# The Challenges of Effective Professional Learning in a Secondary Context

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*This paper considers the topic of Professional Learning within the teaching profession. It will discuss the literature in the field of Professional Learning and the research which has fed into discussions on what makes professional learning effective. The paper also aims to highlight some of the major challenges and questions which still remain in the context of Professional Learning. It will go on to critically analyse a significant piece of empirical research by Pedder (2007)on the topic of effective implementation of Professional Learning as part of the Learning how to Learn Project. The paper will discuss the contribution made by this study in an area with limited empirical research and extremely hazy definitions. The paper will conclude that Pedder (2007)adds a significant amount of empirical data to the study of effective Professional Learning, but that much more needs to be done in terms of understanding Professional Learning which is not centrally imposed. The paper will look at the implications of the research and Pedder’s study in the context of a high achieving Secondary school History department.*

# Context

There is still no clear definition of what is meant by Continued Professional Development (CPD), or Professional Learning. In 2001, the DfEE released a strategy document for CPD. This vision notably blurred the definitions of CPD and Professional Learning (DfEE, 2001). A second publication in 2005 placed even more emphasis on the creation of effective CPD by schools (DfES, 2005). Recent education reforms have shifted more teacher training out of the HE sector and into so-called “Teaching Schools”. Yet in 2006 Ofsted were still led to report that CPD opportunities in many secondary school departments were “wholly unsatisfactory…far more needs to be made available” (Ofsted, 2006, p. 4). It might well be assumed then, that a government focus on CPD had little impact in improving the quality of provision of Professional Learning in English schools.

This paper is written in the context of the History department of Wellspring Grammar, a high achieving, comprehensive school. It is a response, not only to more general criticisms of Professional Learning, outlined above, but also to a recent Ofsted report, *History for All*, which set out the shortcomings of Professional Learning in history departments nationwide. The report notes that “an important issue [in recent history inspections] was the near-absence of appropriate subject training.” (Ofsted, 2011, p. 42) and goes on to highlight the discovery that “…in the 65 schools visited in which the quality of subject training was specifically inspected, it was good or outstanding in only 15 of them.” (Ofsted, 2011, p. 42). The language here is vague at best; however the core point is hammered home with statistical precision. In one institution for example, there had been no professional development in seven years (Ofsted, 2011). These findings by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate clearly present some stark challenges to the history department at Wellspring Grammar, and show at least a political need for the re-evaluation and analysis of effective Professional Learning practices.

Over the last two years, Wellspring Grammar has made moves to internalise more of its Professional Learning. In conjunction with this, it has also begun a programme of establishing “Professional Learning Communities” (PLCs) which aim to foster a cross-curricular, collegiate approach to CPD. This is not unusual, and it is not surprising that a growth in school based PLCs has come at a time when reducing budgets is paramount (Woodcock, 2011). These communities focus on improving teaching and learning across the school through a shared focus on Assessment for Learning. In many ways they mirror the “Learning How to Learn” Project (LHTL) (McCormick, et al., 2011). The challenge with this model of Professional Learning is twofold. Firstly, the expertise must be available within the school already. Focussing too heavily on internal expertise runs the risk of encouraging conservatism and removing the challenge provided by external sources (Pendry, et al., 1998). The second issue is in establishing an effective model of Professional Learning through PLCs which allows all teachers to develop their own learning and which takes account of their professional needs (Hunzicker, 2011).

The core of this piece will analyse a key article by David Pedder (2007) which seeks to assess and evaluate the main challenges of PLCs. This empirical research builds on the work begun by the LHTL project (James, et al., 2006) and seeks to analyse the challenges of Professional Learning faced by schools as well as to offer some suggestions about how PLCs in schools might be made more effective. The findings from the following literature review and critical analysis will be used to draw lessons for the history department at Wellspring Grammar.

# Professional Learning: A Literature Review

## Definitions: From CPD to Professional Learning

Professional Learning, since the early-1990s, has been a much contested field of study (McCormick, et al., 2011). The term Professional Learning is often used in juxtaposition to the earlier use of CPD. The term itself builds on the works of educational theorists such as Stenhouse (1975), who argued that teachers needed to take control of their own professional understanding. This concept has found its way into the mainstream, so that by 2001 the DfEE was advocating that teachers should take charge of their own Professional Learning (McCormick, et al., 2011). However, the terms themselves are often confused and used interchangeably. The DfES (2005) and DfEE (2001) documents for example refer to professional development as Professional Learning. Whereas the latter is personal and holistic, the former is associated more with the specific acquisition of skills and knowledge (Pickering, et al., 2007). Whilst this may appear to by semantics, there is a distinct difference between CPD which has often been seen as a government imposed solution to the “problems” of education (Sugrue, 2004) and Professional Learning which is seen as developmental and tailored to the needs of individuals and learning communities (Guskey, 1995).

