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Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga Aotearoa

An Evaluation of Network Learning Communities — Main report

Report to the Ministry of Education

Ward, L. and Henderson, A.
CYPERUS
with Quigley and Watts

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Network Learning Communities
Main Report

Prepared for: The Ministry of Education.

By Lorrae Ward (PhD) and Adelle Henderson (CYPERUS)

Supported by Quigley and Watts

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from an evaluation undertaken for the Ministry of Education (Ministry) to determine the extent to which a school leader's participation in an NLC (Network Learning Community) has impacted on the curriculum design and review processes in their school. It considers four main evaluation questions and describes the implementation of the NLC initiative at a regional and cluster level.

The NLC initiative was first introduced in 2008. While the composition of the participants and the nature of the support provided has changed since its introduction, the model remains essentially the same. Groups of school leaders are brought together, in professional learning groups, to develop their understanding of *The New Zealand Curriculum* and to support its implementation in their schools. These groups are led and facilitated by sector leaders from within the group. Advisors from School Support Services provide guidance and resources to the sector leaders. In 2010 there were 195 such groups operating, ranging from small, principal led groups to larger, secondary school curriculum area groups. In addition there were a number of cross-curricular groups.

The evaluation utilised a range of data collection methods including a facilitated workshop, interviews, online surveys and document analyses. The workshop involved six advisors from five of the six regions and Ministry personnel. In addition, telephone interviews were undertaken with 11 advisors from across the six regions. All those who attended the workshop were interviewed.

In total, 79 sector leaders and 144 school leaders completed online surveys. These are return rates of approximately 41% and 15% respectively. Ten case studies were also undertaken from around New Zealand, focussed on individual NLCs and the journey they have taken. During these case studies data were gathered from 10 sector leaders and 26 school leaders. Most were interviewed either face-to-face or by telephone, although some completed written questionnaires due to availability issues. A companion technical report provides detailed data analyses from the survey and includes the ten case studies in full. Abbreviated case studies are available online.

Overall, the data from this evaluation suggest that those involved in NLCs are positive about the initiative. They report enjoying the opportunity to network with colleagues, to learn what others are doing in their schools and to support each other with the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Few reported they would not want to see their NLC continued in some form or other. However, the wide standard deviations in the survey data suggest that the experiences of the respondents have been diverse; something likely to be replicated across NLCs in general.

The knowledge and/or expertise of the school leaders surveyed had reportedly increased across all areas included in the survey during the time they had been in the NLC. There were no instances where some degree of influence was not attributed to the NLC. Areas where the NLCs have reportedly had the greatest influence are increasing the knowledge and/or expertise of school participants in *leadership practices for facilitating change*; *engaging students in decisions around their learning* and *effective pedagogies as described in The New Zealand Curriculum*. The level of attribution appears to be dependent on the focus of the NLC with wide variation in responses. One area where there appears to have been little focus is *Māori achieving success as Māori*.

In 2010 the focus of the NLCs broadened beyond the development of local curriculum. Only three of the ten case studies reported this was a focus of their group. However, the data gathered show that where it was a focus the NLC had supported school leaders in developing their local curricula; providing increased motivation for them to do so and in some instances helping them to get started.

While no respondents to the surveys attributed the reported changes to teaching and learning practices entirely to the NLC they did report it had been an enabling factor. Further, when asked whether they would choose the NLC model of professional development as the most effective for influencing teaching and learning practices within schools an overwhelming majority responded positively.

While the opportunity to network within the NLCs was reported as being the greatest benefit for those participating there does not appear to have been networking between communities. Nor do many of the NLCs appear to have operated as professional learning communities, where challenge and critique are the norm. Rather they tend to be professional learning groups focussed on the professional development of those attending the NLC meetings. The exceptions to this do suggest that it may be possible to raise the bar of expectations and to begin to implement more formally a networked learning community model where the focus is explicitly on enhancing student outcomes through the implementation of The New Zealand Curriculum.

Chapter One: The Evaluation

In this chapter the evaluation itself is described including its purpose; the methods used to collect and analyse data; the participants and any perceived limitations to the evaluation findings.

Background

This evaluation was commissioned by the Ministry to inform future developments of the NLC initiative. The purpose of the evaluation, as stated in the evaluation contract, was to determine the extent to which a school leader's participation in an NLC impacted on the curriculum design and review process in his/her school, both during 2009 and into 2010.

There were four key evaluation questions to be considered:

1. To what extent has participation in an NLC increased a school leader's understanding of *The New Zealand Curriculum*?
2. How, and in what ways, has the NLC supported the school in designing their local curriculum?
3. How has the involvement of the leader in an NLC influenced the way teaching and learning has changed in the school?
4. How, and in what ways, has the NLC professional development model contributed to cluster success, both in terms of the curriculum work and more broadly?

In answering these questions it was necessary to consider the processes through which the NLCs have supported the participant schools, the barriers and enablers to their success and how the learnings of the NLC were translated into practice in schools.

The evaluation design and the data collection tools were finalised with the Ministry and a representative from the School Support Services advisory teams working with NLCs. Two workshops were held to finalise the evaluation plan, the working evaluation questions and the tools to be utilised. All tools developed by the evaluation team were approved by the Ministry prior to their use in the field.

Methodology

This evaluation used a range of data collection methods including a facilitated workshop, interviews and surveys. Participants included the advisors working with the NLC initiative, sector leaders¹ and school leaders² directly involved in NLC activities. With the exception of the surveys, the data collected were primarily analysed qualitatively, with responses grouped into common themes for discussion purposes. Survey data were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. In addition to the more formal data collection a number of informal conversations with key Ministry personnel have also informed this report. All data reported in this evaluation are self-report.

¹ Sector leaders are the convenors of the NLC responsible for the co-ordination and facilitation of the group amongst other things. They are drawn from among the member schools.

² School leaders are the other members of the NLC. They are their school's representative in the group. While most are principals the composition of the groups is beginning to include more middle management and classroom teachers.

Advisor workshop

In the initial stages of the evaluation a workshop was held in Wellington comprising representatives from the evaluation team, the Ministry and advisors from five of the six regions. No advisor from the sixth region was able to attend. The Ministry determined the participation at the workshop.

This workshop was facilitated by the principal evaluator from the evaluation team, supported by one other. The workshop was recorded digitally and notes taken. The purpose of the workshop was to develop a better understanding of the nature of the NLC initiative as it was implemented across the different regions. Findings from the workshop influenced the development of the data collection tools and the nature of the case studies.

Advisor interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted with 11 advisors from across the six regions. The advisors who had attended the workshops were included in these interviews along with other colleagues. These advisors were selected by the Ministry as those most able to provide insights into the initiative in each of their regions. The interviews were recorded digitally and detailed notes were also taken.

Each semi-structured interview was between 60 and 90 minutes long. These interviews were informed by the earlier workshop and in many instances provided the evaluation team with an opportunity to clarify specific issues or questions that had arisen from the workshop. In this sense they were more a critical discussion than a direct interview. The evaluator used this opportunity to test some early assumptions regarding the implementation of the NLC initiative.

In subsequent chapters advisor comments are referenced by codes, AD01 through to AD11. The codes were assigned randomly and the numbers do not imply any sequential pattern.

Case studies

Ten case studies were undertaken from across five of the six regions. These cases covered a range of contexts based on school size, location and type. The case for each was the NLC rather than the schools involved³. The selection of the cases was made through consultation with the Ministry and the advisors from each region. Examples of primary, secondary and cross-sector NLCs as well as those from rural, provincial and urban areas were found. Rather than looking for 'best' case stories the evaluators asked for those NLCs which would provide interesting stories for others to learn from.

Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews. However, where an interview was not possible school participants were given the option of completing a written questionnaire. The sector leader from each of the NLCs was interviewed and, with one exception, at least two school participants from each NLC also provided data. In some instances documents pertaining to the NLC were also provided and used in the subsequent development of the case study reports. These data were used to develop a narrative for each of the case studies.

One of the questions asked was what the sector leader would call their case study if it was a television drama, movie or documentary. Their titles became the name of each case study. Throughout the report case studies are referenced by abbreviated versions of these titles e.g. *Country Calendar*, *Scooby Doo*.

³ This was due to the difficulty in obtaining information regarding the participant schools

Surveys

Online surveys of both the sector leaders and the school leaders/participants were undertaken. These included both Likert⁴ style questions and open-ended responses. Participant information sheets were sent to all sector leaders outlining the purpose of the evaluation, the use of the data and inviting them to participate. The sector leaders were also sent information regarding the school leader surveys and asked to forward these to the other participants in their NLCs. This was necessary as in most instances the information provided to the evaluation team regarding NLC composition only included the name of the sector leader.

The Likert style questions used a six-point positively-packed response scale, with two negative and four positive responses. This type of scale promotes greater variance in self-report data where responses are likely to be positive⁵. Analysis of these questions involved the creation of descriptive statistics including means, standards deviations and frequencies.

All open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively with responses grouped into broad thematic categories using an iterative, open-coding method. One member of the evaluation team determined initial coding categories, which were then checked by a second member. Changes were made dependent on the level of agreement between the two evaluators. This process continued until both agreed that the categories determined reflected the responses coded within them.

In some instances participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions with a ranked list of up to three items. These items were “scored” from one to three when analysed as well as being coded into categories.

Document analyses

Documents provided by the Ministry were also considered. These included milestone reports to the Ministry from the different regions over 2009 and 2010 and initial policy documentation. The latter provided an historical account of the initiative and were provided by the Ministry in response to requests from the evaluation team.

Participants

Table 1 presents an overview of participants involved in each data collection method. It is not possible to determine the extent to which those who participated in the case studies also completed the surveys due to the anonymous nature of the surveys.

⁴ Likert style questions ask a respondent to choose their response to a particular question or statement from a given scale. In this way they are similar to multi-choice questions.

⁵ Brown, G. T. L. (2004). Measuring attitude with positively packed self-report ratings: Comparison of agreement and frequency scales. *Psychological Reports, 94*, 1015-1024.

Table 1: Evaluation participants

Data collection method	Participant type	Number of participants
Workshop	School support services advisors	6
Advisor interviews	School support services advisors	11 ⁶
Case studies	Sector leaders	10
	School leaders/participants	26
Surveys	Sector leaders	79
	School leaders/participants	144

Table 2 presents a more detailed summary of the demographics of the NLCs involved in the case studies.

