

Chapter 7

Professional learning culture

Key to the development of great teaching in classrooms and schools is the strength of a school's **professional learning culture**. *Learning schools* are schools which have a strong professional learning culture.

In schools with such a culture, professional learning is understood to be as important a consideration as student learning. Teachers and school leaders understand that professional learning and student learning are interconnected: where there is high-quality professional learning, improved student learning follows. Figure 7.1 illustrates this relationship.

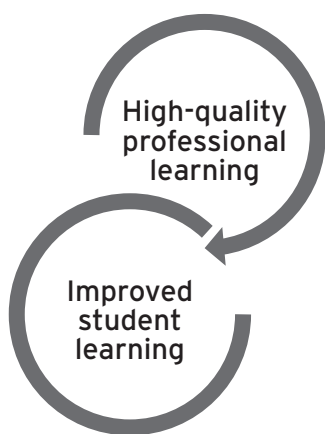


Figure 7.1: The relationship between professional learning and student learning. High-quality professional learning leads to improved student learning. In the absence of professional learning, student learning will not improve.

In this chapter, we will explore what we mean by a ‘professional learning culture’ and start a discussion about how such a culture can be developed. In later chapters, we will drill down to explore specific features of this. We will begin our discussion with an exploration of what the word ‘culture’ means.

Culture

Cultures are about people. When we talk about the **culture** of a school, we are referring to the idea that *this is what we do here*. In other words, we are referring to the behaviours of the people who work in the school. When behaviours become routine, they become *habits*. Rather than thinking, ‘I must remember to do that’, people just do it. The behaviour has become a part of the way that the school works. Habits are the essence of culture.

Climate

The behaviours of people are influenced by **climate**. By climate, I mean *how it feels* to work here. Climate is about ethos and the environment in which people work. Climate isn’t a physical thing – it doesn’t relate directly to the quality of the building or the resources available in it. The most important influences on climate are the *interactions between people* who are working in the organisation. Positive interactions typically lead to a positive climate; negative interactions lead to the opposite.

On the one hand, climate is invisible, because it is about *feel*. On the other hand, climate is very visible through the behaviours and actions of staff. In that sense, culture is a visible manifestation of climate. Ensuring a positive climate is essential to ensuring a positive culture.

In schools with a positive climate:

1. Teachers are supported and encouraged to ‘take risks’
2. There are high levels of trust (balanced with appropriate accountability)
3. There is mutual respect between teachers, students and school leaders
4. There are high standards of conduct from students and staff
5. Working practices are grounded in collegiality (which is different from consensus – it means that the views of people are sought, listened to and considered)

6. There is recognition of effort and high standards of work (which comes across as sincere, rather than tokenistic or over the top)
7. Staff and students are made to feel valued and appreciated
8. People are prioritised over paperwork
9. There is a sense of 'team' – we are all in this together, we all have a vested interest in success and we can all play a role in helping to support, challenge and learn from each other
10. There is collective pride

Mindsets

In the previous chapter, we talked a lot about **mindsets**. Mindsets influence the climate and the culture of a school. Positive mindsets typically lead to positive climates and cultures; negative mindsets lead to negative climates and cultures. Figure 7.2 illustrates the relationship between culture, climate and mindsets.

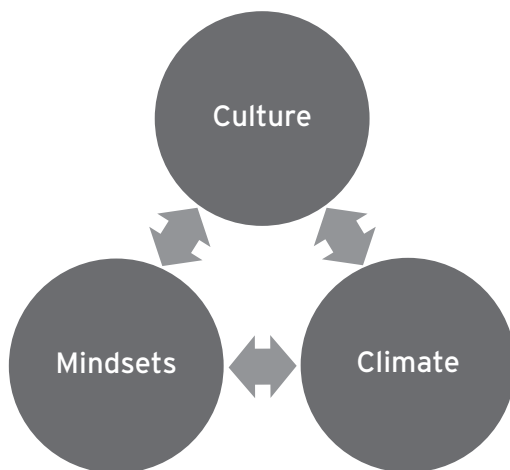


Figure 7.2: The relationship between culture, climate and mindsets.

Culture, climate and mindsets feed off and influence one another. If there are problems with one, it is usually a result of a problem with one or both of the others. If we accept that the development of culture (specifically, a *professional learning culture*) is key to the development of

great teaching in classrooms and schools, then understanding the link between culture, climate and mindsets is an important prerequisite to understanding how great teaching can be developed.

