Professional Learning Communities: A Strategy for School and System Improvement?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reflect upon a large-scale investment in professional learning communities, as a strategy for school and system improvement, in Wales. The article draws upon the international research evidence about professional learning communities and considers issues of definition and impact. It also charts and reflects upon the progress of a system-wide approach to developing professional learning communities at scale. The article highlights that first, under the right conditions, professional learning communities have the potential to build professional capital. Secondly, it reinforces the need for rigorous and sustained implementation if a lasting impact is to be achieved. The article offers insights and reflections upon a significant investment in professional learning communities, in Wales, as a strategy for school and system improvement.

Key words: Professional learning, educational change, system reform, scaling-up and professional collaboration.

Introduction

Looking around the world, it could be concluded that in terms of educational transformation, there has been 'so much reform but so little change' (Payne, 2008: 4). It has been proposed that 'after a couple of decades of being energetically reformed, most schools and most school systems seem

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to be pretty much the same kind of organization that they were at the beginning' (Payne, 2008: 4). So despite more than three decades of evidence from the fields of school improvement, school effectiveness and educational change (Reynolds, 2010; Chapman et al., 2012), and numerous waves of educational reform, the question is how much has really changed? Poverty continues to be a major influence on educational performance and outcomes, schools in challenging circumstances remain the focus of intervention and turnaround treatment; teacher selection and training are prime targets for change and, in some cases, radical revision.

What has altered, however, is the current context for policymaking. Large-scale international comparative assessments, such as PISA, have re-shaped and re-defined the international educational policy terrain for both good and ill. On the positive side, large-scale data sets certainly allow for comparisons across education systems in ways that were not possible before. There is indeed much than can be learned from informed and evidence-based international comparisons. On the converse side, PISA has encouraged policy borrowing, particularly from those systems that feature at the top of its international league tables (Luke, 2011; Harris, Jones and Adams, 2016). It appears that the policy push to emulate the best education systems in the world remains attractive, persuasive and prevalent (Jensen et al., 2012; Tucker, 2016). Evidence shows, however, that even the most successful policies do not travel particularly well and tend not to deliver all that they promise (Whelan, 2009; Hopkins, 2013; Auld and Morris, 2014; Morris, 2012).

The global education beauty contest, largely fuelled by PISA and other large-scale international assessments, has raised the stakes considerably for those leading education systems. The solutions to improved performance are still anxiously sought from education systems performing at a higher level, despite their many contextual and cultural differences (Luke, 2011). So scanning the horizon of contemporary education reform, what exactly are we learning? First, it is clear that the 'top-down model' of educational change remains fairly persistent, despite uneven evidence of success (Fullan, 2011). The mandated, standardized approaches to educational change, in countries like the United States and England, are not producing the gains in performance expected. As Hopkins (2013: 9) notes:

> It is true that the use of external accountability measures in seriously underperforming and dysfunctional schools or education systems will administer a short, sharp, shock – either shaking them out of complacency, or directing their attention to a limited number of measurable goals. The problem is that such top-down

> strategies have a very limited half-life. Once the school or system has begun to improve and to take ownership of its own development, then the continuing pressure for external accountability becomes oppressive, alienating and counter-productive.

In the USA, punitive and aggressive policies in the shape of 'No Child Left Behind' and 'Race to the Top', have not demonstrated significant or sustained improvements in educational standards (Ravitch, 2013).

Secondly, international evidence is placing a question mark over privatization as a lever for school and system improvement (Ravitch, 2013). For example, research on Charter schools in the USA, carried out by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), found little evidence that Charter schools were outperforming traditional state schools (CREDO, 2009, 2013). Other evaluative research that has indicated more positive outcomes for Charter schools underlines that these relative gains remain quite modest (Lewis and Patrinos, 2012). The research on the academies programme in England is also showing that conclusive evidence about a positive impact on learner performance and outcomes is not forthcoming (Worth, 2016; Sims, Grayson and Wespieser, 2015).

Thirdly, an over-reliance on external accountability and increased competition to deliver better results is a lesson that many systems are learning the hard way (Whitty, 2016). International evidence reinforces that authentic and lasting improvement is much more likely in education systems where there is a concerted, collective and collaborative effort to enhance teachers' professionalism and to improve performance in the classroom (Hattie, 2015; Timperley et al., 2007; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). Finally, in the relentless desire for fast educational gains, another important lesson has been learned. Namely, that changes imposed too quickly on the system can prove to be counter-productive (Fullan, 2011). While the policy conveyor belt keeps interventions and initiatives steadily moving along, it is how well and how deeply policies are implemented that seems to be a critical factor in successful educational improvement, at scale (Coburn, 2003).

