You have been involved with the system reform process in Wales over the past two years and have led on the National Programme of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Why this particular approach to the improvement of professional learning at scale?

Looking at the best performing systems around the world, one thing is absolutely clear, teacher quality is pivotally important in securing and sustaining high performance. System performance is heavily dependent upon teacher performance, so it is here that the emphasis needs to be placed if significant improvement in learner outcomes is to be realized. But improving teacher quality, at scale, is notoriously hard to do. Changing teachers’ practice is not just a matter of capability, competence, or confidence, it is intrinsically bound up with the willingness to try something new, to test something out, and to take some risks. If teachers are exposed to low level training and uninspiring staff development, this will be reflected in their classroom teaching. Conversely, if teachers are given opportunities to collaborate, to share ideas, and to innovate, this will also be reflected in everyday practice.

In the search for approaches that make a difference to teacher performance and improved learner outcomes, professional learning communities (PLCs) are high up on the list of strategies that actually work. The research evidence consistently highlights the importance of interdependent learning and collaboration as the cornerstone of school improvement and effective professional development (Timperley et al., 2007; Whitehurst, 2002). It reinforces that where teachers collectively investigate ways of overcoming barriers to their students’ learning, the outcomes can be dramatic. Working in this way, as a professional learning community can bring many benefits but most importantly, if there is fidelity implementation, professional learning communities can result in improved learner outcomes. The extensive research evidence shows that teachers who are part of a properly configured...
professional learning community tend to be more effective in the classroom and achieve better student outcomes (Verscio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Consequently, establishing professional learning communities within schools and between schools in Wales was considered to be a strategy that could pay dividends in terms of better teacher and system performance. The aspiration in Wales is to build the collective capacity of the profession so that it can deliver better results rather than to manipulate the system into higher performance through the reward and punishment of certain groups.

System wide change requires deep rooted cultural change but cultures do not change by mandate, fear, or extrinsic rewards: systems change by the specific displacement and replacement of cultural norms, structures, and processes. The process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modelling new values and behaviors that need to displace the existing ones. This cultural shift will be dependent upon the ability within the system to actively and purposefully create the collective capacity for meaningful change to occur. Building collective capacity requires harnessing the will, skill, and persistence of everyone in the system to improve. It necessitates squeezing every last drop of collective expertise out of the system to allow it to perform at the optimum level. Professional learning communities are one way of generating this collective expertise and one way of creating the capacity for improved professional learning at scale.

How did you ensure that your National PLC model would impact favorably on learners and would create the collective capacity for system-wide reform?

Much has been written about the positive and beneficial aspects of collaboration and networking between teachers. However, some of this literature has unhelpfully reinforced that professional collaboration is a reasonable end in itself. It has suggested that collaboration is fundamentally a good thing without adequate or sufficient consideration of the impact and outcomes of this collaborative effort. Hence, many attempts at developing professional networks and networking at scale have failed, and are still failing, to provide evidence of a direct and sustained positive impact on learner outcomes.

The prime purpose of professional collaboration is to change pedagogical practice in order to secure better outcomes for learners. It is not about collective professional support or collective therapy. Whilst a teacher’s self-image and sense of self-worth is clearly important, the whole point of working together should be, first and foremost, to improve learner outcomes. Otherwise, in the worst case scenario, as Levin (2008) notes, “the professional learning community will pay attention ‘to everything but the real work of looking at and improving everyone’s instructional practice’” (p. 127). Effective professional collaboration means focusing on the needs of the learner first and working relentlessly to improve pedagogy so those needs are met. Collective capacity building requires meaningful, sustained, and productive professional learning that puts the learner, rather than the teacher, at the heart of its work.

Underpinning the National PLC model in Wales is the ‘non-negotiable’ of improved learner outcomes and the clear expectation that all PLCs will start and end with student data. In this way, the impact on learners can be tracked and readily identified. Also within the National PLC model, the central premise is one of professionals engaging with other professionals in order to improve learner outcomes through reflections upon and modifications to their pedagogical practice (Harris & Jones, 2010). It is clear that creating communities of professionals, networks of practitioners, or professional
learning communities is unlikely to make a difference unless there is a clear and consistent model of change that can be used in practice. Consequently, the National PLC model is based upon a robust theory of action accompanied by a clear rubric for measuring impact. To date it is a model that has been shared with over 2,000 schools and all 22 districts. Although it is still relatively early in the implementation process (the pilot commenced in 2010 with national roll out in 2011 and 2012), there is emerging evidence that the PLCs nationally have started to improve learner outcomes through improvements in professional practice.

What are the main threats and challenges for the PLC work in Wales?

While there is a great deal of enthusiasm from many schools and teachers for PLCs plus high degrees of activity, the National PLC programme is still being implemented. The central challenge now is to remain focused on the ‘real work of learning’ (Fullan, 2010) and to deepen the implementation so that PLCs are both strengthened and sustained. Although progress has been made with the National programme of professional learning communities in Wales, it is acknowledged and accepted that they offer only one lever for building collective capacity and securing system improvement (Andrews, 2011).