One aspect which will not be covered in this paper is the extent to which other qualifications form part of the Professional Learning agenda. Current discourse in education for example holds that Professional Learning is a ‘professional choice’ about raising standards for students. Professional Learning in this definition might lead a teacher to pursue the “Leading from the Middle” or NPQH qualifications. By contrast professional doctorates and masters courses are often seen as personal choices to be made by individual teachers (Pickering, 2007). Although there is significant debate, the focus here will remain on Professional Learning which does not work towards a specific accreditation.

## Professional Learning and Professionality

Both Professional Learning and CPD raise the issue of the perception of teaching as a profession in the first instance (Hoyle, 1974, p. 7). Hoyle and John (1995) have suggested that the debates over professionality revolve around issues of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility. They stress that in order for teaching to be perceived as a profession, it needs to have specialist knowledge which is inaccessible to “lay people”, and allow professional autonomy. O’Neil (2002) argues that professional judgement and institutional autonomy has been undermined by centralised, government interference in schools, a stance also adopted by Sugrue (2004) who argues that a prescription of ‘successful’ outcomes in schools has undermined teacher autonomy. Twenty-first century notions of professionality in teaching then “…focus on managerialism rather than social welfare models, teachers find themselves caught between the aspirations of the state and traditional notions of professionality.” (Pachler, 2007, p. 245). Teaching as a profession and new paradigms of Professional Learning which allow greater autonomy may therefore be closely linked.

## Purpose of Professional Learning

Much of the literature around Professional Learning has focused on its underlying purpose (Muijs, et al., 2004). Day and Sachs (2004) outline the diverse purposes and perceptions of Professional Learning. They argue that some have seen Professional Learning as a means to deliver government initiatives; others as a vehicle to improve student outcomes; and yet others still, to keep teachers engaged with their practice. Pickering (2007) develops a different line, explaining that Professional Learning can be seen in terms of ‘teaching quality’ and its effectiveness can be measured in terms of educational outcomes. Such outcomes have tended to be reflected in students’ performance in tests and public examinations. Followers of this school of thought believe that PLCs should be used to establish “effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results.” (Mizell, et al., 2011, p. 12). However, these exam based outcomes are not necessarily a shared vision of what represents improvement (Sugrue, 2004). They also tend to lead to CPD which focusses on “what works” in a general sense to achieve the said results (Pickering, et al., 2007), a kind of performativity leading to “…one-shot and one-size fits all workshops…” (Lock, 2006, p. 665). This is often seen as being contrary to good Professional Learning. Sugrue (2004) builds on this argument and criticises government led CPD initiatives which place a premium on short term (exam based) goals and as such bombard teachers with new initiatives. Guskey (1995), Loucks-Horsley and Stiegelbauer (1991) all support this stance, arguing that lasting change typically takes a minimum of three to five years to embed. Both of these findings imply that Surgue’s aversion to short term goals is indeed valid. Although it is tempting to rally to this call, it is also worth remembering that, for better or worse, public examination results do have a major impact on schools and their students. As has already been shown, the end results for students are paramount, “…therefore, educators must make serious efforts to develop and implement practices that effectively produce those results.” (Mizell, et al., 2011, p. 13). To get caught up in the potentially ideological objections of the aforementioned authors would also risk ignoring one important purpose of Professional Learning.

One way to visualise the attempts of other theorists to grapple with the purposes of CPD is to divide Professional Learning into three main categories: knowledge for practice, knowledge of practice and knowledge in practice (Day & Sachs, 2004). These broad goals all lead to the development of the teacher from a competent professional into an inspirational one (Haydn, et al., 2008). More than this, the purpose of Professional Learning is seen to be a key driver in the perceptions of self-worth of the teacher (Mizell, et al., 2011, p. 12). A similar theme is echoed in an Iranian study from Karimi. Although the educational context here is clearly very different, it is interesting to note the parallels with the US and UK studies already cited. Karimi (2011) explains how teachers’ beliefs about their ability to deliver learning were rooted in their “mastery experience”. Therefore, Professional Learning which develops content knowledge, student management and pedagogical understanding, increased teachers’ efficacy judgments about themselves. These enhanced judgements had an impact on their persistence, drive and instructional success. Although much of Karimi’s work is based on perceptions rather than empirical data, there is a clear link between these perceptions and participation in high quality Professional Learning. Day and Sachs (2004) also show that Professional Learning can have a little appreciated role in renewing teacher enthusiasm. Although this is by no means conclusive, there does seem to be a strong correlation between Professional Learning and softer valuations of worth in the profession.

