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LEADING CHANGE THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: BUILDING COLLECTIVE EFFICACY FOR ENGLISH LITERACY OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Sustained improvement in student learning depends less on isolated training events than on the everyday professional culture that school leaders build and protect. This article presents an evaluative account of a subject-based Professional Learning Community (PLC) established to address a persistent decline in English reading and writing outcomes across Grades III to IX in a large school. Grounded in the Diagnose–Intervene–Implement–Evaluate (DIIE) cycle and informed by research on teacher agency, collective efficacy and distributed leadership, the initiative moved seven volunteer English teachers, and approximately three hundred fifty students, through a structured twelve-week cycle of diagnosis, collaborative planning, classroom implementation and rigorous evaluation. Reading scores rose from 53.4 per cent to 83 per cent and writing scores from 34.8 per cent to 68.6 per cent, with calculated effect sizes of 0.97 and 0.86 respectively, both comfortably exceeding the widely cited 0.40 hinge point for meaningful educational impact. Beyond the numbers, the article traces a leader's own transformation, from a director of compliance toward a facilitator of professional learning, and distils practical lessons for school leaders seeking to embed sustainable, evidence-informed collaboration into their own contexts.

INTRODUCTION:

A Familiar Problem, Revisited

Every school leader eventually confronts the same uncomfortable moment: assessment data that does not match the story the school likes to tell about itself. In our case, a routine review of internal Beaconhouse Mathematics and English Testing Assessment (B-META) results revealed a considerable decline in English attainment, most visibly in Grades V and VII, where reading and writing scores fell well below the school's benchmark. The instinct in many schools is to respond with a mandated, whole-school professional development event: a single workshop, delivered once, evaluated by a feedback form, and quietly forgotten by the following term.

That earlier, compliance-driven attempt at a whole-school PLC had, in fact, already failed in our own context. Discussions remained generic, disconnected from the specific pedagogical problems teachers faced in their own classrooms, and, without a clear sense of ownership, the initiative could not survive beyond a few months. It was an expensive lesson, but an instructive one. It taught us that professional learning imposed from above rarely outlives the leader's attention, and that meaningful, durable change

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requires teachers to hold a genuine stake in both the problem and the solution.

This article revisits that lesson through a second, more deliberately designed initiative: a subject-specific Professional Learning Community for English, built around teacher volunteerism, structured evidence use, and a leadership stance that shifted from directing improvement to enabling it. The account draws on a full academic cycle of planning, mentor consultation, implementation and evaluation completed as part of postgraduate study in educational leadership, and is offered here as a practical case study for school leaders wrestling with the same question: how do we make professional collaboration genuinely improve student learning, rather than simply occupy a slot on the school calendar?

Theoretical Foundations

The initiative did not emerge from intuition alone. It was deliberately anchored in several interlocking bodies of research, spanning instructional leadership, professional learning communities, teacher agency, adult learning, evaluative leadership and change theory that together offer a coherent rationale for why collaborative, evidence-driven inquiry outperforms one-off training as a lever for school improvement. Each is discussed below not as an isolated citation but as a specific design decision it produced.

Instructional Leadership and the Primacy of Teaching Quality

The starting premise for the whole initiative rests on a well-established finding in the school leadership literature: that a leader's influence on student outcomes is almost entirely indirect, exercised through teachers rather than around them. Leithwood and colleagues (2004) identify leadership as second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors affecting what students learn, while Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) go further, arguing that when leaders promote and personally participate in teacher professional learning, this single leadership practice has roughly twice the impact on student outcomes of any other activity available to a Head. Robinson and Timperley (2007) sharpen the point still further, distinguishing leadership focused on the improvement of teaching and learning from leadership consumed by administrative or managerial tasks, and finding the former far more powerful. This body of evidence explains a specific and, on paper, unusual decision in this initiative: that the first-hand knowledge through in-person attendance of every PLC session, rather than delegating oversight to a coordinator or receiving summary reports after the fact.

