The National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales: Evidence base

A research report on collaborative networks of professional learning in Wales (literature review)

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Executive summary

This report seeks to determine the value of collaboration within the professional learning context, and the potential for embedding collaborative networks within the emerging National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales.

It was commissioned by the Welsh Government and involved a research team from Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, with support from Wales’ four regional education consortia (namely CSC, ERW, EAS and GwE).

This report is one of two focussing on collaborative networks as a vehicle for professional learning, and takes the form of a literature review. The corresponding report uses focus groups as its primary methodology.

This particular paper is valuable in that it reflects on the various models of collaborative professional learning currently available, assesses their strengths and weaknesses, and draws out the key characteristics of successful professional learning frameworks overseas.

Under the leadership of Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams, Wales’ education system looks set to continue its evolution over the coming months and years as Wales and the Welsh Government seek to deliver our shared National Mission and collective goal of raising standards for all (Welsh Government, 2017a).

Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017) is the latest in a long line of strategic policy documents published since devolution and is built around three core objectives, namely: raising standards; reducing the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers; and delivering an education system that is a source of national pride and public confidence (Welsh Government, 2017a, p3).

Central to these aims is the development of a new national curriculum for Wales that underpins all of the Welsh Government’s education reforms and requires contribution from all levels of the Welsh education system’s three-tier model.

Described as the cornerstone of a collective effort to raise standards, Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017) considers the successful implementation of the new curriculum to be reliant upon the alignment of four enabling objectives (Welsh Government, 2017a, p17).

Developed in collaboration with education professionals, these include: developing a high-quality education profession; inspirational leaders working collaboratively to raise standards; strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and wellbeing; and robust assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements supporting a self-improving system (Ibid, p23).

Within these inter-connected objectives are a range of actions designed to deliver a better school system for Wales and its learners.

Professor Graham Donaldson’s seminal Successful Futures (2015) publication provides the blueprint for Wales’ curriculum reform and can be considered one of the paving documents supporting the delivery of Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017).

However, the approach being taken in Wales is somewhat unique in that reform is all-encompassing and whole-system change has resulted in a high-profile overhaul of initial teacher
education, professional standards, professional learning and educational leadership, in addition to assessment and curriculum arrangements.

Professional learning is a complex concept and, as such, has been historically difficult to define and indeed quantify. This report provides a clearer understanding of professional learning in the Welsh context, and explores in greater depth collaborative networks as a vehicle for professional development and educational change.

Three initiatives used to good effect in the UK are offered as examples: Professional Learning Communities, Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders, and the Schools Partnership Programme. While not exhaustive, the evidence provided here does offer an insight into what has worked well and what has posed more of a challenge.

Next, the report considers alternative ways of encouraging partnership working between schools and explores the various iterations of the ‘Challenge’ programme that have been employed to varying degrees across the UK.

Lessons learned from the London Challenge, Greater Manchester Challenge and the more recent Schools Challenge Cymru are presented, and together, the case studies provide a useful foundation for the development of further collaborative networks.

A review of literature relating to professional learning in four ‘high performing’ nations, as identified in respected global rankings of student outcomes, offers an overview of current trends and research findings in these jurisdictions.

It is important to note however that practice in each of these countries may not be transferable and, in some cases, be highly reliant on context and a product of the deep-rooted culture in which the professional learning models presented lie.

Our case studies suggest that cultural influences cannot be understated; as the Finland, Singapore, Australia and Canada experiences show, the status of the teaching profession and the respect it is afforded within the community is an important factor.

While this report does not, therefore, condone blanket policy-borrowing, it does consider practice in other notable education systems to be of benefit as a means of comparison.

The report closes by reflecting on the barriers to collaborative professional learning, and considers how the benchmarking of schools can hamper opportunities for fruitful engagement.

Evidence suggests collaborative professional learning is prevalent across Wales, with a variety of different models employed to support teacher development.

But while a prominent feature of Wales’ education system, it could be said that collaborative professional learning is too variable, with no clear structure in place to support practitioners to develop their practice consistently.

Furthermore, the report warns that collaborative professional learning can become confused, and its impact diluted, when various models are in play concurrently and that care should be given when assigning schools to different networks.

So too is the terminology used to describe collaborative forms of working an issue, with the labelling of schools at various stages of development eliciting potentially negative connotations.
The notion of ‘systemness’ is introduced and championed, and the collective responsibility among teachers for all pupils and schools in Wales is viewed as a laudable and essential trait for educators.

The report recommends that collaborative networks are given sufficient time to bed down, and a warning that meaningful development of professional learning opportunities requires significant financial investment is, perhaps, to be expected.

In the short-term, the Welsh Government would be well-advised to communicate effectively the National Approach to Professional Learning to interested parties and ensure school leaders, in particular, are fully abreast of proposed changes to existing practice.

It will need to provide clarity and coherence regarding preferred collaborative models of professional learning, making clear expectations at all levels of the education system, and consider carefully the conditions necessary for collaborative networks to succeed.

A coherent structure, with clear expectations and agreed entitlement at all levels of the education system, is required to support practitioners to develop their practice consistently across Wales.

Building on the foundations laid by *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* (2017), the Welsh Government must further strengthen its commitment to the principles of professional development and work with the teaching profession and other key stakeholders to develop a national model that best suits Welsh needs.

This model will need to prepare teachers for the vision outlined in *Successful Futures* (2015) and support the systematic development of reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who are confident in shaping and leading educational change.

A fully-functioning and responsive framework for delivery will serve not only those currently practising, but help raise the status of teaching as a profession that is agile, innovative and constantly regenerating in the best interests of learners.

Collaborative working, in an environment conducive to sharing openly and honestly the collective challenges educators face, is regarded an important tool in career development of the teaching workforce and should become a feature of the Welsh Government’s National Approach to Professional Learning moving forward.
National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales: Collaborative networks (literature review)

Contents

1. Introduction

2. Context

3. Literature review
   a. What is collaborative professional learning?
   b. Models of collaborative professional learning
   c. Challenge programme
   d. Professional learning as a vehicle for system-change
   e. International professional learning: Case studies
   f. Challenges to collaborative professional learning

4. Findings

5. Conclusions and implications

6. References
1. Introduction

Following a process of competitive tender, a research team from Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, in collaboration with Wales’ four regional education consortia (namely CSC, ERW, EAS and GwE), was commissioned by the Welsh Government to consider whether collaborative networks can be an effective vehicle for professional learning. The project sought to determine the value of collaboration within the professional learning context, and the potential for embedding collaborative networks within the new National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales. It reflects on the various models of collaborative professional learning, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and draws out the key characteristics of successful professional learning frameworks overseas. The research was commissioned in June 2018 and a final report was made available in October 2018.

Aims and research questions

Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, was commissioned to explore the following research questions:

- What is the history of collaborative professional learning in Wales, and what models have been tested?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of networks as environments for professional learning in higher performing systems?
- What are the enablers/barriers to effective collaboration?

This report is one of 11 discrete projects commissioned by the Welsh Government, and carried out by middle-tier organisations, to explicate and extend the evidence-based for the emerging National Approach to Professional Learning. In line with agreed expectations, the report therefore serves to:

- Summarise collaborative networks and the justification for their inclusion in the new model, drawing upon the evidence underpinning them
- Indicate the strength of collaborative networks in securing effective professional learning
- Indicate the further work that needs to be done to secure greater confidence in the model

It was agreed with the Welsh Government that the research should incorporate a thorough analysis of collaborative professional learning in recent Welsh education policy development. It considers the key characteristics of successful professional learning frameworks in noted education systems internationally, and draws upon a wide range of documentation to bring attention to the foundations on which the National Approach to Professional Learning will be built. Importantly, the report reflects on associated professional learning developments in Scotland, widely considered a model for policy development in Wales, and considers various iterations of the ‘Challenge’ programme.

