Cross-school 'close-to-practice' action research, system leadership and local civic partnership re-engineering an inner-city learning community

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Cross-school 'close-to-practice' action research, system leadership and local civic partnership re-engineering an inner-city learning community

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Abstract

This article presents two sequential case reports of how 60 schools in the London Borough of Camden used action research in three phases of development of their local school system reform, from a traditional council-led, top-down model of centrally based professional development and monitoring of schools, to one that is schools-led and 'bottom-up' in nature, but still in close partnership with its local council and community. The article uses a sociocultural lens through which to view this journey of self-reform, tracking change through three evolutions of the sociocultural model as professional learning becomes situated in classrooms and between schools in Camden, as motivations to develop and change become increasingly intrinsic and less driven by fear of failure or the consequences of failure. Of critical importance is the feedback-rich context created by adoption of enquiry- and coaching-based learning models at classroom, organizational and system levels. This both fuels and is fuelled by the strategic collaboration of head teachers and by system leadership also provided by middle leaders, whose increased cross-school agency builds improvement capacity and collaborative capital. The article does not report on the action research alone: unlike many accounts of action research for change, this account provides a narrative backdrop in which to locate both scientific and system developments. This is provided through three short vignettes that place the changes reported in a societal, political and community context, without whose energetic actors (in the form of local political and community leaders and school governors) the local 'civic governance' so strongly behind these reforms, would not have existed.

Keywords: local education, lesson study, school-led improvement, system leadership

Introduction

This article seeks to do more than report an action research project. It seeks to report on the role played by three consecutive programmes of cross-school, close-to-practice uses of action research (Wyse *et al.*, 2018) during the self-reform process of school and community-led educational development in the inner London Borough of Camden.

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All research happens in a context that is inevitably human and societal. Researchers strive to seek objectivity, trustworthiness and, of course, to develop theory in their work. Theory (and the new knowledge theory establishes) suggest that when it is discovered that elements come together in ways that repeatedly change a prior reality to a new one, this happens as a result of some underlying nature in the situation under investigation. These underlying natures, or 'lenses' as they are sometimes called, acquire theoretical names with which social researchers are familiar, such as sociocultural learning theory, cultural historical learning theory or complexity theory.

Action research, which allows repeated cycles of data collection and analysis to take place, affords a researcher the opportunity to revisit a context in order to collect more or different evidence, or to conduct further analyses providing clearer or deeper understanding of the matter under investigation. It affords a participant-researcher the opportunity to intervene in order to change things and even, reflexively, to affect the underlying nature of these things, which may, in time, lead to evolution of the theory itself.

Results of actions in research studies are usually reported in relation to the samples, cases and units of analysis under investigation. But, in reality, the world neither ends nor begins with a research project. Research cannot be conducted unless someone wishes it so, in order to understand things in new, more helpful ways. (And, of course, in that wider world, there are probably people who do not want the research to occur; who want no change or who want different changes from those motivating the researcher.)

Paradoxically, in the desire of researchers to demonstrate fairness, impartiality and rigour, motivating factors and the contexts in which they are generated are often omitted. We do not often see lasting effects and reverberations of a piece of action research because funding ends and the researchers move on.

John Elliott, who has played a leading role in the development of educational action research since the 1970s, has stated that there is no point in doing action research unless there is something you want to change. He also stated that without at least two cycles of data gathering and analysis, research cannot be termed 'action research' (Elliott, 1991).

What we report here are two snapshots of a community of 60 schools in the inner London Borough of Camden. The first snapshot is of a Camden-led 96-school London-wide action research project using lesson studies to systematically develop mathematics schemes of learning for the new national curriculum (DfE, 2014) in over three quarters of Camden schools and fifty others across London between 2013 and 2015. The second snapshot, reported here for the first time, is of the work of one of Camden schools' subsequent 'learning hubs' – a cross-school improvement model generating disciplined curricular and pedagogical innovation (Hargreaves, 1999) through action research and inquiry-based, cross-school coaching; all of this only made possible because of a local context of deepening, formalized and systemic collaborative leadership. In this second snapshot, the curricular focus is on the development of oracy.

In this article, we do not claim that the first study led directly to the second. However, we will argue that between 2012 and 2017, sociocultural learning theory was broadly applied in three phases of development in Camden to support development of a sustainable, local, 'bottom-up' approach to school improvement that replaced more top-down, council-led structures, which were neither fit for purpose as the schools-led approach developed, nor affordable as national austerity policies cut 50 per cent of council spending.

In order to provide this wider backdrop to these action research studies, we will also report a narrative summary of the local and national policy drivers, economic realities and local decisions taken along the way, which dramatically affected the motivations of school and local political, professional and community-based system leaders, and that coalesced in a phenomenon known locally as civic governance. This narrative appears as three vignettes in boxes presented within the document.