Professional Learning Communities and Collective Responsibility

DuFour (2004) frames a genuine PLC not as a meeting schedule but as a fundamental shift in how a staff thinks about its work: from individual teaching activity toward collective responsibility for whether students actually learn. Stoll and colleagues (2006), reviewing the wider literature, argue that effective PLCs shift the unit of accountability from the individual classroom to the shared inquiry of the group. Vescio, Ross and Adams (2008), synthesizing the empirical research most directly, add two findings of particular relevance here. First, teacher authority, meaning genuine control over the direction of the collaborative work itself, is one of the clearest drivers of whether a PLC changes teaching culture at all: their review reports a case in which handing curriculum decisions to teachers, rather than prescribing them from outside, transformed participants' sense of ownership over the resulting changes. Second, and more decisively, they show that collaboration on its own does not reliably raise student achievement; where teachers met regularly but without a sustained, explicit focus on instructional practice and its effect on student learning, achievement gains simply did not appear, whereas focused collaboration produced them consistently. Both findings speak directly to design choices made here: facilitation was rotated among teachers rather than retained by the Head, and every session was anchored to a specific diagnostic finding about student writing or reading, rather than left as open collegial discussion. Harris and Jones (2017) add an important caveat directly relevant to this school's own history: a PLC produces a lasting

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impact on practice and achievement only when it is sustained over time and properly resourced, rather than treated as a short-lived initiative. This is precisely where the earlier, whole-school attempt at the school had failed, and it is why the redesigned initiative was deliberately narrowed to a single subject with protected, recurring time, rather than launched again across every department at once.

Harris and Jones (2017: 19), synthesizing Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) concept of professional capital, offer a further, practically useful distinction: a PLC builds human capital (a teacher's own skill and knowledge), social capital (what teachers gain from one another through collaboration) and decisional capital (the professional judgement developed through repeated, evaluated practice), and that these three combine with a leader's own capital to determine an initiative's overall quality. Harris and Jones (2017: 20) add a related finding directly relevant to this school's own history: professional learning communities that are imposed on teachers tend to be far less successful than those that are teacher-led. Read against this framework, the earlier, failed whole-school PLC had invested almost exclusively in human capital, a single training event intended to upgrade individual knowledge, while neglecting social capital (there was no sustained structure for teachers to learn from one another) and decisional capital (there was no cycle of evaluated practice through which judgment could develop). The redesigned initiative deliberately targeted all three: social capital through the fortnightly collaborative sessions themselves, decisional capital through the DIIE cycle's insistence on evaluated implementation, and human capital as a by-product of both.

This distinction also clarifies a finding that might otherwise seem counter-intuitive. Timperley and colleagues (2007: 25–26), in a synthesis directly cited by Harris and Jones (2017), found little evidence that simply giving teachers time and resources as self-regulating professionals is sufficient, on its own, to improve outcomes for students; as they put it, the "conditions that promote learning are more complex than this" (Timperley et al., 2007: 26). This finding matched our own experience precisely. Protected fortnightly time was necessary, but insufficient by itself, for the initiative's success; it was the combination of protected time with voluntary ownership, a shared diagnostic focus and a closed evaluation loop that produced the result, a distinction that matters for any leader tempted to treat a simple timetable change as the whole of the solution.

Teacher Agency as an Ecological Achievement

Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) argue that teacher agency is not a fixed personal trait but an ecological achievement, produced through the interplay of individual capacity, structural conditions such as timetables and policy, and relational dynamics with colleagues and leaders. Biesta and Tedder (2007) reinforce this by describing agency as relational and situated rather than an attribute an individual simply possesses, which repositions the leader's job as one of shaping enabling conditions rather than issuing directives. This reframing was central to the initiative's design: participation was voluntary in principle, facilitation was rotated among teachers rather than held by the Head, and the sessions were deliberately convened in the school's Learning Centre rather than in my office, a small but symbolically important structural choice intended to signal shared ownership rather than supervision.

Collective Efficacy as a Driver of Achievement

Donohoo (2017) advances the concept of collective teacher efficacy, the shared belief among a staff that their combined effort can meaningfully influence student learning, and presents evidence that this belief is among the strongest available predictors of achievement, in some analyses outweighing the effect of socio-economic background. Donohoo identifies four conditions that cultivate it: shared goals, evidence-focused dialogue, supportive leadership, and coherent instructional planning. All four were built into the PLC's structure by design, most visibly through the requirement that every session's discussion be anchored in actual diagnostic data and student work samples rather than opinion, and through the shared

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success indicators agreed by the group before implementation began.