Methodology and evidence

In responding to the agreed research questions, the research team was instructed by the Welsh Government to undertake a review of educational literature in the field of professional learning. This would include peer-reviewed academic literature, and high-quality grey literature emanating from non-commercial publishers. In this case, grey literature refers specifically to that produced by various levels of government and organisations operating outside of academia.
The literature review considered a wide range of secondary sources and sought to include as much of what is known about collaborative professional learning in Wales and further afield as was possible in the relatively short timeframe. It therefore included:

- An initial search for reputable, accurate and up-to-date material on the chosen area of study
- Reading and summarising the key points from this literature
- Synthesising key ideas, theories and concepts into a summary of what is known
- An evaluation of these findings, including the identification of particular areas of interest
- The drawing of broad recommendations based on this evaluation

A search for quality peer-reviewed articles was conducted using a number of reputable literature databases, including EBSCO, SAGE Journals Online, and Taylor and Francis Online. These searches were undertaken during July 2018 and August 2018. Articles were limited to English language, published in the last 10 years. The scope of the research was for the most part limited to countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), with a greater weight of emphasis being given to English speaking countries and countries with systems bearing significant similarities to the Welsh system, for example their position in relation to the global curriculum reform agenda. There was one exception and reference to Singapore was made because of its consistently high-ranking in international performance measures, and reputation as a bastion of professional learning. However, we recognise that contextually the approach taken in Singapore, with its more centralised and tightly-controlled education system, differs significantly from that currently being employed in Wales (Schleicher 2018, p129) and that this should be acknowledged at the outset.


2. Context

Education in Wales is undergoing a period of sustained and widespread evolution (Evans 2015; Dixon, 2016). Under the leadership of Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams, the change will continue considerably over the coming months and years as Wales and the Welsh Government seek to deliver our shared National Mission and collective goal of raising standards for all (Welsh Government, 2017a). A comprehensive reform agenda, outlined in the Welsh Government’s action plan for 2017-2021, Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017), builds on the publication of Successful Futures (2015) and the subsequent adoption of its recommendations in A Curriculum for Wales – A Curriculum for Life (2015).

Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017) is the latest in a long line of strategic policy documents published since the establishment of the Welsh Assembly in 1999 and is built around three core objectives, namely: raising standards; reducing the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers; and delivering an education system that is a source of national pride and public confidence (Welsh Government, 2017a, p3). It is envisaged that these objectives, cited frequently by Williams at public engagements and in the media (BBC Wales, 2018a), will be realised by the successful design and implementation of transformational curriculum and assessment arrangements (Welsh Government, 2017a, p17).

The development of a new national curriculum for Wales underpins all of the Welsh Government’s education reforms and requires contribution from all levels of the Welsh education system’s three-tier model, as outlined in Figure 1:
Described as the cornerstone of a collective effort to raise standards, *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* (2017) considers the successful implementation of the new curriculum to be reliant upon the alignment of four enabling objectives (Welsh Government, 2017a, p17). Developed in collaboration with education professionals, these include: developing a high-quality education profession; inspirational leaders working collaboratively to raise standards; strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and wellbeing; and robust assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements supporting a self-improving system (Ibid, p23). Within these inter-connected objectives are a range of actions designed to deliver a better school system for Wales and its learners.

Professor Graham Donaldson’s seminal *Successful Futures* (2015) publication provides the blueprint for Wales’ curriculum reform and can be considered one of the paving documents supporting the delivery of *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* (2017). In his report, Donaldson argues that the introduction of ‘progression steps’ will provide a more coherent basis for learning, teaching and assessment. He champions six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) – expressive arts; health and wellbeing; humanities; languages, literacy and communication; maths and numeracy; and science and technology – as cross-curricular themes to transcend all learning from the age of three through to 16. In addition, three ‘cross-curriculum responsibilities’ of literacy, numeracy and digital competence would be the domain of all teachers, regardless of subject or age specialism (Donaldson, 2015).

*Successful Futures* (2015) demands that children and young people develop as: ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work; ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; and healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society. Speaking at the time of its publication, the then Education Minister Huw Lewis said of *Successful Futures* (2015):

‘Professor Donaldson sets out a compelling, exciting and ambitious vision for a new curriculum in Wales. The scope and scale of the changes he envisages are both fundamental and wide-ranging and will take time to create and secure. What we do know
is that the sustained and active participation of educational practitioners and the wider community will be essential to building this new curriculum.’ (Lewis, 2015a)

Since the publication of *Successful Futures* (2015), a national strategy has been underway to build new curriculum, pedagogy and assessment arrangements to offer young people in Wales educational experiences that are fit for the 21st century. The creation of these new arrangements is the responsibility of all involved in education in Wales — communities, policymakers, practitioners and researchers — and is led by a network of Pioneer schools whose task it is to identify what matters in the curriculum and how progress might best be described and discerned (University of Glasgow & University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2018, p6). The Curriculum Pioneer schools are working in national groups related to each of the six AoLEs and the Welsh Government’s collaborative approach to policy development has been welcomed as a distinctly new and positive way of working (Evans, 2018). Furthermore, evidence suggests collaborative practices shift the drive for change away from the centre to the front lines of schools, helping to make system improvement self-sustaining (Barber et al, 2010, p83). The following diagram (Figure 2) makes clear the relationship between these qualities and the Welsh Government’s four enabling objectives:

![Diagram showing the purposes of Wales’ new national curriculum and the Welsh Government’s four enabling objectives](Welsh Government, 2017a, p19)

Fundamentally, *Successful Futures* represents one of several curricula being developed across the world to guide educational practice, rather than as a prescriptive recipe to be followed to the letter (Drew & Priestley, 2016a, p2). This does of course have implications for the professional workforce and the vision outlined in *Successful Futures* (2015) chimes with that presented in *Teaching Tomorrow’s Teachers* (2015). In it, Professor John Furlong (2015, p5) argues there is widespread consensus that overall initial teacher education (ITE) in Wales is not of a sufficiently
high quality to serve the needs of the country and that it must change. The changing nature of schooling in the 21st century, he adds, will require teachers to be experts in teaching certain disciplines and in teaching their students to ‘learn how to learn’ (Ibid, p5). According to Furlong, Wales needs ‘a new form of professionalism amongst its teachers’ that demands a change for both the form and content of ITE (Ibid, p6). He said:

‘What is needed in Wales are forms of ITE and CPD that will allow and encourage the achievement of a new kind of teacher professionalism of the sort proposed by Donaldson; one that is appropriate for the challenges of 21st century schooling.’ (Furlong, 2015, p7)

Furlong’s review, which claimed teacher education in Wales was at ‘a critical turning point’, prompted the publication of a new set of criteria against which ITE providers would be judged (Ibid, p38). Only those providers able to demonstrate their capacity to meet these criteria would receive accreditation from the Education Workforce Council (EWC), the body appointed to oversee the selection process (Welsh Government, 2017b). Providers successful in their application to deliver programmes of ITE were given authorisation to do so beyond September 2019, subject to conditions. Furlong, as chairman of the EWC’s ITE accreditation board, said he was confident that as a result of the planned changes to provision ‘Wales will soon have an ITE sector of which it can be proud’ (Furlong, 2018).

ITE providers were required to reference within their new programmes emerging Professional Teaching and Leadership Standards (2017), drafted by the Welsh Government in collaboration with key stakeholders. Developed in response to independent reviews undertaken by Donaldson (2015), Furlong (2015) and Professor Ralph Tabberer (2013), the revised standards were said to better reflect the new vision for teaching and leadership in Wales and replaced the Qualified Teacher Status Standards (2009), Practising Teacher Standards (2011) and Leadership Standards (2011).