Table 2: Case study demographics

Demographic		Number of NLCs
Year initiated	2008	4
	2009	2
	2010	4
Type of NLC	Primary principal led	4
	Secondary	4
	Cross sector	2
Location	Rural	3
	Provincial	2
	Urban	5
School Support Services region	Auckland	3
	Waikato	1
	Massey (Taranaki)	2
	Wellington	2
	Christchurch	2

Table 3 presents detailed demographic data for the sector leader surveys. Just over half (51%) of the respondent sector leaders are from NLCs initiated in 2010. The majority of them (55%) are principals. The most frequently reported size of an NLC was between six and ten schools (51%) with a further 32% being less than six schools. The length of time they reported being a sector leader varied. The largest group (n=30, 39%) reported having been sector leaders for less than a year. Of the rest, 30% reported they had held the position for more than two years.

⁶ All six who attended the workshop were also interviewed.

Table 3: Sector leader demographics⁷

Demographic		Number of participants
Year initiated	2008	17
	2009	19
	2010	37
Size of NLC	1 to 5 schools	23
	6 to 10 schools	37
	11 to 15 schools	7
	16 or more schools	6
School Support Services region	Auckland	20
	Waikato	15
	Massey	12
	Wellington	17
	Christchurch	8
	Otago	4
Main role in school	Principal	51
	Senior Management	7
	Middle Management	18
	Classroom Teacher	17
Multiple roles held	Principal/Classroom teacher	6
	Middle manager/Classroom teacher	6
	Senior/Middle manager/ Classroom teacher	3
	Senior manager/Middle manager	1
Length of time as sector leader	Less than one year	30
	One year	9
	Between one and two years	14
	More than two years	23
Total respondents		79

Table 4 presents similar demographic data for the school leader/participant surveys. A large majority (77%) of the respondents to this survey are from primary schools. Most (67%) are principals. Only 12% report classroom teacher being their main role. Just over a third (37.5%) reported they had been personally involved in the NLC for less than a year.

⁷ Note in some instances more than one response was possible. In others, not all respondents answered these questions. The total number of respondents for each demographic therefore varies.

Table 4: School leader/participant demographics⁸

Demographic		Number of participants
Number of teachers (School size)	1 - 4 teachers	30
	5 - 10 teacher	38
	11 - 20 teachers	28
	21 - 30 teachers	16
	31 - 40 teachers	6
	41 + teachers	18
School Support Services region	Auckland	50
	Waikato	13
	Massey	29
	Wellington	26
	Christchurch	22
	Otago	3
Decile	Low (1-3)	28
	Medium (4-7)	69
	High (8-10)	46
School Type	Primary	111
	Secondary	31
	Other	2
Role	Principal	96
	Senior Management	22
	Middle Management	27
	Classroom Teacher	39
Multiple roles	Principal/Classroom teacher	19
	Middle management/Classroom teacher	7
	Senior manager/Middle manager/Classroom teacher	3
	Senior manager/Middle manager	2
Year school joined	2010	54
	2009	32
	2008	38
Length of time personally involved	Less than one year	54
	One year	18
	Two years	38
	More than two years	33
Total respondents		144

⁸ More than one response was possible in some instances. Again, not all respondents answered each question.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to the findings of this evaluation, related to the representativeness of the samples for each of the main data collection methods. These are largely due to difficulties in accessing school based participants due to the autonomous nature of the NLCs and the focus of the advisors on providing support and professional development to the sector leaders, rather than working directly with the NLC.

First, the return rate for the school leader/participant surveys is very low; estimated to be less than 15%. There is no way of determining representativeness from the advisor records provided to the evaluation team as they do not include detail regarding the schools participating in each NLC. The following demographics suggest caution needs to be taken concerning the school leader survey results, in that there is a potential for data to be biased. Interestingly, there is the likelihood of both a positive and a negative bias dependent on the question being asked.

1. There are a relatively large number of respondents from smaller schools. This will be related to the high proportion of primary schools. However, in a small school it is likely to be easier for one person to influence teaching and learning practices across their school.
2. There is a high proportion of respondents from NLCs formed in 2010. These NLCs are unlikely to have had more than two or three meetings when the survey was completed. As such there will have been little opportunity for the NLC to impact on their knowledge/expertise, or to have influenced school practice.

Further, due to the anonymity of the survey we do not know how many NLCs are represented by these respondents.

Second, while the return rate for the sector leader survey is reasonably high at approximately 49%, there are similar concerns regarding representativeness. As with the school leader/participant survey most respondents are from small schools. They are also predominantly from NLCs that were formed in 2010. A detailed analysis of the nature of the NLCs across all regions would enable consideration of the representativeness of the sample. However, this was beyond the scope of this evaluation and the information may not be readily available.

Finally, concerted efforts were made to ensure a broadly representative group of NLCs for the case studies in terms of the composition and location of the NLC. Efforts were also made to ensure a range of foci. However, again there is no easy way of determining the extent to which this is the case.

Chapter Two: The NLC Initiative

In this chapter the background of the initiative is briefly summarised before the implementation of the NLC initiative at a regional level is described. Data for this chapter were primarily collected through the advisor workshop; the telephone interviews with individual advisors and the analysis of key Ministry documentation. However, reference has also been made to the surveys and case studies where findings have particular relevance to the point being discussed.

Background to the initiative

The NLCs were first set up in 2008 as one element of the support provided by the Ministry “to assist schools in the process of engaging with and implementing *The New Zealand Curriculum*”⁹. Under this initiative, additional funding was provided to the regional School Support Service providers to establish and maintain professional groups, or clusters, of schools. The intention of this funding was to “recognise and grow leadership capability in each of the regions.” A total of 100 sector leaders were to be appointed, whose role was to develop “professional communities” and “contribute to schools sharing and building collaborative approaches for exploring ideas and trying new practice that gives effect to *The New Zealand Curriculum*.”¹⁰

The long term intention was that once these clusters were operating they would require very little additional support. Further, there was an expectation they would supplement existing resources in the regions. The role of School Support Services was to identify the sector leaders and their communities; support the sector leaders in creating an action plan and to distribute the funds allocated to each NLC. The sector leaders’ role was to work with the School Support Services’ teams in each region to facilitate local learning opportunities for principals, Boards of Trustees and teacher representatives from schools in the first two terms of 2008.

Any further support for the communities was to be through regular School Support Services’ work, including the co-ordination of professional development opportunities. It was acknowledged that advisor support might be needed to facilitate the gathering and sharing of material and experiences and an online environment was touted as a means of doing this. However, it was assumed that the sector leaders chosen would be self-starters and as such they would not require a large amount of professional development.

In 2008 the NLC initiative was known as the 100 Sector Leaders initiative. The clusters that were to be set up were called Sector Leader Professional Communities. The term NLCs was introduced in 2009. However, as data collected during this evaluation has shown this name has never really taken hold. More than one advisor commented that the term NLC had never been formally adopted by those implementing the clusters. Further, it was clear throughout the evaluation that NLCs was not a readily recognised term for many of the participants who tended to describe their clusters in a variety of ways, primarily as a curriculum cluster or professional learning group. The term NLC is used throughout this report reflecting the current policy title of the initiative.

The NLC model

The NLC model has evolved over time with changes in both 2009 and 2010 to the way in which it has been implemented. In 2008 the NLCs were all principal-led and focussed on supporting school leaders to develop their

⁹ Ministry of Education (2010) Request for Proposals with respect to an Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Network Learning Communities to Schools, p.3

¹⁰ Unpublished Ministry of Education working document provided to the evaluation team.

understandings of *The New Zealand Curriculum* document and what it would mean for their schools. The other participants in the NLCs were also predominantly principals. The focus was on their local school-based curricula and on undertaking curriculum review processes. The NLCs were a “*means to get information out to schools - and for them to make sense of it.*” (AD05)¹¹ Participants in the NLCs were meant to share ideas; talk together about how they might do things; going back to their schools to put things into action before coming back to share again.

In 2008 principals applied for the role of sector leader and then gathered a group of school leaders who wished to work with them. In a number of instances these were from schools in existing clusters; in others they were formed through other commonalities such as geographical location or school size. The majority of the communities were primary.

In 2009 the nature of the communities changed, reflecting a broadening of focus. While the majority of the 2008 communities remained, new ones were also formed; not all principal led and with more specific areas of focus. For example, there were NLCs developed around: specific learning areas, deputy principals, special schools, pastoral care, school review, and pedagogy. These new NLCs were created through an application process in which a group of schools would develop a proposal and submit it to their regional School Support Services. There were also a number of special project NLCs designed to take into account the demographics of each region. For example, in Waikato there was recognition that they had the largest number of Kura and schools with level 1 and 2 units in the country¹².

One of the advisors discussed how the model had perhaps “*lost the way - become muddied*” when the NLCs, and their sector leaders, were extended to include learning areas and middle leaders. In the view of this advisor the model had originally “*been fuelled by the understanding that leadership made a difference*”. However, in 2009/2010 with the imperative to “*grow*” the number of clusters the focus had shifted from school curricula to practice consistent with *The New Zealand Curriculum* in a range of ways. (AD07)

In 2010 many of the NLCs continued from previous years; including the special projects. However, the role of the advisors changed. In the preceding years they had been more directly involved with the NLCs themselves. Their role in 2010 was to support the sector leaders who had responsibility for facilitating the NLCs. In this way, the 2010 model appears to align closely with the original policy intent. In instances where no sector leader was available an advisor took that role until one could be found. Again, proposals were required from NLCs and all funding was contestable.

There were more subject specific secondary NLCs formed in 2010 than in previous years. As subsequent data collection showed, the different needs of these NLCs, from those originally developed, may need further consideration. Their leaders are often classroom teachers or middle managers rather than senior management; their focus is much narrower and more directly linked to classroom practice and they are likely to require more specific support in terms of both leadership and content knowledge. Further, they are likely to have less influence on school-wide teaching and learning practices.

While it was acknowledged in the 2010 School Support Services output schedule¹³ that the NLCs may be of different kinds they were all to be “*structured, focused and supported to give effect to The New Zealand Curriculum and especially to school curriculum development.*” The NLCs were expected, from a Ministry perspective, to “*use the National Standards or secondary assessment practices, as appropriate, to gather data to inform school curriculum development consistent with The New Zealand Curriculum*”.

¹¹ As explained in methodology AD05 refers to advisor interview number five.

¹² Taken from the 2009 Milestone report to the MoE from the University of Waikato School Support Services.