## Motivation

The bulk of the available literature also shows that effective Professional Learning is highly dependent on the motivation of the participants. Day and Sachs have shown through various case studies that many teachers view CPD as demeaning and ill-conceived, something which is best avoided. Yet others see it as a vital part of teacher development (Day & Sachs, 2004). The difference in teacher outlook on Professional Learning is crucial. Intrinsic motivation of teachers is seen as a necessary prerequisite for the learning process to happen. Research tends to show that there is a symbiotic relationship between professional development, teacher motivation and a commitment to the learning process itself (Hunzicker, 2011). Professional Learning in the best case scenarios “…signals the importance of educators taking an active role in their continuous improvement...” (Mizell, et al., 2011). It is important to note that Mizell et al. are promoting their own “Standards for Professional Learning” developed in conjunction with “Learning Forward”, a company which seeks to promote and codify standardised PLCs. Therefore they have clear positionality in their discourse of the effectiveness of standardised PLCs. The importance of intrinsic motivation is picked up by the influential studies of Lave and Wenger (1991). In Vasumathi’s academic overview of CPD, it is suggested that the “…success of professional development depends on how teachers are able to learn the new skills and recognize the disadvantages of previous beliefs and practices.” (Vasumathi, 2010, p. 3). Hunzicker (2011) and Day and Sachs (2004) argue that in order to elicit this motivation, CPD must consider teachers’ personal and professional needs. Day and Sachs’ work in particular is based on a wide range of international studies and takes a broad range of evidence into account in arriving at this conclusion.

## Structures and Integration

The structuring and integration of Professional Learning has a huge impact on its effectiveness. The TDA in the UK places a great deal of focus on schools being at the centre of determining their own CPD agenda (Pedder, 2007). As Hunzicker has stated, effectively planned Professional Learning “…engages teachers in learning opportunities that are job-embedded, instructionally-focused, collaborative, and ongoing.” (Hunzicker, 2011, p. 4). The notion of Professional Learning as something which needs to be embedded certainly appears to be shared amongst the major theorists. Sugrue notes that the main criticisms of CPD have arisen when it appears to have little actual impact on classroom practice, or when the learning is not sustained (Sugrue, 2004). Under the best circumstances, teacher learning is made authentic through seamless integration into each school day (Fullan, 1995).

Mizell et al. take this idea of effectively planned Professional Learning one stage further again, arguing that the most important part of Professional Learning is “…recognizing and leveraging it systemwide, rather than using [it] solely as a strategy for individual growth.” (Mizell, et al., 2011, p. 13). For Mizell et al.’s “Learning Forward” programme, Professional Learning is part of a regional and even national drive to improve standards in the USA. The positionality of this team has already been noted, as “Learning Forward” is actively selling its own “Standards for Professional Learning” as a commercial concern. Comparing this to a view from Malta, Bezzina also argues that schools are most effective when they look at controlling and addressing local and national agendas through their Professional Learning programmes (Bezzina, 2006). Bezzina’s study is more an overview of current literature and is clearly based in a very specific and small scale context, so may well be less generalisable to the UK context. Both of these approaches have suggested a model of Professional Learning which is concerned with national policy goals, one which is fundamentally co-ordinated at a higher level. This point of view is also adopted by the LHTL Project from which Pedder’s study (2007) takes its lead. James et al. (2006) were keen to point out that Professional Learning should take the national picture into account, schools not being isolated but part of an educational community. However there is a sharp division over whether or not Professional Learning should be co-ordinated to fit in with national agendas. One major criticism comes in the form of Brighouse’s ideological attack on centralised Professional Learning initiatives. Like his peers, Brighouse sees Professional Learning as central to the teaching profession; however he argues that the introduction of the National Curriculum in the UK meant that money was no longer being spent on developing teachers in the broadest sense but rather encouraging them to match the very specific pedagogical intricacies of the new curriculum (Brighouse, 2008). This is a view shared by Sugrue who argues that the main interests of government planning in CPD are driven by concern for economic competitiveness, rather than a concern to improve students’ education (Sugrue, 2004). Building on this criticism, Lave and Wenger have argued that teachers need to take more control of their Professional Learning. They advocate the formation of ‘communities of practice’ which move beyond the model of state imposed CPD (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such communities should develop out of people’s individual and collective concerns suggesting that, rather than being imposed from the top down, Professional Learning should be a grassroots movement from the bottom up (Wenger, 1998). Taking the argument further still, Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) have suggested that non-collaborative models of CPD are used widely as technocratic and bureaucratic controls masquerading as bottom up development. For Stigler and Hiebert, authors of the highly influential book ‘The Teaching Gap’ (1999), a teacher led model of Professional Learning is more than just allowing a degree of professional freedom, it is central to the improvement of teaching as a whole (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). In their review of international evidence on teaching efficacy, they argue that only by giving teachers the freedom to structure their own learning will the ‘teaching gap’ between the USA and world leaders such as Japan be closed (Stigler & Hiebert, 2009). Although this is very specific to a set of US concerns, there are certainly shared issues here which are applicable to the UK.