Taking Wales Forward 2016–2021 (2016) sets out the Welsh Government’s programme to drive improvement in the Welsh economy and public services, delivering a Wales which is prosperous and secure, healthy and active, ambitious and learning, united and connected. A key priority for education is to incentivise, recognise and promote teaching and leadership excellence so that standards are raised across the board, and to develop training and opportunities for teachers, leaders and the broader education workforce (Ibid, p10). It is accepted that professional standards have an important role to play in achieving this priority, by describing the skills, knowledge and behaviours that characterise excellent practice and by supporting professional growth (Welsh Government, 2017c, p2). The standards are based on five ‘dimensions’ of practice: pedagogy, innovation, collaboration, leadership and professional learning, with pedagogy considered to be the most important dimension (Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2017, p17). According to the Welsh Government (2018a), the new Professional Teaching and Leadership Standards are intended to:

- Set clear expectations about effective practice during a practitioner’s career including, where applicable, entry to the profession
- Enable practitioners to reflect on their practice, individually and collectively, against nationally agreed standards of effective practice and affirm and celebrate their successes
- Support practitioners to identify areas for further professional development
- Form a backdrop to the performance management process

The launch in May 2018 of a new National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) will further enhance these aims and, set alongside the Professional Teaching and Leadership Standards, exists to provide strategic support for those in current leadership roles as well as
providing encouragement and inspiration for those who wish to pursue a leadership career in education (Welsh Government, 2018b). Williams announced in July 2018 that while there was still much work to do, she was proud of what had been achieved in a relatively short space of time since the launch of Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017). She said:

‘When I announced our national mission for education last September I said that we would never be able to achieve our ambitions if we just stayed still. That’s why the past year has been all about momentum – a drive for self-improvement that reaches right across our education system… Our schools are changing, education in Wales is changing and I’m confident that our national mission is well on course to deliver the wholesale reforms that we need.’ (Williams, 2018)

The education reforms currently underway in Wales are working towards the same common goal, as outlined in Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017), and there appears some consensus that this new approach offers an improvement on that which went before (Evans, 2017; OECD, 2017; BBC Wales, 2017). As such, it could be said that the Welsh Government has responded positively to criticism, levelled by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), that its various reform initiatives lacked coherence and required better sequencing and alignment (OECD, 2014, p123). The actions detailed in Education in Wales: Our National Mission (2017) have since been welcomed by the OECD as providing a stronger vision of the Welsh learner and a more coherent school improvement strategy (OECD, 2017, p8).

3. Literature review

a. What is collaborative professional learning?

Professional learning is a complex concept (Fraser et al, 2007) that can be defined in a number of ways. Peter Earley and Sara Bubb (2005, p3) define professional development as activities that include ‘all formal and informal learning that enables individuals to improve their own practice’, a broad definition originally derived from the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW, 2002). According to the GTCW’s sister organisation, the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), professional learning is defined as ‘what teachers engage in to stimulate their thinking and professional knowledge and to ensure that their practice is critically informed and up-to-date’ (GTCS, 2018a). Helen Timperley suggests that ‘to make significant changes to their practice, teachers need multiple opportunities to learn new information and understand its implications for practice’ (Timperley, 2008, p15), and that these opportunities should integrate theory alongside practice in order to ‘allow teachers to use their theoretical understandings as the basis for making ongoing, principled decisions about practice’ (Timperley, 2008, p11).

Collaborative networks have, in recent years, been used to good effect to support professional learning and drive educational change (Coleman, 2012; Kidson & Norris, 2014; Ainscow, 2015). Partnership working between schools has been encouraged and various iterations of the ‘Challenge’ programme have been employed across the UK. In fact, school-to-school networking and cross-authority partnership work has been considered by some to be key levers of innovation and system improvement (Chapman et al, 2016, p15). A seminal report by Michael Barber and colleagues on behalf of McKinsey and Company (Barber et al, 2010, p21) highlighted the impact of ‘establishing collaborative practices between teachers within and across schools’ in sustaining improvement across leading education systems internationally. Furthermore, Barber and colleagues argue that collaborative tendencies are underpinned by an ‘infrastructure of professional career paths that not only enable teachers to chart their individual development course but also make them responsible for sharing their pedagogical skills throughout the system’ (ibid, p22). The report adds:
‘In general, collaborative practices shift the drive for change away from the centre to the front lines of schools, helping to make system improvement self-sustaining.’ (Barber et al, 2010, p22)

Collaborative professional learning can be defined as ‘any occasion where a teacher works with or talks to another teacher to improve their own or others’ understanding of any pedagogical issue’ (Duncombe & Armour, 2004, p144). It is notable in this description that Rebecca Duncombe and Kathleen Armour choose specifically to define this relationship as being with another teacher, as there is some contention on this issue. Some believe that collaborative professional learning must be between teachers, whereas others seem content to broaden its scope to involve other external professionals. For example, the GTCS (2018a) puts forward the concept of ‘learning-as-collaborative’ and defines it in the following ways:

- Learning is an interactive and active process
- Teacher as learner reflects on, in and about their professional practice, learning and students’ learning
- Teacher as learner self-evaluates and considers own assumptions, context, relationships with others and is self-aware
- Conversations about learning are:
  - Frequent and prioritised
  - Productive and focused
  - Based on feedback loops between and for teachers, students, colleagues, leaders
- Knowledge is developed by and with teachers, students, family/carers and learning community
- Engaging learners and their families/carers
- External knowledge and other expertise and perspectives
- Learning with and from colleagues, pupils and others
- Teachers part of an active learning community

Cherie Taylor-Patel (2014, p8) defines collaboration in the education context as ‘the process of sharing learning and engaging in dialogue, to create joint new learning that informs future actions focused on the learning of leaders, teachers, students and/or the wider community, over time’. And it is this idea of sharing for mutual benefit that inspires Santiago Rincón-Gallardo and Michael Fullan (2016), who present ‘systemness’ as the moral purpose of all educators to improve standards of education beyond the confines of their own institutional boundaries. However, the literature available in this field suggests that the stimulation of learning networks, within which schools, leaders and teachers learn from and assist one another, is reliant upon a number of conditions. Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan offer the following as essential features of effective networks in education:

- Focussing on ambitious student learning outcomes linked to effective pedagogy
- Developing strong relationships of trust and internal accountability
- Continuously improving practice and systems through cycles of collaborative inquiry
- Using deliberate leadership and skilled facilitation within flat power structures
- Frequently interacting and learning inwards
- Connecting outwards to learn from others
- Forming new partnership among students, teachers, families, and communities
- Securing adequate resources to sustain the work
These features are intrinsically linked and support Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan’s model for effective networks in education, presented here:

![Image of Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan's model](image.png)

*Figure 3: Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan’s essentials for effective networks in education (2016)*

b. Models of collaborative professional learning

Collaborative networks, while increasingly popular (Coleman, 2012; Kidson & Norris, 2014; Ainscow, 2015), can come in many forms. This section of the report will critically explore three of these initiatives: Professional Learning Communities and Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders, both of which have come to prominence in Wales, and the third, the Schools Partnership Programme, which has attracted attention in England.

- Professional Learning Communities

There are various models for implementing collaborative learning, but the establishment of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) can be viewed as something of an umbrella concept. A PLC can be described as ‘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’ (Welsh Government, 2013, p5). These PLCs may be peer-to-peer or school-to-school, they may manifest as ‘networks’ or ‘clusters’, school collaborations or teacher-led communities, but they are all focused on collaborative enquiry into pedagogy. Timperley suggests that ‘participation in a professional community with one’s colleagues is an integral part of professional learning that impacts positively on students’ (Timperley, 2008, p19). In *Improving Schools in Wales: An OECD Perspective*, the OECD (2014, p77) claims that ‘PLCs are potentially one of the most powerful strategies for developing social capital among teachers in schools’ and recommends that, in Wales, these PLCs should ‘develop constant interaction among all leaders in the system, focused on improving student learning’ and ‘developing excellence in teaching’.
The notion of a PLC has roots in Judith Little’s seminal 1982 study, and it is therefore useful to draw on her perception of collaboration in the educational environment. Little found that change in professional practice was more likely to be achieved when:

‘teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice…[when] teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful critiques of their teaching… [when] teachers plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together… [and when] teachers teach each other the practice of teaching.’ (Little, 1982, p331)

In their 2011 review, V. Darleen Opfer and David Pedder found that when a professional learning community is established, ‘participating teachers are more likely to discuss problems, strategies, and solutions. Change in teaching behaviour then becomes an ongoing, collective responsibility rather than an individual one’ (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p385). This idea of collective responsibility is exemplified even further when we consider school-to-school networks, or even peer-to-peer networks that span national and international learning communities. These collaborations ‘provide the means of circulating knowledge and strategies around the system… it develops collective responsibility among all schools for all students’ success’ (OECD, 2014, p77). This notion of collective responsibility is pertinent in Wales, and links in part to the challenges arising from accountability and the underlying competition between schools striving to feature favourably in performance measures (see Section 3.f).

