RESEARCH BRIEF

CREATING AND SUSTAINING EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

This Briefing summarises the main findings from the *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities* project (EPLC), funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the General Teaching Council for England (GTCe) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) from January 2002 to October 2004.

Key Findings

This was an exploratory investigation of a relatively new and complex set of ideas and practices. These findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

- Pupil learning was the foremost concern of people working in a school operating as a professional learning community (PLC) and the more developed the PLC appeared to be, the more positive was the association with two key measures of effectiveness - pupil achievement and professional learning.
- Practitioners in all types of school – nursery, primary, secondary and special -responded very positively to the idea of a PLC as a strategy for promoting pupil learning and school improvement.
- An effective professional learning community (EPLC) appeared to fully exhibit eight key, inter-related characteristics: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and collective professional learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support.
- PLCs appeared to be created, managed and sustained through four key operational processes: optimising resources and structures; promoting individual and collective learning; explicitly promoting, monitoring and sustaining an EPLC; and PLC-focused leadership and management. How well these four processes are themselves carried out is a third measure of overall PLC effectiveness.
- The specific conditions – like phase, size and location – of particular school contexts and settings were a significant influence on PLC development. Moreover, each PLC changed over time in ways that may or may not be planned or controllable.
- Facilitators of PLC development included individual staff commitment and motivation, links with other schools, focused CPD (Continuing Professional Development) coordination and site facilities that helped collaborative work and professional dialogue. Inhibitors included resistance to change, central and local policies affecting resources and budgets and staff changes, especially at senior level.

Background and Aims

At the outset of the project, the idea of a PLC was relatively new in this country; it is now central to the NCSL's revised National Standards for Headteachers (www.ncsl.org.uk) and the DfES' Core Principles for raising standards in teaching and learning (www.dfes-uk.co.uk). Of course, the importance of professional development for raising standards through school improvement and individual teacher development has been widely accepted for some time. Indeed, our earlier literature review demonstrated that the progress of educational reform appears to depend in

crucial ways on teachers' capacity, both individually and collectively, to enhance pupils' learning. The rationale for the broader concept of a PLC is that, when teachers and other school staff work together collaboratively with a clear focus on learning, the school's overall capacity to raise standards is enhanced. Moreover, an EPLC seems more likely
to generate and support sustainable improvements because it builds the necessary professional skill and capacity.

Against this background, the project's main aims were to:

a. Identify and convey:

- the characteristics of EPLCs and what these look like in different kinds of school setting;
- the key enabling and inhibiting factors – at national, local, institutional, departmental/team and individual levels – which seem to be implicated in the initial creation, ongoing management and longer-term sustaining of such communities;
- innovative and effective practices in managing human and financial resources to create time and opportunity for professional learning and development and optimise its impact.

b. Generate models which illuminate the principles of EPLCs and assess the generalisability and transferability of such models.

Research Design

Over the 34-month period of the project, we carried out four main research activities:

a. An ongoing **literature review** focused largely on material published since 1990. Most of the directly relevant research was from North America but studies from other countries were included as appropriate. The literature was of different types; some studies were based on careful empirical research while others were of a more prescriptive nature.

b. A **questionnaire survey** in three parts:

- opinions about professional learning in the school;
- perceptions of the features of a PLC in a school and the facilitating and inhibiting factors for such communities;
- factual items about the range and extent of professional development activities in the school.

The final version of the questionnaire was administered to a total of 2,300 nursery, primary, secondary and special schools (one questionnaire per school) in two stages - the summer term 2002 and January 2003. Usable replies were received from 393 schools. This final response rate of 17% was disappointingly low but, nevertheless, was one judged to be representative of nursery, primary, secondary and special schools across England.

Data analysis focused on three key areas/tasks:

- basic descriptive data on the characteristics of professional learning communities;
- factor analysis techniques to identify and examine key factors related to the processes of developing PLCs;
- comparisons of key PLC indicators with selected pupil and teacher outcome data using multilevel analysis.

c. These data were supplemented by **case studies** conducted in 16 school sites. The survey returns from the first sample were used as the starting point for selection. The main criteria for selection were:

- willingness for the school to be included;
- school type - nursery, primary, secondary and special;
- self-reported stage of development as a PLC - 'starter', 'developer', 'mature'.