## Focus of Professional Learning

Another key debate in terms of effective Professional Learning relates to its focus and content. Muijs et al. identify five main models of Professional Learning: course focused, project focused, school focused, pupil focused and teacher focused (Muijs, et al., 2004). Each of these models looks for different outcomes in terms of development. In evaluating Professional Learning at a school level, these different purposes are seldom taken into account (Muijs, et al., 2004). It is therefore very difficult to accurately assess the most effective foci of Professional Learning and it is clear that much more work needs to be done in this area. Guskey points out that much of the ‘evaluation’ of ‘effectiveness’ has taken the form of summarising the activities carried out, or conducting basic and subjective ‘satisfaction’ questionnaires (Guskey, 2000, pp. 8-10). Empirical study and evaluation of the focus of Professional Learning is thin on the ground.

The studies which have been conducted, suggest there are three major camps regarding the content of Professional Learning; “…the cognitive (especially subject knowledge), the affective (especially children’s development) and the pedagogical (especially the subtleties of learning as they interface with the new technologies)” (Brighouse, 2008, p. 315). Brighouse explains that “…the need for the teacher to be initially sufficiently equipped and subsequently and continually refreshed is significant.” (Brighouse, 2008, p. 315). In a History based context, Pendry et al. (1998) give three specific examples of Professional Learning: an internal meeting to develop a scheme of work using internal expertise; the use of external support to aid a department internal expertise has failed; and the management of school context to facilitate Professional Learning (Pendry, et al., 1998). Importantly they do not recognise models which have a school wide or policy focus. This is most likely due to the purpose of the book as a guide for History departments; however it does give some indication that a shared understanding of the focus of Professional Learning is far from clear cut.

Although some lone voices have called for CPD which represents a “…cross curricular, cross phase, cross experience approach to teacher learning…” (Pickering, 2007, p. 213), there seems to be a significant weight of evidence that suggests that Professional Learning needs to focus on both the strategies to teach as well as specific subject content (Hunzicker, 2011). However, there are studies which have suggested that too tight a focus on strategies for teaching has damaged the professional freedom of teachers. Sugrue (2004) argues that current CPD policy creates rationalised, simplified and prescriptive solutions. In an empirical study of CPD for K12 literacy, Quick et al. have shown that a focus on the instructional over subject content is likely to be less effective. Teachers, they argue, must have the knowledge to engage with and challenge student misconceptions (Quick, et al., 2009). It is notable here that Hunzicker (2011) refutes Quick’s conclusions as an isolated and ungeneralisable study, possibly subject limited. However an increasing focus on subject knowledge has been echoed by recent UK movements such as the Prince’s Teaching Institute, which looks to deliver subject based Professional Learning as a clear rejection of previous instruction based models. This is a stance with which Karimi (2011) would agree. Once again it is important to highlight that Quick’s US study and Karimi’s Iranian one might not be generalizable to a UK context due to cultural differences. What is clear however, is that many teachers and educationalists have felt there has been an unwelcome shift towards generic and non subject-specific training in education.