¹³ This schedule was provided to the evaluation team by the Ministry of Education.

What was readily apparent at the advisors' workshop was that many of the characteristics of Networked Learning Communities (as described in the literature¹⁴) had not been purposefully implemented. First, there was no real knowledge amongst the advisors as to the extent to which networking had occurred between learning communities based within individual schools and the NLC, or between different NLCs. In discussing this, one advisor explained that s/he had “*never really thought about what networked means*” or “*explored its potential*” and “*networking consciously has not occurred.*” (AD07) The feeling at the workshop generally was that too much emphasis was being placed on the word ‘networked’ by the evaluation team and that it was not relevant to what had been implemented. The intent in the New Zealand model, as implemented by the advisors, appears to have been for networking to occur within individual NLCs for the dissemination and sharing of information, resources and ideas. The extent to which this moves beyond the NLC group itself is not widely known.

The second defining feature of the term NLCs, the idea of learning communities, is also problematic. Professional learning communities (in an educational sense) are generally described as communities within which there is a clear intent to improve student outcomes and within which practice is challenged and critiqued through professional conversations. The data for this evaluation suggest there has been an emphasis on collaboration, on supporting each other, rather than on critique and changing practice in schools. The advisors were not sure how much challenging was actually occurring and the language used in the case studies was predominantly that of collegiality and sharing. There was a strong sense from the case studies that the primary based NLCs were enabling school leaders to affirm their own “*journey*” to date with *The New Zealand Curriculum*; to see what others had done and to determine where they were in comparison. This may have been due to the sense-making nature of their focus in 2008/2009 when the NLCs were about “*getting their head around The New Zealand Curriculum.*” (AD05)

While there was agreement at the workshop that more effort was needed to determine the extent to which the work of the NLC was influencing practice in schools it should be remembered that this was outside their brief as it was formulated at the time of the evaluation. The advisory output schedule for 2010 was clearly focussed on supporting the sector leaders to run an effective professional learning group.

In conclusion, the idea of networked learning communities was not clearly espoused in the actual policy implementation direction and there are questions around whether sufficient resource was available to enable this to happen. What is potentially of more concern is the extent to which the NLCs are operating as collegial support groups rather than professional learning groups or learning communities.

Implementation at a regional level in 2010

There are subtle differences in the ways in which each region has implemented the initiative. This regional variation provides flexibility to meet the needs of local schools and to provide for a level of ground-up design. However, it can also be viewed as reflecting a lack of overall central alignment in the model; in “*the MoE brief being too broad*” (AD09).

¹⁴ For a discussion of networked learning communities see Katz, Steven & Earl, Lorna. (2010). Learning about networked learning communities. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement (21)* 1, 27-51.

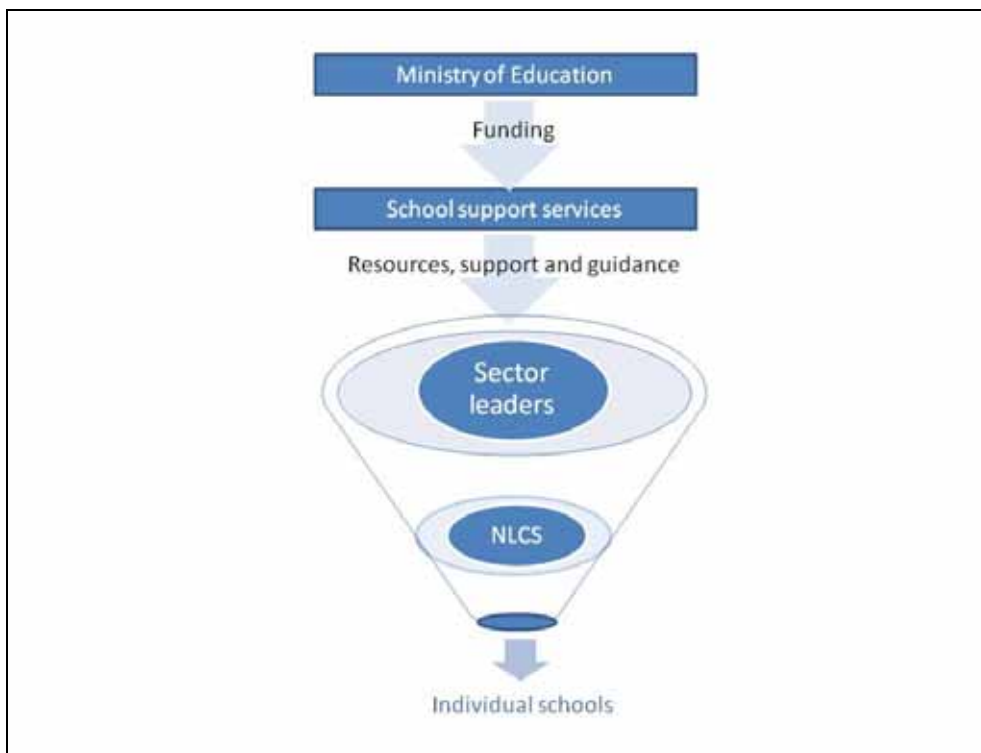
In order to understand the nature of the regional implementation workshop attendees were asked to draw a model that best represented the way the NLC initiative was currently being implemented in their regions. They were asked to include the following in their models:

- the key participants
- the layers of communities (if there was more than one)
- the flow of information, expertise and/or knowledge
- the nature of the network
- the boundary walkers (people who move between clusters in a network, connecting them).

These features had been determined based on the literature around Networked Learning Communities and the characteristics of each. This was due to an assumption by the evaluation team that this literature had informed the original design of the initiative. That this was not the case only became clear in subsequent questioning and analysis.

All regions implemented the model in similar ways. The main differences related to the way support had been provided and the extent of that support. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the basic model as it has been implemented.

Figure 1: Model of information and knowledge dissemination



In all instances a cascade model has operated with the flow of information and expertise primarily downward from the advisors to the sector leaders and then onto the school leaders¹⁵. This information is filtered at each level; either consciously or sub-consciously. One advisor described this flow as ensuring that the sector leaders “*are fed so they can feed others*”; knowing “*what they are taking out has some authority*”, further stating that the strength of the model is in the “*structured trickle down.*” (AD07)

¹⁵ Note that throughout this report the terminology school leaders is used to refer to all NLC participants other than the sector leader.

However, others expressed concern about the cascade model and felt it was not ideal. This was clearly stated by one advisor who said “*no sort of cascade model works - but this is better than nothing - we are stuck with it for money reasons.*” (AD02) Another commented it was the “*best way of doing it within the resource*” while acknowledging they had no way of knowing how much information was going back to the NLCs from the sector leader days. (AD05) This concern with the cascade model was also found in the case studies and the surveys. As one survey respondent stated “*the very best professional development happens when the ‘experts’ go into a school and work alongside a whole staff.*” An example of this occurring, and its success, was provided in the *Honest Teacher*¹⁶ case study. The professional development half-day with Gunhild Litwin, reportedly provided all attendees with a much better understanding of *The New Zealand Curriculum* and was one of the reported highlights for members of the NLC.

The ‘feeding’ of sector leaders seems to occur most frequently through sector leader professional development days, where they are brought together for leadership training and/or for the provision of content knowledge regarding different facets of The New Zealand Curriculum. There do appear to be opportunities for sharing between sector leaders at these events and in some instances expos have been run where sector leaders present material from their NLC. However, data suggest these are primarily “show and tell”. The frequency of these meetings and the size of them vary across the regions; as does the extent to which they are the key activity undertaken by the advisors attached to the NLC initiative.

While it is realistic for Auckland or Wellington to bring sector leaders together regularly this is not as easy in the other regions which, in reality, cover multiple areas. In 2010 one region did not bring their sector leaders together; they felt that the communities were too diverse and it was too expensive. Another region ran sub-region sector leader training sessions instead of one large regional day. The cost of bringing the sector leaders together was raised during an informal conversation with a third regional advisor who expressed concern that a number of sector leaders could not afford the time, or the expense, of coming to a central location for a training day. While a regional session was planned for late 2010 the organisers were not confident of a large attendance and were considering running smaller sessions in different centres the following year. In one of the case studies a sector leader reported not attending the sector leader hui because it was felt the NLC would get more benefit from the three co-leaders attending a language teachers’ conference. There was not enough funding for both (*Honest Teacher*). In this way geographical spread impacts not only on the NLCs themselves but also on the way in which regions are able to operate.

The use of wikis and other communication tools could become far more relevant in those regions which cover a wide area and where schools are often geographically widely spread. All regions do operate wiki spaces through which material is disseminated in addition to the national wiki. In one region a concerted effort has been made to push the use of digital communication tools to facilitate sharing across NLCs and this appears to be having some early success. This is currently being led by one advisor who was described as “*doggedly passionate about getting it right*” by a colleague. (AD03) In this region the wiki is “*positioned as a dispersement point as well as a collection point.*” (AD03) However, as the surveys show there is currently very little use of communication tools outside of email and face-face meetings. Further, there was a sense of reluctance from other advisors to utilise digital tools and reports of a lack of participation.

Beyond specific sector leader training the nature and extent of support provided to the NLCs appears to be largely dependent on the perceived needs of the NLC and on their requests for further support. Some regions have made an effort to ensure that a nominated advisor is working with individual NLCs and that the strengths of this advisor are matched to the needs of the NLC where possible. One region described how curriculum advisors and experts in National Standards have worked with NLCs. Another reported experts in literacy and e-learning working with NLCs.

¹⁶ As explained in the methodology *Honest Teacher* refers to the case study titled “The honest teacher: True confessions of a language teacher on the path from confusion to clarity”.

However, this does appear to have been dependent on the sector leaders asking for, and organizing, this support. Further, where no sector leader has been available a leadership and management advisor has taken on that role for some NLCs.

Overall, there was a strong belief expressed by the advisors that the power of the NLCs was in the autonomy they offered to the participants to run their clusters themselves and that more control from external sources would undermine that strength. It was stated during the workshop, and in some interviews, that these clusters were different to the others, such as EHSAS (Extending High Standards Across Schools) or schooling improvement, because of this freedom. However, there was also agreement that for change to be effected at a school level there was a need for greater external input beyond the sector leaders.