The context

Camden's 60 state schools are the most diverse in any council area in England. Almost half are voluntary aided, and among these there is further diversity. London's Catholic and Anglican dioceses support the voluntary aided primaries, but the two Catholic secondary schools are associated with two different religious orders, rather than with the Westminster diocese, and there are also two secular voluntary aided secondary schools. Then there are community schools, special schools, free schools, academies, pupil referral units and hospital schools. The academies and free schools were newly established as academies (as required by the 2010 Academies Act). At the time of writing, no Camden school has converted to academy status. Of Camden students, 33 per cent live below the poverty line, and 90 per cent learn English as an additional language.

Vignette 1: 2011–14

After the election in 2010 of a government determined to remove schools from council control and to halve public-sector spending, Camden Council created an independent 'commission' to map out future education policy, which recommended much greater school collaboration and innovation.

The diversity of Camden's schools meant that the purpose of any new local system had to be one based on an ambition for an inclusive and excellent educational offer for every Camden student as a shared endeavour. Crucially, it had to be one that would need to be embraced and endorsed by every type of school, their leaders, governors and trustees (and among these, the borough's two teaching schools, now charged with local responsibilities for teacher education, professional development and school improvement by the Department for Education, whose joint endeavour and leadership would be essential).

The approach taken, therefore, was explicitly not about structures: voluntary aided or not; Catholic or Anglican (or not); academy or not. It was about evolving a highly effective, collaborative educational ecosystem in a defined locality (Camden) that could celebrate diversity while uniting around a core set of values, ideas, practices and goals. Its leadership would therefore need to be equally collaborative and increasingly capable of finding new ways forward together, rather than relying on a national policy that posed an existential threat to such an ecosystem.
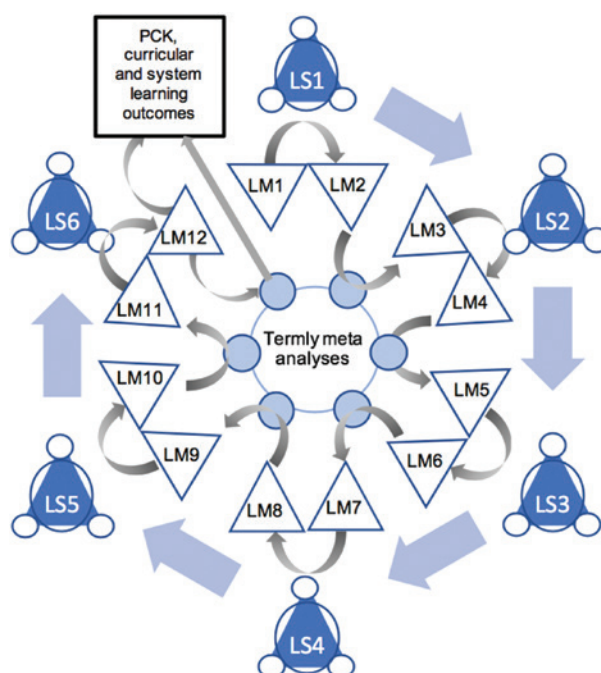

The Camden new mathematics curriculum lesson study project

In 2012, one 'Camden Commission' cross-school project had begun to develop curriculum and teaching through a form of Japanese collaborative, classroom, teacher-research called lesson study (Dudley, 2014). In 2013, the borough bid successfully with

the University of Cambridge for funding from the Greater London Authority's London Schools Excellence Fund (LSEF) to lead a programme designed to utilize lesson studies that would be designed to tailor the 2014 mathematics national curriculum to the needs of inner-city students.

Schools were concerned that the new curriculum's emphasis on knowledge divorced from skills, and on assessments that depended on decontextualized, written tests, might disadvantage students still learning English or making up ground from very low early-language baselines. The cross-phase project involved 42 Camden schools (and in its second year, 96 London schools in total). Having established the mathematics curriculum areas that teachers felt least confident to teach and viewed as the hardest to learn, the programme harnessed a termly development cycle of local meetings where national mathematics experts worked with teachers in cross-borough lesson study groups exploring mathematics curricular concepts and (to use the Japanese term) 'knowledgeable others' probed potential implications and approaches for teaching in their lesson studies.

Lesson study groups (of three teachers) then designed and conducted 'research lesson studies' each consisting of three research lessons collaboratively planned and conducted in their schools. After each research lesson, students were interviewed in order to explore their perceptions of their learning, before the learning of the students, including three focus 'case students' (Dudley and Lang, forthcoming), was discussed and analysed to seek a joint, detailed understanding of how students had responded prior to the planning of the next research lesson. The lesson study groups maintained 'workbooks' containing their plans, research lesson data, interviews and analyses. They also video-recorded their discussions for analysis. At each second termly district-level meeting, the lesson study groups presented their findings to each other, focusing on what they had discovered in the lesson studies, how their future teaching would change as a result and what they considered to be curricular implications for all schools.