Professional learning

Having discussed what we mean by the word ‘culture’, it makes sense to turn our attention to what we mean by the term ‘professional learning’.

At a basic level, ‘professional learning’ means exactly what it suggests: the *learning of professionals*. In the context of our discussions, this means the learning of teachers and school leaders. However, what is it that teachers and school leaders should be learning and what activities would best support this? In relation to these questions, the term ‘professional learning’ is less clear.

A definition of professional learning

In *Aligning Professional Learning, Performance Management and Effective Teaching*⁶⁵, Peter Cole helps us make sense of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of professional learning. In this paper, he defines professional learning as:

The formal and informal learning experiences undertaken by teachers and school leaders that improve their individual professional practice and the school’s collective effectiveness as measured by improved student engagement and learning outcomes.

With this definition, Cole is arguing that professional learning is learning which impacts positively on ‘professional practice’. For teachers, this means *teaching practice*; for leaders, this means *leadership*. **Teaching and leadership should be the key focus of professional learning in schools.**

This is an important point to emphasise. Too often, the focus of professional learning in schools is on learning which is not directly concerned with teaching and leadership. While there will always be a need for learning to go beyond these areas (for example, in relation to policy and legislation, covering topics such as health and safety or child protection), it is imperative that a focus on teaching and leadership is maintained.

65. Cole, P. (2012) *Aligning Professional Learning, Performance Management and Effective Teaching*

Building capacity

Through a focus on developing the quality of teaching and leadership, professional learning builds **capacity**. When we talk about capacity, we are referring to *professional knowledge and skills*. **The purpose of professional learning in schools should be to develop the capacity of teachers and school leaders**, in other words, to develop knowledge and skills in relation to teaching and leadership. Figure 7.3 illustrates this point.

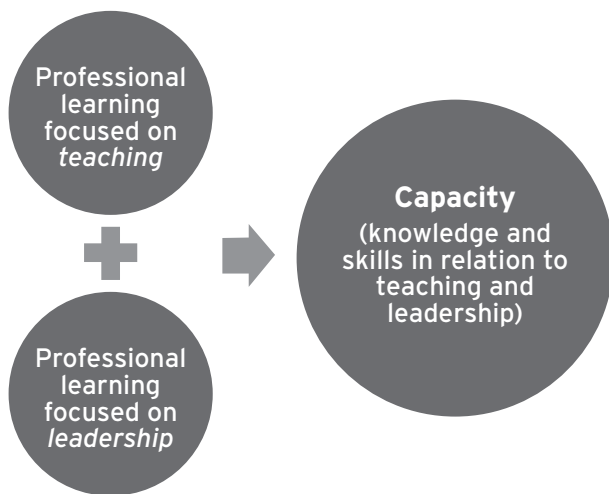


Figure 7.3: In the drive towards great teaching across a school, professional learning needs to focus on developing capacity (professional knowledge and skills) through a focus on teaching and leadership quality.

The stronger the professional learning culture of a school, the more capacity it will develop. In the pursuit of great teaching in every classroom, every day, schools need to focus on developing their professional learning culture in order to build staff capacity.

The impact of professional learning

Professional learning, in itself, has limited value. To be able to say that staff in your school engage in professional learning is one thing, but to say that staff in your school engage in professional learning which is

making a positive impact on teaching and learning is quite another. To be able to say that staff in your school engage in professional learning which is making a positive impact on teaching and learning in *every classroom* across your school is the ultimate goal.

Ineffective professional learning

Achieving impact is not easy. Educational research tells us that, all too often, professional learning is ineffective, in that it fails to make a significant impact in the classroom⁶⁶. In other words, too often, professional learning fails to make any difference to teaching practice. Understanding why – and how this can be addressed – should be a key consideration for all teachers and school leaders.

Peter Cole has discussed why there is often poor transference from professional learning to improvements in teaching practice and student outcomes. He highlights nine reasons⁶⁷:

1. Professional learning activities aren't linked closely enough with effective teaching practice, but instead focus on policy and procedures
2. There is no agreement across the school about what constitutes effective teaching
3. Professional learning activities lack focus and are fragmented, with little or no follow-up
4. Professional learning activities don't engage teachers, that is, they don't get them to *think* and to *discuss*
5. Professional learning activities highlight practices which could improve teaching and learning, but don't explain or exemplify how
6. School leaders don't convey the message, through their words and actions, that they think professional learning is important
7. Teachers aren't supported to implement improved practices
8. Teachers believe that their professional learning is a private affair and don't see other teachers as having a role in supporting

66. For example: Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2012) *Professional Capital*

67. Cole, P. (2012) *Aligning Professional Learning, Performance Management and Effective Teaching*

their professional learning, or see themselves as having a role in supporting the professional learning of others

9. Teachers aren't held accountable for the implementation of practices which are in line with the school's 'instructional model' (which this book refers to as a *Lesson Evaluation Toolkit*)

If school leaders are to lead the development of a professional learning culture which will bring out transformations in teaching practice and student outcomes, then they need to consider how each of these points can be addressed.