## Professional Learning Communities

Many of the arguments over effective Professional Learning have recently been subsumed into the wider theme of PLCs. In a series of works on the subject, Lave and Wenger have built the argument that Professional Learning is a communal activity which relies less on what is learnt than the fact that the learning itself becomes a social activity. This method of ‘situated learning’ is one in which teachers are encouraged to participate in ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such communities are bound by the mutual engagement of their members, and have a shared repertoire of resources, routines, products, vocabulary and pedagogies (Wenger, 1999). There is a growing body of evidence that, by shifting Professional Learning into networks such as these, teachers will be able to break down barriers of conservatism and collaborate on projects to really benefit learning (Day & Sachs, 2004). Pachler links this notion of the ‘community of practice’ to the notion of professionality, pursuing a line that in the twenty-first century, any model of professionality must stress collaboration and be judged in terms of teachers’ involvedness in professional teams (Pachler, 2007). Again, the issue of the limited empirical evidence surfaces here. However Day and Sachs (2004) do provide a number of interesting international case studies which point to the positive impact of PLCs. In his Maltese example, Bezzina notes that the decentralization of Professional Learning and the focus on teacher collaboration has had a huge impact on the way schools are run (Bezzina, 2006). This is particularly important as it implies the need for schools to be open to the challenges of PLCs as, “…the sort of departmental collegiality implied…is unlikely to even exist, let alone flourish, if the whole school ethos is inimical to it.” (Pendry, et al., 1998, p. 133). Of course the LHTL project on which Pedder’s study (2007) is based aimed to build on the idea of disseminating core learning concepts through PLCs (McCormick, et al., 2011).

There is also significant debate over the extent to which PLCs should be utilised as a central means of disseminating skills and knowledge, as in the LHTL example. For Lave and Wenger (1991) the process of participation in a community is more important than what is being learnt. As Guskey suggests “…professional development is interactive when it engages teachers socially through regular opportunities to share problems, ideas, and viewpoints, and work together toward solutions…” (Guskey, 1995, p. 6). For Wenger, teachers are not busy acquiring models and structures to improve teaching but taking part in something which has a structure (Wenger, 1999). In being part of a community, learners have to participate in its socio-cultural practices (Wenger, 1998). This process of integrating into the learning community includes and subsumes the learning of knowledge and skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However there are two main caveats on the effectiveness of this social model of learning. Firstly that it makes no sense to talk of knowledge that is decontextualized; and secondly that there is an assumption being made that new knowledge and learning will be found in these communities of practice (Tennant, 1998, p. 177). Tennant has also argued that the approach taken by Lave and Wenger has led to an under-appreciation of formal structures of learning (Tennant, 1998). However, Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) caution that adding a more formal structure to the creation of these ‘communities of practice’ is top down, overtly masculine, bureaucratic and technocratic. This kind of contrived collegiality is part of the problem and not the solution as it makes collaboration compulsory rather than voluntary, thereby limiting teachers’ ‘buy-in’. PLCs must allow the balance of power to shift from the centre to the periphery if they are to be effective (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). This of course raises interesting issues for the model of Professional Learning which is evaluated by Pedder, and which has been based on a centrally imposed collegiate model (McCormick, et al., 2011).

# Assessing the Research Evidence: Profiling Teachers’ Professional Learning

## Background

Pedder’s article (2007) attempts to address the issues of implementing effective Professional Learning in the context of PLCs across England. Schools, he argues, face very different challenges in supporting teacher learning – not least as there is no single perception on what makes this effective (Pedder, 2007, p. 232). His work fits into a much larger body of research and represents an evaluation point at the end of the LHTL programme (McCormick, et al., 2011). Pedder highlights many of the challenges of establishing an effective framework for Professional Learning. In doing this he identifies four dimensions of Professional Learning practices (‘factors’) and aims to codify five different teacher learning profiles (Clusters). His highlighting of systematic differences between schools, departments and sectors is crucial in understanding the challenges faced when attempting to implement effective Professional Learning. His findings have various implications for the specific context of Wellspring Grammar.

Pedder’s article represents a type of research literature. It aims to evaluate teachers’ perceptions of the importance Professional Learning in their schools as well as the value they place on different types of Professional Learning. His study uses surveys from the 32 schools who formed part of the LHTL Project. The theoretical framework on which LHTL was based is not discussed at length, although references are made to the appropriate literature which discusses the LHTL Project theory and rationale (James, et al., 2006). The framework therefore, whilst not explicitly discussed in the article, can easily be accessed through the connected works. This does mean that the article does not question any of the core assumptions and theoretical underpinning of the LHTL Project. Pedder is therefore looking to understand how the LHTL Project might be most effectively promoted, rather than questioning the nature of the Project itself. The underlying theory assumptions include the notion that the LHTL Project would lead to improved teaching and learning in the schools concerned (Pedder, 2007), and that collaborative learning practices, in the form of PLCs would be the best way to deliver this (James, et al., 2006). Clearly, the LHTL Project flies contrary to much of the work by Hargreaves, Fullan and others which suggests that such top-down projects are counter-productive (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Pedder’s findings may also therefore be open to debate and criticism in a theoretical sense. Ultimately, as Pedder is investigating variation in attitudes and perceived practice in a small sample of schools within a very specific framework, his conclusions therefore are only a small part of a much more complex picture.