Figure 1: The two-year cycle of twice termly local meetings for curriculum study and sharing lesson study findings (LM), school-based lesson studies (LS) and termly local meta-analysis that drove the mathematics curriculum lesson study project

During the school holidays, the local authority and university teams analysed the research lesson study (RLS) workbooks and teacher discussions, identifying cross-case themes that were presented at the start of the following term's meeting. Figure 1 shows the two-year cycle of local meetings and intervening lesson studies, and the termly meta-analyses carried out by Cambridge and Camden teams.

The role of the University of Cambridge team

While writing the LSEF bid, the first and fifth authors of this article (Dudley and Lang) had been keen to involve researchers from the University of Cambridge who had expertise in dialogic and teacher learning. The first author had completed a PhD in 2011 exploring teacher learning in lesson study, which built on Mercer's (2000) theories of the role of talk in contexts of collaborative learning, applying it to the learning of teachers in contexts of lesson studies (Dudley, 2013). A team from Cambridge actively contributed to the bid, and a proportion of the project funding supported the team's research investigating these same dialogic teacher learning phenomena at much larger scale. The aim was to feed emergent findings back into the project each term, potentially enhancing the quality of teacher learning and, as a result, enhancing also the learning of students in mathematics.

By 2015, the project reported a wide range of ways in which schools had tailored their curricula and teaching to optimize student learning in the new curriculum. Some (such as approaches to teaching fractions, mental calculation and algebra) had been predicted, while others (such as the use of manipulatives for all students and the systematic engineering of 'exploratory talk' (Barnes and Todd, 1977) among students to grasp and deepen conceptual understanding) were powerful but less-well predicted outcomes (Ylonen *et al.*, 2015).

The first new curriculum national assessments of 11-year-olds in 2016 provided an independent indication of the effects of the 12 lesson studies on student attainment. As these were new tests for the new curriculum, the only way of comparing school attainment levels pre and post the project was to look at their results in comparison with the national averages in 2013 and 2016. This revealed that while the overall Camden average was little changed and remained above the national average, a four percentage-point gap had opened between the schools that had participated in the project (which had increased by two percentage points) and the non-participating schools, which collectively had fallen by two percentage points. Furthermore, in both phases, low-income students entitled to free school meals had caught up with 'all students' by an average of one month's progress per academic year. Teachers' confidence in teaching the new curriculum had dramatically increased, and they had universally valued the RLS approach (ibid.).

RLS had also been used because it involves a highly dialogic approach to 'teacher learning' (Dudley, 2013) (see Figure 2). Not only were students using exploratory talk in order to develop new knowledge, but, through the RLS process that involved teachers learning by discussing predicted and observed student learning in research lessons, they were themselves learning through exploratory talk, optimized by the deliberate processes of RLS that created 'ground rules for talk', which Mercer (2000) has found optimize this sociocultural mode of learning (Dudley *et al.*, 2019a).

The two-year programme had provided repeated opportunities for senior and middle leaders, as well as teachers, to work together across schools solving teaching and learning problems, better understanding students' mathematical thinking and learning, and even working together in each other's schools, across phases. The project's analyses of their lesson study discussions, and reports of how their professional
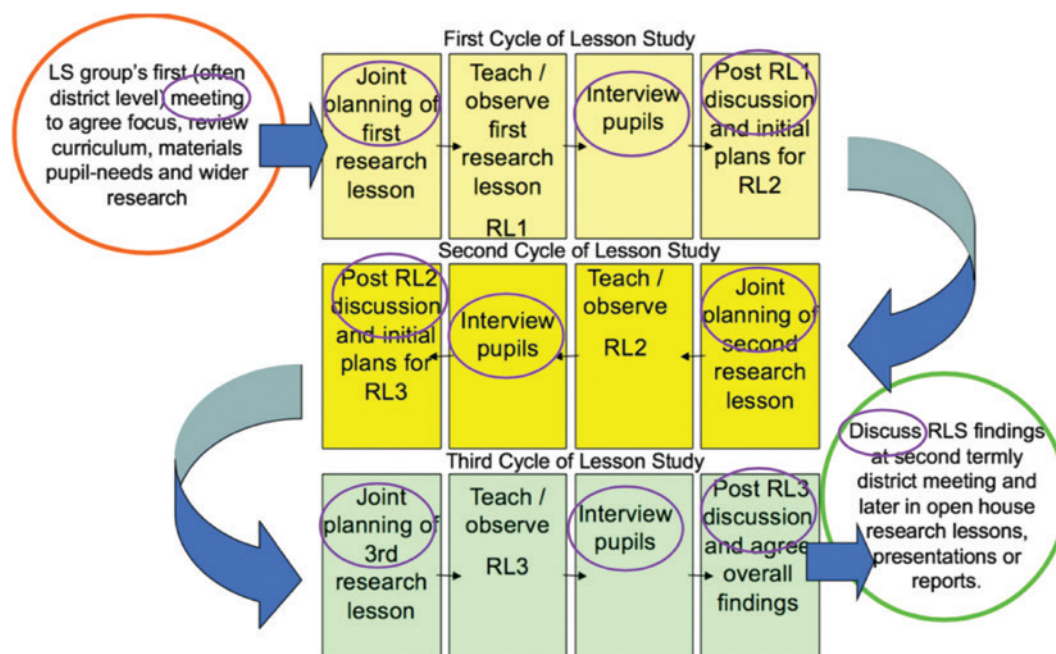
Figure 2: The district-level research lesson study process used in Camden (elements demanding teachers' use of exploratory talk to solve problems and analyse findings are circled)