The issue of “*balance between the desire for flexibility and the need for a more prescriptive approach to shape the work*” (AD03) was highlighted by more than one advisor. In one region there has been a strong commitment to “*handing over the power*” to the NLCs, to ensuring a high level of autonomy; something the advisors in this region believe to be “*motivating*.” (AD07) Yet, the advisors hold the NLCs accountable through rigid checks on action plans and reported goal achievement; suggesting a high level of prescription and control. During the sector leader training days they provide the sector leaders with a huge number of resources from which “*they can pick and choose what is useful*.” (AD07) The level of prescription is evidenced in the case studies from this region with strong similarities between them.

The role of the advisors

The first question asked during the individual advisor interviews was what the role and purpose of School Support Services was in this initiative. It was difficult to get a sense of a clearly defined role from these interviews in that it appears to have been dependent on both the needs of different NLCs and on the extent to which advisors merged different outputs around this initiative. In most interviews reference was made to the NLC specific outputs schedule as driving their delivery of the initiative and what they did. However, as one advisor commented this has been “*interpreted in a variety of ways around the country*.” (AD11)

In 2010 advisors appear to have had two key functions as part of their NLC outputs: administration of the initiative itself and the provision of professional support to sector leaders. In some regions advisors still provided direct support to individual NLCs but this was not common and the shift away from direct involvement was, as already discussed, linked to a change in the required outputs.

Comments made reflect how the role has changed over time, as the advisors have pulled back from directly supporting and working with individual NLCs and focussed more on delivering professional development to sector leaders. The NLC model and the role of advisors in 2010 was described as being about “*ensuring everybody has the same messages; giving consistent messages to the sector leaders*.” (AD02) One of the advisors explained “*in the beginning [my role was to] provide knowledge to other participants*” (AD02) but now the role was to support the sector leader only. This advisor was no longer going to NLC meetings. Another advisor spoke of how the role had “*gone from being general to being more specific*.” (AD06) The extent to which this was a shift varies by region. Auckland appears to have always operated less directly in NLCs, while other regions continue to do so in a number of cases.

Further, one advisor discussed how the role varied dependent on the capacity of individual NLCs to stand alone. Where middle leaders in schools had been appointed as sector leaders the role was seen as “*a challenge for them*”; requiring more support than experienced principals. (AD08)

As a result of being less directly involved the advisors reported having less knowledge about what was occurring in the various NLCs and very little, if any, knowledge of the influence of the NLCs on school practice. Further, one advisor explained that the model was not an *“in-depth flexible response...it was not about getting down and dirty.”* (AD02) A number of the advisors mentioned a need to consider this issue and to begin to look more deeply into what was happening in schools as a result of the NLCs. This was described by one interviewee as *“digging in at this point...to what is happening.”* (AD06) Another felt whether anything was happening at a school level was something for *“sector leaders to look into.”* (AD04)

The extent to which the lack of direct involvement has had an impact on the success of the initiative is difficult to gauge. Case study work would suggest that in some NLCs more direct support and involvement from external sources would be beneficial, particularly where the NLCs are working in a specific learning area. In others, there was a sense that external facilitation would help shift the NLC away from being a collegial support group into a learning group. An advisor provided an example of the possible issues by describing attending a meeting of an NLC that had a reportedly *“competent leader.”* However, when the advisor *“forced herself on [the NLC] the level of challenge was not there.”* (AD10)

In most regions there was someone who was responsible for the overall co-ordination of the initiative. The extent of this role depended on how the regional School Support Services team worked with the NLCs. In some instances the role was extensive including the co-ordination of advisors to work with each NLC, for example ensuring subject advisors are available to support and, in some instances facilitate NLCs focussed on specific learning areas. Two of the advisors spoken to talked of how this co-ordination role, *“had been more time consuming than expected.”* (AD09) At a minimum it involved the administration of the application process and the management of funds.

The other main advisor role, in 2010, was the provision of professional support and learning to the sector leaders. In most, if not all, regions¹⁷ advisors were attached to each sector leader. These were leadership advisors or subject area advisors depending on availability and the nature of the NLC. The extent to which these advisors worked directly with NLCs varied by NLC and the availability and capacity of people willing to be sector leaders within a region. The range of expertise amongst sector leaders was evidenced in the case studies including relatively new principals and those who had been in their roles for some years. In one instance the sector leader was a curriculum leader rather than a formal school leader. In another the sector leader, a principal, had been a leadership and management advisor in the past and as such was an experienced facilitator.

In some instances there was an obvious overlap between the work of advisors supporting schools in specific areas such as literacy or numeracy and their work in supporting the NLCs. In these cases advisors reported sometimes supporting NLCs as part of their wider school support role. One advisor interviewed commented *“there is no clear delineation between roles”* (AD04) as a 1B and a 2B advisor¹⁸. Another also spoke of the *“explicit links”* (AD01) between 3A output work and the NLC role. A third described how working with schools as a numeracy advisor meant being able to *“make links back to the NLC.”* (AD10) For others this overlap does not appear to have occurred.

¹⁷ It is difficult to ascertain from interview data whether all regions have done so but it appears to be the case.

¹⁸ 1B 2B and 3A all reflect different output schedules and roles that the MoE have assigned to School Support Services. The FTE role of individual advisors can be formed from a range of outputs.

Activities reported by the advisors interviewed include¹⁹:

- administering of the application process for becoming an NLC
- managing the distribution of funds to the NLCs
- monitoring work through milestones and reports
- identifying areas of need and connecting schools or groups together to form NLCs
- ensuring there are appropriate advisors matched to each of the NLCs (potentially not all regions)
- organising sector leader training days (emphasis on these varies by region)
- managing the wiki and ensuring material is available (again emphasis varies by region)
- delivering sessions at the sector leader days
- taking the role of sector leader where no-one was willing and/or had the capacity (not all regions)
- co-facilitating some of the NLC meetings as requested by sector leaders (this seems to happen infrequently and possibly only in a few regions)
- coaching and mentoring individual sector leaders when asked (interview data suggest this does not happen very often)
- developing an action plan with each NLC face to face (not all NLCs)
- providing professional learning for advisors working with the NLCs, including clarifying their work and disseminating information to them.

The roles and attributes of the NLC members

The advisors were also asked to describe the roles and attributes of a successful sector leader. The extent to which the NLCs are viewed as a potential networked learning community rather than a curriculum cluster or professional learning group appears to have had a strong influence on the responses to this question. Their descriptions of the role were varied reflecting differing notions of what an NLC is and, perhaps, also what leadership is. The advisors also suggested a wide range of attributes reflecting the complexity of the sector leader role. Despite these differences there was universal agreement that the role was critical for the success of individual NLCs. There was also agreement that the role was challenging in that sector leaders have to lead their peers.

A key sector leader role was described by one advisor as ensuring that the learning within the NLC was “*purposeful*”; and that meetings did not become “*mildly shambolic and a waste of time.*” (AD07) For another advisor the main role of the sector leader was to create an environment and share information in such a way that the other members of the community are “*then on an equal footing to the sector leader.*” who becomes a mentor or facilitator. (AD04) For another the sector leader was someone who “*practices democratically, but models and demands high professional expectations...who maintains a clear direction and vision on behalf of the group.*” (AD03) Others spoke of the “*leadership of change*” (AD01) of having to “*support people to go back [to their schools] and change their practice*”. (AD10).

While the role was primarily described by the advisors as one of leadership the role is also an administrative one; involving the co-ordination of activities and setting up of systems. In many instances sector leaders also facilitate professional development sessions. In the sector leader survey respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of

¹⁹ Not all advisors undertook all these roles. In some instances NLC work was the majority of their work in others they might have had only a 0.2 FTE or less.

their time that was spent undertaking these different roles. The highest reported mean percentage of time was spent on facilitating professional development (37.6%). Less time was reported as being spent on administrative tasks or as a resource manager (with means of 18.2% and 17.2% respectively). The mean reported percentage of time spent on co-ordinating activities was 27.7%. In all instances sector leaders reported more than one activity type, reinforcing the multi-faceted and complex nature of their role.

Recognising this a number of advisors described how important it is that the sector leaders are not the only leaders of the group; that there is shared leadership. In the *Honest Teacher* case study there is a three person leadership team, something reported as being very successful. In *Dream Sleepers* the leadership responsibilities are rotated around all members of the NLC. Other sector leaders spoke of their concern at the level of dependency on them for leadership (*The Sky is the Limit*) and of a desire to spread the workload (*What's the point?*).

The advisors commented on a wide range of attributes and knowledge that sector leaders need to have to be successful in the role. While it was not expected that sector leaders should know everything it was felt they need to know how to “draw it out of others.” (AD11) and to ensure that others are well informed. They also reportedly need to be able to delegate jobs, enthuse their peers and motivate them to achieve the desired outcomes. They need to know “when to challenge and when to support” and to not “push their own barrows.” (AD05) One advisor suggested that ideally a sector leader would have evaluative capabilities and a strong understanding of facilitation techniques. They would “know what professional development is and how to engage people in learning and challenge.” (AD10)

The notion of sector leaders having “moral purpose”; of thinking beyond the NLC to the wider education community and being concerned about the “bigger picture” (AD10) was commonly expressed. Advisors spoke of sector leaders being “big picture thinkers” (AD06) and having a “real passion and belief - a moral purpose.” (AD04) Included in this is the idea of “being able to give direction”, to enable the others in the NLC “to see the long term while seated in the short term.” (AD03)

Further, the relationship skills of the sector leaders were mentioned by all advisors in some way or other. Attributes mentioned included being able to connect with others and being strong networkers. Also mentioned were being good communicators; able to have challenging conversations and to ask the hard questions.

Amongst the specific attributes mentioned were:

- being able to share information effectively and ensure that it is accessible to their NLCs
- having knowledge of what a professional learning group is and how one operates
- having a strong understanding of curriculum and pedagogy; not just being a manager
- being open to learning themselves and being a reflective practitioner
- being organised, strategic thinkers
- being passionate about the focus of their NLC
- being creative and innovative in themselves and being able to think outside the box.

Many of these qualities were also frequently mentioned as enablers of success in the case studies.

The advisors were also asked to describe the role and attributes of the school leaders or participants in each NLC. The key role of this group was seen as transferring the learning from the NLC back into their individual school communities. They were also seen as providing for the learning of others in a collaborative model. In most instances the attributes of the school leader were described as being the same as those of the sector leaders. Other more specific

attributes mentioned included that they have strong links back to the professional development that is occurring in their school and an understanding of what they can offer the NLC. They also need to be people who can make a difference back in their schools; who have sufficient authority to facilitate change.