## Type of Literature

Pedder’s article aims to “…examine evidence of systematic differences between school sectors, schools and groups of staff within schools in relation to teachers’ professional learning practices and values.” (Pedder, 2007, p. 231). The work falls uncomfortably into standard categories and lies somewhere between ‘knowledge for critical evaluation’ and ‘knowledge for action’. His mixed stance can be seen through the social scientific base for the LHTL Project, combined with the more applied research conducted through the Staff Questionnaire (Pedder, 2007). The knowledge he generates plays some role in raising questions for policy makers about the most effective types of Professional Learning. The article is both implicitly critical of existing CPD practices, but is also positive towards the possibility of improving Professional Learning in schools through modifying the LHTL scheme (Pedder, 2007, p. 250). Pedder’s positionality as part of the LHTL project is not really acknowledged and there is an underlying assumption that improvement might be achieved equally well beyond the small sample of 32 schools surveyed. A more conservative estimate might roll out this large study to other schools within the Local Authorities involved. With the article forming part of a much larger study, many of the assumptions are linked to an audience who have likely been connected to the project over the previous six years and may well share the uncritical view of the intellectual framework. The study is more interested in asking questions about how the LHTL Project might be better implemented through PLCs rather than in critically engaging with the concept itself. The article is more interested in raising practical rather than theoretical issues with relation to PLCs, although a number of issues are raised in terms of the impact of specific school contexts which do require some further theoretical study (Pedder, 2007, p. 250).

## Methodology

Methodologically, Pedder’s article is based on the LHTL Staff Questionnaire which he describes in some depth (Pedder, 2007, p. 232).[[1]](#footnote-1) Notably Section B, on which the study relies, is based on a double answer to the set of 28 statements. The first response represents the personal value placed by teachers on the statement, the second response represents their perception of its importance in their school (Pedder, 2007, p. 241). As this knowledge is based on perceptions there are a number of epistemological issue and methodological issues relating to how these views might alter on a day by day or even hour by hour basis. There are also some basic ontological issues in terms of the differing ways the statements might be interpreted and responded to by the participants. Pedder does not really engage with this issue at all, although it is covered in some depth in other articles related to the project (James, et al., 2006). Overall the survey was administered twice in 2002 and 2004, with a 63% return rate in the first instance and 55% in the second. The large numbers of responses do add some degree of statistical validity, although Pedder makes a strong claim that this survey is representative of schools in England (Pedder, 2007, p. 233). This certainly must be questioned as whilst 32 schools took part in 2002, only 23 took part in 2004. Little is done to explain this, or question the impact of this on the longitudinal validity of the data. Pedder also does little to explain how he has dealt with the longitudinal nature of the data as it all seems to have been dealt with as a single set. Never-the-less, a more detailed contextual analysis of the data is referenced in James et al. (2006).

## A Critical Analysis of Key Claims

A number of key claims of theoretical and practice knowledge are made by Pedder in the course of the article. Firstly, that there are some key theoretical underpinnings to teachers’ engagement in Professional Learning (see Appendix A for more details). He notes that there are four main ‘factors’ which represent the various purposes of Professional Learning: learning as enquiry, learning as a social enterprise, learning as critical reflection and learning as something intrinsically valuable (Pedder, 2007, p. 233). He also identifies five different clusters of teachers which represent broad groups for comparison and analysis. All of these categories and groups are statistically defined and based on evidence from the Staff Questionnaire. Pedder goes on to explain how the 28 statements from the Questionnaire were analysed to form the four ‘factors’ – a process he terms ‘factor analysis’ (Pedder, 2007, p. 234). There are some real questions of descriptive validity here, as Pedder does not adequately explain how these questions were weighted to form the ‘factors’. He also notes that three questions were discarded from analysis as they fitted more than one ‘factor’ profile. This may well have affected the results and changed the weightings of responses which fitted into certain ‘factors’. Pedder does add some degree of theoretical validity by highlighting that these ‘factors’ overlap with those created by Bolam et al. in their “Creating and Sustaining Effective PLCs” project (Pedder, 2007). The conclusion here was that there was a stark difference between teachers’ values and perceptions of ‘factors’ which were based on classroom practice and those which were not.