The three main data collection methods used were:

- semi-structured, confidential interviews with individuals (and occasionally small groups);
- document analysis (eg. school prospectuses, Ofsted inspection reports, handouts from in-service training days, school development plans);
- non-participant observation of collective activities connected with leading and managing the PLC (eg. senior leadership team meetings, secondary school departmental meetings) or designed as professional learning opportunities (eg. in-service training days, cluster group meetings, lesson planning meetings).

A series of 28 research questions were derived from the project aims, the initial literature review and the emergent conceptual framework. These research questions were addressed through 301 interviews and 22 observations in four major rounds of data collection at each case study site.

d. Three **workshop conferences** were held for representatives from the case study schools and the project Steering Group.

In addition, we carried out an extensive range of dissemination activities, including setting up a project website (www.eplc.info).

Findings

We were asked to find out how feasible and useful the idea of a PLC was and what practical lessons could be learned from experience in England and elsewhere. Our starting point was a working definition:

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.

Our overall finding was that the practitioners in the survey and case study schools generally responded positively to the idea of a PLC and, for the most part, to the working definition. Even though not many were familiar with the term, or used it in their everyday professional conversations, most appeared to find it helpful and also to understand what it conveyed. Taken together with the evidence from the survey and case studies about impact on pupil and professional learning, as summarised below, our overall, general conclusion is, therefore, as follows:

- **Conclusion 1**
  The idea of a PLC is one well worth pursuing as a means of promoting school and system-wide capacity building for sustainable improvement and pupil learning.

a. **What are the characteristics of EPLCs?**

Our first task was to identify and convey the characteristics of *effective professional learning communities* and, implicitly, *why they are worth promoting.*

The Project findings all confirmed the existence and importance of the five PLC characteristics identified in the literature review - shared values and vision, collective responsibility for pupils' learning, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration focused on group as well as individual professional learning. In addition, three more characteristics were found to be important: inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support; openness, networks and partnerships.

- **Conclusion 2** *Effective* PLCs fully exhibit eight key characteristics: shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and

collective professional learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support.

We investigated the question *Are PLCs worth promoting?* in terms of their effectiveness. Being a PLC is clearly not an end in itself; rather it is a means to an end. We argued that its 'effectiveness' should be judged in relation to two main outcomes: impact on the professional learning and morale of the staff – teachers, school leaders and other adult workers – and, most importantly, impact on pupils.

The highest mean level of teacher involvement in PLC-style activities reported by survey respondents was for two items: *collective responsibility for pupil learning and create conditions for pupils to feel the confidence to learn.* More importantly, some survey findings demonstrated a positive, though weak, link between full expression of PLC characteristics and pupil outcomes – in particular value-added performance. The case study findings supported the conclusion that the more fully a PLC expressed the characteristics, the greater the positive impact on pupils' attendance, interest in learning and actual learning, as well as on the individual and collective professional learning, practice and morale of teaching and support staff.

It is important to note the overall limitations of the survey, including the fact that the findings on impact are based on statistical correlations and thus do not in themselves confirm any causal links. Nevertheless these statistical relationships were all positive and none were negative. Similarly, the case study findings were generally positive, especially with respect to impact on staff learning.

- **Conclusion 3**
  Pupil learning was the foremost concern of people working in PLCs and, the more developed a PLC appeared to be, the more positive was the association with two key measures of effectiveness - pupil achievement and professional learning.

b. **What processes promote and sustain EPLCs?**

Our next two, linked, tasks were to identify and convey:

- *the key enabling and inhibiting factors – at national, local, institutional, departmental/team and individual levels – which seem to be implicated in the initial creation, ongoing management and longer-term sustaining of such communities;*
- *innovative and effective practice in managing human and financial resources to create time and*

opportunity for professional learning and development and optimise its impact.

