has 60 children on roll, with 45 attending at any one time. Of these, 30 per cent have free school meals, and 24 languages are spoken. It received a very favourable external inspection report two years before the project began.

Despite staff changes and the head's external secondment for a term, Chestnut exuded a consistent feeling of energy and drive to find new ways of enhancing children's learning, as well as openness to feedback, change and growth. Posters, quotes and notices around the school gave powerful messages about learning, teamwork and leadership.

The head had a half-time teaching timetable. When she started she felt it was *"a sad school, allowed to go to seed with health and safety problems and a staff who were antagonistic"*. Seven years later, her view, borne out by colleagues, was that *"It's an exciting place to be"*.

She viewed staff as *"our greatest resource"*. Her high expectations of them were balanced by a nurturing approach tailored to each individual. She tried to ensure a wide range of professional and leadership learning experiences to equip staff for their role as members of the school's PLC, as contributors to the local authority's learning community, and for potential future job applications. One teacher commented:

"When I went for another job, I thought she wouldn't take it well, but she was really supportive, and said, 'I think you've done really well here. It's time for you to widen your sphere. Ask me if you need any help.'"

Nursery officers (support staff) were extremely committed and all were given responsibility for a group of children and a curriculum area. A nursery officer said:

"I hope people feel their efforts are valued. I do. It's the end of a hard year and they've been under pressure. We do a tremendous job here."

The emphasis on learning and questioning was very evident. A quote on the head's office door read:

*"A place of questioning where you must ask the question and the answer questions you."*

There was a strong sense of joint responsibility for all pupils' learning, together with evidence of reflective enquiry through informal and formal observation notes; some peer observation; collaboration on setting goals for individual children; weekly monitoring meetings and considerable sharing and joint problem-solving promoting group professional learning. There was also strong mutual support and caring, highlighted when the school was awarded Investors in People (IiP) for a third time.

Professional development opportunities were plentiful with staff members feeding into local authority working parties, often as the only nursery representative. A young teacher enthused:

"This has been a brilliant place for my first post. It wasn't until I began to write my supporting statement that I realised how much I've done. I sent a copy to my mentor. She said, 'It's too long, but it's all relevant – don't take anything out – it's all important.' *The teachers I trained with all started at the same time, but no one's done what I've done."*

While there had been significantly positive changes, the head did not see the school as always moving in one direction:

"You can't be growing all the time. There are ebbs and flows: when you get into a new school year; after a few weeks; the beginning of a new term; the end of term tidying up and rewards and satisfaction. No document you can produce will ever show us all those layers. What fires us up may be life-changing to one of us. There are phases when you have spurts, or when you chill out, or when the waters are distinctly choppy."
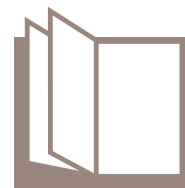
Princeland High School
Building and sustaining PLC

Princeland is in a rural location 10 miles outside a large city. It has about 1,000 pupils, aged 13–18, 60 teaching and 8 support staff. Pupil achievement was above average. External inspectors noted that the headteacher and senior staff provided very good leadership and promoted an inclusive and engaging spirit, encouraging staff to believe they could affect the school's direction.

Staff had been working to improve learning and teaching for several years. A deputy headteacher, with a brief for learning development, explained:

"The school is developing emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills and strategies to raise achievement. We've been doing it for a long time and the last two and a half years we have been looking at learning. We've been looking at people skills for seven years."

The headteacher said the school was a thriving community when he arrived four years earlier:

"Yes there was a lot going on. The previous head had done a fantastic job and had created a vision and direction for the school... as an organisation leading the community through regeneration… very significant and very unusual… We wanted to continue that work and embed it".

He was committed to promoting learning and to a distributed style of leadership:

"There is a lot of delegated authority but not delegated responsibility. I think it's a belief in outcomes rather than process, we know where we want to go and that's shared and accepted by everybody but how we get there is a decision that we take and that's really a decision that people will take in teams."

The senior leadership team was encouraging staff to take a whole-school view of learning. The deputy with curriculum responsibility said, *"virtually every policy that we write we put the emphasis on teaching and learning".* Two successful strategies were: the Learning Forum, a voluntary, half-termly, after-school meeting where learning and teaching were discussed and

good practice shared, and the Learning Leader initiative, whereby teachers bid for internal resources to develop a learning project. Within two years, ten projects were under way, increasing classroom observation and feedback as a means of professional development and learning. Of this, a deputy head said:

"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."

Day-to-day administration tasks were well handled and there were sound administrative systems. Relationships between staff had been good for many years and staff felt it was a caring school. Systems for mentoring, coaching and facilitation for staff had also been introduced. Comments from several teachers indicated that they felt professionally supported and encouraged to develop:

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

Staff were increasingly using ICT, which facilitated the exchange of information and ideas within the school and beyond. The school was involved in several external partnerships and networks and was the lead school in a large Networked Learning Community. It was also leading on initiatives with the local community. For example, a partnership had been developed to secure funding to build a state-of-the-art football facility which could be jointly managed and used by the school and the community. Funding was being sought to set up a virtual college for vocational training which would serve five high schools in the area.

Questions for reflection and dialogue: For notes of group dialogue

Reflecting on these schools' stories of change, what appear to be the:
• most critical leadership and management actions, and why?
• other critical factors, and why?

(For those reading the Building and sustaining PLC stories) What do you think may have been key to their success thus far?

(For those reading all three sets of stories) What seem to be the key differences, if any, in actions taken at different stages of the journey?

What might you have done differently and why?

How might you apply any learning from these stories to your own context?

What is your story of PLC development?

[1] 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**

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