Professional Capital and Collaboration

Changing schools and education systems is a complex, fraught and complicated business (Whelan, 2009; Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan and Hopkins, 2014). Ultimately, the task of improving any education system is

fundamentally dependent upon changing what happens in the smallest unit of change, the classroom (Hattie, 2015; Wiliam, 2016). This section outlines the evidence that supports teachers' professional collaboration as a way of building professional capital. Its purpose is to outline the rationale and evidential base for professional collaboration and learning as a strategy for school and system improvement.

A range of evidence shows that at the heart of successful educational reform at scale, is the critical task of changing pedagogy and professional practice for the better (Fullan, 2011; Reynolds, 2010; Muijs and Reynolds, 2010). As Wiliam (2015) notes 'every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better'.[1] There are various international reports that underline the centrality of teachers' professional collaboration in producing better school and system performance (Hattie, 2015; Jensen et al., 2016; Timperley et al., 2007). This evidence reinforces the importance of building professional capacity and capital for positive and lasting change.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) define 'professional capital' as a mix of professional capability, professional competence and professional confidence. They propose that professional capital among teachers can be divided into three categories: human capital, social capital and decisional capital. 'Human capital' refers to the quality of teachers' initial training and ongoing professional development; their skills, qualifications and professional knowledge. 'Social capital' refers to the impact that teachers and other learning professionals have on each other through collaboration and professional learning communities. 'Decisional capital' refers to the development of teachers' professional judgement and careers, especially as they reach the middle level. 'These three factors, they suggest, work in combination with the leadership capital of head teachers and other leaders to define the quality of the education system as a whole' (OECD, 2014: 67).

There is a considerable literature that reinforces the importance of 'social capital', in the shape of teacher leadership and teacher agency, as positive contributors to school and system improvement (Hopkins and Jackson, 2003; Crowther, 2011; Lambert, 2007). There is also evidence that reinforces that building the collective capacity for organisational change (social capital) through professional collaboration results in improved organisational outcomes (Wenger, 2000; Spillane and Coldren, 2011; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). In their writing, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) highlight how professional learning communities, defined as systematic and focused teacher collaboration, have the potential to build

both professional and social capital. They note that positive outcomes from teacher-led professional learning communities occur when there is shared enquiry into real problems of practice and where teachers take shared responsibility for the outcomes of their collaborative work. They also suggest that when professional learning communities are imposed on teachers they tend to be far less successful.

This article considers professional learning communities as a strategy for school and system improvement. In particular, the article reflects upon the introduction, implementation and impact of a national professional learning community programme in Wales and offers some views about the potential of this form of professional collaboration to contribute to school and system improvement. The article is structured in three sections. The first section examines the idea of capacity building and explores the links between social capital and organisational improvement. The second section considers the literature on professional learning communities, as a particular approach to capacity building, and outlines some of the empirical evidence concerning influence and effects. The third section reflects upon the introduction, implementation and impact of professional learning communities in Wales.

Collective capacity building

Whatever policy makers believe to be the case, in reality, authentic school and system improvement is rarely achieved through coercion. As highlighted earlier, autocratic approaches to educational reform and change tend not to have a strong track record of success. Conversely, there is evidence to suggest that where education systems actively build the capacity for change and invest in professional and social capital, the potential for school and system improvement is far greater. For example, Campbell et al., (2016) outline a system-wide approach to valuing, respecting and developing teachers' collective professional practice in Ontario. The Teacher Learning and Leadership Program (TLLP) has the following shared goals:

1. Create and support opportunities for teacher professional learning;
2. Foster teacher leadership; and
3. Facilitate the sharing of exemplary practices with others for the benefit of Ontario's students (Campbell et al., 2016: 222).

The evaluation of the TLLP programme (Lieberman et al., 2016) points towards 'teacher collaborative learning groups' as the most prevalent activity to improve professional knowledge and skills. It also suggests that 'developing teachers as leaders of their peers is vital' to developing professional capital through leadership and learning (Campbell et al., 2016: 232).