Adult Learning and Reflective Practice

Because the initiative asked experienced professionals to change established classroom habits, it was equally important to draw on theories of how adults, rather than students, learn. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2015) identify relevance, self-direction, prior experience and problem orientation as central to adult motivation, an insight that shaped the decision to let teachers select and adapt their own instructional strategies within each grade band rather than being handed a prescribed toolkit. Schön (1983) complements this with the concept of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, which underpinned the use of reflective journals throughout the cycle: teachers were asked not merely to try new strategies but to document, in their own words, what those strategies revealed about their practice and their students' learning.

Evaluative Leadership and the DIIE Cycle

Hattie and Smith (2021) describe ten mindframes for school leaders, several of which position the leader explicitly as an evaluator of impact rather than a deliverer of activity, a stance Rodgers (2025) operationalizes through a practical Diagnose–Intervene–Implement–Evaluate (DIIE) cycle, which became the organizing structure for the entire initiative described here. The framework's particular value lies in its insistence on closing the loop: every diagnostic finding had to lead to a planned intervention, every intervention had to be implemented with a degree of fidelity, and every implementation had to be evaluated against the original baseline using a defined effect-size calculation, rather than judged by impression or anecdote. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2017) reinforces this by cautioning that evidence is only useful when it is authentic, context-specific and focused on improving practice rather than generating additional workload, a principle that guided the decision to build diagnostic assessment into existing class tests rather than introducing new ones.

Leading Change and Distributed Leadership

Kotter (1995) identifies the communication of urgency and the celebration of short-term wins as decisive factors in sustaining momentum through change, both of which were used deliberately in this initiative by sharing early gains in student performance with the wider staff. Fullan (2011) warns against relying on pressure, fear or accountability alone as the primary driver of reform, arguing instead for the deliberate building of professional capacity, while Bridges (2009) offers a psychological account of why some teachers resisted peer observation early in the cycle: change is experienced internally as an ending before it can be experienced as a new beginning, and leaders who expect instant enthusiasm typically misread this normal transitional discomfort as failure. Harris (2014) makes the case for distributed leadership as the mechanism that ultimately makes any of this sustainable, since improvement efforts anchored in a single leader's energy rarely survive that leader's attention moving elsewhere. This principle shaped the decision to rotate facilitation of PLC sessions among the seven participating teachers, rather than have the Head chair every meeting, and it is the same logic now guiding the extension of the model into Mathematics and Science.

The Initiative in Context

The school in which this initiative was undertaken is a large, purpose-built, co-educational institution catering to approximately nine hundred students, part of a long-established international school network. The annual B-META result review showed Grade V students scoring below 40 per cent and Grade VII students below 50 per cent in English, against a school benchmark of 70 per cent for reading and writing across all levels. Grade VI, by contrast, was performing comparatively well, which strengthened the case

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that the issue was one of inconsistent instructional practice across classes rather than a uniformly weak curriculum.

Following discussion with the School Leadership Team (SLT) and all English teachers, seven teachers spanning Grades III to IX volunteered to form a subject-based PLC, collectively responsible for close to four hundred students. Critically, participation was framed as a professional opportunity rather than a directive. This single design choice, informed directly by the earlier failed whole-school attempt, proved foundational to everything that followed.

In framing this design, it proved useful to borrow, at a much smaller scale, the three core principles Harris and Jones (2017: 26) identify at the heart of Wales's own national PLC model: an absolute focus on improving learner outcomes, purposeful rather than open-ended collaboration, and a combination of professional autonomy with accountability. Translated into this school's single-subject context, these three principles mapped directly onto the initiative's design choices: the diagnostic focus on B-META reading and writing data kept the work anchored to learner outcomes rather than general professional development; the DIIE (diagnosis, intervention, implementation and evaluation) cycle gave the collaboration a clear, purposeful structure rather than open-ended discussion; and voluntary participation, paired with a rigorous, effect-size-based evaluation phase, supplied autonomy and accountability together, rather than treating them as competing demands.

Implementing the DIIE Cycle

The initiative was structured as a twelve-week cycle within the first term, comprising two weeks of diagnosis, two weeks of intervention planning, six weeks of classroom implementation, and two weeks of evaluation. Fortnightly sixty-minute sessions were held in the school's Learning Centre rather than the Head's office, a deliberate choice intended to signal equality of contribution among participants.