Pedder also spends some time explaining his process of ‘Cluster analysis’. The analysis involves the grouping of teachers who scored similar scores on the four ‘factors’ already identified. Pedder argues that there were five clear groupings (See Appendix A), although the results are clearly not provided due to space constraints. Cluster 1 recorded high responses for all four ‘factors’; Cluster 5 recorded lower than average values in all areas; Cluster 4 were similar to Cluster 1 but not as high in some areas; Cluster 2 were nearly the same as Cluster 1 but had a significantly different outlook on the enquiry ‘factor’; Cluster 3 were similar to Cluster 5, showing low perceptions and values in most areas. Pedder does provide an appendix which shows how the teachers were “clustered” based on their responses (Pedder, 2007, p. 252). It is important to note standard deviations for these groups are very high with figures ranging over 14 percentage points from the mean in some cases. There is also the issue that the groups are formed from staff perceptions of practice within the school rather than by their personal values. Had the latter been the case, then there might well have been only two clear groups which emerged. What is clear is that the groupings are not necessarily as distinct as Pedder insists. Pedder (2007, p. 238) describes Clusters 1 and 5 as being on opposite ends of a continuum of perceptions of practice and values, however this is simply not true[[2]](#footnote-2). Despite Pedder’s claims, the main differences between Clusters 1 and 5 come in terms of their perceptions of only two of the ‘factors’. There is also no significant difference between their stated personal values for all four ‘factors’, despite claims to the contrary (Pedder, 2007, p. 239). Whilst these claims are unlikely to be a deliberate attempt to mislead, Pedder’s choice of data interpretation is likely to be in no small way linked to his promotion of the wider LHTL Project and his desire to show groups not supporting it properly.

The theoretical framework of these ‘factors’ and Clusters is used by Pedder to make practice knowledge claims about the effectiveness and value placed on Professional Learining within school contexts. He shows that whilst 46% of Primary school staff fell into Cluster 1, only 25% of secondary school staff were in the same band. He draws from this that promoting Professional Learning in Primary schools might be more developed than in Secondary schools. Importantly, Pedder (2007, p. 240) notes that the smaller size of Primary schools may well have impacted on this result. However, there is an implicit assumption that membership of Cluster 1 implies that staff are more engaged with Professional Learning and value it more, as their perceptions of the quality of Professional Learning at their schools outstrips their personal values. An alternative interpretation might be that this shows a complacency, an interpretation which Pedder does not really address. Interestingly he goes on to show that in an analysis of support staff, nearly 50% fell into Cluster 1 and a further 40% into Cluster 4, both groups showing a high perception of the state of Professional Learning in the institution. Those with more responsibility tended to fall more into Clusters 3 and 5 where values placed on Professional Learning far outstripped the perceived provision in the school environment. Again, there is an assumption made by Pedder (2007, p. 240) that Clusters 1 and 4 represent a positive engagement with the LHTL Project and Clusters 3 and 5 a rejection of the concept of Professional Learning. There is no direct evidence to back up these ideological claims however, thereby damaging the interpretative validity of Pedder’s study.

Interestingly, Pedder’s analysis reveals some distinct differences between Secondary teachers of different subjects. Again he states that Clusters 1 and 4 show positive engagement with Professional Learning. He then shows how some subjects show a higher percentage of staff in these categories[[3]](#footnote-3). He compares this to other areas such as Humanities and Science where only 35% and 32% of teachers fall into these ‘positive’ Clusters. The article goes on to show that 46% of Humanities teachers were members of Clusters 3 or 5 as well as 37% of Science staff. These figures certainly give the impression that there is a fundamental divide between the perceptions and values of Professional Learning in different subjects (Pedder, 2007, p. 242). Pedder does note however that even MFL had 20% of their staff in Clusters 3 and 5. He deals with this errant data by suggesting this may have more to do with the policies of individual schools.

Pedder (2007, p. 250) is led to conclude that schools need to develop differentiated strategies to help different groups of staff engage with Professional Learning. This would certainly fit with the notion of devolving responsibility and therefore has some theoretical validity (Stigler & Hiebert, 2009). He goes on to argue that in order for this to work, teachers in Clusters 3 and 5 will need help in developing “…strategies, dispositions and relationships conducive to more classroom contextualized collaborative teacher learning.” (Pedder, 2007, p. 250). However the interpretive validity of this statement can be questioned, as the study has not proven that teachers in Clusters 3 and 5 do not value collaborative learning[[4]](#footnote-4). Indeed, the data clearly shows that in relative terms, teachers in Clusters 3 and 5 place a similar value on collaborative learning to other Clusters. This might suggest that the school and not the individual is falling short. Finally, Pedder concludes that the main challenge for schools will be “…fostering classroom research among groups of teachers while at the same time ﬁnding ways of minimizing unhelpful diversity among staff groups that prevents the development of a shared sense of direction.” (Pedder, 2007, p. 250). Although this has theoretical validity in fitting in with the studies of Mizell et al. (2011), there is an underlying assumption that diversity might be ‘unhelpful’. He chooses to ignore theoretical imperatives which imply that a centrally imposed PLC is more damaging than it is helpful (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992).