The Ontario example reiterates the need for long-term investment in this type of collective capacity building, in order to make a positive and lasting difference. This issue will be returned to later in the article. As Fullan (2010: 72) notes:

> The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things – for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still – working together generates commitment. Moral purpose, when it stares you in the face through students and your peers working together to make lives and society better, is palpable, indeed virtually irresistible. The collective motivational well seems bottomless. The speed of effective change increases exponentially. Collective capacity, quite simply, gets more and deeper things done in shorter periods.

Sharrat and Fullan (2009) highlight that capacity building 'is a highly complex, dynamic, knowledge-building process, intended to lead to increased student achievement in every school. To achieve that goal, consideration must be given to the approaches that will result in systemic capacity building' (Sharrat and Fullan, 2009: 8).

While professional collaboration, within educational settings, continues to be increasingly popular and the source of much recent international attention, it has also been noted that 'some of these forms of collaboration are more suited to the fostering of professional capital than others' (Chapman et al., 2016: 181). In addition, it has been suggested that the greatest gains secured from professional collaboration are when they are focused primarily and exclusively on improving teaching and learning (Hattie, 2015; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Harris and Jones, 2011). The main message, from the extensive research base on professional learning, is that collective capacity building and the enhancement of social capital emanates from focused and systematic collaborative practice *among* teachers (Timperley et al., 2007; Harris, Jones and Huffman, 2017). Rather less is said, however, about the exact form that this professional collaboration should take.

While there is extensive literature endorsing, supporting and celebrating professional collaboration (Darling-Hammond, 2016; Timperley et al.,

2007), the evidential base about exactly which model or models of professional collaboration are most effective remains relatively understated and under-developed. Despite a great deal of enthusiasm for, and endorsement of, professional sharing, networking and collaboration, the normative arguments about professional collaboration tend to outpace the empirical evidence about direct effects and impact. Recently, large-scale evaluations of professional collaboration at the system level (e.g. Campbell et al., 2016 and Chapman et al., 2016) are providing detailed research findings about the net results and impact of various forms of professional collaboration. This contemporary evidence is highlighting that to be most impactful, professional collaboration has to be structured, supported and properly resourced. Other evidence about the impact of professional collaboration reinforces the importance of teacher research and enquiry as essential components (Cordingley, 2016).

Inevitably, caution needs to be exercised when advocating, supporting or recommending any particular approach to professional collaboration, or any particular model, as contexts, situations and schools vary considerably. But one thing is clear: teachers, or indeed any professional group, cannot just generate meaningful and impactful professional collaboration without some model or some way of working. Indeed, Timperley et al. (2007: 25) found little evidence to support the view that if teachers are treated as self-regulating professionals with sufficient time and resources, they 'are able to construct their own learning experiences and develop a more effective reality for their students through their collective expertise'. They conclude that providing teachers with time and resources is insufficient to promote professional learning in ways that have positive outcomes for students, as 'conditions that promote learning are more complex than this' (Timperley et al., 2007: 26).

Meaningful changes to professional practice are more likely to take place where there is a systematic approach to teacher research, reflection and collective action (Cordingley, 2016). In addition, the evidence shows that professional capital is significantly enhanced where there is an overall design that shapes, defines and informs the collective effort (Lieberman et al., 2016; Harris and Jones, 2013). In looking for effective and impactful approaches or models of professional learning, Timperley et al. (2007) outline evidence about the influence and impact of professional learning communities (PLCs). They note that the most effective professional learning communities are characterised by two conditions: first, participants are supported to process new understandings and to assess their implications

for teaching; secondly, the focus of the PLC is on analysing the impact of teaching on student learning.

The next section takes a closer look at the idea of PLCs. It explores the origins of PLCs, the associated evidence base and the different interpretations of the term. The purpose of this section is to provide additional explanation and justification for professional learning communities as a potential strategy for school and system improvement.

Professional learning communities

The PLC concept originally came from the business sector and was associated largely with research work that focused on organisational learning (Vescio et al., 2008). Adapted, adjusted and modified to fit the world of education, the genesis of the idea was derived from research studies of collaborative work cultures (Thompson et al., 2004). Within the field of education, Newmann (1996) highlight five characteristics associated with PLCs. Although expressed slightly differently, most of these characteristics have found their way, in some form, into the broader literature on whole school PLCs (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord, 2004; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007).