Looking ahead to 2011 and beyond

During their interviews the advisors were also asked about future implementations of the NLC initiative and what, if anything, they would do differently. All believed the initiative should continue; that it was serving a purpose and that there was more work to be done. However, they also felt there should be changes, most critically to the timing of the initiative and for some attention to be given to the lack of focus at an individual school level.

One of the key desired changes was to start training the sector leaders (or facilitators) a lot earlier than had occurred in previous years. Included in this training would be more specific guidance to “*make really clear what needs to be done.*” (AD10) There was an identified need to begin preparing the NLCs a lot sooner; to “*set them up ahead of the start of the year.*” (AD04) The need for this was clearly evidenced in the *Scooby Doo* case study.

It was felt that time was needed to “*go out and talk in some detail about the implications of being in an NLC*” to ensure there was real interest in forming one. There was a concern that many just did so because “*it was a good idea, let’s try it.*” This advisor wanted to see that the NLC was allowing schools to work together on something they were genuinely interested in and had been working on for some time. (AD03) Another advisor suggested ensuring that they were “*upfront with the expectations of the contract - where the focus needed to stay*” when talking with NLCs. (AD04)

A number of comments related to the need for more “*systems and structures*” to enable the NLCs “*to do their thinking and talking.*” There was also a perceived need for “*action plans that are more demanding and focussed.*” (AD09) Linked to this was a desire for the advisors to have more one to one visits with NLCs to “*clearly establish the sector leader role.*” (AD08) “*More explicit direction for the NLCs*” was seen as necessary to move them past exploring and sharing. (AD06) Also suggested was that advisors, not just sector leaders, worked with the whole NLC to develop action plans.

The need for advisors to get into the schools was mentioned in some context by most of the advisors interviewed; although it should be noted this may have arisen as a result of the workshop. There was a strong awareness of their lack of knowledge about the impact of the NLCs and the extent to which they were influencing practice in individual schools. There was acknowledgement that: “*the links back to schools could be stronger*” (AD08); that there should be a “*focus on the classroom*” (AD01) providing “*more clarity*” about what is happening in the schools (AD02). That this had not occurred in 2010 was primarily because it was not included in the output schedule determining their role. Changes to this schedule and potentially more resource would be needed to ensure this happened.

Also mentioned was the need for a mechanism to enable schools to determine if the NLC work was impacting on student outcomes. One solution offered was that an aim for 2011 could be to encourage “*self-review - monitoring what is happening in their schools.*” This advisor felt that the NLCs should be a “*forum for schools to look into their practices.*” (AD05) The need for “*more rigorous protocols*” was also mentioned. It was felt by one advisor that “*accountability for participant schools should be managed by the sector leaders*”, acknowledging that advisors would “*have to support the sector leader to develop that accountability.*” (AD11)

It was suggested by one advisor that the extent to which the transfer of learning back to schools was an issue depended on the definition used for NLCs. The belief expressed was that if NLCs were professional learning groups, focussed on the professional development of individual participants, the extent to which learning was transferred to school communities was not a major issue. However, if they were intended to be networked learning communities with strong

links to individual school communities than there needed to be a “*more structured and decisive way of making sure that happens.*” Further, “*timelines would have to be extended*” to enable results to be seen. In addition, sector leaders would “*need to know about transference into their schools*” (AD03).

Another suggestion made was that there should be more than one sector leader in an NLC; that the role should be shared amongst different members to ensure sustainability. Another possibility raised was that an external provider co-facilitated the NLC with the sector leader to ensure that the group were challenged. Also suggested was that the NLC participation from individual schools was extended. This would enable leadership within each school to come from more than one person. However, this had reportedly been attempted in one region but had not worked.

Chapter Three: The NLC Model Implemented

Introduction

In this chapter we describe how the initiative was implemented in 2010. Consideration is given to the nature of the NLCs, how they operate and what the benefits and outcomes have been for participants. Consideration is also given to the factors that have influenced the effectiveness of the NLCs.

Data for this chapter were gathered through the advisor interviews (n=11); the case studies and the surveys. Findings from across the case studies and the surveys have been summarised and included where they pertain to the specific questions being answered. Detailed reports from both are provided in the companion technical report. For the purpose of this chapter comments made during case study interviews have been analysed and coded into broad categories where appropriate. Advisor comments are included throughout the narrative of this chapter as relevant.

The nature of the NLCs

As described in the previous chapter the advisors agreed that the notion of networked learning communities, as identified in the international literature, had not been purposively implemented in New Zealand. This view was supported by those spoken to from the Ministry who commented that the NLC model in New Zealand had been developed to meet the specific needs of the New Zealand system with relation to the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. The model had been modified over time as the perceived needs of schools changed. The NLCs were viewed primarily as being either professional learning groups or New Zealand Curriculum Clusters and were defined by the advisors in a myriad of ways as indicated below.

- “A group of school leaders who come together for a purpose to share and learn from one another and to do some new learning.” (AD04)
- “Professional groups who have a common interest or need.” (AD03)
- “Communities of practice.” (AD06)
- “Self-regulated professionals who are constructing their own learning through what [their regional School Support Services] offer them and what they get from each other.” (AD09)

Another advisor suggested that “*individually they are professional learning groups*” but that “*the point of difference*” between NLCs and other professional learning groups is “*they have a defined national support structure*” (AD11) and that there is potential for them to be networked. However, this was seen as the hardest aspect to develop and sustain. The same advisor reported they had tried to create networks of clusters but had not been successful and wondered if the term had been borrowed from England but not the meaning. S/he commented “*the networking would go first*” (AD11), when considering how to utilise resources and what was the most important thing to achieve.

The sector leaders were also asked how they would describe their cluster in the case study interviews. As with the advisors their responses were varied. Nearly all commented on the collegiality of the group; on the support, trust and commitment members felt towards each other. They spoke of sharing ideas and concerns; of how their groups were safe environments. Only one of the sector leaders, (*Dream Sleepers*), described a professional group where practice is routinely critiqued and challenged. In this NLC “puzzles of practice” are the focus of each meeting. In two instances,

(*Scooby Doo*, and *The Sky is the Limit*), sector leaders spoke of a desire to move their NLC towards being a professional learning group where challenge and professional conversations were the norm.

Forming an NLC

In this section findings related to the development of the NLCs are presented. These are primarily from responses to the sector leader survey, supported by relevant data from the case studies.

Nearly half the respondents to the sector leader survey (n=37, 48.6%) reported that there was already a relationship between the schools; either because they had worked together as a cluster (n=22, 28.9%) or the principals involved were part of a collegial network of some kind (n=15, 19.7%). The other main reason was related to geographical proximity (n=25, 32.9%). In some instances the schools shared an identified need (n=18, 23.7%). In others, the close proximity of the schools was the only reason provided for forming an NLC (n=7, 9.2%). Similar findings were reported by sector leaders in the case studies. In all instances they reported some form of prior connection between the schools. This included informal collegial relationships between principals; belonging to the same Principals' Association or being in a cluster or subject association already.

In addition, survey respondents were asked how they became a sector leader. Nearly half of them (n=35, 47.3%) reported being asked by School Support Services. A further 23% (n=17) said they had applied in 2008 and formed an NLC subsequent to their acceptance. The others had been cluster leaders before (n=7, 9.5%), had replaced the previous sector leader (n=5, 6.8%) or were nominated by colleagues (n=7, 9.5%). Three (4.1%) reported having volunteered.

Survey respondents were also asked about the goals for their NLC. Their responses were coded into three main thematic categories. Half of the goals (n=34, 50%) referred directly to understanding more about The New Zealand Curriculum and/or implementing it in their schools. A further 20.6% (n=14) referred to enhancing student outcomes while 19.1% (n=13) referred to National Standards. In most instances the National Standards goals were related to aligning these with school curricula.

The goals reported in the case studies were primarily related to developing and/or implementing school curricula. In the case of three of the secondary school NLCs this was in a specific learning area. The fourth was focused on integrated studies. Transition between primary and secondary was a focus for one of the case study NLCs.

Key activities occurring within the NLCs

This section reports data from the sector leader surveys and the case studies with regard to the activities and processes of the NLCs in 2010.

Respondents to the sector leader survey were asked about the nature and focus of activities within their NLC and how often different types of activities occurred. They were given a list of activities and the response scale used was from 1= never through to 6= always. Overall, two of the seven activities listed were reported to be occurring 'very frequently', if not 'always'. These were:

- *Participants offer each other support and listen to concerns in a collegial and supportive manner.* Over half of the respondents (n=38, 53.5%) said this 'always' happened while a further 18.3% (n=13) said it 'very frequently' occurred.
- *Practices and ideas are shared by participants based on what is occurring in their schools.* Nearly half of the respondents (n=33, 46.5%) said this 'always' happened while 29.6% (n=21) said it 'very frequently' occurred.

- Less likely to occur were the use of data to inform NLC needs ($\bar{x} = 4.00$) and the sharing and discussion of ideas NLC participants have discovered in research and other literature ($\bar{x} = 3.99$). That the lowest reported overall mean level of occurrence for any activity is “frequently” suggests a wide range of activities across all NLCs. Further, the high standard deviations for this question suggest that the extent to which activities occur within individual NLCs varies considerably between NLCs.
- The most frequently reported area of focus overall was *raising student achievement* with 29.2% (n=21) of respondents reporting this was ‘always’ an area of focus for their NLC and 23.6% (n=17) saying it was ‘very frequently’ one. *Teaching and learning practices in the classroom, as defined in The New Zealand Curriculum*, was also a common area of focus with 20.8% (n=15) reporting this was ‘always’ a focus and 33% (n=24) stating it was one ‘very frequently’.
- Both *student agency* and *Māori achieving as Māori* were less likely to be reported as an area of focus. Only 10% of respondent sector leaders reported they were ‘always’ a focus while 25.7% and 35.7% respectively reported that they were an area of focus only ‘occasionally’.
- Across the case studies a wide range of activities and processes were described. The majority of the NLCs, in particular the primary ones, reported meeting once a term. These meetings were described as being very structured with detailed agendas and protocols outlining expectations.
- A number of case studies (n=6) also spoke of organising professional development days facilitated by external experts. In two instances (*Bridging Islands* and *Family Ties*) these days were for all teaching staff from across the schools involved in the NLC. A third (*The Sky is the Limit*) held a curriculum review day which was extended to include the associate and deputy principals. Other activities mentioned include:
 - classroom observations across NLC schools
 - visiting other schools outside the NLC to view practices
 - a regular newsletter
 - sharing “puzzles of practices”
 - moderating and providing feedback on student work
 - organising a two day conference for those involved in NLC.