In the light of the literature review and the case study findings, with some support from the survey's open-ended comments, we identified four key PLC processes for promoting and sustaining an effective PLC: optimising resources and structures; promoting individual and collective learning; specifically promoting and sustaining the PLC; leadership and management. Moreover, it was evident from the case studies that the effectiveness of these processes varied between schools, and over time in the same school, for example in terms of their impact on individual teaching-related practice and on leadership and management practice.

- **Conclusion 4**
  PLCs are created, managed and sustained through four key operational processes: optimising resources and structures; promoting individual and collective learning; explicit promotion and sustaining of an effective PLC; and leadership and management. Furthermore, the extent to which these four processes are carried out effectively is a third measure of overall PLC effectiveness.

A different mix of facilitating and inhibiting factors, both internal and external, was identified in each of the 16 case study schools, indicating the importance of both external and site-level contextual factors and underlining both the opportunities and the limitations of headteachers' and staff capacity to exercise control over factors that are often complex and dynamic. Facilitators included individual staff commitment and motivation, links with other schools, focused CPD coordination and site facilities that helped collaborative work and professional dialogue. Inhibitors included resistance to change, staff turnover, central and local policies affecting resources and budgets and staff changes, especially at senior level. The survey also indicated the influence of certain inhibiting contextual factors at the primary level, such as a high percentage of free school meals and of English as a second language.

There were many examples of innovative ideas and methods employed to make best use of human and physical resources including a competitive 'Learning leaders' scheme in a secondary school, ensuring that all staff in a nursery school had non-contact time, using regular staff meetings to promote collaborative work and professional learning in a primary school and three-weekly case conferences for all staff working with individual children in a special school.

- **Conclusion 5**
  Staff in more developed PLCs adopt a range of innovative practices to deal with the inhibiting and facilitating factors in their particular contexts. Many of these practices are potentially useful for other schools.

We were specifically asked to look at Investors in People and did so in relation to the case study schools and at the second workshop conference, where it was found to be especially helpful in promoting a PLC, but less helpful once schools were quite far along the process of PLC development. In summary, it was a useful, perhaps necessary, but not sufficient method for achieving a PLC.

- **Conclusion 6**
  Investors in People is a useful tool and could profitably be used alongside other approaches in the early stages of developing a more effective PLC.

c. Do PLCs go through stages of development?

We hypothesised that a school might be at one of three stages as a PLC – starter, developer and mature. The survey respondents and the case study interviewees accepted these common-sense distinctions. In the survey, mature PLC respondents reported a higher, and starter PLCs a lower, percentage of staff involvement in key PLC activities: thus, their reports of their schools being at a particular stage were consistent with their other replies, thereby providing some support for the validity of the 'stages of development' concept. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that, when applying the stringent criteria of statistical significance, there appeared to be some exceptions to this pattern suggesting that the concept of developmental progress may be less appropriate to some aspects of PLCs than others. From the case studies we found a loose positive association between stage of development and the expression of the eight characteristics of PLCs especially across the nursery phase and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the primary phase. Evidence from the case studies about differential levels of impact related to the PLC's stage of development was inconclusive.

In the light of these findings, it is reasonable to suppose that PLCs in all types of English school – nursery, primary, secondary and special – are likely to exhibit the eight characteristics identified above, 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. However, although the face validity of the three stages of development was supported, they need to be modified if they are to be of further use to practitioners and researchers, as argued below.

- **Conclusion 7**

  PLCs change over time in ways and in particular aspects that may or may not be planned or visible. The idea of three stages of development – starter, developer and mature – provides some useful insights into these changes and ways of responding to them but needs modifying to be of real help for practitioners and researchers.

d. What do PLCs look like in different settings?

