University of Glasgow | Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

External Evaluation of the West Partnership Regional Improvement Collaborative

Summary of Findings

2022-2023 Report 3

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1. Introduction

This report presents findings from the third phase of the evaluation covering the period 2022-2023. It builds on previous cycles of external evaluation conducted by the Robert Owen Centre since the inception of the West Partnership (WP) Regional Improvement Collaborative (RIC) in 2017. Phase one has been reported on previously under separate cover. This phase focused on the following research questions:

1. To what extent are WP workstreams and programmes being implemented in schools and classrooms? This gave insights into the reach of the partnership as well as engagement and impact at different levels.
2. To what extent, and in what ways, are the workstreams and programmes impacting on children, young people and families? This gave insights on the nature of impact and related processes/factors.

The evaluation adopted a mixed-method approach. Qualitative evidence was gathered using in-depth interviews conducted between June and September 2023 with additional information collected by notetaking, observation at in-situ and online professional learning events and dialogue with workstream leads. Quantitative evidence was gathered through an online survey (n=472). The overwhelming majority of responses (85%) were from staff working in educational establishments.

2. Key findings

Recovery from the pandemic

The effects of the pandemic are still being experienced throughout the system, particularly on staff and Children and Young People`s (CYP`s) health and wellbeing and a detrimental impact on attendance. The WP has supported recovery from the pandemic, in particular the various forms of professional learning offered by the WP has facilitated dialogue and evidence-informed collaborative working with colleagues across Local Authorities (LA's).

Impact within and between schools

There has been substantial progress regarding impact of the WP objectives at school and classroom level and across WP. The evaluation evidence strongly indicates that teachers' engagement with the WP has enhanced their professional learning, enabling them to positively impact on children and young people's learning. Moreover, the learning from WP activity is being embedded in school improvement planning which is promoting the sustainability of effective practice and strategies in schools. A secondary deputy headteacher illustrated how WP programmes had promoted staff development and the school's improvement planning:

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> *It's allowed us to show good justification in the direction we're taking the curriculum. And through conversations with pupils…so learning that the pupil voice is such an important part of that data collection. It really allowed us to drill down into our own practice through their responses and gave us a good line of development that we've taken forward for the IOD… We've taken elements from the West Partnership practice and IOD to develop a whole school practice on attainment and assessment following a similar framework. This is just a really good way of doing our school improvement plan and our departmental improvement plans following this framework…and everything is coming back to the impact it's having on the learner.*

The WP promotion of learner-centred strategies with more emphasis on pupil voice has enhanced practice in curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment. This was frequently reported to have led to positive impact on the engagement, achievement and attainment of CYP. WP activities have an emphasis on self-reflection and self-evaluation which had led to increased evidence-informed practice and greater empowerment to innovate. This activity includes Collaborative Action Research (CAR) which is offered across many WP programmes. These developments are supported by high-quality WP resources and programmes, including: Assessment & Moderation activity, Primary Curriculum: Pedagogy for All including Collaborative Enquiry, the IOC/D/S suite, School-to-School Partnerships and Young Leaders of Learning.

WP activity has enhanced cross-school and cross sector sharing of resources, tools and ideas. These have promoted attendance and a more sophisticated identification of needs of CYP through better use of data. A secondary class teacher spoke about the value of learning from primary school colleagues:

> *…there's ideas there…with my Higher class. There were things that the Primary Three class had been looking at their retrieval practice. And they'd been looking at just more independent learning strategies. And I thought, actually, if these guys can do it in Primary Three why not a higher class… The visits to, certainly to the primary classroom but also that chance to look at self-evaluation and do some reading. Wider reading, wider research and then to think about how that could obviously make a difference, in terms of how I go about my routine in the classroom.*

Impact beyond the school

There is also evidence that practitioner and other professionals' engagement with the WP has impacted beyond the classroom, school and across local authorities. There was recognition of the ongoing challenge of impacting positively on parents/carers and the wider community, particularly following the pandemic. However, there were examples of positive developments including family-centred work to improve transitions, attendance and wellbeing of CYP. The role of Community Learning and Development in WP activity to promote family learning in the context of equity was highlighted as was the WP activity around UNCRC and the Promise. As with other WP activity, such work was seen as being informed by the reflective use of data