# Implications for Practice

The wider research conducted here seems to suggest that the implementation of PLCs at Wellspring Grammar has been a step in the right direction. The majority of the available literature agrees that this move will promote the development of teaching and learning. Research would suggest that ‘communities of practice’ can implement change quickly, moving away from a cumbersome hierarchy (Wenger, 1998). This implies that the History department should continue to actively participate in this mode of Professional Learning.

However, Pedder’s research has a number of other implications for practice in the context of the History department at Wellspring Grammar. The PLCs at Wellspring aim to promote AfL, much in the same vein as the LHTL Project. As such it is important to note that, in line with Pedder’s findings (2007), the History department may perceive far less impact from the PLCs than other departments within the school. Experiences at Wellspring would suggest that many members of staff within the Humanities are dissatisfied with the cross-curricular nature of the PLCs. This subverts their effectiveness and leads to discontentment rather than the formation of true, active communities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). A question mark remains over strategies to deal with the apparent disconnect between humanities teachers’ values of Professional Learning, compared to their judgments of its implementation. To this end, Pendry et al. (1998) and Haydn et al. (2008) have suggested that a departmental focus rather than a cross-curricular focus may well help with teachers seeing the value of Professional Learning. This of course will require a whole school change of direction.

A second challenge comes in the form of the extent to which control of Professional Learning should be devolved. Pedder (2007) discusses walking a fine line between devolved control and unified direction. However Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) have written such an approach off as nothing more than contrived collegiality. The challenge therefore is for the History department to take a more active role in determining its own Professional Learning agenda; not simply identifying a CPD agenda, but establishing a functioning PLC. This should have a shared purpose, language and pedagogy, be subject specific, and involve a constant evolution of relations (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such a task is no mean feat and will require the active participation of all members of the department. For this to happen, some significant work will need to be done in looking at building effective communities of practice with teachers at different stages of their careers (Haydn, et al., 2008).

Pedder’s study has also highlighted the notion that despite a clear focus on learning and professional development, not all teachers have bought into the concept of a centrally directed PLC. In order for Professional Learning to be effective as demanded by Ofsted (2011), the PLCs must meet the high values shared by the majority of teachers for learning both inside and outside the classroom. The gulf identified by Pedder is one of unrealised values, rather than a rejection of Professional Learning. A PLC at Wellspring Grammar would therefore need to encourage all teachers to contribute to a long-term ‘departmental memory’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This in turn would help individuals to see a greater perceived value in the Professional Learning and therefore generate a greater motivation to participate (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). It seems that this could only be done through a system of collegiality which grows from the ground up and is genuinely interested in long term development of all the staff involved.

It is clear that much work needs to be done in changing perceptions of Professional Learning. For Pedder (2007) this means changing the perceptions of certain Clusters of staff towards Professional Learning. However critical analysis would suggest that the problem may lie with a theoretical and management framework which promotes managerial control of Professional Learning rather than intellectual and professional freedom (Tennant, 1998) (Sugrue, 2004). Where the literature currently falls down is in recommending courses of action to remedy this situation. In effect, in PLCs the profession has been granted an excellent means to achieve Professional Learning. However, differing ideologies determine that these means are being used for a range of purposes, measured against an even greater range of ‘desirable’ outcomes. At this point it seems that not all of these are conducive to effective professional development. Perhaps the main lesson to draw is that effective Professional Learning is something which “…equips the individual for commitment and action... It works most effectively not through authority but through attempting to generate responsibility and caring in a context of emancipation.” (Stenhouse, 1978, p. 741)

# Appendix A – Clusters and Values

1. The Questionnaire contains three main sections. “Section A with 30 statements about classroom assessment; section B with 28 statements about teachers’ professional learning; and section C with 26 statements about school management practices and systems. A ﬁnal section asks staff to record details of their school, length of professional experience, key responsibilities, phase and subjects as appropriate” (Pedder, 2007, p. 232) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is interesting to note that Pedder decided to show his Clusters on a line graph, suggesting continuous data rather than as a bar chart or radar chart, which would have been more appropriate. See Appendix A for an example of Pedder’s data converted to a radar chart format. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Notably MFL (58%), English (54%) and PE (50%) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is very clear from the data in Appendix A [↑](#footnote-ref-4)