A key part of the three tasks was to find out what these characteristics and processes look like in different kinds of school setting. Context and setting are crucial to any understanding of how these characteristics and processes play out in practice. For example, the survey found that primary schools were generally more likely than secondary schools to exhibit the eight characteristics to a greater extent, but not in all cases. These differences between primary and secondary schools were, broadly, confirmed in the case studies, which also indicated important similarities between nursery and special schools. For instance, support staff in nursery, primary and special schools typically worked most closely with teachers whereas the demarcation between teaching and support staff was most apparent in secondary schools. In the latter, the departmental structure often produced small PLCs, with their own distinctive ways of working together, although one-teacher departments in smaller secondary schools faced quite different issues. Location was also sometimes crucial, for example staff in relatively remote schools found it difficult to share experience beyond their own school.

- **Conclusion 8**

  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 – like phase, size and location – of particular contexts and settings.

e. Definitions and principles of EPLCs

Our fourth task was to:

generate models which illuminate the principles of effective professional learning communities and assess the generalisability and transferability of such models.

We began the study with a working definition, presented above, that found broad acceptance with practitioners. In the light of our findings, we now summarise our current thinking on the somewhat problematic issues embedded in the working definition.

The term 'professional' was rarely explicitly challenged in the case study interviews but it figured prominently, and often controversially, in discussions at various dissemination events about the related issue of PLC membership. Thus, one key issue was to do with who was, or should be, thought of as a member of a professional community in a school. The literature on PLCs, most of it American, tended to assume that only teachers were members. This was always unlikely to be true in England, especially in nursery and special schools where, our data confirmed, teaching assistants and support staff of all kinds were, more often than not, integral to teaching and learning. Moreover, 'Investors in People', quite well established in our sample and more broadly across the country's schools, also included support staff in its definitions and standards. Finally, the introduction of the Workforce Agreement (www.teachernet.gov.uk) made it essential that support staff be considered directly as potential PLC members and this continues to be the case.

This immediately raised the question: who counts as a professional and by what criteria? We take it as axiomatic, first, that teachers and headteachers are trained, qualified, paid and held accountable for the standards of teaching and learning in a school and, second, that support staff are entirely legitimate members of a professional learning community. We were advised on several occasions that it was more productive to focus on people 'being professional' rather than 'being a professional'. We agree and, therefore, suggest a way forward that depends on the adoption of professional standards as the basis for deciding what counts as professional behaviour by any and all members of a PLC.

Teachers and headteachers now have professional standards in the form of the *GTCe Code of Professional Values and Practice for Teachers* and the NCSL's *National Standards for Headteachers*. We suggest that these two sets of standards should be used to inform the work of school staff who collectively see themselves as a *professional* learning community. We also suggest that appropriate professional standards be developed for support staff and that, when this is done, each school staff should ensure they are mutually consistent.

With respect to professional *learning*, our findings lead us to conclude that the view of professional learning adopted in our research rationale is broadly satisfactory. In summary, we assumed that it was focused either directly on promoting effective pupil learning or indirectly on creating conditions to enable effective pupil learning to be promoted. Such learning might arise from both intended and incidental opportunities and might be individual or collective, whether involving a group within the PLC or all members. Any actual professional learning that might result was inevitably an individual experience

at one level, although new learning and understandings about practice could also be shared through a process of joint knowledge creation, and it would be here where collective learning had taken place. We conceived learning from such opportunities that improved practice as entailing transfer of learning plus additional learning in and on the job in order to integrate whatever had been learned into skilful performance in the job setting. This would normally require support with transfer of learning into skilful workplace performance, for example through coaching or observation with constructive feedback on practice. Our research found the transfer of practice to be one of the least developed processes of PLCs.

When the case study interviewees spoke of their school, department or group as a *community*, they were usually referring, implicitly or explicitly, to such key characteristics as *inclusiveness, shared values, collective responsibility for pupil learning, collaboration focused on learning* and, most of all, a sense of experiencing *mutual trust, respect and support*. We suggest that this is a useful way of summarising the community dimension of a PLC in schools.

However, there is a further important aspect of PLC membership – namely *pupil voice* – that we only touched on in this project. It became clear as the project progressed, especially from the workshop conferences, that staff in the case study schools were, to varying extents and using a range of different methods, seeking to take account of pupils' views and opinions about their own learning and about the school more generally. This was true of all types of school, including nursery and special. Hence, we suggest that this aspect be included in future thinking and practice about the membership and operation of PLCs.