The development of professional learning communities, as a movement, was supported by a number of influential writers in the USA (Little and Horn, 2007; Louis and Marks, 1998; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001, 2006, 2007; Kruse and Louis, 2007; Hord, 2004). Largely, these writers conceptualise a PLC as the whole school level, where certain principles, such as shared values, a focus on student learning, reflective dialogue and action enquiry are firmly in place (Hord, 2004; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007). There are, however, other definitions of PLCs that do not subscribe to the whole school interpretation, causing some conceptual confusion in the field. As DuFour (2004: 4) notes, 'the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning'.

In essence, definitions of a PLC tend to wander between three different but overlapping interpretations. First, there is the *whole school* interpretation, as already mentioned, where the entire school is considered to be operating as a learning community by adhering to certain norms and values (Bolam et al., 2005; Hipp et al., 2008). Secondly, there is a *within school* interpretation where PLCs teams or groups are responsible for leading research, improvement and innovation (Harris and Jones, 2010; Dufour and Dufour,

2013). Thirdly, there is an *across school* interpretation where the collaborative activity between teachers is 'school to school' and embodies network learning (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009; Kaser and Halbert, 2006). Where systems are supporting two or even three of these PLC models simultaneously, inevitably confusion arises.

The evidential base on professional learning communities within educational settings comes from studies showing gains in student learning outcomes from focused and purposeful teacher collaboration within, between and across schools (Louis and Marks, 1998; Bryk et al., 1993, Hipp et al., 2008). Early foundational research (Rosenholtz, 1989) showed that professional support, through teacher networks, professional collaboration and expanded professional roles, significantly improved teacher efficacy and enhanced teacher effectiveness. It also highlighted that teachers with a high sense of their own efficacy were more likely to adopt new classroom behaviours and also more likely to stay in the profession.

Research by Little (1993) found that where teachers had the opportunity for systematic collective inquiry and were able to develop and share their knowledge, it broke down the 'privacy of practice' and resulted in positive learning for teachers and students. More recent research has similarly underlined that distributed leadership, shared decision-making and co-enquiry among teachers are strongly associated with better learner outcomes and improved organisational performance (Spillane et al., 2001; Harris and Muijs, 2004; Harris, 2014).

Turning to the issue of the impact of professional learning communities, the evidence shows that, if properly constructed and enacted within schools, this form of professional collaboration can contribute to improvements in student achievement (Lomos et al., 2011; Verscio et al., 2008). The evidence base underlines that professional learning teams or communities are a powerful vehicle for changing teachers' behaviour and improving student-learning outcomes if there is focused or 'disciplined collaboration' (Jones and Harris, 2014: 2).

In summary, the research evidence about this form of professional collaborative learning confirms two things: first, where teachers are part of a well-functioning professional learning community they tend to be more reflective on their professional practice and more willing to innovate in the classroom (Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007). Secondly, that under the right conditions, a professional learning community can improve teachers' professional practice and can make a positive contribution to improved student and school performance (Lomos et al., 2011).

The Welsh 'Professional Learning Community' (PLC) model

The final section of this article reflects upon the experience of introducing and implementing professional learning communities, at scale, as part of the national school improvement plan in Wales. The intention is not to outline a detailed chronology of this development as accounts of the PLC process in Wales can be found in a wide range of publications and commentaries (e.g. Andrews, 2014; Harris and Jones, 2013; Harris, 2013). Rather, the aim of this section is to focus upon how the national PLC model was developed and implemented in Wales and in so doing, to reflect more generally upon PLCs as a strategy for school and system improvement.

In 2008, the Welsh Assembly Government introduced a national School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) as its overarching policy for achieving system-level reform and improved student outcomes for all students (DCELLS, 2008). In Wales, the SEF, as it became known, was based on international research evidence and became the central policy driver for reform and system level improvement. As part of the SEF, the Welsh Assembly Government and its partners (including representatives of local authorities and head teachers) developed a statement of national purpose for schools. This statement included the need to 'establish strong *professional learning communities* in schools where practitioners can develop and share their professional knowledge on learning and teaching' (8). As a result, many local projects arose between schools and within local authorities, with the prime purpose of developing professional learning communities.

During the early phase of the implementation of the SEF in Wales, 'SEF Associates' were appointed to work regionally with clusters of schools to generate innovative and collaborative activities, in line with policy expectations. In 2009, a small-scale project commenced with a focus upon building professional learning communities (PLCs) *within* schools, in line with the priorities within the SEF. This small-scale project involved six schools, two secondary, two primary and two special schools all located within one consortium (Harris and Jones, 2010).