learning was changed through RLS, revealed that they were utilizing a form of dialogue-based teacher learning (Vrikki *et al.*, 2017) that is highly generative of improved student attainment. Vermunt and Endedijk (2011) had termed this 'Meaning Oriented Teacher Learning', which, usually a rarity, was found in abundance in the RLS discussions and teacher data in this project (Vermunt *et al.* 2019).

Sociocultural learning theory stage 1

The lesson study project had a longer-term objective beyond that of ensuring curriculum and teaching quality in mathematics for all Camden students. This was to increase capacity throughout Camden schools to sustain collective improvement. There is growing evidence that by learning together through purposeful exploratory talk in lesson study contexts where teachers feel jointly motivated to improve their students' learning; safe to take risks in their own learning; and valued by their co-researching colleagues; they not only pool their collective, conscious pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1986; Ball *et al.*, 2008), but also by jointly imagining how specific students will respond to proposed teaching ideas, they are enabled to channel each other's usually invisible and unconscious *tacit* PCK (Dudley, 2013; Chen and Yang, 2013).

Over a cycle of three research lessons, teachers develop strong joint motivation to help their students overcome their barriers to learning, be they motivational or conceptual. Figure 3 adapts Vygotsky's (1962) sociocultural model of learning as an activity system by superimposing teacher's learning in lesson study (from studying and intervening to improve their students' learning through successive research lessons) over the learning of these students.

In Figure 3, professional learning in RLS is mediated through teachers' exploratory talk in an RLS group, where it is safe to take risks. Teachers' motivation to learn is provided by their joint endeavour to improve their students' learning. Being involved in up to 12 successive research lesson studies repeatedly brought teachers
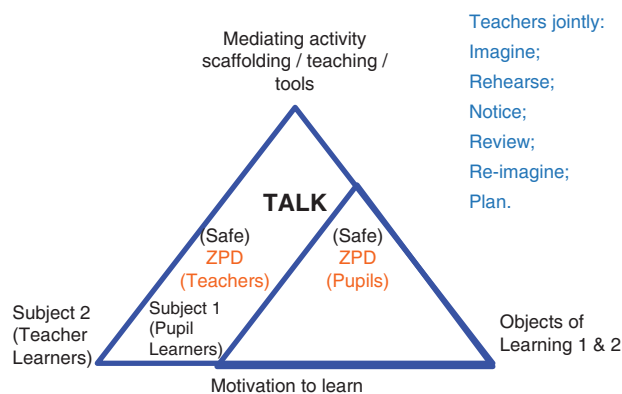
Figure 3: Activity theory integrating teacher learning with student learning in contexts of RLS

together in what became mathematics-focused communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that developed their subject and pedagogical content knowledge; their skills in collaborative professional learning, and in the creation of new, close-to-practice research-informed practice knowledge, where the learning is situated in the place where it is used – the classroom. This changed their own teaching and their students' learning, and informed the schemes of work for their schools. Table 1 presents the key characteristics of the sociocultural learning model that was playing out at classroom, school and system levels in this first project.

RLS seemed to be developing 'teacher leadership' (Lieberman and Miller, 2004; Harris and Jones, 2019) and, in theory, this would build greater capacity for improvement, led in part from the classroom up. The final project report states:

- Participating schools are adopting Lesson Study as part of their approach to professional learning and beginning to use it beyond mathematics.
- 19 Lead mathematics practitioners have been developed to support schools to improve pupil progress and practice in teaching mathematics through the Lesson Study approach.

Table 1: Sociocultural classroom-, school- and system-level professional learning model – Stage 1

	Motivation	Object(s) of learning	Mode of learning	Mediating tools and artefacts	Leadership implications
1. Whole local system enquiry	Extrinsic/intrinsic Improvement in a shared need identified by Council in discussion with school leaders – new curriculum mathematics.	Skills and knowledge at classroom and school level to design and teach new curriculum in ways that meets needs of EAL and disadvantaged learners.	Borough-wide communities of mathematics practice innovating pedagogy and PCK. School-level lesson studies informing schemes of learning.	Recursive, deliberate, collaborative enquiries into students' learning, PCK and pedagogic practice in communities of mathematics practice.	Overall Council-led. Schools take on ownership of enquiry-based CPD through head teacher and teacher leader agency.