Types of professional learning activities

When we talk about professional learning, many teachers don't understand what sort of activities constitute this, and far less what types of professional learning are most effective. Often, when they hear the term 'professional learning', they think: 'courses'.

Courses

External courses offer relatively weak professional learning⁶⁸. While teachers who go on courses might enjoy their day out of school and the opportunity which comes with this to network with other professionals, which is important, the impact:cost ratio is usually very low. To send a member of staff on an external course typically costs hundreds of pounds. Unless they are encouraged to disseminate what they have learned with other staff, the impact of the course on teacher professional learning is limited to the staff who attended the course. Even if they do disseminate information, staff on the receiving end of this tend to learn very little.

Powerful professional learning

Far richer and more cost-effective professional learning is high-quality in-school professional learning. This can take many forms, which are summarised in the Professional Learning Model presented in Figure 7.4.

68. Forde, C. in J. O'Brien (2016) *School Leadership*

Read	Observe	Practice	Get feedback	Participate	Share
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Books • Research • Blogs • Twitter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other teachers • Other professionals (e.g. Support for Learning, Pastoral) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trying things out • Self-evaluate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From peers • From school leaders • From students • From assessment evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In discussions • In workshops • In working groups • In collaborative planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your learning • Good practice

Figure 7.4: A suggested in-school Professional Learning Model for departments and schools.

The professional learning activities captured in this Professional Learning Model are not only cost-effective, they are effective. By this, I mean they are effective in terms of their potential to build teaching and leadership capacity in teachers and school leaders. On their own, each should have an impact. However, it is when each of the components of the Professional Learning Model are combined that transformations to teaching practice in classrooms and schools start to occur. The synergy of the different components produces powerful professional learning. In later chapters, we will explore these components in more detail.

The power of collaboration

Professional learning can be an individual activity or it can be collaborative. Generally, it is far more powerful when staff learn with and from one another, rather than alone. While staff are able to learn alone, isolated professional learning usually leads to disjointed professional learning, with different teachers developing their teaching practice in different ways – some effectively and some less so. In *learning schools*, the culture is one of collaboration, not isolation. **Collaborative professional learning is key to the development of a strong professional learning culture.**

Developing a shared understanding

For a shared understanding of great teaching to develop across a school, staff need to learn together. By learning together, pedagogical principles take on a common meaning, as opposed to meaning one thing to one person and a different thing to another. Discussions support staff to refine their learning, reconsidering and reconceptualising it in ways they might not have had they not discussed it.

In a school where professional learning is collaborative, the professional learning of teachers is de-privatised. Teachers don't read, learn and keep information to themselves. Instead, they discuss what they have been reading and their learning from this. They observe other teachers teaching and they invite other professionals to watch them teach. They plan and evaluate lessons together. They use meeting time to discuss pedagogy and to share practice. In doing so, pockets of good practice spread and become hives of good practice. Collaboration is the hallmark of a *learning school*.

Leading professional learning

A high-quality in-school professional learning programme will not come about by itself. Rather, there needs to be leadership of such a programme. Accordingly, school leaders should establish a '**Teaching and Learning Improvement Group**', the remit of which is to plan, co-ordinate and evaluate the school's professional learning programme.

Teaching and Learning Improvement Group

A Teaching and Learning Improvement Group should be an open community – every member of staff should have the opportunity to join. It should meet regularly (about once a month) and be empowered to make strategic decisions. In the interests of transparency and good communication, the minutes from meetings should be shared with all staff.

The Teaching and Learning Improvement Group should use a Professional Learning Model (such as the one presented in this chapter) to guide their planning of professional learning initiatives. Such initiatives might include:

1. A Professional Reading Group
2. Systems for teachers to share learning with each other
3. Peer Observation Programmes
4. A staff-led, in-school workshop programme

Depending on the size of the group, there may be value in establishing sub-groups which lead different initiatives. A key benefit of creating sub-groups is that it creates more leadership opportunities for staff, which helps to develop leadership capacity.