Diagnosis

Teachers began by analyzing diagnostic assessment data, lesson observation notes and samples of student writing across three broad bands: Grades III to V, where the gaps centered on vocabulary, phonics and basic sentence construction; Grades VI and VII, where paragraphing, cohesion and grammar application were the concern; and Grades VIII and IX, where the challenge lay in text analysis, argument development and extended writing. This banded diagnosis allowed subsequent interventions to be genuinely differentiated rather than uniformly applied across a seven-year age range.

Intervention Planning

Drawing on the diagnostic findings, teachers co-designed research-based instructional strategies for each band: modelling and scaffolded sentence starters for younger learners, graphic organizers and structured paragraph frameworks for the middle years, and analytical writing with evidence-based argumentation for the senior classes. Strategies such as Bloom's questioning, think-aloud modelling, reciprocal reading and retrieval practice were selected through professional dialogue rather than imposed by the leadership team.

Implementation

Over six weeks, teachers applied the agreed strategies in their own classrooms while engaging in peer observation, framed explicitly as developmental rather than evaluative, consistent with Hendry and Oliver's (2012) findings on the professional value of non-judgmental peer observation. Reflective journals and a shared digital folder of resources supported ongoing dialogue between the fortnightly sessions. Initial apprehension about being observed, a common feature of early-stage PLCs, was addressed through consistent reassurance of purpose and, over several weeks, gave way to a more open culture of shared problem-solving.

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Evaluation

The evaluation phase used assessment data collected against the same standard as the original diagnosis, ensuring comparability. Effect size was calculated using the standard formula: the difference between mean post-test and pre-test scores, divided by the pre-test standard deviation. The results are summarized below.

Domain	Baseline (Diagnosis)	Post-Intervention (Evaluation)	Effect Size
Reading	53.4%	83.0%	0.97
Writing	34.8%	68.6%	0.86

Both effect sizes substantially exceeded the 0.40 hinge point identified by Hattie (2012) as the threshold for a year's worth of expected growth, indicating a genuinely substantial rather than marginal impact on student learning. Teacher Effectiveness Framework (TEF) scores also rose across the group, and student feedback pointed to improved confidence in using linking words and organizing ideas in writing.

What Changed for Teachers, and for Me

Numbers alone do not capture what shifted in the culture of the team. Teachers who had previously worked in relative isolation began sharing lesson resources and observations unprompted between formal sessions. English teachers who completed the cycle expressed willingness to mentor colleagues in other departments, and two subject leads, in Mathematics and Science, subsequently approached the school to adopt a similar model for their own subjects, using the existing Mid-Term and End-Term examinations as diagnosis and evaluation points to avoid additional workload.

Our own role changed more than we initially anticipated. Sessions were attended in person and training sessions were joined alongside teachers. This reflects Fullan's (2011) description of effective leaders as lead learners: people who model the very practices of reflection and inquiry they ask of their staff. I also learned, sometimes uncomfortably, that leadership influence in this context was relational rather than positional. Trust had to be earned in the room, through consistent presence and a willingness to lower my own status relative to the expertise in front of me, echoing Robinson's (2024) observation that effective leaders raise the status of teachers rather than protecting their own.

Not every outcome was uniformly positive. One teacher's classroom performance declined slightly across the cycle, a reminder that collective strategies, however well designed, do not remove the need for individualized coaching and support. This tempered any temptation to treat the initiative's aggregate success as evidence that every participant had been equally well served, and it has directly informed a personal leadership development objective to strengthen the specificity and consistency of my own feedback to individual teachers going forward.

Research on language teachers' professional identity suggests why this kind of individualized follow-up matters, beyond simply improving technique. Hiver and Whitehead (2018) found that teachers who hit a difficult classroom moment did not all make sense of it the same way: some came to see the episode as evidence of their own capacity to turn a difficult situation around, which reinforced their confidence going forward, while others, having exercised what looked like a similar degree of effort and skill, instead concluded that their intervention had quietly made things worse, which eroded their confidence instead. Which of these two readings a teacher settles on is not guaranteed by the outcome itself; it is shaped by how the moment gets talked through afterwards. This is the more precise reason a coaching conversation with the teacher whose results dipped matters here, not only to adjust what she does differently next time,

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but to help her land on the first reading rather than the second.