Networking within and between communities

Data gathered through the case studies and surveys suggest that networking between participants within an NLC is viewed as one of the main benefits of the initiative for participants. Whether this networking was for collegial purposes or to facilitate professional learning conversations varies across NLCs; although the former appears to be the most common form of networking. There is also reportedly significant dissemination of material back into schools and a number of instances where practice is shared between schools. This is particularly true for the secondary curriculum area NLCs.

School leader survey respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of their school colleagues that they believed were engaged with the initiative. The majority of respondents (63.3%) reported that, in their view, more than half of the staff in their schools were engaged with material from the NLC. These results do need to be treated with caution given that most of the schools in the sample for this survey are small. For example, ‘everyone’ could represent only two or three people.

Further, the case studies suggest that networking across schools may be happening; either because NLC participants are part of multiple clusters; or because they are looking to other schools for ideas of best and next practice. It is possible that members of these clusters act as boundary walkers taking information from one cluster to another, whether

consciously or subconsciously. This was evidenced by the *Family Ties* case study. This NLC was actively looking at what was happening in other schools to inform their own practice. School leaders and teachers from the participant schools had visited other schools as part of their professional learning. To this extent there was networking; although the sharing of information appears to have been one way.

Belonging to multiple clusters was evidenced by all of the principal led NLCs within the case studies. Members of these NLCs met for reasons other than the curriculum cluster such as ICTPD (Information Communication Technology Professional Development) clusters (*Family Ties*; *Country Calendar*); specific professional learning projects (*The Sky is the Limit* working with an external academic) and as part of their local principals association (all instances). In these cases the membership of the different clusters varied slightly but there was a definite opportunity to build on and consolidate professional learning across these clusters. In a fourth example, the *Coffee, Cake and Twiducate* NLC extends an invitation to other sole charge schools from the region to attend all its meetings. As a result members of a second NLC attend these and learnings are extended across the two groups. The example of a school artefact attached to this case study in the technical report was actually supplied by students from across these two NLCs.

There is also evidence from some case studies (for example *Family Ties* and *Bridging Islands*) that classroom teachers are actively involved in the professional learning occurring through some NLCs. Both these NLCs have held days where teachers from all the schools involved have participated in professional development. These days still appear to be primarily for the dissemination of information; but in the case of *Family Ties* the next step is to share data amongst schools. In *The Sky is the Limit* case study the professional learning group has evolved from a principal group to a deputy/associate principal group reflecting the need for greater involvement from across the school communities. This was viewed as necessary to facilitate the implementation of the NLC learnings.

Success for the NLCs

One of the questions considered in the evaluation was ‘what does success look like for NLCs?’ This is not an easy question to answer given the variation in implementation models and the different levels the model can be evaluated at. Given the diversity amongst the NLCs it is not surprising that one advisor suggested there is “*not one picture of success...the NLCs all have become such different beasts.*” (AD06)

At a policy level success is “*that effect is given to the implementation of The New Zealand Curriculum at a grassroots level.*”²⁰ That is to say that *The New Zealand Curriculum* is implemented in classrooms. However, for both the advisors and the sector leaders, success was more likely to be related to the operation or culture of the NLC, than to what is achieved in terms of school changes. Further, the advisors, and many of the NLC participants, felt that it was too early to see changes in school practice.

One of the advisors commented that it would take three years for an NLC to be running as a learning community and for effective networking to occur; others spoke of needing five years to make changes to school practices. The idea that it was too early to expect school level changes was commonly expressed throughout the data collection. Interestingly, in one case study (*Dream Sleepers*) the sector leader was adamant that they did not have three to five years to improve the teaching and learning in their schools and that their NLC was expected to operate as a professional learning community from day one. This NLC was set up with very clear protocols and expectations around the nature and purpose of their meetings. These were outlined in a charter. This idea is discussed further in the final chapter.

²⁰ Taken from the RFP document.

For the advisors, the main criteria for success are related to the way the different NLCs operate as well the extent to which they achieve their individual action plans. One advisor explained that success was related to both “*the characteristics of a community as well as their outcomes.*” (AD11) Another suggested that the extent to which the NLC operated as a “*collegial professional group that learns and feeds off each other*” was a measure of success (AD09). This advisor believed that a focus on learning within the NLC would “*ultimately go through to teacher and student learning*” (AD09).

Other success criteria offered by the advisors include:

- that there is trust between the school leaders in the NLC
- that the NLC is facilitated properly by the sector leader
- that there is continual review and monitoring of practices at both an NLC and a school level
- that there is shared leadership and responsibility
- changes to school practices.

Sector leader survey respondents were asked to identify up to three key measures of success. Their responses were coded into three broad categories: *NLC operation*; *school outcomes*; and *developing professional knowledge and skill*. A total of 88 responses (57.5% of all responses) were coded into the first category. The most comments in this category (n=31) were related to *whether networking and/or the sharing of practice occurs*. In addition 22 comments were made regarding the *level of commitment of the members to the NLC*. The *development of a learning community* (n=13) or of a *collegial community* (n=15) were also mentioned as was *having a shared purpose or focus* (n=7). A total of 51 responses (33.3%) were coded into the school outcomes category. The majority of these (n=31) were related to *changes to school practices*.

Respondent sector leaders were then asked to rate the success of their NLC based on the criteria they had identified. On average, they viewed the success of their NLCs as ‘very good’ ($\bar{x} = 4.00$ on a six point scale from ‘very poor’ through to ‘excellent’). Just 7.2% (n=5) of the sector leaders reported that their NLC was ‘poor’ while none said it was ‘very poor’. In total 10.1% (n=7) rated their NLC as ‘excellent’ against the criteria they had identified.

Benefits for NLC participants

Findings related to the benefits for different groups from across the initiative, including the sector leaders, the school leaders and the wider school communities, are reported in this section. The data summarised here are primarily from the sector leader survey and the case studies. Comments from the advisors are also included where relevant. Across these different data collection methods the benefits are remarkably similar and primarily related to professional development opportunities and networking or collegial support. For schools the benefits reported relate to the knowledge and expertise their school leaders are able to bring back.

In the sector leader survey respondents were asked what had been the single most important benefit to them from belonging to the NLC. This was an open-ended question with their responses coded into six categories. The two categories most commonly used to code responses are very similar to the key benefits suggested by the advisors. These are *increased personal knowledge*, with 43.9% of respondents (n=29) mentioning a benefit that was coded into this category; and *networking/sharing ideas and practice*. A total of 31.8% (n=21) of respondents identified benefits that were coded into the latter category. No other categories were utilised to code more than 9.1% (n=6) of respondents’ comments.

The advisors described similar benefits for the sector leaders through their involvement in an NLC. These were related to the professional development the sector leaders received and the challenges the role provided them with. The role was described as one that: “*broadens their horizons*”; it “*opens their views and gets them thinking about things beyond their own schools.*” (AD10) It was also seen as “*reigniting their commitment to teaching and learning*” (AD01); something mentioned by individual sector leaders in the case studies.

Survey respondents were also asked to identify three benefits they believed schools gained from participating in the NLC. These were coded into seven response categories. The largest category was *networking and sharing* with 69 responses (38.8%) coded within this category. Four other categories all had between 22 (12.3%) and 29 (16.3%) responses coded into them. These were: *teaching and learning*; *interaction for a purpose*; *professional learning*; and *collegial support*. In total 69.7% (n=124) of responses related to some level of interaction between participants. The teaching and learning category included comments related to effective teaching, planning for teaching and learning, the ability to make changes to practice and increased student engagement and achievement.

In the case studies participants were asked to identify the benefits for them personally and for their school communities from their involvement in an NLC. In total 20 different benefits were identified for individual participants in the case studies. The most commonly mentioned were:

- the sharing of ideas and practices
- the opportunity to network
- learning what other schools are doing; what works and what does not
- the professional development gained
- access to external experts
- collegial support and relationships.

Each of these was mentioned by at least one participant in at least four case studies. In other instances individuals talked of personal, individual benefits such as renewing their enthusiasm or passion; challenging them to think outside the square or moving them out of their comfort zone.

Fewer benefits were mentioned in the case studies for the school communities of participants. In all instances one benefit reported was that ideas and resources have been taken back into their schools by the participants. Those sector leaders, who were also principals, spoke of how they were better leaders in their schools; the professional development they had experienced had made them better at their jobs. Other benefits were very specific to the goals of individual NLCs such as more efficiently developing and implementing a school curriculum or introducing new technologies to their schools.

Outcomes from the NLC initiative

Self-report data were gathered on three different types of outcome from the NLC initiative. These are related to the professional knowledge of the sector leaders and the school leaders/participants and the influence on the wider school communities of the NLC.

Sector leader outcomes

In the sector leader survey respondents were asked to rate their current levels of knowledge regarding a number of identified areas. The overall mean levels of knowledge were between 3.87 and 4.70 on a six point scale (‘very poor’ through to ‘excellent’). This suggests that on average the sector leader respondents believed their knowledge was ‘good’, or approaching ‘very good’, across all areas.

The area with the highest overall mean was *the concepts and ideas in The New Zealand Curriculum and their implications for schools* ($\bar{x} = 4.70$). The other areas were:

- *Using assessment data to inform practice* ($\bar{x} = 4.56$)
- *Effective leadership practices for change* ($\bar{x} = 4.29$)
- *The characteristics of effective learning communities* ($\bar{x} = 4.23$).
- *The organization of professional learning events such as conferences and symposia* ($\bar{x} = 3.87$).

The sector leaders reported their level of knowledge across the different areas could be attributed between ‘some extent’ and a ‘large extent’ to the NLC. The highest reported mean level of attribution was for their knowledge regarding the *concepts and ideas in The New Zealand Curriculum and their implications for schools* ($\bar{x} = 4.00$ on a six point scale from not at all through to entirely). This response reflects the likelihood that the NLC initiative is one aspect of a wider suite of professional development opportunities utilised within schools.

As with all questions in the surveys there were wide standard deviations for both the levels of knowledge and the levels of attribution reflecting the diversity in the skills, knowledge and experiences of these sector leaders.