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and evidence enhanced by professional learning programmes. A board member highlighted the importance of partnership working with CLD to promote engagement with families,

> *The wellbeing for learning is probably where that's making the most impact [beyond the school] because you've got the CLD aspect of that workstream, which I think, you know, if you're looking at the supporting families aspect, then there's been really good practice in that… And I found that the early years group that worked actually out with the West Partnership but has now, obviously, come into the West Partnership group. That early years group was really invaluable to working with families as well. You know, it was looking at good practice in early years but also how we impact on families.*

Participants also highlighted increasing potential of the WP's increasing networking with other services and agencies. including sharing practice and knowledge to promote educational equity. WP leads and LA officers have been important in facilitating knowledge mobilisation and networking.

Scale and pace of impact

Progress is not uniform across WP and there was recognition from those at all levels that such developments take time, particularly given the challenges that schools and local authorities are currently experiencing. Recovery from the pandemic, its lasting impact on staffing and the needs of CYP are major disruptive factors affecting the WP and all system change and educational improvement efforts. Nevertheless, this evaluation has identified ongoing positive impact from the WP, including improving teachers' professional skills which is translating into positive outcomes for CYP.

Impact on partnership working and collaboration

There was consensus from those interviewed that the WP activity has promoted collaboration and partnership working at strategic and operational levels in LAs and within and across schools and sectors. Importantly the WP is reported to have promoted networked learning, sharing of practice and resources across the local authorities.

The WP has also been successful in promoting networks that support specialist or specific fields. For example, the WP's ESOL activity, has facilitated the bringing together of people with specialist knowledge, expertise and resources. This was seen to be particularly helpful for those LAs with less developed ESOL provision and demonstrates the ‘`added value` support that the WP contributes to the system. Improved partnership working facilitated by the WP has also supported the mobilisation of knowledge and expertise and created networks that are informing and enhancing practice in the classroom. This mobilisation of expertise is promoting systems change within and across the local authorities.

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As pandemic restrictions eased, practitioners greatly valued the WP facilitation of school visits and associated networked learning for teachers and mentors. This enhanced networking has also included QIOs networking with their peers across authorities. The cross-sectoral working promoted by the WP activity has also supported the mobilisation of new ways of thinking and working across and within both primary and secondary sectors.

3. Enablers and inhibitors to progress

Enabling factors

Planned time. Participants in the IOC programme welcomed the `protected` time they had for this professional learning. While protected time can be difficult to realise for all involved in collaborative activity, if school planning can help address this issue, a major challenge will be overcome in promoting improvement partnerships.

Networked learning and collaboration. Improved partnership working facilitated by the WP has supported the mobilisation of knowledge and expertise and created networks that are informing and enhancing practice in the classroom.

Specific programmes. Programmes such as IOC, Thinking About Headship, Early Years activity, Pedagogy for All, and Curriculum: Learning and Teaching Cycle and the Curriculum Groups were seen as key drivers in promoting cross-authority working and school partnership working that impacted on teacher practice and CYP achievement.

Strategic leadership. The collaborative culture and trust established in the WP Board is reflected in the wider working of the system. This has developed over time and was accelerated through tackling the challenges of COVID-19. This collective agency has enhanced the functioning of the Board, fostered a culture of collaboration and promoted synergy across the local authorities.

Data-informed systems, tools and resources. These developments across the WP have played a role in fostering collaboration and impact. This includes a focused attainment/ achievement database, and the Early Years self-evaluation tool.

Relevance of professional learning and programmes. While the majority of those interviewed saw the WP offer as relevant to their work, some suggested that the support could be improved further if it also addressed broader complex issues such as emotionally based school avoidance and dysregulated children.

Peer recommendation. As more participants become involved in the various core WP programmes word of mouth appears to be facilitating the WP offer. The growth in networking is also helping to communicate this offer. There is a snowballing effect at work.