A further key component of the working definition relates to an issue that has already been discussed above – the *effectiveness* of a PLC. In summary, we suggest that a PLC's effectiveness should be judged on three criteria:

- its ultimate impact on pupil learning and social development;
- its intermediate impact on professional learning, performance and morale;
- its operational performance as a PLC.

Our findings on *sustaining a PLC* indicated that this was relatively weak in most of the case study schools, although the limited time frame of the project made this more difficult to explore. In part, the relative weakness was because a number of the issues involved are often intractable and beyond the control, or even influence, of headteachers and senior staff. The most dramatic examples were the closure of one school, due to falling rolls, and the departure of the headteacher in another, but there were several more typical occurrences, notably those arising from key staff changes, especially at senior level. Succession planning and management are familiar and notoriously difficult tasks, especially to those responsible for appointing headteachers. We found in our case study schools that, on the whole, neither governors nor LEAs were much involved in directly supporting PLCs as such, so it is unclear how far those appointing a new headteacher would take this aspect of the school's work into account. It seems unlikely that they would, for the simple reason that the idea of a PLC, still less the terminology, is not yet familiar or widely used.

This also had consequences for new staff coming in as replacements for key staff. Of course, there is always a balance to be struck between maximising the value of 'new blood' and ensuring that successful practice is maintained. There were some very good examples of induction arrangements that achieved this, but the overall concept of a PLC was rarely used as the rationale. Moreover, we also found that neither the impact of professional learning nor the process of PLC operation were normally monitored or evaluated; and neither, therefore, was follow-up action taken to maximise their effectiveness. Clearly, the implied question here is: *How necessary is it to make explicit use of the idea of a PLC, and the terminology, and to seek a shared understanding of it in order to promote and sustain a PLC?* We suggest that it is very necessary.

In seeking to arrive at a revised or updated definition of a PLC, we were conscious of the various issues raised in this section and of Conclusion 8, above, that each school's context and setting must be taken into account. It was in this spirit that, at our first workshop conference, the view was expressed that each school staff will probably need to formulate its own working definition of a PLC. We agree and, accordingly, we suggest that the working definition should stand as a useful trigger for this to happen.

- **Conclusion 9**
  The project's working definition offers a practical basis for staff in schools wishing to promote an effective PLC. In so doing, they should take account of the issues associated with the components of that definition, as discussed in this section and, in particular, relate the definition to their own context.

- **Conclusion 10**

  Staff in schools wishing to promote and sustain an effective PLC should monitor and evaluate the development of the eight characteristics and the implementation of the four processes over time, taking appropriate follow-up action to maximise their effectiveness.

f. A provisional model of an EPLC and a development profile

Although the idea that PLCs may progress through three stages of development was useful as an initial hypothesis, our experience during the case studies led us to conclude (Conclusion 7) that these distinctions need to be refined. We, therefore, suggest that a revised model, together with a development profile, both based on the eight characteristics and four processes found to be important in our research findings, might offer a useful basis for practice and research. Hence, we now propose the *Provisional Model of a School Operating as an Effective Professional Learning Community* as represented in Diagram 1.

The *Provisional Model* builds on an earlier model and has been produced in the light of our findings from four sources - the literature review, the survey, the case studies and the workshop conferences. Its main purpose is to summarise our findings in a reasonably accessible form. Accordingly, it portrays a PLC operating within a school – the outer dotted line – influenced by two sets of inhibitors and facilitators – those which are external (Box A) and internal (Box B) to the school. The unbroken arrows linking the four processes (Box C) to the eight characteristics (Box D) and the three sets of outcomes (Box E) indicate the presumed broad causal direction of PLC operation. The arrows are not intended to imply a simplistic, unidirectional, causal chain and the provisional model is best thought of as cyclic and recursive. Hence, the unbroken arrows indicate the ways in which the phenomena in each of the five boxes are presumed to be reciprocally influencing each other.