Research suggests PLCs lay claim to some defining collaborative characteristics: they should ‘occur in environments characterised by both trust and challenge’ (Timperley, 2008, p16), and should promote ‘shared practice and purpose, trust, and mutual respect’ (Teague & Anfara, 2012, p59). Indeed, professional learning activities should allow ‘time [for teachers] to develop, discuss, and practice new knowledge’, and be ‘sustained and intensive rather than brief and sporadic’ (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p384). All of these are important features that will require due consideration in the formation of the National Approach to Professional Learning. Richard Dufour and colleagues identify the iterative, ongoing cycle of professional learning that should occur for each member of a PLC:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing the strategies and ideas
- Analysing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- Applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement (Dufour et al, 2009, p91)

It is important to note that analysis and reflection remain a critical component of professional learning when this learning is collaborative.

- Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders

The Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders initiative was introduced in March 2013 with a timescale of 18 months. Schools were invited by Wales’ regional education consortia to apply to take part in the project, the focus of which was ‘to disseminate and implement best practice on a systematic basis’ (EAS, 2012). Schools were able to apply in two phases, or tranches: Tranche 1 saw 43 schools being accepted to take part in the project (NFER 2014), while Tranche 2 involved just 20 schools (NFER, 2016).
According to Robert Smith (2016), the overall aim of the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders project was to ‘raise the standards within primary and secondary schools in Wales by facilitating school-to-school support to accelerate improvement’, a reiteration of the description in the National Foundation for Educational Research’s (NFER) mid-point evaluation of the project (2014). The Pathfinder element of the project aimed to match a Lead Practitioner School (LPS), defined by Smith as ‘high-performing primary and secondary schools with a proven leadership track record that has resulted in high levels of performance and/or improvement over a sustained period’, with an Emerging Practitioner School (EPS), defined as ‘schools that have already shown an early improvement in pupil outcomes but some of these schools have a mixed record of in-school variability over the last two to three years’ (Smith, 2016). An EPS was then matched with a LPS whose main role was to provide support in stabilising the EPS’s in-school variability. A co-written Partnership Plan and building the EPS’s capacity for self-evaluation were the two core methods identified for meeting the overall aim of the project (NFER, 2014).

In both its mid-point (2014) and final evaluation (2016) of the project, NFER differentiated between the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders’ impact in primary and secondary school settings. Impact was then divided into three categories: teachers’ professional practice, whole-school, and pupils and learning (2014), or, as is being referred to more frequently during the current curriculum reform in Wales (Priestley, 2017) the meso, micro and nano (Thijs & Akker, 2009). Whilst the mid-point evaluation revealed increased professional reflection, professional dialogue, sharing of practice, and raised expectations in terms of teaching and learning as general impacts of the project (NFER, 2014), the final evaluation revealed more specific impacts in terms of leadership, data tracking and professional development.

It could be argued that a change in the leadership model reported by the majority of partnered LPSs and EPSs in Tranche 2 of the project is most significant (NFER, 2016). A number of schools described a move towards a distributed leadership model, which is broadly defined by NFER as ‘a leadership approach in which collaborative working is undertaken between individuals who trust and respect each other’s contribution’ (2016, p4). The final evaluation of the project goes on to explain in more detail the impact this model of leadership had:

‘In most partnered Lead and Emerging Practitioner Schools middle leaders assumed greater responsibility for day-to-day leadership and co-ordination of activities. In some of these cases, interviewees reported that middle and subject leaders had assumed progressively greater responsibility for leading the partnerships. They attributed this to a concurrent growth in their skills and confidence, developed through their involvement with the partnership.’ (Ibid, p16)

This is an important finding and has implications for the Welsh approach to collaborative professional learning moving forward. It suggests that not only is leadership important in securing the time and resource necessary for effective professional learning, but so too is it important in building an environment of trust and shared responsibility. ‘Enablers and barriers’ are the terms used for strengths and weaknesses in both the NFER’s mid-point (2014) and final evaluation (2016) of the project. The final evaluation summarises the project’s strengths and weaknesses as follows:
A weakness, or barrier, not alluded to in Figure 4, but which is discussed in the NFER’s final evaluation (2016), is the involvement of LPSs in other Welsh Government initiatives that were introduced concurrently with the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders project. One such initiative was Schools Challenge Cymru (see Section 3.c), and, for a variety of reasons, including the intensity of involvement it required, it superseded the Pathfinder project as the primary way to ensure school improvement:

‘It was suggested that because of its scale and the level of support which it provided, Schools Challenge Cymru had tended to be the ‘principal’ improvement method for the small number of schools involved in both programmes. Moreover, there was a suggestion that the two programmes did not dovetail effectively…’ (NFER, 2016, p20)

This is an important observation as it suggests a lack of clarity on the part of agencies leading collaboration, and points to the need for more coherent structures to support school partnerships and the development of a clear line of sight from one initiative to the next. The NFER’s evaluation concludes that the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinder initiative was appropriate in terms of its aims, outcomes and timescale (2016). It offers some useful recommendations in terms of labelling schools, clarification of the project’s aims and rationale from the outset, and a more careful consideration of the suitability of matches between schools. This brokering of relationships, and understanding of the many factors impacting on fruitful collaboration, appears crucial and where a school is on its improvement journey must be properly investigated when assigning prospective partners. What the NFER report also highlights is how the experience of being involved in the project gave teachers access to valuable professional learning opportunities that developed their confidence in their ability to lead. Furthermore, it could be argued that the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinder project provided the rationale for further school-to-

Figure 4: Enabling factors and Barriers to success of the Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders project (NFER, 2016, p19)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Enabling factors</strong></th>
<th><strong>Barriers</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear understanding of a school’s development needs based on robust analysis</td>
<td>Refusal to acknowledge a school’s position or development needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A whole-school approach to change, underpinned by senior leaders working to the same agenda</td>
<td>Rigid sub-divisions using established autonomy to avoid engaging in whole-school approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ‘distributed leadership’ approach to develop capacity</td>
<td>Leadership style that is unable/unwilling to delegate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on pedagogy and learner wellbeing</td>
<td>Not being able to see the ‘big picture’ around teaching and learning or learners’ wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using data to tailor provision and support learner progression</td>
<td>Lack of capacity to use data/data management systems to best effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting high expectations of learners</td>
<td>Culture of low aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mindset that both schools can learn from each other</td>
<td>One school assuming it has all the answers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
school partnership working and laid the foundations for more recent interpretations of this activity employed by each of the regional education consortia. Today, collaborative networks are commonplace across CSC, EAS, ERW and GwE.

- **The Schools Partnership Programme**

A cluster-based approach to school improvement, the celebrated Schools Partnership Programme (SPP) is developed by schools, for schools and currently works with more than 1,200 schools in England (EDT, 2018). The programme, launched in 2014 by the Education Development Trust (EDT), develops a culture of partnership working through school self-evaluation, peer review and school-to-school support (see Figure 5 below):

![Figure 5: The SPP model of school self-review, peer review and school-to-school support (Farrar & Cronin, 2017, p3)](image)

According to its founders, a framework such as the SPP is vital to creating the right conditions for effective peer review as it formalises the practice and embeds it into school life. The SPP does this using three bespoke phases of training and support, which includes:

- **Stage 1: Self-review**

  The process starts by considering how well the school knows itself. The framework, based on enquiry questions, supports schools in carrying out robust self-review to help inform the focus of the peer review.