In reflecting upon the threats or challenges, three questions immediately spring to mind. Firstly, does the National PLC work have depth? In short, is there evidence that the PLCs across Wales are making a difference to learner outcomes? There are some who would argue that showing any direct correlation or identifying any causation between PLCs and improved learner outcomes is too difficult. But the fact that it is difficult seems to be a woefully inadequate reason not to try. Analyzing data to identify a specific learner needs and then trying to address those needs through the work of the PLC and subsequently returning to the data to check if progress has been made is one straightforward means of measuring impact. At present, a National online platform has been developed to support and sustain PLCs and to capture their impact over time (Jones & Harris, 2013; Harris & Jones, 2013).

The second question is whether the National PLC work has breadth? Building collective capacity in the system will require broad based involvement of professionals at all levels in the work of PLCs. It will require PLCs to be the right of the many rather than the preserve of the few. It will mean that the PLC work is viewed as a professional entitlement rather than an imposition.

The third question is about sustainability - does the National PLC work have length? Is it sustainable? If the PLC work is not to be viewed as just another initiative and quickly jettisoned in favor of more attractive policies or expedient approaches, then attention to supporting this work in the long term is required. High performing education systems, do not improve overnight; there are no quick fixes and no shortcuts; it takes many years of concerted effort. Sustained high performance depends upon the routine, hard slog of improving teaching and learning, year in and year out. If PLCs are to make a real difference in Wales, they cannot be short term, far too much is at stake. PLCs need to be actively maintained and sustained if they are to build the collective capacity to secure the gains in learner outcomes that the profession anticipates and the system urgently requires.

The challenge of transforming an entire education system cannot be underestimated. Professional learning communities are not a failsafe school improvement approach or a ‘silver bullet’ for successful system reform.
There are risks and unfortunately, no guarantees. Much depends on how the PLC work is supported in the months and years ahead. Sustaining and implementing policies is much less exciting work that inventing them. Either professional learning communities in Wales will be supported, sustained, and sufficiently resourced to achieve their full potential or they will be undermined, devalued, and dismantled. There will be no shades of grey, and only time will tell which of these options becomes the reality.

What are the main lessons that you have learned through being part of the system-wide reform in Wales?

There are a whole range of lessons I have learned from working at all levels in the system, (i.e. classroom, teacher, school, district, and Government) in the past two and a half years. One particular lesson that stands out is the need to have a limited number of goals linked to a clear moral purpose and to reinforce both of these continuously and relentlessly. Inevitably, in a busy and cluttered policy context with political downward pressure, the temptation for those within Government is to generate multiple priorities because the problems are too complex, too great, and too pressing. These priorities then spawn multiple interventions which hit the system like policy confetti, in no particular order, causing confusion, disbelief, and consternation. The most improved systems have achieved success through simplicity rather than complexity. They have focused on a few priorities and have implemented the required changes carefully and thoroughly. They have not been distracted from these priorities, at any point and have fiercely resisted U-turns. In short, the best performing systems have kept focus and have not been deterred by external events, political pressure, or early disappointments. Despite everything, they have stayed the course.

Another lesson is one of communicating clearly, continuously, and relentlessly about what needs to be done. This is hugely important because without this constant drumbeat, actions can be misinterpreted, responses can be misunderstood, and positions can become entrenched. Unless there is transparency of purpose and clear and consistent communication at all levels in the system then trust will quickly erode and the possibility for meaningful change will start to fade. The system level consists of many parts, it is not one complete, coherent, and aligned system. It is made up of subsystems that can compete, contradict, and confuse unless the core message is one hundred percent clear and consistent. The task of clearly, routinely, and tirelessly communicating intent, purpose, and outcomes is critical if attempts at large scale improvement, reform, and change are to succeed.

A final lesson concerns the unintended consequences of policy interventions. In other words, expect that there will be misinterpretation and misrepresentation as well as deliberate undermining whatever the policy might be. For example, when PLCs were initially introduced, despite clarity of message, consistency of the model, and a total commitment to professional empowerment and learning, there was concern from certain quarters that this ‘in house’ model of professional development was being introduced simply because money for external professional development courses was being reduced. Subsequently, as PLCs gained momentum and respect from those within the profession, the discourse altered and PLCs were vilified, by some, as yet another mechanism of Government
control and surveillance, despite evidence to the contrary.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

The most pressing issue in my view relates to the fact that despite decades of research on school improvement, school effectiveness, and system reform, some policymakers are still selecting and implementing policies that have little, if any, independent empirical evidence supporting them. Why it is that relevant research evidence is blatantly ignored or conveniently airbrushed out if it does not accord with the needs or aspirations of those responsible for policy making? Part of the reason must reside with those of us engaged in research. How far do our research findings relate to policymakers and their concerns? How far are our research findings accessible and readily available to those making the decisions about policy direction? This is not to suggest that all the blame should reside with the research community; policymakers can be disinterested, disengaged, and even hostile to research findings, particularly those presented in an academic form. For maximum impact and progress to be made, evidence-informed policy needs to be more than just rhetoric. It has to be the touchstone of educational reform, change, and improvement if schools and school systems are to significantly change for the better.

The views represented in this article are those of the author and not the Welsh Government.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge Michelle Jones who co-led the National PLC program.

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