The presumed relationships between the characteristics and processes, on the one hand, and the four survey factors on the other, are as follows. Most of these characteristics and processes were identified – although not necessarily with the same name or degree of emphasis - in the literature review. One of the three, newly highlighted characteristics - *mutual trust, respect and support* - emerged clearly in a workshop conference and was subsequently confirmed as important in the case studies. Another characteristic, *Inclusive membership*, emerged first from the case studies and was confirmed b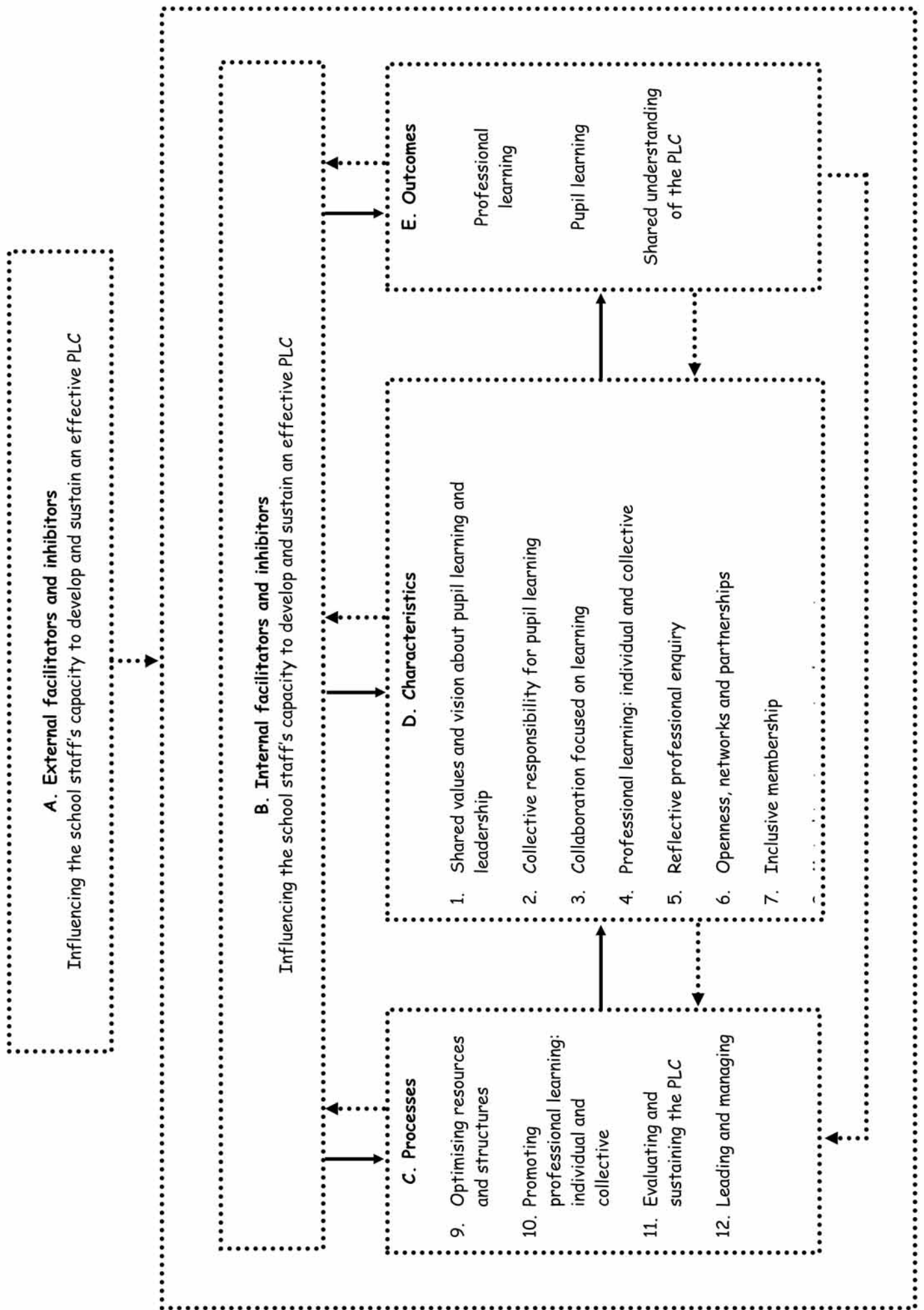y the survey in relation to Factor 4: *Participation of non-teaching staff in the PLC* and was subsequently confirmed in the workshop conferences. The third new characteristic - *Openness, networks and partnerships* - was brought out most powerfully in the case studies and the workshop conferences, and was also linked to Factor 3: *Enquiry orientation (external and internal)*. One of the processes – *promoting individual and collective professional learning* – is directly consistent with Factor 2: *Within school policy, management and support for professional learning*; the other three, which emerged most clearly from the case studies and workshop conferences, are arguably also linked to Factor 2. Three characteristics – *shared values and vision, collective responsibility for pupil learning and collaboration focused on learning* – are consistent with Factor 1.