- A number of schools have adopted Lesson Study as the default mode of school improvement and teacher development, aligning it with policies and practice such as CPD, performance management and leadership development and they have also built it into school systems and processes such as job descriptions, recruitment and [newly qualified teachers'] induction-year training. (Ylonen *et al.*, 2015: 5)

Vignette 2: 2015–16

During the period of the mathematics lesson study project, schools and council were developing a proposition for a way of working that could provide a counter-narrative to the national policy vision, which was of schools as entirely autonomous entities, competing with each other for children, staff and resources and freed from the 'control' of councils, whose only remaining local accountability was to concern school admissions, safeguarding and special educational needs, and who were no longer considered sufficiently interested in or competent to hold a significant education role.

This alternative proposition had begun to form inspired by head teachers' and governors' discussions with people such as David Hargreaves (2012) about his vision for self-improving schools, and Robert Hill and his studies of system leadership in multi-academy trusts, within which academies were attempting to develop collaborative capacities by working together, but were often doing so across significant geographical distances and with roots in many different communities (Reid, 2016).

The alternative proposition recognized the significance of the relationship between schools and the communities in which they are anchor institutions, of the legitimacy of local accountability and, crucially, it recognized the power of systemic, local collaboration to drive improvement and innovation. The first form in which this became a reality was through the creation of the Camden Schools-Led Partnership (CSLP) in 2015. A reduction in the council's direct school improvement capacity enabled a new structure to be formed in which local school improvement and professional development were co-funded by schools and council, and were co-led and governed by groups comprising school and council political and professional leaders (including those of Camden's two teaching schools) and community leaders involved in school governance.

From 2015 to 2017, the CSLP was responsible for delivering all statutory and non-statutory school improvement in the borough. For this to happen in a sustainable way, the sociocultural learning model would need to gather greater capacity and to draw on layers of leadership beyond the classroom and school.

Sociocultural model stage 2: Harnessing the power of middle leadership

The LSEF new curriculum mathematics lesson study project had left a legacy. Sixty of the 96 schools had continued to meet termly in three London localities after the project ended, and to continue the cycle of termly lesson studies and local planning and sharing groups (see Figure 1). They did this entirely of their own volition using their own resources, and they continued to do so until 2017 (Dudley *et al.*, 2019a, 2019b). In addition to this, in Camden, schools and teaching schools were developing

further versions of collaborative classroom research exploring Shanghai mathematics, Connecting Classrooms and Learning Study (Lo, 2009), to name just three.

The harnessing of collaborative enquiry to create the motivation and scaffolding for professional learning that takes place in the location in which it is used and needed, the classroom, is clear to see in this school-level model. It has been studied in recent years by Viviane Robinson, who has advocated achieving more for students by focusing change in classrooms and by involving all parties in that process, so they see and feel the benefits of a new way of working by studying it and by evaluating its impact on students themselves as they do so (Robinson, 2018). Her 2009 meta-study concluded that the leadership action that has the most significant (0.8) effect on student outcomes of all those studied is to lead inquiry among teachers into their students' learning and into how they can change their practices in order to help their students learn and achieve more in their classrooms (Robinson *et al.*, 2009).

Leaders of the CSLP sought to further develop these models of cross-school development in order to build the next supply of leadership capacity. As heads took on more strategic system leadership responsibilities in the partnership, a model was sought that would create motivating, scaffolded opportunities for teachers with experience and particular expertise to play leading roles in multi-school development and improvement.

They did this by harnessing the potential of middle leaders, who in the LSEF had forged new curricular and subject expertise together in their termly communities of practice, and led the mobilization and transfer of this knowledge within their own schools through their lesson studies. The power of middle leaders to create cross-school system improvement capacity is well recognized. 'Leading from the middle' has been recognized in England as critical for system improvement capacity for many years, and it has recently developed internationally (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2021).

Learning hubs pilot

From 2015 to 2017, the partnership designed and then piloted Camden Learning Hubs. A 'learning hub' is a group of schools that jointly bids for and is commissioned by the partnership to collaboratively research and to develop professional practice to meet a local improvement need, and then swiftly to mobilize this new knowledge and practice across partnership schools.

The first hubs were driven by senior school leaders and proved fruitful models for developing collaborative professional practice focused on students and classrooms – such as that of the Assessment Hub that led the moderation, agreement and exemplification of progression across the curriculum in Camden schools, published on their practice-sharing website. Other hubs developed practice in core subjects with subject (middle) leaders working with their peers and taking leading roles in coaching and collaborative enquiry in their own schools.