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Professional learning informed by established models of good practice. The positive impact of the WP's programmes reflects models of effective professional learning practice in the literature[1]. The WP professional learning and resources are also based on a research-based and collaborative model of improvement[2] that aligns teaching strategies with the needs of CYP and curriculum design. This again reflects models of effective professional learning[3].

Inhibiting factors

The WP has enhanced and expanded collaboration within and across authorities. However, there are challenges that threaten the impact and sustainability of these developments, including:

Lack of time. Interviewees highlighted the challenge of finding time for school visits and arranging cover for teachers released from school.

Awareness of opportunities. Strategic leaders indicated that most teachers are aware of the WP offer. However, practitioners suggest that some colleagues perceive opportunities as being for 'others' and for school leaders. There is further work to be done regarding communication and messaging. School leaders and local education officers were seen as being key in helping to convey the WP offer. The establishment of a HT Strategy Group and diversified Board membership would also be helpful in this respect.

Staff illness and CYP attendance issues. Staff are continuing to cope with illness and absenteeism and attendance at WP events is still a major issue for many schools across the partnership.

Variability in online support and compatibility. Varied accessibility to online resources and support across the local authorities was seen as an ongoing challenge for some establishments. For example, not all local authorities use Glow and practitioners also highlighted issues with internet technology.

4. Commentary and reflections on progress

The WP aims to ensure that practitioners across the partnership are both aware and able to engage in activity, should they wish to do so. This means that not all practitioners will be

[1] Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M. (2017) *Effective Teacher Professional Development.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute

Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational researcher*, *38*(3), 181-199.

[2] Chapman, C. and Hadfield, M. (2010) Supporting the middle tier to engage with school-based networks: change strategies for influencing and cohering. *Journal of Educational Change,* 11(3), pp. 221-240.

Hargreaves, A. (2021) Teacher collaboration: 30 years of research on its nature, forms, limitations and effects. *Policy, Teacher Education and the Quality of Teachers and Teaching*, 103-121.

Chapman, C., & Ainscow, M. (2022) *Educational Equity: Pathways to Success* Routledge.

[3] CUREE (2012) *Understanding what enables high quality professional Learning: A report on the research evidence*. CUREE

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participating in WP activities at any one time. Rather, personnel across the Partnership have equitable access to WP opportunities and can benefit from them when they add value or meet a specific need. The findings from this evaluation report suggest that the WP is making very good progress in supporting improvements in the quality of teaching and learning in educational establishments and promoting positive outcomes of children and young people. While the degree of progress varies across establishments and LAs, it must be recognised that such ambitious and large-scale systems change will take time. The current findings and those of previous evaluation reports, make it clear that the direction of travel and trajectory of the WP are very positive. Furthermore, the strategies and approaches adopted by WP have been agile enough to flex to the changing demands of a rapidly evolving context. This was particularly evident in its swift adaptation to meet the huge challenges imposed by COVID-19.

Given the relatively low levels of resource available to WP, the return on investment is substantial. However, the WP will need to continue adapt and evolve, not only to the diminishing public funding in the system, but also to the emerging policy landscape. On the one hand the educational reform agenda is ambitious and complex. Whilst on the other hand many of the educational policy priorities remain unchanged with a focus on CfE and equity, for example. This creates a maintenance-development dilemma; the WP will need to continue to be agile to optimise opportunities and to continue to draw on and develop robust self-review mechanisms to optimise activity. The WP has already recognised the diverse and complex nature of these challenges and the partnership has been particularly innovative in its approaches and programmes including the use of technology to support developments and ensure impact.

The overall WP strategy of creating a networked learning system underpinned by collaboration across different types of boundaries and systematic enquiry and evidence building[4] is now yielding dividends and is worthy of future investment, especially in times of financial austerity.

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[4] Madrid Miranda, R. and Chapman, C. (2021) Towards a network learning system: reflections on a university initial teacher education and school-based collaborative initiative in Chile. *Professional Development in Education*, (doi: 10.1080/19415257.2021.1902840) (Early Online Publication)