A further caution is owed to the reader directly. We both facilitated this initiative and are reporting its impact, and Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008), in their own review of PLC research, are blunt : research conducted by the person who ran the initiative "will be suspect" (p. 90), whatever the rigour of its methodology. Seven of the eleven most credible studies in their review drew on evaluators independent of whoever facilitated the work; this account has no such independence to offer. The effect sizes reported here are drawn from standardized assessment data rather than from my own impression, which limits but does not remove this concern. Readers, and school leaders considering a similar initiative, should weigh this account accordingly: as a detailed, honestly-reported single case, not as independent evaluation.

Challenges, and What Made the Initiative Hold

The initiative was not without friction. Finding sixty protected minutes fortnightly against an already packed timetable was a persistent logistical strain, eased only once teachers themselves began to see tangible value in the sessions. Running separate diagnostic assessments proved time-consuming until the team agreed to build diagnosis into existing class assessments rather than adding new ones. Early skepticism about whether the initiative would outlast the term, understandable given the school's own recent history with a failed whole-school PLC, gradually gave way to genuine engagement as teachers observed the strategies working in their own classrooms (Ramzan et al., 2023a).

Several conditions appear, in retrospect, to have been decisive in sustaining the initiative where the earlier attempt had failed. Participation was voluntary rather than mandated, which protected a sense of professional ownership. Facilitation was rotated among teachers rather than concentrated in the Head, which distributed both leadership and accountability. The focus stayed tightly bound to one subject and a clearly diagnosed problem, rather than sprawling across the whole staff and every possible topic. And, perhaps most importantly, the improvement cycle was closed by evidence: teachers could see, in effect-size terms, that their collective effort had produced a measurable difference for the students in front of them (Ramzan et al., 2023b).

A useful, if sobering, point of comparison is Wales's own national attempt to build professional learning communities at system scale between 2009 and 2014, documented in detail by Harris and Jones (2017). Despite sustained government investment, a clear national model and explicit ministerial backing, the initiative encountered precisely the difficulties this school's own PLC was designed to avoid: teachers across many schools found dedicated meeting time simply did not materialize once national training had concluded, and the purpose of the work was, in Harris and Jones's own account, criticized as too "woolly" (2017: 29) once removed from a single, locally diagnosed problem; a fast pace of scale-up, from a six-school pilot to a national roll-out within roughly a year, left "relatively little time to evaluate the impact of the training" before it reached full scale (Harris and Jones, 2017: 30); and, as noted above, Harris and Jones (2017: 20) separately report that professional learning communities imposed on teachers tend to be far less successful than those that are teacher-led. A single school moving one subject through one deliberately narrow cycle is, of course, a different proposition to a national reform touching every school in a country; but the underlying lesson holds at either scale, and it is precisely the lesson this initiative's design tried to anticipate: protected time, a clearly diagnosed and bounded purpose, and genuine (rather than mandated) ownership are not optional refinements to a PLC model, but close to the whole of what determines whether one survives its first year.

Implications for Practice

Several practical implications emerge for school leaders considering a similar initiative in their own context. First, begin narrow. A tightly defined, subject-specific PLC anchored in genuine diagnostic need is more likely to sustain itself than an ambitious whole-school programme launched before any single

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group has demonstrated success. Second, protect voluntarism wherever the school's context allows it; ownership, once established, does far more to sustain effort than compliance ever will. Third, build in a genuine evaluation phase from the outset, including a defined method for measuring impact, rather than treating evaluation as an afterthought once enthusiasm has already waned. Fourth, distribute facilitation early. A PLC that depends entirely on the Head's continued attention is not, by definition, a sustainable one. Finally, expect and plan for an implementation dip: Fullan's (2011) observation that performance may temporarily decline as new practices are adopted proved accurate in this initiative, and leaders who interpret this as failure rather than a normal stage of change risk abandoning promising work too early.

Conclusion

This initiative began with an uncomfortable set of numbers and a leader's memory of an earlier attempt that had not worked. What made the difference the second time was not a more sophisticated intervention in isolation, but a more deliberate theory of change: teacher agency protected through genuine choice, evidence used as a compass rather than a scorecard, and leadership exercised through facilitation rather than direction. The resulting effect sizes, 0.97 in reading and 0.86 in writing, are a meaningful outcome in their own right. But the more durable legacy may be cultural: a group of teachers who now default to collaborative inquiry rather than isolated practice, and colleagues in other subjects who have asked, unprompted, to build something similar for themselves. For school leaders facing their own uncomfortable set of numbers, the lesson on offer here is a modest one: structure the collaboration, protect the ownership, and let the evidence do the persuading.

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