School participant outcomes

Respondents to the school leader survey were also asked about outcomes on a personal level as a result of belonging to an NLC. They were asked to think about their levels of knowledge and/or expertise in twelve identified areas both prior to joining the NLC and at the time of the survey. Each of these areas was directly related to The New Zealand Curriculum. The scale used for this question was comprised of six categories reflecting shifts in knowledge and/or expertise across a continuum. They were also asked to indicate the extent to which they believed any shifts in their levels of knowledge and/or expertise could be attributed to the NLC.

The length of time respondents had been part of an NLC is very likely to have mediated responses to this question. Those joining in 2008 are likely to have had lower levels of knowledge and/or expertise prior to joining and more opportunity since joining to improve these. For those joining in 2010 there has been little opportunity for the NLC to have had an influence. As the demographic data show the largest group of respondents were those who had joined in 2010.

The area with the highest overall mean level of reported knowledge and/or expertise prior to joining the NLC was *assessment practices to inform teaching and learning* ($\bar{x} = 4.24$). In total 20% of the respondents ($n=26$) reported that they were actively facilitating others in their school to include this process/concept in their practice. A further 51.5% ($n=67$) reported that they had either begun to or were regularly including it in their own practice.

Areas with relatively low overall means prior to joining the NLC were:

- *How to review and develop curriculum* ($\bar{x} = 3.32$).
- *The principles as described in The New Zealand Curriculum document* ($\bar{x} = 3.32$).
- *Engaging the community in decisions related to their children’s learning* ($\bar{x} = 3.23$).

Between 42% ($n=55$) and 56% ($n=73$) of respondents said that they were either beginning to think about how to incorporate these concepts into their practice or had begun to consider the implications of doing so.

The areas with the highest mean level of knowledge and/or expertise at the time of the survey were:

- *The key competencies as described in The New Zealand Curriculum document* (\bar{x} = 3.88 to 5.58; a shift of 1.70).
- *Assessment practices to inform teaching and learning* (\bar{x} = 4.24 to 5.52; a shift of 1.28).

Prior to joining the NLC the overall mean level of knowledge and/or expertise across all areas was 3.65. This had increased to 5.25 at the time of the survey. This suggests that respondents had moved from beginning to consider the implications of different concepts or processes to regularly including them in their practices. The largest shifts were reported for the following areas:

- *The principles as described in The New Zealand Curriculum document* (\bar{x} = 3.32 to 5.15; shift of 1.83).
- *Teaching as inquiry as described in The New Zealand Curriculum document* (\bar{x} = 3.51 to 5.33; shift of 1.83).

Enabling Māori to succeed as Māori was the only area where the mean level of knowledge and/or expertise remained below 5.00 (\bar{x} = 4.27) at the time of the survey. The shift for this area was also the lowest overall at 1.22. When considering potential case studies there appeared to be few options where the focus of the NLC was on Māori achievement and these data do suggest it has not been a major focus for the NLCs in general.

The data above highlight the extent to which the NLCs in this sample appear to have been focussed on understanding the front end of *The New Zealand Curriculum* document.

Across all areas the respondents reported mean levels of attribution to the NLC for increases in their knowledge and/or expertise of between 3.07 and 3.77. These means equate to between ‘some extent’ and ‘a large extent’. The highest mean level of attribution was reported for *leadership practices for facilitating change* (\bar{x} = 3.77). This was followed by *engaging students in decisions around their learning* (\bar{x} = 3.60) and *effective pedagogies as described in The New Zealand Curriculum* document (\bar{x} = 3.59). For all these areas over 50% of respondents (53.5%, 51.6% and 51.9% respectively) reported that the shifts could ‘largely’, ‘very largely’ or ‘entirely’ be attributed to the NLC.

School level outcomes

While implementing *The New Zealand Curriculum* has been described as a “*big blue sky - not something you can put your finger on*” (AD04) the desired policy outcome from the initiative is that schools are being supported to implement *The New Zealand Curriculum* through the involvement of their representatives in an NLC. To determine the extent to which this was happening the school leader survey respondents were asked a number of questions about their influence in their school and what was happening regarding practices related to *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

They were first asked to indicate the extent to which they believed they had been able to influence the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* in their school as a direct result of their involvement in the NLC. More than half (n=75, 56.8%) reported that they had a ‘large’, ‘very large’ or ‘significant’ influence. Only 11.4% (n=15) indicated that their influence had been ‘very slight’ or ‘not at all’. This positive response is probably due to the large proportion of principals (n=96, 66.2% of all respondents) and other senior management (n=22, 15.2%) in the survey sample. The mean level of reported influence for principals was 4.29 (on a six point scale from ‘not at all’ through to a ‘very significant’ effect). By comparison, for classroom teachers the mean was 2.44. School size was also a determining factor in the level of influence with a mean reported level for respondents from schools with one to four teachers of 4.28. The overall mean level of influence was 3.78 which equates to a ‘large extent.’

They were also asked to consider what was happening in their schools at the time of the survey across a range of areas related to the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. They were given a number of categorical responses to choose from. Across all areas the majority of respondents indicated that ‘changes had happened or were happening

already' in their schools. Very few respondents reported that they were only in the 'early stages of reviewing' or that 'after reviewing they did not believe changes were needed'.

The most commonly reported area where 'changes had happened or were happening already' was *teaching and learning practices in the classroom as described in The New Zealand Curriculum* (n=106, 83.5% of all respondents). A further 3.9% (n=5) intend to 'make changes in the future' while 5.5% (n=7) said that they were 'in the early stages of review.' The same proportion (n=7, 5.5%) reported that 'after a review process there was no need to change.'

The area for which the highest proportion of respondents (n=18, 14.2%) reported they intended to 'make changes in the future' was *community involvement in school decision making with regard to teaching and learning in the school*. This area also had the highest proportion of respondents reporting they were 'in the early stages of review' (n=20, 15.7%). However, over half of the respondents (n=75, 59.1%) did report 'changes had already happened or were happening.'

Student agency was the other area with a relatively high proportion of respondents (n=16, 12.6%) reporting 'changes were intended in the future.' A further 7.1% (n=9) said that they were 'in the early stages of review' for this area while 72.4% (n=92) reported 'changes had happened already or were happening.'

These responses were further analysed by school type. With the exception of *local school curriculum review and development* secondary school respondents were less likely than their primary school counterparts to report 'changes had happened or were happening already.' In this instance their responses were very similar (n=21, 80.8% and n=77, 77.8% respectively). The largest difference between the two sectors was for *school organisational structures* with 75.8% (n=75) of primary respondents reporting that 'changes had happened or were happening' already compared to 34.6% (n=9) of secondary. It should be noted that there were a lot fewer secondary respondents (n=31, 21.5%) than primary to the survey (n=111, 77.1%).

As well as considering the extent of change across a range of areas respondents to the school leader survey were asked about the breadth of change across their school focussing only on changes to teaching and learning practices. They were provided with six categories of response to choose from. The majority of respondents indicated that school wide changes had occurred to teaching and learning practices (n=80, 61.5%). Smaller numbers reported changes had occurred across some year levels and/or subject areas only (n=24, 18.5%) or individual classrooms (n=14, 10.8%). Again the size of the schools in the sample and the number of primary schools does need to be remembered when considering this result.

The respondents were then asked the extent to which they believed the reported changes could be directly attributed to the NLC. Nearly half of the respondents (n=58, 45%) reported changes to practice could be directly attributed to 'some extent' to the NLC. A further 39 (30.2%) reported they could be directly attributed to a 'large extent'. None attributed the changes entirely to the NLC while 3.1% (n=4) reported that the changes could not be attributed to the NLC at all. The overall mean level of attribution was 3.19 (to 'some extent'). Primary school respondents reported a higher mean level of attribution than their secondary counterparts (\bar{x} = 3.26 compared with 2.85). Low decile schools (\bar{x} = 3.57) and schools with one to four teachers (\bar{x} = 3.59) were the respondent groups with the highest mean levels of attribution.

Finally, they were asked the extent to which the NLC had helped meet their school's needs in supporting the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. The majority of respondents reported that the NLC had helped meet their school's needs to 'some extent' (n=48, 36.9%) or to a 'large extent' (n=42, 32.3%). The reported mean level of help provided by the NLC was 3.41 (to 'some extent'). Again primary school respondents reported higher mean levels of support in implementing *The New Zealand Curriculum* than secondary (\bar{x} = 3.53 compared with 2.88). Also, again, the highest reported means were for low decile schools (\bar{x} = 3.75) and schools with between one and four teachers (\bar{x} = 3.69).

During the case studies respondents were asked what school level outcomes could be attributed to the NLC and to describe one concrete thing that had happened in their school as a result of their participation in the NLC. Their responses were varied. A number referred in some way to the development and/or implementation of school curricula. In *Family Ties* the sector leader displayed a mural size integrated curriculum plan on the staffroom wall. The secondary school participants from *Bridging Islands* reported changing their orientation day while a primary participant had changed the language used when discussing learning areas with a Year 8 class to align with secondary sector terminology. Others reported introducing new technology such as blogs to enable student voice (*Dream Sleepers*) and Voice Thread so students could peer review work across schools (*Coffee Cake and Twiducate*).

Participant expectations and satisfaction

In the school leader survey respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they expected certain activities to occur in their NLC, prior to joining. They were then asked whether their expectations had been met. A six point scale was used for both questions. Only one activity had a mean level of expectation of 5.00 ('very likely to happen'). This was to *develop relationships with other colleagues from other schools*. Nearly half (n=64, 45.7%) of the respondents said they 'definitely expected this to happen' with a further 23.6% saying they thought it was 'very likely to happen'. All other activities had mean levels of expectation of between 4.07 and 4.59 suggesting that participants thought they were 'likely to happen'.

Overall, 75% (n=105) of respondents reported their expectations had been met to a 'large extent' or more. Comparisons by school type, size or decile showed no marked differences in responses to this question suggesting demographics do not influence the extent to which expectations are met. The overall mean for this question was 4.29 on a six point scale from 'not at all' through to 'exceeded expectations'.

With regard to satisfaction with the initiative, when asked whether they would choose NLCs as the most effective way to influence changes to teaching and learning practices in their schools, the majority (93.6%) responded positively. Over half (n=76, 54.3%) said they would 'very probably' or 'definitely' choose NLCs. The overall mean for this question was 4.35 on a six point scale from 'definitely not' through to 'definitely'. Primary schools were slightly more likely than secondary to choose the NLC model of professional development. The largest variation in responses was by school size with schools in the two smallest size categories more likely to choose the model than larger schools.