- **Stage 2: Peer review**
The peer review requires an agreed focus and stems from an initial conversation between the lead reviewer and the reviewed school. The review team then undertakes to make sure that this agreed focus is based on evidence of what needs to improve and the outcome is going to be of most benefit to the school. It is in this initial conversation that the evidence to be collected in the peer review will be agreed. The peer reviewers are in the school for one to two days to enquire into the areas agreed by the school. They are not there to pass judgement but to seek evidence and agree findings that are then shared with the school. As peer review is also a professional development opportunity, the SPP encourages a middle or senior leader in the school to take the opportunity to shadow the review team and provide feedback at the end of the process.

- Stage 3: Follow-up workshop and school-to-school support

The SPP model includes a post-review improvement workshop that takes place no more than two weeks after the review. For most schools this takes place in a staff meeting and, using a range of facilitation tools, is designed to get to the root cause of issues, agree actions and broker any necessary support from other schools in the cluster (Farrar & Cronin, 2017, p6).

A report into the impact of the SPP suggested that there were a ‘growing number of leaders’ prepared to invest in reciprocal peer review ‘because they believe it’s the right thing to do and it gets results’ (Ibid, p7). Re-enforcing this claim was an analysis of performance in Ofsted inspections for schools engaged in the SPP for at least one year. The analysis found that schools were improving their baseline inspection grades upon joining the programme, and SPP schools were ‘significantly more likely’ to improve by one or more grades in inspection than the national average (67% vs 61.8%) (Ibid, p4). Teacher testimonies offer a valuable insight into their involvement in the programme, and its associated benefits:

‘Our experience of SPP as a collaboration has been extremely powerful. It has been a great privilege to have unlimited access in each other's classrooms and we have been able to shine a light into all aspects of our schools.’ Helen Barker, head of KYRA Teaching Schools Alliance, Lincolnshire

‘An enormous amount of trust is generated through the process. That doesn't mean that it becomes cosy. Because there is a bedrock of trust, heads of schools have felt confident to be really open.’ Amanda Dawson, headteacher, Mellers Primary School, Nottinghamshire

‘The SPP approach and materials have provided an excellent framework for developing and supporting some of the key lead schools’ work within the Plymouth Teaching School Alliance. What’s great about the SPP is that you can put together a bespoke peer review that is right for you and driven by your school improvement needs, rather than Ofsted's.’ Simon Spry, executive headteacher, Prince Rock Primary School (EDT, 2018)

c. Challenge programme

Another model of collaborative professional learning that has grown in popularity is the ‘Challenge’ programme. A raft of such programmes have been introduced across the UK and, since the turn of the 21st Century, been credited with raising school standards in a number of notoriously under-performing regions (Coleman, 2012; Kidson & Norris, 2014; Ainscow, 2015; SQW, 2017). Despite each iteration bringing with it subtle differences, least not in personnel, Challenge programmes have for the most part shared three common characteristics designed to facilitate school
improvement, namely: support with effective use of data, support for leadership, and support for teaching and learning. Three bespoke examples of the Challenge programme relating to different parts of the UK are presented below:

- **The London Challenge**

The original ‘Challenge’ programme, the London Challenge was a secondary school improvement programme that ran in the UK capital from 2003 to 2011 and was expanded in 2008 to include primary schools. At its peak, the Challenge drew a budget of £40m a year that funded ‘in-kind’ packages of support for underperforming schools, jointly brokered by an expert adviser and officials in the UK Department for Education, and also invested heavily in school leadership, including development programmes and consultant heads to support leaders of struggling schools, and worked with key boroughs to ensure robust local planning and support for school improvement. During the period of the London Challenge, secondary school performance in London saw a dramatic improvement, and local authorities in inner London went from the worst performing to the best performing nationally (Kidson & Norris, 2014, p2). A key feature of the London Challenge was its sustainability, driven by ownership and a deep sense of ‘moral purpose’ from within the teaching profession (Munby, 2013). An evaluation of the London Challenge found that its system of support ‘relied on relationships’, and these in turn ‘built on a sense of moral purpose among the profession’. It noted the important role of Challenge Advisers as ‘connectors’ who joined successful headteachers to struggling schools and shared insights into what was happening in different places (Kidson & Norris, 2014, p22).

- **The Greater Manchester Challenge**

Launched in 2008, the Greater Manchester Challenge built on the success of the London Challenge, this time in the North-West of England. Working across 1,100 schools in 10 local authorities, the project ran for three years and cost £50m. It was designed to improve educational outcomes for children and young people in some of the most deprived areas of the region. Former headteacher Professor Mel Ainscow, from the University of Manchester, was named Chief Adviser and oversaw rapid progress in many schools. His mantra was that ‘schools have a greater potential for improvement than is currently being used’ and education systems themselves can become self-improving if the conditions are conducive (Ainscow, 2015, p7). Ainscow argued that ‘evidence is the engine for change… [and] we can use it to create space for re-thinking and to focus our attention on overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward’ (Ibid, p22). The Challenge championed collaboration as a vehicle for change and its work revolved around the notion that there were untapped resources within schools and the communities they served. Notable was the terminology used to describe participating schools; building on the experience of the London Challenge, ‘Keys to Success’ schools were so-called very deliberately to signal a move away from the deficit terminology of ‘failing schools’ or ‘schools in challenging circumstances’ that imply that low performance in key indicators arise from poor school practices (Ainscow, 2015, p48). Future models of collaborative professional learning would do well to bear in mind the nuance of language and the negative connotations attached to certain labels, as suggested here:

‘The emphasis on collaboration and experimentation was further signaled by other carefully chosen language used to talk about the Challenge... For example, frequent mention was made of the importance of ‘moving knowledge around’, recognizing that ‘most of the expertise that is needed is here in Greater Manchester’, and ‘getting behind those in schools who can make things happen’. I also reminded people that ‘this is not about doing more of the same’, encouraging people to understand that we did have a
National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales: Collaborative networks (literature review)

degree of freedom to experiment, albeit within a context where we’re all under pressure ‘to deliver’.’ (Kidson & Norris, 2014, p22)

However, the long-term benefits have not been as was hoped. In 2017, some six years after core funding for the Challenge ceased, children in Greater Manchester were the least likely in England to leave school with good GCSEs in English and maths, with fewer than 55% of pupils gaining A*-C grades in those subjects (Dobson, 2018). Ainscow (in Dobson, 2018) said the Challenge had failed to deliver sustainable outcomes because its funding had been cut short. He argued: ‘You need at least five to 10 years to bring about meaningful change. The problem is, politicians don’t have that long.’ Ainscow’s comments suggest that the longevity of collaborative networks is important, and new relationships need time to bed down.

• Schools Challenge Cymru

Ainscow reprised his role as chief advisor (this time, known as ‘Champion’) during Schools Challenge Cymru, the latest iteration of the Challenge programme developed for a distinctly Welsh audience. Launched in June 2014, Schools Challenge Cymru ran for three academic years and represented a concerted effort by the Welsh Government to respond to variability in the performance of different schools across Wales in supporting the development of their pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. In total, up to £40m was made available to support the delivery of Schools Challenge Cymru during the first two years of the programme. Schools were selected to take part in the programme using a range of performance data and on the basis of their potential ‘to deliver swift and positive improvements for learners’ (Thomas, 2015). Schools Challenge Cymru promised ‘an acceleration and concentration of the Welsh Government’s school improvement efforts’ (Welsh Government, 2014, p4), with a particular focus on ‘empowering’ and ‘equipping’ participating schools ‘to be able to achieve continuous self-improvement by building on existing good practice, mobilising additional support and monitoring the impact of their efforts’ (ibid).

