In some ways, ALEA Local Councils operate as professional learning communities, bringing members from a number of schools together to focus on various aspects of literacy learning and teaching. As an organisation, ALEA places great value on professional learning. It is therefore interesting to note some recent research findings about the value of professional learning communities.

A ‘hot topic’
Increased understanding of the links between quality teaching and student achievement has led to greater recognition of the importance of strengthening teachers’ individual and collective capacity. Evidence from international studies indicates the value of developing professional learning communities for capacity building for sustainable improvement. It is reported that research into the development of professional communities has become a ‘hot topic’ in many countries. (Stoll, Bolam et al., 2006)

Defining professional learning communities
A report summarising the major findings from the Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities, funded by the Department for Education and Skills, the General Teaching Council for England, and the National College for School Leadership from 2002-2004 adopted this definition of a professional learning community:

An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning. (Bolam et al., 2005)

Another study described a professional learning community as ...

… an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils’ learning. (Stoll et al., 2006)

The findings from this study suggested that professional learning communities display these eight characteristics:
1. shared values and vision
2. collective responsibility for students’ learning
3. collaboration focused on learning
4. group as well as individual professional learning
5. reflective professional enquiry
6. openness, networks and partnerships
7. inclusive membership
8. mutual trust, respect and support. (Stoll et al., 2006)

Creating and sharing knowledge
Katz and Earl (2006) investigated networks and professional learning communities in order to identify features of networks that could enable the creation and sharing of knowledge. Their analysis identified seven key features: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, inquiry, leadership, accountability, and capacity building and support. Their investigation suggested that networked learning communities represent complex interactions between structures and activities that are intentionally dedicated to creating new knowledge and sharing it broadly.

An extensive review of research studies addressed five major questions about professional learning communities:
1. What are professional learning communities?
2. What makes professional learning communities effective?
3. What processes are used to create and develop an effective professional learning community?
4. What other factors help or inhibit the creation and development of effective professional learning communities?
5. Are effective professional learning communities sustainable? (Stoll, Bolam et al., 2006)

This review identified a comprehensive body of research related to these questions. There was a clear indication that creating and developing professional learning communities is dependent on a number of processes inside and outside schools, and these were described under four headings: focusing on learning processes; making the best of human and social resources; managing structural resources; and interacting with and drawing on external agents. (Stoll, Bolam et al., 2006) Many factors were identified as being involved in these processes, including an emphasis on group or collective learning, active support of school leadership at all levels, and school organisation that allows time for staff to meet and talk regularly.

Various factors were found to be involved in schools’ overall
capacity for change and development, including individuals’ orientation to change, group dynamics, school context influences. The review concluded that building professional learning communities is by no means easy... Nonetheless, it also demonstrates that PLCs appear to be worth the considerable effort put to creating and developing them, although there is still much more to learn about sustainability. (Stoll, Bolam, et al., 2006)

A further aspect of professional learning communities involves networks not only within but between schools. Networked learning takes place when individuals from different schools in a network come together in groups to engage in purposeful and sustained developmental activity informed by the public knowledge base, using their own know-how and co-constructing knowledge together. … In doing so, they are involved in four distinct learning processes:

- **Learning from one another**: where groups capitalise on their individual differences and diversity through sharing their knowledge, experience, expertise, practices, and know-how.
- **Learning with one another**: where individuals learn together, notice that they are learning together, co-construct learning and make meaning together. Collaborative practitioner enquiry, and collaborative learning about recent research are good examples of this activity.
- **Learning on behalf of**: where learning between individuals from different schools is also done on behalf of other individuals within their school or network – or the wider system.
- **Meta-learning**: where individuals are additionally learning about the processes of their own learning. (Jackson & Temperley, 2007)

**Instructional rounds**

An interesting example of networked learning (City, Elmore, Fiarman & Teitel, 2009) is described as ‘instructional rounds’, which are networks based on classroom observation and extensive and disciplined collaborative discussion. In instructional rounds, colleagues … gather regularly to engage in and develop the practice of rounds together, over time developing a community of practice that supports their improvement work. Key features of the model are the observations with colleagues and the subsequent discussion of these observations. The rounds are intended to bridge the knowledge gap between educators and their practice. The rounds mean:

… a set of protocols and processes for observing, analysing, discussing, and understanding instruction that can be used to improve student learning at scale. The practice works because it creates a common discipline and focus among practitioners with a common purpose and set of problems. (City et al., 2009)

These protocols add rigour to the process, which involves networks of principals, teachers, and other educators who meet at regular intervals, each time at a different school. They spend time together observing the teaching and learning, and then debrief exhaustively on what they have seen. In the debriefing meeting, members are further asked to take four steps, which create opportunities for professional learning embedded in close observations of practice. These four steps connect the observations to developing capacity amongst teachers and within schools:

- **Describe** what they observed in class
- **Analyse** any patterns that emerge
- **Predict** the kind of learning they might expect from the teaching they observe
- **Recommend the next level of work** that could help the school better achieve their desired goal. (City et al., 2009)

**Summing up: effective professional learning**

A research review published in 2009 (Darling-Hammond & Richardson) identified the effectiveness of ‘sustained, job-embedded, collaborative teacher learning strategies’. They concluded that ‘professional learning communities can change practice and transform student learning’. The review found that research supports professional development that:

- Deepens teachers’ knowledge of content and how to teach it to students
- Helps teachers understand how students learn specific content.
- Provides opportunities for active, hands-on learning.
- Enables teachers to acquire new knowledge, apply it to practice, and reflect on the results with colleagues.
- Is part of a school reform effort that links curriculum, assessment and standards to professional learning.
- Is collaborative and collegial.
- Is intensive and sustained over time. (Darling Hammond & Richardson, 2009).

**References**