In a Camden school learning hub, the sociocultural model is taken a stage further. Unlike the earlier LSEF research programme, the local peer group 'community of practice' meetings are not hosted by a project team largely comprised of council officers and Cambridge academics. They are hosted in hub-lead schools for members of other partnership schools. The research and development is led for the most part by head teachers, middle leaders and teacher leaders in the hub-lead schools. As Table 2 shows, it was clear from the evaluation of this pilot that distributed leadership

Table 2: Sociocultural classroom-, school- and system-level professional learning model – Stage 2

	Motivation	Object(s) of learning	Mode of learning	Mediating tools and artefacts	Leadership implications
2. CSLP pilot learning hubs	Intrinsic/Extrinsic Improvement in a shared need initially proposed by council and co-developed by partnership lead head teachers on the CSLP Management Group (chaired at that time by a council chief officer).	Skills and knowledge at school level in supporting peer schools to secure greater progress in core subject. Shared partnership-wide knowledge of what counts as progress from senior school leaders to classroom teachers. Greater agency and leadership know-how for middle (subject) leaders at system level.	Hub-wide communities of subject or aspect practice (subjects, assessment, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)) innovating pedagogy and creating new PCK for teachers. School-level classroom enquiries and coaching. Visible learning processes and public outcomes.	Peer-led communities of practice (heads, subject or aspect leaders). Peer-led classroom coaching and enquiry processes. Shared curriculum and lesson plans resulting from joint enquiry and coaching of middle leaders and classroom practitioners. Teacher exploratory talk: negotiation of meaning in workshops and enquiries. Guided construction of meaning in school-based coaching.	Overall partnership commissioned. Devolved to hub-lead school groups. Deliberate hub-school learning how to lead and develop schools in subsystems (hubs). Head teacher strategic role and monitoring. Middle leaders shoulder large share of design and delivery in lead and member schools.

stretched across (Spillane, 2006) head teachers and middle leaders in hub-lead schools was a prerequisite for their success.

After two years of piloting, the hub model was deemed so successful that it was given a second lease of life in 2017. The evaluation found that the approach had harnessed active engagement from a wide range of professionals, deepened collaborative learning, improved practice in key areas and:

> Where teachers have been part of action research or joint practice development groups, this has provided a more sustained period through which teachers' skills and knowledge can be developed and through which the outcomes of the projects on the pupils' learning can be measured. (CSLP hub internal evaluation, 2017: 4)

Vignette 3: 2016–17

The school-led partnership was enabling the most diverse local mix of state school types in the country to work collaboratively with a shared vision for their development and for the education of Camden students. In March 2016, the government published its White Paper, *Education Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016). These proposals centred on an uncompromising objective: by 2022 no school in England would be under council control.

However, in 2015, Camden heads, governors and education leaders had anticipated the potential existential threat that such a national scenario would hold to break up Camden's place-based, diverse yet collaborative partnership of schools that was so rapidly building its capacity for sustained improvement. Much local evolution stood to be lost should this family of schools be subject to forced takeover by external providers. A public consultation on incorporation of the CSLP began in December 2015, in a move to protect its relationships, its funding and its activities.

The company model consulted upon was a not-for-profit, schools company, limited by guarantee. As well as emphasizing the protection that legal status could confer on the modes of cross-school working established by the CSLP, significantly, this consultation also gave voice to the aspirations of the wider school community partnership that contributes to, and benefits from, excellent local education. These voices were those of parents, families, community leaders, local business leaders and school employees. They represented 'civic governance' in action and the consultation proved decisive.

Every Camden school joined the company – Camden Learning – in the summer of 2016. They appointed a board of directors comprising head teachers, school governors and two senior council leaders (one political and one officer) who represented the council's 19 per cent stake in the organization. They appointed an independent chair and a managing director. The small central council team was 'loaned' to the new company. The company's income consisted of school membership subscriptions and a commission from the council to deliver its statutory services and those concerned with other council responsibilities, such as health education and safeguarding. The period 2016–17 was transitional. Camden Learning began trading in under its completely new leadership in September 2017.

Case study: Camden Learning Oracy Hub

Findings from the LSEF mathematics project about the importance of exploratory talk in helping students to develop mathematical thinking had prompted widened interest among Camden schools in Mercer's (2000) work on the power of 'oracy' to help children use talk effectively to communicate orally, to think and, as a result, to learn. (Professor Neil Mercer had been a member of the 2013–15 Cambridge team.)

In 2017, three primary schools and one secondary school proposed that they run one of Camden's second generation of school learning hubs focused on the development of oracy across the borough.