The 'Leading Learning for School Effectiveness' (LLSE) project involved a partnership between academics, 3 SEF associates, the Welsh Assembly Government and schools. At the early stage of this project, no existing model of PLCs was imposed but instead head teachers and teachers were introduced to a set of guiding principles around effective professional collaboration, teacher enquiry and teacher research. As highlighted earlier,

there are many different definitions of professional learning communities and indeed many different ways to construct and operationalise them. The broad approach used with schools, in the early stages of the LLSE project, was based on an action enquiry approach to professional learning that had been utilised in other school improvement projects, including the highly successful 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (Hopkins, 1994).

The LLSE project commenced with six schools early in 2009 with a launch event and an introduction to professional collaboration. Schools identified an issue for enquiry and worked as teams in their schools to collect data and to trial new teaching and learning strategies. During the course of the LLSE project, a seven-stage PLC model was developed, revised and further tested with teachers. This model was predicated upon PLC teams *within* schools with the prime aim of building professional capacity and capital through focused and collective enquiry. The PLC model, designed and developed with teachers as part of the LLSE project, captured and reflected seven stages in the PLC process (Harris and Jones, 2010). This model was tested and developed further, in the subsequent pilot phase of the PLC work in Wales, and eventually became known as the National PLC model.[2]

In 2010, officials in the Welsh Assembly Government decided to extend the LLSE approach to two local authorities in south and north Wales, Merthyr Tydfil and Flintshire. This became the pilot programme for the national PLC rollout and in both local authorities all schools were part of bespoke PLC training. This training was extended to all schools in Wales throughout 2010/11. The national PLC model adhered to three core principles: (a) an absolute focus on improving learner outcomes; (b) purposeful collaboration; and (c) professional autonomy and accountability (Harris and Jones, 2011).

The professional learning community model in Wales was also underpinned by the theory of distributed leadership (Spillane et al., 2001; Harris, 2008; Harris et al., 2014). Distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the reciprocal interdependencies that shape leadership practice. A distributed perspective focuses on the 'practice of leadership' rather than leadership roles or responsibilities (Spillane et al., 2001). Distributed leadership encompasses both formal and informal forms of leadership practice. The PLC model in Wales was premised upon teacher agency, teacher leadership and teacher collaboration.

During the initial introduction of the PLCs in Wales, it was clear that across the local authorities there was a wide variety of professional

collaboration in place. Some local authorities already had their own model or approach to professional learning communities, so it became important to locate points of synergy and complementarity. The Welsh Government's agreed definition of a PLC was also established at this time: 'A PLC is a group of practitioners working together using a structured process of enquiry to focus on a specific area of their teaching to improve learner outcomes and so raise school standards.'[3] The professional learning community model developed in Wales reinforced the belief that professional collaboration was an important lever for change (Egan and Hopkins, 2009; Egan et al., 2009). The core idea was that, if properly constructed, PLCs could both stimulate and spread innovation about the best learning and teaching practices, as well as contributing to capacity building and the development of professional capital (Hopkins, 2003).

The implementation of professional learning communities across schools in Wales gained particular momentum during 2010/11. There was ongoing political support for the PLC development work from the Minister of Education and Skills (Andrews, 2014). This support ensured that the PLC agenda remained high profile. At this time, there were also critics of the PLC work and some dissenting voices. For example, there were some very vocal fears that PLCs would simply mean more work for teachers and place additional demands on their time. There were also some views that PLCs were just a way of conducting professional development more cost effectively. Despite such reservations, the roll out of the PLC programme continued, eventually covering all schools and local authorities in Wales. In addition, the British Council, in conjunction with Welsh Government, agreed to launch the International Professional Learning Communities Programme, which is still continuing.[4]

In the early part of 2011, however, change was on the horizon. The PISA results in Wales were worse than anyone had anticipated or expected. They showed student performance to be significantly below the OECD average, in particular for reading and mathematics. Consequently, in February 2011, the Minister of Education and Skills, Leighton Andrews, launched a new '20 point plan' aimed at radical school and system improvement. His speech included an important reference to professional learning communities:

> The next area is school improvement. The School Effectiveness Framework has been an important driver for change but it needs sharpening and streamlining. We have built collective capacity through Professional Learning Communities across Wales. The Professional Learning Communities can offer grounded practical