Collaborative working, in particular between Schools Challenge Cymru schools, is identified as a strength in the evaluation of the programme (SQW, 2017). Feedback from staff and pupils suggests that the quality of lessons had improved after participation in Schools Challenge Cymru and that ‘such improvements were attributed commonly to the effectiveness of CPD in building the confidence of practitioners and leading to more purposeful lessons using a range of pedagogical approaches’ (ibid, p48). However, despite pupils commonly reporting exposure to a wider range of pedagogical strategies in lessons, the programme’s evaluation questioned the breadth and depth of professional development received, and the extent which pedagogies were being understood and appropriately applied in the classroom. It said:

‘The question remains as to how transformational it has been. It is not clear whether the programme has been running long enough to have led to school-wide cultural change in approaches to teaching and learning.’ (SQW, 2017, p82)

Interestingly, core funding was the only impact reported by the programme’s evaluation as a consistent factor in improvements seen in schools. Developments in all four of the challenge’s themes – leadership, learning and teaching, the pupil, and the school and the community – were consistently linked to the funding participating schools had received. While this funding was viewed as a strength of the programme, it could also be viewed as a weakness:

‘This apparent reliance on SCC funding to support the release of staff suggests there may be an issue about the longer-term sustainability of cluster working following the end of Schools Challenge Cymru funding.’ (ibid, p55)
This reliance on funding, as identified in evaluation of other Challenge models, cannot be ignored and must, one suspects, factor in high-level budgetary discussion and debate moving forward. Despite the protestation of many involved in the programme, Schools Challenge Cymru was wound down and ended after three years in March 2017. In a written statement, the Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams (2017) said Schools Challenge Cymru was never planned to be a long-term investment and was instead developed as ‘a time-limited intervention’ to accelerate improvement in Wales’ most challenge schools.

d. Professional learning as a vehicle for system-change

In order to discuss how effective models of collaborative professional learning are, we must first determine what we mean by ‘effectiveness’. If we take the term ‘effectiveness’ to mean having a demonstrable and sustainable impact on practice that has a positive effect on learning and outcomes for students, then we can see that, within this new multi-outcome context of professional learning, ‘success needs to be defined not in terms of teacher mastery of new strategies but in terms of the impact that changed practice has on valued outcomes’ (Timperley, 2008, p8). The GTCS recommends that the following points be reflected upon with regards to one’s professional learning, in order to generate evidence of impact:

- What you do (your behaviours)
- Why you do it (your values, belief, assumptions, aspirations)
- How you feel (use your emotional intelligence)
- How you think
- How do I know this is important/worthwhile?
- What difference is it making?
- How do I know? (GTCS 2018b)

Professional learning strategies employed in Canada are considered world-leading in professionally-driven system-change (OECD, 2010, p75). Its sustained high performance in the triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study would support that view. Results over time show that Canada has both strong average results and less dispersion among its high and low socio-economic status students than many other nations (Ibid, p66). In the most recent PISA tranche, published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in December 2016, Canada remained one of the world’s top-performing countries in all disciplines. Overall, Canadian 15-year-old students achieved a mean score of 528 in science, 35 points above the OECD average. Similarly, Canadian students performed well in reading and mathematics with an average score of 527 in reading and 516 in mathematics, well above the OECD averages of 493 and 490, respectively. Canada has not scored below 516 points in any of the three domains since first entering PISA in 2000.

Statistics show that 90% of teachers in Canada are engaged in professional learning, and collaborative professional learning opportunities exist across all levels of the education system in Canada (Campbell et al, 2016, p8). Carol Campbell and colleagues discuss the Changing Results for Young Readers (CR4YR) initiative in British Columbia as an example of the impact collaborative professional learning can have on student learning outcomes. The initiative intended to increase the number of children who are engaged, successful readers through teacher networking, shared resources and ongoing dialogue. The results indicated that ‘96% of the vulnerable students selected... showed growth in reading’ (Campbell et al, 2016, p6), and that there was a benefit to ‘teachers’ confidence and their engagement in professional collaboration and inquiry’ (Campbell et al, 2016, p6). This supports the view that professional learning is a
perpetual and symbiotic process that influences system-change in terms of both student and teacher outcomes.

However, the study also indicated the impact of the CR4YR initiative on broader student learning outcomes: for example, in addition to assessing their reading skills, ‘teachers were most likely to focus on increasing student confidence (75%), followed by personal responsibility and motivation (72%)’ (Campbell et al, 2016, p6). This has implications as a professional learning model for the implementation of the new curriculum in Wales as it acknowledges the concern for student achievement through standardised testing but also has a wider focus on improved student wellbeing as a learning outcome: indeed, Donaldson has highlighted the ‘health and well-being of our children and young people’ (Donaldson, 2015, p24) as an area that needs supporting in the new curriculum. This section of the review serves as an important reminder that tangible impact must result from professional learning activities and that improved learner outcomes are expected.

In order to address the implementation of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, the University of Stirling undertook a school-based curriculum development project that utilised Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CCPE) as a methodology, centring on collaborative enquiry in the establishment of PLCs. In this study, Valerie Drew and colleagues found that the programme ‘opened up new ways of working in school with the potential for enhanced practice and outcomes for children’ (Drew et al, 2016b, p7). The results showed that ‘a number of participants articulated renewed engagement with and deeper understandings of the core aims/principles and purposes of the curriculum’ (Ibid, p7). Teachers emerged from this collaborative enquiry with a more comprehensive understanding of how to implement Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: the CCPE model, then, may have an impact on the implementation of collaborative professional learning in supporting teacher engagement with, and understanding of, the new curriculum for Wales.

e. International professional learning: Case studies

This section of the report explores literature on professional learning in four ‘high performing’ nations in global rankings of student outcomes. This is not intended as an exhaustive list of all literature on the subject, rather the aim is to offer an overview of current trends and research findings in these nations. It is important to note at the outset that practice in each of these countries may not be transferable and, in some cases, be highly reliant on context and a product of the deep-rooted culture in which the professional learning models presented lie.

- Finland

Linda Darling-Hammond (2014, p1) refers to Finland’s ‘teaching and learning system’ to describe the set of elements that, when well-designed and connected, reliably support all students in their learning. Finland rapidly climbed to the top of international rankings, including PISA, and now has a highly equitable distribution of achievement across all its schools. Schools enjoy large autonomy, little interference from central administration in their everyday running, and incorporate systematic methods to address pupils’ problems as well as targeted professional help for those in need (Sahlberg, 2009).

Much of the improvement to Finland’s education system is attributed to teacher education, which now comprises three years of high quality, graduate-level studies at the expense of the state. The result of this extended, quality education is highly trained teachers who design the curriculum around broad national standards, which results in local creativity and an increase in equity, since context is a core component of curriculum design. The focus in Finland is on ensuring teachers
are qualified, rather than introducing standardised instruction and testing, and the development of local capacity for innovation and problem-solving as opposed to adopting educational ideas from external sources (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Pasi Sahlberg (2007) describes professional learning and practice in the Finnish system as follows:

‘Finnish teachers are conscious, critical consumers of professional development and in-service training services... Most compulsory, traditional in-service training has disappeared. In its place are school- or municipality-based longer term programs and professional development opportunities. Continuous upgrading of teachers’ pedagogical professionalism has become a right rather than an obligation... As a consequence of strengthened professionalism in schools, it has become understood that teachers and schools are responsible for their own work and also solve most problems rather than shift them elsewhere. Today the Finnish teaching profession is on a par with other professional workers; teachers can diagnose problems in their classrooms and schools, apply evidence-based and often alternative solutions to them, and evaluate and analyze the impact of implemented procedures.’ (Sahlberg, 2007, p155)

This focus on teacher autonomy and reliance on internal research capacity, it is argued, has led to good results since the decentralised focus on innovation enables teachers to find new ways to improve learning within their own specific context (Laukkanen, 2008). This is particularly pertinent to Wales in the context of Successful Futures. However, while the focus on research and collaboration, coupled with local autonomy reflects well on teacher education and arguably produces excellent results from pupils, professional development and in-service programs for teachers have been variable. The local co-ordination of professional development means that while some schools have advanced processes and support systems for staff, others are not so streamlined. Sahlberg (2011) claims that concerns have been raised about the variability of in-service education, ascribing much of this variation to the mechanisms dictating overall responsibility of professional development.