Their bid was successful, and they supported a large cross-phase group of schools to implement oracy-based learning, 20 of which explored the impact on the achievement and progress of disadvantaged students through a structured approach

to teaching vocabulary and structured talk. Schools used the *Oracy Skills Framework* (Mercer *et al.*, 2012), support from oracy charity Voice 21 and the local Unicorn Theatre to help schools introduce weekly interventions in ground-ruled exploratory talk and curriculum content vocabulary (Bannon *et al.*, 2019), and to develop oracy leadership among middle leaders in the four lead schools, and then in turn in the wider group (Dudley and Mercer, 2018). The hub's aim was:

> To elevate the status of oracy in every school, get people to understand what it is and see it both as a pedagogy on its own, and as part of the curriculum and to give it equal status with reading, writing and mathematics. To provide contexts for talk through interdisciplinary learning. [To understand] … how oracy is important in thinking-development and in the outcomes that the children produce. (Helen Bruckdorfer, in Dudley and Mercer, 2018: 4)

The coaching exchange captured in the following two fragments of separate conversations with oracy leaders has echoes of the meaning-oriented teacher-learning through exploratory talk initially developed in the LSEF Lesson Study project:

> When teachers are planning (with me as an oracy leader), I am mentally going through a process of trying to *anticipate* some of the *sentence structures* the children *might need to use* in order to formulate the mathematics. (Rosemary – lead-school oracy leader)
>
> An idea I got from Rosemary was, at the [lesson] planning stage, *anticipating – by thinking –* 'What are the children going to need to say to be able (for example) to *clarify* something?' So, I have to think 'What do *I* say when *I* am *making a clarification*?' and then try and *engineer that talk* naturally into the lesson. It's brilliant!! (Hub member school oracy leader, in Dudley and Mercer, 2018: 11; emphasis added)

After three terms, member schools working with the hub-lead schools claimed a markedly increased understanding of how oracy is both vital and yet neglected. But they also believed that the hub-lead schools were supporting them in tackling this effectively because, so relatively recently, they too had gone through this learning process:

> Oracy involves complex concepts, so hub-member schools who are starting from differing points of knowledge and experience need carefully planned opportunities to confront and struggle successfully with them: 'It is not fair to jump people over things that were hugely important in crystallising where *we* got to with *our* thinking ... But we can fast track them a little bit'. (Kathy Bannon, in Dudley and Mercer, 2018: 6; emphasis added)

It was also clear that joint classroom action research, led by hub-lead-school oracy leaders, was a powerful vehicle for the 'fast tracking' Kathy Bannon describes above, because they recognize the specific barriers that the research process reveals, and so they can provide these schools with bespoke support informed by their own recent research experiences:

> When we were asking, in the mini hubs, to get the participants to do the research project, … that was the point when I realised that everybody had really, really different starting points. (Hub-lead-school oracy leader, in Dudley and Mercer, 2018: 6)

One oracy leader, discussing her thoughts on where her next teaching post might be, has said publicly that involvement in the learning hub activity was focusing her sights on choosing another Camden school:

> I've already been thinking, ooh, if I moved anywhere else in London I'd be missing this opportunity of the schools all working together… (Hub member school oracy Leader, Camden Learning launch video)

In the words of co-author Helen Bruckdorfer, head teachers and oracy leaders in the lead schools were held to account by their peer schools for the quality and impact of their work:

> They've given us the [commission] money, but we definitely have to produce the goods. We have to say what's working and what's not. There are set meetings. We have to produce a report on what's gone well, on take-up and issues that have arisen and we all [Oracy Hub head teachers] go to a board meeting each term to discuss our reports. So it's rigorous. (Camden Learning launch video)

Table 3: Sociocultural classroom-, school- and system-level professional learning model – Stage 3

	Motivation	Object(s) of learning	Mode of learning	Mediating tools and artefacts	Leadership implications
Camden Learning Hubs	Intrinsic Improvement in a shared need identified by school-led improvement group. Hub designs proposed by would-be hub schools. Commission by school-led Camden Learning improvement group.	Improved/ Innovated knowledge at classroom, school and system levels of evidenced approaches to teaching and learning that improve learning in curriculum areas/groups of students identified by Camden Learning as underperforming.	Hub-lead-school middle leader to hub member school middle leader enquiry and coaching. Workshops and CPD sessions. Active sharing of outcomes for students.	Shared endeavour and joint work in planning and leading change in hub member schools. Exploratory talk in peer-led classroom collaborative lesson and curriculum designs. Hub-lead-school middle leaders modelling leadership of change through joint work for member school middle leaders; CPD and enquiry processes.	Middle leaders in hub-lead schools play at least as significant a system leadership role as do their respective headteachers. A school's owned and driven organization takes overall lead.

The schools that led Camden Learning Oracy Hub between 2017 and 2019 are now leading players in oracy development across London as Voice Camden has become a key partner of the national oracy charity, Voice 21.

Table 3 shows how, in its third stage of development, the nature of motivation to learn and change in the sociocultural model has become increasingly intrinsic. Fear of failure in an Ofsted inspection is a (negative) extrinsic motivator for individuals, schools and systems alike. However, as Camden's schools are, through Camden Learning, actively leading the risk analyses and interventions systems in place to prevent failure, confidence in the system and its communication among head teachers is high. The high levels of intrinsic motivation stem from the fact that the lead organization for professional learning and improvement in Camden is now owned and driven by schools themselves, with the council now a vitally supportive, but minority, stakeholder and partner.