> examples of what works to teachers and headteachers as to how they source best practice. The implementation of best practice is essential. Those who refuse to implement it will be told 'adopt or justify'.
>
> We need to move from theory to practice. By the end of this school year, the School Effectiveness Framework will have been fully implemented and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) will be in operation across Wales. We will be far more prescriptive about what those PLCs can focus on. They will not be allowed to be laissez-faire in their operation. (Andrews, 2011: 9)

The National PLC work continued in 2011/12 but with a new stipulation that the PLCs had to focus on one of the three national priorities: literacy, numeracy and closing the gap, and to provide evidence of impact. A dedicated online platform was commissioned and launched in 2012 by the Minister of Education and Skills. At the same time new literacy and numeracy frameworks were also being developed, which inevitably refocused the attention of teachers and school leaders. Even though the PLC implementation process continued, the introduction of a new Standards Unit and a banding system for all schools inevitably set a more competitive tone within the education system as a whole.

In 2012, the team supporting the development and delivery of the PLC programme was reconfigured and new personnel were appointed to lead the next phase of development. This came at a time when there was a move towards more focused consortium working among local authorities in Wales and new numeracy and literacy strategies resulted in changed priorities and plans for schools. During 2012/13, the Welsh Government continued to support the PLC programme in Wales. New resources, materials and case studies appeared on the 'Learning Wales' website accompanied by evidence of impact from schools still engaging with the national PLC model. It remained the case, however, that the early enthusiasm for the PLC work in Wales slowed down.

This experience of a national roll-out of PLCs in Wales highlighted a number of important learning points. The first point concerned the fact that, in the feedback and follow up to the training, many teachers noted that they found it difficult to maintain and sustain professional learning communities within their schools without the support of senior leadership. While the national PLC training had been targeted initially at senior school leaders, following the training, this work was shared, disseminated and cascaded to teachers through local authority training and school-based INSET days. Strong, supportive leadership was found to be an essential

condition for professional learning communities to thrive and survive within schools.

The second learning point relates to the understanding and resourcing of the PLC process. Even though national training was provided to all schools in Wales and a comprehensive online resource had been provided for teachers, there was still some criticism that PLCs were a rather 'woolly' strategy for school improvement and that a clear understanding of their purpose was lacking.[5] Also, for many teachers the dedicated time to meet in their PLCs was not forthcoming and this proved, for some, to be an impediment to their collective work.

The third learning point concerned the fact that support at the local level for the PLC work varied considerably. While there were local authorities that supported the national PLC training through developing additional training programmes and materials for their schools, other local authorities placed less emphasis upon the PLC work. This local support was a critical factor in the successful implementation and continued sustainability of PLCs in Welsh schools.

In 2014, the OECD report *Improving Schools in Wales and OECD Perspective* was published making many observations and a number of recommendations. This report observed that:

> One of the more promising strategies to support school improvement and effective continuous professional development in Wales has been the commitment to creating professional learning communities in and across schools. This strategy, which commenced in 2009, foresaw the initial training for school teams in developing professional learning communities (Harris and Jones, 2010). The professional learning community model is founded on having teachers of different levels inquire into and improve practice with a view to having a positive effect on student outcomes (Harris and Jones, 2013; Jones and Harris, 2013). (OECD, 2014: 76)

The report also noted that professional learning communities in Wales were aimed at capacity building and generating professional capital.

Commentary

Inevitably, being involved in the development and delivery of the national professional learning communities programme in Wales makes it difficult to take a dispassionate and independent view. Every effort, however, has been made in this article to produce facts and not opinion. Reflecting on

the PLC experience in Wales, there are some lessons that apply more broadly to any type of intervention, particularly at scale. First, there is the pace of change. The move from the pilot phase to national PLC roll-out was fairly fast, possibly too fast. Consequently, there was relatively little time to evaluate the impact of the training and to refine or develop new training materials. In addition, a small delivery team meant that resources were inevitably stretched. Clearly, getting the pace of change right is an essential part of any successful reform process.

Secondly, there is the issue of changing priorities that, it could be argued, is both a predictable and an inevitable part of any large-scale reform process. The ongoing success of the PLC work, after the national training, depended heavily on it remaining a key priority for teachers and head teachers. But as noted earlier, policy priorities shifted and the focus of attention for government, teachers and schools was significantly re-calibrated. As a result, attention wandered away from PLCs and this resulted in a loss of momentum and a slowing down of activity in some schools and local authorities.