Case study: A Professional Reading Group

In my school we have established a Professional Reading Group which is having a tremendous impact on teaching practice across the whole school. The group is led by a middle leader and has around 10 teacher participants (out of a teaching staff of 40). The choice of book is up to group members, but the focus is always on books which are going to help staff learn more about teaching and learning.

We invest in a copy of a book for each member of the group. This is important, because members are investing their time in being a part of the group. Once they have finished the book, group members can either keep it or donate it to our staff Professional Learning Library, which is what most of them do.

The group meets once a fortnight. At these meetings, there is discussion about the section of the book the group has been reading over the past two weeks. Usually, this is around 40 pages. Group members are encouraged to come to meetings with examples of things they have found particularly interesting or which have resonated with them. Key quotations are shared with other members of staff via a 'Learning from Reading' noticeboard in the staffroom.

The Professional Reading Group plays an integral part in the professional learning culture of our school. Prior to its existence, very few staff engaged in regular professional reading. Staff understanding of what makes great teaching was inconsistent and, in many cases, misguided. While most staff were well-read in terms of national policy, this had resulted in a very narrow understanding of what high-quality teaching looks like. This is no longer the case. Professional reading has played a key role in expanding minds, motivating staff and improving teaching quality across our school. To quote one member of the group: 'The Professional Reading Group is a genuine highlight of my job. It has made me a better teacher.'

If you don't have a Professional Reading Group in your school, set one up. It doesn't need to be the headteacher who does this – anyone can. My advice is, just get on and do it! You might be surprised by just how many staff have a genuine desire to get involved.

Professional learning versus performance management

The key to improving teaching and learning in schools is high-quality professional learning. High-quality professional learning supports all teachers to become good and good teachers to become great. So long as teachers want to improve and are prepared to work with peers and school leaders to improve, professional learning should always be the preferred option to performance management.

That said, performance management does have a place and sometimes needs to be used. The time to use it is either when:

1. A poor teacher is refusing to engage in professional learning to improve their teaching
2. Professional learning is failing to have any significant impact on the practice of a poor teacher

While nobody ever wants to go down the performance management route, occasionally, in the interests of our students, this is what needs to be done.

The professional learning culture in your department or school

How strong is the professional learning culture in your department or school?

Because the strength of a professional learning culture is fundamental to the improvement of teaching and learning, if you are a middle or senior leader I encourage you to make use of the evaluation tool below to help you evaluate the strength of this culture in your department or school. This will be most powerful if you do it collaboratively, with your team.

Evaluating the strength of your culture

Use a green/amber/red or 0–10 system to evaluate the strength of your school or departmental professional learning culture against the features listed.

	Key features of a teaching- and learning-focused professional learning culture	Evaluation
1	There is a shared understanding of what makes great teaching.	
2	There is a mindset of continuous improvement.	
3	There is a positive climate for learning.	
4	Learning (for everyone) is the core business.	
5	The continuous improvement of teaching and learning is the number one priority.	
6	Teachers collaborate with other teachers to improve their teaching.	
7	Teachers and school leaders learn from professional reading.	
8	Learning from professional reading is shared and discussed.	
9	Teaching practices from across the school are shared, discussed and evaluated.	
10	Teachers have access to a high-quality in-school workshop programme, led by staff.	
11	Teachers regularly watch each other teach.	
12	Teachers receive high-quality feedback on their teaching from other professionals.	
13	Teachers seek feedback on their teaching from students.	
14	Coaching and mentoring approaches are used to support the development of teachers.	
15	Teachers self-evaluate the quality of teaching in lessons.	
16	Teachers are empowered to try things out and take risks.	
17	Assessment evidence is used to evaluate the extent to which what is taught is learned.	
18	Teachers analyse performance data relating to student attainment and progress.	
19	Individual and whole-school improvement planning focuses on teaching and learning.	
20	Teachers maintain teaching-focused Professional Learning Plans*.	



As we conclude this chapter, I hope I have been successful in persuading you that the strength of your professional learning culture is the key factor in determining the extent to which teaching and learning in your department or school can improve. Assuming I have, I will also assume that you are interested in developing the professional learning culture in your department or school. The evaluation tool above should have supported you to think about this. However, with so much to think about, a logical question is: where do I start? My answer to this is: create a *Lesson Evaluation Toolkit*.

In the next chapter, we will explore what a *Lesson Evaluation Toolkit* is and how you can go about creating one.

* We will discuss Professional Learning Plans in Chapter 12.