Of course, it is not possible to convey the complexity and dynamism of the operation of a PLC in a diagram. In essence, it should be seen as a potentially useful tool, to be tested out in practice and research. For practitioners, in addition to its summary function, it is intended to clarify the rationale for the *Development Profile* (Table1). For researchers, it is intended to help to generate hypotheses for future research.

- **Conclusion 11**

  The Provisional Model summarises findings from this study and should prove productive in further illuminating issues associated with EPLCs for practitioners and researchers.

Diagram 1: Provisional Model of a School Operating as an Effective Professional Learning Community

A. External facilitators and inhibitors
Influencing the school staff's capacity to develop and sustain an effective PLC

B. Internal facilitators and inhibitors
Influencing the school staff's capacity to develop and sustain an effective PLC

E. Outcomes

Professional learning

Pupil learning

Shared understanding of the PLC

D. Characteristics

1. Shared values and vision about pupil learning and leadership
2. Collective responsibility for pupil learning
3. Collaboration focused on learning
4. Professional learning: individual and collective
5. Reflective professional enquiry
6. Openness, networks and partnerships
7. Inclusive membership

C. Processes

9. Optimising resources and structures
10. Promoting professional learning: individual and collective
11. Evaluating and sustaining the PLC
12. Leading and managing

Each of the model's dimensions may be exhibited to a greater or lesser extent and so the third aspect of PLC effectiveness proposed above (Conclusion 4) may be usefully thought of as having 12 dimensions. Hence, we also propose an extension of the model in the form of a *Development Profile* that reflects the dynamic and changing nature of a PLC. As indicated below, we suggest that such a revised model would benefit from trialling in a research and development project. In the meantime, schools may wish to adapt it for use as a self-audit tool, perhaps as part of their self-evaluation strategy under the new Ofsted arrangements. If they do, we suggest that it would be useful to rate the effectiveness of each of the twelve dimensions on a simple but practical high/low scale, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1   PLC Development Profile

       High------------------------Low

1. Shared values and vision
2. Collective responsibility for pupils' learning
3. Collaboration focused on learning
4. Professional learning: individual and collective
5. Reflective professional enquiry
6. Openness, networks and partnerships
7. Inclusive membership
8. Mutual trust, respect and support
9. Optimising resources and structures to promote the PLC
10. Promoting professional learning: individual and collective
11. Evaluating and sustaining the PLC
12. Leading and managing the PLC

- **Conclusion 12**
  Schools wishing to promote a PLC might usefully adapt the Development Profile for use as a practical self-audit tool, possibly within the framework of their Ofsted self-evaluation strategy.

Key Messages

This was an exploratory study of a relatively sophisticated and complex approach to capacity building and school improvement. A PLC may usefully be seen as a complex metaphor, one that is multi-dimensional and which needs to be 'unpacked'. The findings should, we hope, inform this 'unpacking' process and thus contribute to theory building as the basis for future research. In summary, they supported the importance of the five main characteristics identified in the initial literature review - shared values and vision, collective responsibility for pupil learning, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration and group, as well as individual, learning. They also indicated the importance of three further characteristics – inclusive membership, networks, partnerships and openness and mutual trust, respect and support – and four operational processes – leadership and management, optimising resources and structures, promoting individual and collective professional learning and promoting, evaluating and sustaining the PLC.