Municipalities, who oversee primary, middle and high schools, are responsible for providing teachers with learning opportunities according to need. In some municipalities, programmes of professional development are organised for all teachers, whereas in others, it is the responsibility of the teacher or school principal to decide the amount and type of professional development needed, and whether it will be funded. All teachers in Finland have three mandatory days per year devoted to planning and professional development. However, the amount of time spent on professional development varies according to budget decisions and other, logistical rationale, made locally. These inequalities have been recognised by the Ministry of Education, and in 2016, the budget for professional development was doubled in an effort to address the variability of professional development across the municipalities. Finland’s educational success globally has been attributed in part to significant funding for professional development (Sahlberg, 2010).

- Singapore

In Singapore, the main focus of efforts to raise teacher competency – and therefore improve student learning outcomes – since 1997 has been teacher professional development. The Singapore Government is committed to seeing the implementation of PLCs in all 360 of its schools across the four, geographical zones – North, South, East and West. Interest in PLCs was first made public by the government in 2009 as a means to raise the level of teacher quality and professionalism. The aim is to enable teachers to learn collaboratively; to reconstruc the curriculum in order to keep pace with the requirements of a knowledge-based economy; to meet objectives of academic grades; and to support students’ holistic development. These aims are particularly significant in such a strongly centralised system.
Salleh Hairon and Clive Dimmock (2012) identify five main trends in teacher development policy in Singapore since 1997, all of which are consistent with international discourse on PLCs:

- Policy is steadily placing responsibility for professional development on teachers
- Professional development is directly tied to curriculum development and student learning
- There is a desire to integrate teachers’ professional development into professional practice, thereby linking it to curricular development and student learning
- Although a diverse range of professional development platforms are recognised, emphasis is placed on collaborative and community-oriented forms of professional development
- There is an emerging preference for use of reflection and inquiry, and action research in order to interrogate and develop subject content and pedagogical knowledge

Schools that adopt the PLC framework form ‘Learning Teams’ of teachers, who choose from a range of collaborative methods and undertake a cyclical process of continuous improvement. The Teams are directed by a Coalition Team, comprised of the principal and four middle managers. Hairon and Dimmock (2012) argue that the one hour of professional development time allocated for the Learning Teams to carry out this research/development is insufficient and that it is still unclear how the process impacts on improved student outcomes. Hairon and Dimmock (2012) also report that teachers are reluctant to sacrifice core teaching activities, feel unsure of the efficacy of the PLC process, and feel unsupported. This lack of support and uncertainty around the impact means that schools may opt for other reforms that are quicker and have obvious effects. Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of the initiative may interfere with the aims – for example, managers ensuring that teachers engage in PLC activity might be counterproductive to the collaborative, innovative spirit of the concept. The focus on encouraging school leaders to expand their leadership skills to become transformational, instructional, and distributed also introduces the danger that teachers are forced into a government-controlled cycle of performativity and accountability.

In Singapore, the strong hierarchical and work structures suggest that the influence of PLCs is likely to be confined to pedagogical practices, subject expertise, and student learning – which is more restricted that in Anglo-American settings where discourses around PLCs focuses on teacher agency, empowerment, and autonomy (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012). In other words, cultural context plays a significant role in promoting, shaping, and potentially impeding the possibilities of this model. Daphnee Lee and Wing On Lee (2013) also argue that the hierarchical, ‘top-down’ PLC model as it has been implemented in Singapore, may not bring about the most effective innovation since it stifles teachers’ creativity. The authors also claim that genuine reflective inquiry is impeded by the PLC structure and reflective dialogue with the aim of cultural re-orientation to bring about change is entirely absent, arguing that, ‘a balance needs to be maintained between the importance of cultural authenticity and the potential of reform’ (Lee & Lee, 2013, p14). This approach is seemingly at odds with the Pioneer model currently employed in Wales.

The impact of culture, not just on this example of the PLC model of professional learning, but on the wider role of teachers is worth noting. Neville Ellis (2013) argues that the cultural phenomenon of kiasuism profoundly shapes the type of work teachers do as researchers in Singapore schools. The concept of kiasu refers to the notion of being afraid to lose out, and of winning at all costs. It has negative connotations, implying a willingness to undertake calculated tactics in order to take advantage of others and get ahead – this is kiasu-negative. However, there is also kiasu-positive, which is associated with hard work and diligence. This example from Singapore illustrates the influence, and therefore importance, of prevailing culture on models of professional learning. In a Western context, it also suggests the need for professional learning policy initiatives and practice...
to incorporate an element of reflexivity in order to allow teacher autonomy and genuine innovation and creativity that brings about change.

**Australia**

Increasingly in Australia, teacher professional learning is positioned as a solution to intransigent educational problems, as well as a policy problem in and of itself. For example, on the one hand, the rhetoric of Australia’s National Plan for School Improvement (NPSI) implies that professional learning is a problem of insufficient teacher quality that recruiting the ‘best and brightest’ will overcome. At the same time, it can be argued that effective professional learning can overcome the crisis of quality and help improve schools. In Australia, the growth of professional standards and associated registration and accreditation processes for teachers over the past 20 years have been accompanied by a focus on professional learning as a means to maintain professional standards. This is particularly important since the Australian Education Act (2013) outlines the national goal to be ‘Top 5 by 2025’ in international standardised tests. Professional learning is seen as key to achieving this goal.

The Ramsay Review (2000) of teacher education in New South Wales included 17 recommendations. One of these was to establish an Institute of Teachers that would develop professional teaching standards, which would form the basis for a three-level accreditation system for practicing teachers. The Institute of Teachers Act, 2004, only focused on new teachers and had no mandate for existing teachers, which resulted in a split between those newly qualified and those already in schools. This issue was later addressed, and from January 2018, all teachers must now be accredited. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership introduced a nationally consistent registration approach within which teachers are required to participate in 100 hours of professional development activities every five years, demonstrate evidence against the teaching standards, and pay an annual fee, in order to maintain their registration as teachers (Baker et al, 2017). The tool for this professional learning is an annual, three phase plan-implement-improve process known as the Performance Development Process (PDP). It requires a cycle of goal-setting, professional learning, evidence collection, reflection, self-assessment and annual review. In addition, teachers are observed and receive feedback twice a year, on issues linked to professional goals and standards. The model was implemented in response to both national and international focus on standards. However, John Baker and colleagues (2017) argue that there is no evidence around whether it improves teaching practice at present.

Nicole Mockler (2013) argues that the approach has resulted in a narrow model of professional learning that focuses on skills and knowledge that support teachers to demonstrate competence in the professional standards, rather than locally specific needs for the teachers’ own context/personal development. Furthermore, the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework (AITSL, 2012) links professional learning to performance appraisal, making engagement in such activity more of an obligation than a choice to learn. Christopher Day and Judyth Sachs (2004) refer to this approach as managerial professionalism, as opposed to democratic models of professionalism, that is regulated externally, is competitive and market-driven, and characterised by control/compliance.

**Canada**

A recent study into professional learning in Canada carried out by Carol Campbell and colleagues (2016) sought to address the gap in evidence regarding pan-Canadian data and research to examine professional learning across the 10 provinces and three territories of the country. The aim was not to argue for a uniform approach across Canada, but to understand the rich diversity of educational experiences, approaches and outcomes from professional learning within and
National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales: Collaborative networks (literature review)

across the provinces and territories. The methods comprised: document review for all provinces and territories; review of research reports and survey analyses from the Canadian Teachers' Federation; international analyses and comparisons of professional learning; focus group conference calls with representatives from teachers' organisations across Canada; an advisory group with members form each province, territory, and national organisations; surveys carried out by teachers' associations in some provinces, as well as examples of practice and field work; four focus groups in person; and three in-depth case studies which included document analysis, interviews and focus groups. This extensive research project identified three components and 10 features of effective, research-informed professional learning, as follows:

- **Support and sustainability**
  - Ongoing in duration
  - Resourced
  - Supportive and engaged leadership

- **Quality content**
  - Evidence-informed
  - Subject-specific and pedagogical content knowledge
  - A focus on student outcomes
  - A balance of teacher voice and system coherence

- **Learning design and implementation**
  - Active and variable learning
  - Collaborative learning experiences
  - Job-embedded learning (Campbell et al, 2016, p91)

The report concludes the following 'evidence concerning experiences and examples of educators' professional learning in Canada' that offer useful signposts for application in other contexts:

- Evidence, inquiry and professional judgement are informing professional learning policies and practices
- The priority area identified by teachers for developing their knowledge and practices is how to support diverse learners’ needs
- A focus on a broad range of students' and professionals’ learning outcomes is important
- The appropriate balance of system-directed and self-directed professional development for teachers is complex and contested
- There is ‘no one-size-fits-all’ approach to professional learning; teachers are engaging in multiple opportunities for professional learning and inquiry with differentiation for their professional needs
- Collaborative learning experiences are highly valued and prevalent within and across schools and wider professional networks
- Teachers value professional learning that is relevant and practical for their work; ‘job-embedded’ should not mean school-based exclusively as opportunities to engage with external colleagues and learning opportunities matter also
- Time for sustained, cumulative professional learning integrated within educators’ work lives requires attention
- Inequitable variations in access to funding for teachers’ self-selected professional development are problematic
- System and school leaders have important roles in supporting professional learning for teachers and for themselves (Campbell et al, 2016, p3)
f. Challenges to collaborative professional learning

One of the biggest challenges facing the implementation of professional learning is accountability. There is ongoing concern over whether multi-outcome processes can be subject to standardised testing, and how arbitrary student learning outcomes can be measured when they are inherently so varied. There can often be an ‘over-reliance on external accountability and increased competition to deliver better results’ (Harris & Jones, 2017, p18) in schools, and professional learning falls by the wayside as ‘accountability measures appear to constrain opportunities for collaboration beyond the school’ (Adams, 2017, p168). In an era of school inspections and quality assurance, how can schools be held accountable for both providing professional learning opportunities for their staff and ensuring they raise standards at the same time? Moving forward, these are questions that will need to be addressed.

As with any professional collaboration, emotional involvement can also be a challenge to consider. We have established that collaborative professional learning should occur in a safe, respectful environment, but it is worth noting that ‘expectations for change can touch raw nerves if teachers take them as reflections on their competence or challenges to their professional identity’ (Timperley, 2008, p16). However, we might see this as a reason why collaboration is so necessary: sharing insecurities and vulnerabilities can strengthen a community and teachers can learn strategies for dealing with this from each other. The appropriate handling of conflict will also have to be addressed, as ‘people will have strong and often conflicting ideas about what constitutes effective pedagogy or excellent professional learning’ (Harris & Jones, 2012, p11).

There are certain logistical challenges to implementing collaborative professional learning: ‘time constraints... the issue of supply cover. A teacher may not be released from their teaching duties because of the cost, or the lack of good quality cover’ (Duncombe & Armour, 2004, p158). In a similar vein, professional learning can be difficult to sustain and develop internally: Drew and colleagues noted in their study of CCPE in Scotland the challenge of the ‘sustainability of projects, once external provocation and support is withdrawn’ (Drew et al, 2016b, p10). Leaders of collaborative professional leaning can, however, support their staff in the following ways:

- Build slowly, act fast
- Increasingly integrate formal and informal collaboration
- Use protocols to separate criticisms from critics
- Allow people to collaborate in their own way
- Do not let bad collaborative experiences poison the possibility for having good ones
- Use technology to expand interaction
- Learn to let go (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018)

Despite these challenges, we can see that the potential for improved student learning outcomes and the development of the teacher-as-learner within a healthy community of professionals is very attractive. The models identified in this review may provide opportunities to cultivate a collaborative professional learning environment that supports the implementation of the new national curriculum in Wales.

4. Findings

This report, drawing upon an extensive literature review of relevant materials, presents a number of findings. These have been listed in response to the research questions outlined in Section 1 and are as follows:
What is the history of collaborative professional learning in Wales, and what models have been tested?

- Evidence suggests collaborative professional learning is prevalent across Wales, with a variety of different models employed to support teacher development.
- However, while prominent and a feature of Wales’ education system, it could be said that collaborative professional learning is too variable, with no clear structure in place to support practitioners to develop their practice consistently.
- PLCs, Lead and Emerging Practitioner Pathfinders and Schools Challenge Cymru have been used to good effect in Wales, and have allowed participating teachers the opportunity to discuss problems, strategies and solutions.
- Collaborative networks are commonplace across all four of Wales’ regional education consortia.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of networks as environments for professional learning in higher performing systems?

- The development of collaborative networks as a vehicle for professional learning is considered favourable and of significant benefit, but requires an open and non-judgmental environment conducive to this form of working; the emotional involvement of teachers is a factor.
- The establishing of collaborative practices between teachers within and across schools has become a feature of school improvement policy across leading education systems internationally.
- Collaborative practices require a shift away from the centre to the front lines of schools, which in turns helps to make system improvement self-sustaining.
- The involvement of families/carers and the wider learning community in collaborative practices should be encouraged, and not seen as a ‘bolt-on’ or unrelated activity.
- Collaborative professional learning helps to develop collective responsibility among teachers for all pupils and schools, including those they are not directly working with; ‘systemness’ is regarded a laudable trait for educators.
- Evidence suggests the Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CCPE) model, as utilised in the development of Scotland’s new national curriculum, has been warmly received by teachers and is worthy of consideration.
- Building teacher agency and giving practitioners greater autonomy over their own career pathway shifts responsibility for professional development onto teachers themselves; buy-in for such activity is crucial.
- Professional development is directly tied to curriculum development and student learning; teachers value professional learning that is relevant and practical for their work.

What are the enablers/barriers to effective collaboration?

- Collaborative professional learning can become confused, and its impact diluted, when various models are in play concurrently and care should be given when assigning schools to different networks. Similarly, the suitability of matches between schools needs to be carefully considered.
- The terminology used to describe collaborative forms of working, and labels given to schools at various stages of development, needs to be worked through properly; the potentially negative connotations relating to some descriptors can and does have serious implications.
The longevity of collaborative networks is important, and evidence suggests collaborative working needs time to embed properly.

The development of collaborative professional learning opportunities requires significant and ongoing financial investment.

The impact of accountability mechanisms on collaborative practices can be significant and result in increased competition between prospective partners.

Effective leadership is required to secure the time and resource necessary for collaborative professional learning; so too is it important in building an environment of trust and shared responsibility.

An open mindset is crucial to collaborative professional learning; schools and their staff must be as willing to learn as they are to share.

Building teacher agency and a strengthened professionalism in schools ensures teachers take ownership of their own development and are more likely to diagnose problems in their classrooms.

5. Conclusions and implications

From these findings, several conclusions can be drawn. We therefore recommend that, to support the future development of collaborative professional learning across Wales for the benefit of the nation’s education system, the Welsh Government should:

- Embed effective collaboration within the emerging National Approach to Professional Learning, ensuring a consistency in approach across all regional education consortia and associated schools.
- Provide clarity and coherence regarding preferred collaborative models of professional learning, making clear expectations at all levels of the education system.
- Ensure collaborative professional learning is suitably resourced and that sufficient time is given to its development, supporting school leaders in the process.
- Consider how best to encourage collaborative professional learning and the conditions necessary for collaborative networks to succeed, recognising the emotional involvement of teachers.
- Communicate effectively the National Approach to Professional Learning to interested parties and ensure school leaders, in particular, are fully abreast of proposed changes to existing practice.
- Draw on the experience of education systems internationally and consider fully the benefits/pitfalls associated with adopting collaborative models of professional learning employed overseas.
- Consider delegation of responsibility for brokering relationships between schools to those operating at a more local level, and entrust schools to lead on collaborative working in the best interests of their learners.
- Encourage the involvement of families/carers and the wider learning community in collaborative practices.
- Ward against conflicting collaborative networks; care should be given when assigning schools to different networks, especially when various models are in operation concurrently.
- Consider carefully the terminology used to describe collaborative forms of working, and the labels given to schools at various stages of development.
- Consider adoption of the Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry (CCPE) model, as utilised in the development of Scotland’s new national curriculum, as a means of testing professional learning concepts.
Take action to reduce the impact of accountability measures on collaborative practices and thereby limit the propensity of schools to compete against each other unnecessarily.

6. References