Thirdly, there is the reality of competing priorities. The PLC work was only one dimension within a comprehensive School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) that had many themes and moving parts. For busy teachers and head teachers, many different priorities meant that often they felt overloaded and overwhelmed by the different demands placed upon them from the various initiatives. Indeed, the OECD (2014: 66) report states that 'the challenge for Wales does not lie in a lack of willingness and commitment of the profession to implement the desired changes. One issue has been the timing, with the profession feeling increasingly overwhelmed by the high pace of change.' The report also highlights how shifting priorities created additional pressure within the system.

In spite of some early wins, occasional challenges and a few detours along the way, the PLC work continues in schools across Wales. The Learning Wales website has numerous contemporary case studies outlining the positive impact of the PLC work on the improvement of student outcomes.[6] As noted earlier, the British Council in Wales still supports the highly successful 'International PLC programme' involving professional collaboration between PLC teams in various countries.[7] In addition, there are new collaborative arrangements in place *between* schools in Wales and initiatives, such as Challenge Cymru, that are focused on strengthening consortia working and enhancing professional collaboration.[8]

Conclusion

To conclude, professional learning communities still have the potential to provide a much-needed infrastructure and platform for the development of professional capital in Wales. A great deal has already been achieved and in many schools the PLC work is still continuing. However, as the OECD report (2014: 77) notes:

> The challenge for Wales would be to align the professional learning communities more closely with system priorities – not through bureaucratically imposing a purpose and focus on all professional learning communities but through developing constant interaction among all leaders in the system, focused on improving system learning.

The success or failure of any education intervention depends upon the nature, quality and sustainability of implementation. Evidence from a range of education systems, that perform well on international assessments, reinforce the message that strong processes of implementation are required, at the central and local level, for any policy to be given a real chance of success (Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009). This strong implementation process has been termed an 'implementation science' (Harris et al., 2014: 869) where careful, informed policy choices are made, based on research, the rigorous and relentless embedding of those policies follows, along with continuous evaluation, refinement, and change. 'Success is the result of thorough research, careful policy selection, rigorous planning, and the systematic realization of policy into practice' (Harris et al., 2014: 6).

Looking to the future, it is perfectly possible that collaboration within, between and across schools, in the form of professional learning communities, or indeed any other collaborative configuration, may still prove to be a powerful strategy for building capacity and enhancing professional capital in Wales. Much will depend however on the investment in, and commitment to, quality implementation at both the local and central level. As the OECD (2014: 84) report concludes:

> DfES, schools, local authorities, regional consortia and other stakeholders should support professional learning communities and networked school to school collaboration, making sure they are well resourced and form a key component in the larger continuous professional development strategy of the education reform. It is essential that professional development opportunities are connected to examples of existing practice, and that teachers have the opportunity to practice with and learn from colleagues in their everyday work. Professional learning

communities and networked school-to-school collaboration are excellent vehicles for making this happen.

Ultimately, the ongoing challenge is to ensure that teachers' professional capital is prioritised, developed and enhanced in all schools in Wales to ensure that the education system moves closer to its goal of improving student achievement and attainment for all young people.

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Notes

[1] *http://www.dylanwiliamcenter.com/changing-what-teachers-do-is-more-important-than-changing-what-they-know/* (accessed 5 April 2016).

[2] *http://learning.gov.wales/resources/collections/professional-learning-communities* (accessed 5 April 2016).

[3] 'A Professional Learning Community is created when a group of professionals collaborate and enquire in order to improve learner outcomes. They participate in decision-making; trial and refine new strategies for improvement and are both accountable and responsible for the outcomes of their collective work. The ultimate goal of a PLC can be summed up in three words: improved learner outcomes (see *http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/130830-plc-guidance-en.pdf;* accessed 5 April 2016).. 166-178.aks, Corwin.ege Press,

[4] *https://wales.britishcouncil.org/en/educational-resources/school-teacher/international-professional-learning-committee* (accessed 5 April 2016).

[5] *https://www.tes.com/news/tes-archive/tes-publication/a-weak-and-woolly-policy-faces-a-rewrite-wales* (accessed 5 April 2016).

[6] *http://learning.gov.wales/resources/collections/professional-learning-communities?lang=en* (accessed 5 April 2016).

[7] *International Professional Learning Communities Programme https://wales.britishcouncil.org/en/educational-resources/school-teacher/international-professional-learning-committee* (accessed 3 March 2016).

[8] *http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/raisingstandards/schools-challenge-cymru/?lang=en* (accessed 3 March 2016).