Furthermore, PLCs and the ways in which they exhibit the twelve dimensions look very different in different phases of schooling and in different contexts and settings. They also change over time along these dimensions, sometimes as a result of deliberate planning and action by heads and senior staff but also in unplanned ways and as a result of factors beyond their control. Although it may be helpful initially to see this as progression through three stages – *starter, developer and mature* – it is probably more productive to see it as a continuum made up of the twelve dimensions in the *Provisional Model* rather than as three, uni-dimensional, discrete stages. As implied in the *Development Profile*, a PLC may progress or regress on any one or more of the dimensions in a given time period. Hence, the importance of headteachers and senior staff both having a coherent and explicit concept of a PLC, of deliberately sharing their understanding with colleagues in order to seek their interpretations of its implications, and of monitoring and evaluating its progress on each dimension so that appropriate action can be taken.

The idea of a PLC undoubtedly overlaps with the earlier concept of a 'learning organisation' and with work in the school improvement tradition. We suggest that the concept of 'community' offers the possibility of new insights especially in conjunction with the associated characteristics of inclusive membership, mutual trust, respect and support, and the particular emphasis on the collective learning of professionals within the community. Certainly this is worthy of further investigation. We also suggest that the concept of sustainability illuminates current discussions about capacity building for school improvement. The rapid nature of change facing schools indicates that it is unhelpful to think in terms of specific changes being institutionalised: rather, continuous and sustainable professional learning and improvement, sharply directed at pupils' learning, are required.

The study's limitations will be apparent. One survey questionnaire was sent to each school, to be completed by the headteacher, or CPD coordinator in consultation with other staff. Although the response rate was low, the responses were judged to be representative of schools across the country. Clearly, in any future study, it would be helpful to collect survey data from other staff and, ideally, to increase the response rate (though the latter

would continue to be problematic). The case study data were collected in 16 schools of various types. These were selected with great care but they are not, of course, necessarily typical. The case study headteachers and senior staff undoubtedly became more aware of the nature of an EPLC from our feedback, especially via the three Workshop Conferences but in our judgement, there was insufficient time for this to make a significant difference to their schools and so the Hawthorn effect can be discounted. Accordingly, the findings from this study should be regarded as indicative rather than conclusive: they certainly do not offer easy solutions or quick fixes. Nevertheless, we believe them to be sufficiently robust as to represent a significant step forward in understanding the idea and potential of a PLC for schools in England and to be potentially valuable in informing future practice and research in this field. We make some suggestions about this in our main report.

- **Conclusion 13**
  Serious consideration should be given to the possibility of commissioning and carrying out further research and development work on EPLCs, as indicated above.

In many ways this was a pioneering study, at least in this country. The practical implications of a concept that has gained wide currency have been investigated for the first time on a national scale using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. It is, by its very nature, an exploratory study but we believe the findings have significant messages for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers. The main message was contained in our first conclusion: that the idea of a PLC is one well worth pursuing as a means of promoting school and system wide capacity building for sustainable improvement and pupil learning.

The key messages for schools will by now be clear. Essentially we suggest that all actual and potential members of a PLC – heads, teachers, heads of department, learning support assistants, other support staff and governors – should seriously consider adopting the PLC approach and the methodology proposed above. The complementary message for external support agencies, LEA staff, initial trainers, CPD trainers and consultants, and those involved in leadership development is that they, too, should consider the implications of these findings for their own work in supporting people in schools as they seek to promote and sustain a PLC. Finally, we recommend policy makers at national level and especially our sponsors – the DfES, NCSL and GTCe – to take forward these ideas.

- **Conclusion 14**
  Given our substantive general conclusion that the idea of a PLC is one well worth adopting in order to promote school and system wide capacity building for sustainable improvement and pupil learning, we suggest that schools, external support agencies and national policy makers should take forward the findings and conclusions contained in this report.

Additional Information