Discussion

We have traced the development of the way that action research-based enquiry practices taking place in classrooms, at school and across the whole school system in Camden have advanced in their nature between 2013 and the present day. It is clear now that classroom-located collaborative enquiry is not seen as simply 'research', it is viewed as a vital tool in the toolbox of methods employed at system, school and classroom level in Camden, which combines classroom enquiry, coaching and more traditional approaches such as workshops, 'teach meets' or local conferences to secure school and curriculum development in the borough. In doing so, it has created what Munby and Fullan (2016) call a feedback-rich culture.

Table 4 summarizes the changes in the sociocultural model from its first stage under traditional school improvement arrangements and contrasts them with the key features of the system in 2019.

A significant change has been the faith placed in expert middle leaders to increasingly support whole school improvement in other schools, as was witnessed in the oracy hub exemplar. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) have termed this combination of professional efficacy and collaborative leadership 'collaborative capital'. Such capital is essential for school-led improvement to be sustainable. It can also create a powerful recruitment and retention effect for teacher leaders who want to do more but who also want to stay connected to teaching and learning and professional growth, as we see in the words of the teacher who clearly sees greater career growth available in a context where schools collaborate. This faith is in part rewarded by the fact that in 2020, for the first time, every school in Camden was judged by England's national schools regulator, Ofsted, to be either good or outstanding.

Conclusion and next steps

In recent years, the number of local education partnerships that support schools and help to drive improvements in outcomes for children and young people has continued to grow in London and nationally. They have assumed responsibility for strategic oversight of education in the local area and act as an engine of improvement, brokering connections and initiatives across schools. In many of these partnerships, schools themselves are voluntarily taking responsibility for collective performance in an area. A schools-led, local partnership for improvement means that schools themselves take on responsibility, and even accountability, for ensuring that every school has the

Table 4: Sociocultural learning model development summary – building professional and leadership capital

	Motivation	Locus of object(s) of learning	Mode of learning	Leadership characteristics
Stage 1	Extrinsic/ Intrinsic (often negative, through fear of public failure).	Classroom- and school-level improved student learning.	Centrally-led classroom action research made public. Council-led CPD and 'courses' offer classroom-situated collaborative teacher learning.	Council seen as overall lead body accountable for school improvement, but with decreasing statutory role and resources. Heads of teaching schools (and others) through their own agency beginning to take lead in areas of expertise to support council model. Joint endeavour of schools and council to provide good education for all Camden students begins to develop shared system leadership, and civic governance.
Stage 3	Intrinsic (mainly positive – desire to succeed in improving learning further while confident in local school-led systems).	Classroom-, school- and whole system-level improved learning that creates the conditions and skills that ultimately improve student learning.	Head teacher- and middle-leader-led expert peer coaching of other middle leaders in implementing change by leading coaching and enquiry in their own schools.	Collaborative leadership by schools-owned joint venture not-for-profit company. Head teachers strategically design and lead improvement activities. School middle leaders, expert in a field, coach other middle leaders to do the same in their schools, thus building strategic, collaborative capital and capacity for improvement. Council and local stakeholders through the Camden Learning Board, through school governance and through local democratic processes provide strategic direction, an authorizing environment and feedback from communities and families.

support it needs to improve and achieve well. Partnership working and collaboration across schools are key elements of this system. However, as Greany and Higham (2018) indicated, the trust needed for deep partnership is hard to develop in a quasi-market system, with competition so deeply embedded. It feels easier for collaboration and competition to coexist and to work positively and supportively for schools within a voluntary, lateral partnership that has built openness and trust into the way it works.

This is not top-down accountability with a statutory base in individual schools, trusts and local authorities. It is lateral, shared responsibility rooted in ambitious local vision and professional networks.

As interest in local education partnerships has grown, so too has their interest in working together to learn and develop. A national association (AEPA) has been established which is co-chaired by the chairs of Birmingham Education Partnership (BEP) and Camden Learning. Camden Learning itself chairs a termly meeting of London partnerships to share knowledge and experience.

These partnerships are seeking to make a bigger difference by creating a more connected system locally and, indeed, nationally. Many, like Camden Learning, have captured local hearts and it is evident they have the potential to reduce the risk of fragmentation and dangers of isolationism in an increasingly diverse system. The experience in Camden shows that they can enhance the professional and social capital of teachers, and how they can deepen motivation, learning and achievement. At the heart of those processes is constant enquiry and scrutiny of practice – not in a negative, judgement-laden way, nor in a purely scientific, experimental way, but as a process of constant renewal of self-knowledge and self-improvement.

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Christine Gilbert has been a teacher, a secondary head teacher and a director of education, first in Harrow and then in Tower Hamlets, where she also went on to become Chief Executive. Between 2006 and 2011, she held the post of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted. A visiting professor at UCL Institute of Education, Christine is involved in a wide range of education projects. She is the independent chair of Camden Learning.

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