The sector leaders were also asked whether they would choose NLCs as the most effective way to influence changes to teaching and learning. On a six point scale from 'definitely not' through to 'definitely' the overall mean was 4.31 indicating that they 'probably' would. Sixteen respondents reported they would 'definitely' do so while only one reported either 'definitely not' or 'probably not'.

In addition, the case study participants were asked about the highlights of the NLC for them to date. The most common responses were related to the collegiality of the group, the relationships developed and the opportunities to share ideas and practice. Other highlights reflected the achievement of specific goals such as improved dialogue between sectors (from *Bridging Islands*) or specific activities such as "puzzles of practice" (from *Dream Sleepers*).

Factors impacting on the success of the NLCs

In this section we consider the factors likely to mediate the success of the NLCs. Data regarding both the enablers and barriers or challenges were gathered through the advisor interviews, the sector leader surveys and the case studies. In a number of instances factors were mentioned both as enablers or barriers depending on the context. For example, the commitment of participants in some NLCs was an enabler; in others it was a perceived challenge for the sector leader.

The enablers

A key enabler, mentioned by the advisors and by case study participants, was the leadership provided by the sector leader and their attributes and skills. The commitment of the sector leader to the work they were doing as well as their ability to be proactive; to bring “*energy and life to the group*” were seen as key factors for the success of an NLC. (AD06) Commonly mentioned in the case studies was the need for them to be well organised and prepared. Also mentioned was the need for sector leaders to be able to ensure the NLC remains focussed. Other qualities were strong interpersonal skills and being an excellent communicator.

The commitment of NLC members to its core purpose and vision was also viewed by the advisors and others to be an enabler. Linked to this was the importance of the qualities of the members including their ability to take a shared leadership role. Further, it was seen as important that goals were co-constructed across the NLC rather than developed by the sector leader in isolation. However, “*encouraging genuine and deep commitment*” was described as “*difficult*” by one advisor reflecting how this can also be a challenge. (AD06)

Similarly, in the case studies a number of comments referred to the attributes of the NLC participants and the way they work together. A key enabler was reported to be their enthusiasm, passion and commitment. This was mentioned by at least one participant in seven of the case studies. That they form a cohesive group who trust and respect each other was also reported to be an important enabler. Other attributes mentioned are that they hold each other accountable, are willing to take risks and are open to learning.

A group of comments from the case studies were related to the composition of the NLC. These comments come from across five NLCs and specifically described unique features of individual NLCs. Combined they reflect the importance of ensuring schools within an NLC have matching needs and a shared vision and values.

Geographical proximity was listed as an enabler by one of the advisors in that there was a “*common interest if the schools share community kids.*” (AD06). This view was supported by one of the participants in *The Sky is the Limit* case study who described the shared community as creating a strong bond between the schools.

The processes and activities of the NLC was another large category of enablers mentioned in the case studies. As with the composition of the NLC, many of the comments were specific to individual NLCs. In seven of the ten cases reference was made to the need for a clear focus and goals. Also mentioned was the use of protocols and/or a charter outlining expectations. One sector leader spoke of the need for clear guidelines from the advisors. Access to external experts and resource material was a commonly mentioned enabler. Others were:

- regular meetings and a formal structure
- opportunities to reflect and review
- having homework and deadlines
- regular communication outside meetings
- linking activities to practice
- ensuring everyone is able to have their say
- sharing what is happening in schools
- being flexible in planning
- having some fun/some laughs.

Similar enablers mentioned by the advisors include:

- There is coherency between individual school professional development programmes and the NLC.
- There are embedded accountability processes.
- Access to external experts.

Respondents to the sector leader survey were asked to list, in order from most to least, the three factors they believed were critical for developing an effective NLC. Their responses were analysed in two ways. First they were coded into nine categories. The three largest reinforce the importance of those factors discussed above. The largest single category was *access to resources, current information and ideas* with 29 responses (16.8% of responses) coded in this way. A further 26 responses (15.0% of responses) were coded as *having trust, respect and a collegial culture*. The third largest single category, in terms of the number of responses, was *the commitment and ownership of the members* (n=23, 12.9% of responses).

Second, each response was given a score of 1, 2 or 3 dependent on their relative importance ranking. The highest overall mean for importance ($\bar{x} = 2.62$) was for responses related to *having the right people in NLC*. This was mentioned by 21 respondents. This was followed by *effective leadership* with a mean rating of 2.50. However, it was only mentioned by 12 of the sector leaders. While *access to resources, current information and ideas* was mentioned by the most respondents its mean level of importance was only 1.69 suggesting it was more likely to be ranked third by those reporting it.

Barriers or challenges

One of the key barriers mentioned by the advisors was the lead in time for developing the clusters in both 2009 and 2010. In both instances it seems to have been at least April before the NLCs were operational. The impact of this was seen in NLCs such as *Scooby Doo* where the sector leader had yet to attend a sector leader professional development day despite it being December when she was interviewed for the evaluation. Further, there was concern that one year was not long enough for the NLCs to have any influence on school practice. This was due to the commonly held view that change takes between three and five years to occur. The advisors, and some sector leaders, commented that the individual NLCs needed to be funded for longer periods of time and that they should not have to reapply annually.

Another challenge mentioned by both the advisors and the case study participants was the introduction of the National Standards. While one sector leader commented that they had not allowed the National Standards to detract from their core work others felt it had. One of the advisors commented that the National Standards had been “*damaging to the culture*” of the NLCs (AD02), while a number of those interviewed for case studies expressed a desire to ensure that the core work of the NLCs remained focussed on curriculum rather than National Standards.

Secondary clusters were reported as having additional challenges to those experienced by their primary counterparts, in that participants in these NLCs are generally not senior management. Many are Heads of Department, who were seen as likely to struggle to find time, amongst their other responsibilities, to prioritise the work of the NLCs. Further, they were viewed as often having no real power in their schools and as such being dependent on the support of their senior leaders. This concern was reported for all secondary NLCs that were involved in the case studies.

One of the advisors mentioned itinerant membership as a barrier with schools “*dipping in and out.*” (AD11) This was evidenced in the *Pataka Classroom* case study where school leaders mentioned their concern over the repetitive nature of some of their sessions to cater for attendees who had missed earlier sessions. Similarly, participants from *What’s the Point* spoke about their concerns around members not attending sessions. In another case study the lack of ongoing involvement by the secondary school had implications for the ability of the NLC to meet their original purpose (*The Sky is the Limit*).

Also mentioned in the advisor interviews as barriers were:

- the lack of financial and other material incentives
- the lack of recognition for the sector leaders and the work they do
- the lack of time for the sector leaders to do this work
- the geographical spread both within and between NLCs where this did not readily allow for regular face-face meetings
- the evaluative capacity of the NLC members and their willingness to challenge each other.

A number of challenges or barriers were mentioned in four case studies. These were:

- getting everyone together
- meeting everyone's needs
- national Standards
- participants finding time to do things.

The most commonly reported challenge for sector leaders was finding the time to meet the demands of the role and managing their workload. This was mentioned by five of the ten sector leaders interviewed.

Respondents to the sector leader surveys were asked to list three challenges to schools working together as an NLC, ranking them from most important to least. As with the enablers the responses were analysed in two ways. They were specifically asked not to include time or money as these would be taken as a given. The reason for this was to try to move beyond the 'obvious'.

Their responses could be grouped into two categories: the NLC operation (n=93, 57.4%) or the NLC culture (n=69, 42.6%). *Ensuring that everyone is able to attend* was the most commonly reported challenge overall (n=34). The second most commonly reported challenge related to the culture of the NLC. This was the *diversity of participant needs and the stages of their development* (n=24). Three other challenges were mentioned by 16 respondents. These were: *remaining focussed, ensuring commitment and momentum and having sufficient knowledge, expertise and/or resources*.

As with the enablers, there was some variation in the most important challenges reported when considering rating as opposed to frequency of mention. The highest overall mean rating of 2.65 was for a challenge mentioned by only three respondents; *the personalities and egos of those involved*. The implication is that while 'personality' problems are rare they are very important challenges when they do exist. The next highest rating ($\bar{x} = 2.50$) was also for a challenge mentioned by only a few respondents. In this instance 12 respondents reported that *developing a learning culture* was a challenge. *That everyone is able to attend* had a mean rating of 2.35 while for *the diversity of participant needs and the stages of their development* the mean rating was 2.21. This reflects the specificity to context of the key challenges faced and the diversity amongst NLCs; highlighting the extent to which one size fits all support can be problematic.

Chapter Four: Discussion and Implications

First, in this chapter the four high level evaluation questions from the Request for Proposals (RFP) are specifically responded to using the findings presented in this report. Second, there is a discussion of the findings from this evaluation considering their implications for the NLC model in the future.

As reported in the method section four evaluation questions were presented in the RFP documentation for this evaluation. These broad evaluation questions underpinned the early design processes, with the specific evaluation sub-questions derived from them. The broad questions relate to the original policy intent of the initiative of giving effect to *The New Zealand Curriculum* and are focused primarily on school level change. In particular the questions in both the sector leader and school leader survey were based on these.

The four broad evaluation questions are:

1. To what extent has participation in an NLC increased a school leader's understanding of *The New Zealand Curriculum*?
2. How and in what ways has the NLC supported the school in designing their local curriculum?
3. How has the involvement of the school leaders in an NLC influenced the way teaching and learning has changed in the school?
4. How and in what ways has the NLC professional development model contributed to cluster success both in terms of the curriculum work and also more broadly?

As was subsequently shown, the implementation of the NLC initiative has focused on the sector leader and the NLC; rather than on what is occurring in schools. There is no denying the sector leaders are critical to the success of any NLCs, and, arguably, the NLCs to the implementation of the curriculum in schools. However, the latter part of this causal chain seems to be a 'leap of faith'; that is the belief is if the other two are operating effectively then the third will automatically occur. As a result there has been little, if any, accountability beyond that the NLCs are operational, and have action plans that meet certain criteria.

This lack of accountability has impacted most strongly on the design of the case studies. The original intention had been to undertake the 10 case studies in schools and to backward map the influence of the NLC on observed practices within these schools. This did not occur for two reasons. First, the advisors were unable to provide sufficient information as to individual schools which would make good case studies. They were, however, better able to suggest NLCs. Second, they felt it was too soon to look for changes at a school level. The extent to which this is an accurate view is open to debate but this belief played a factor in the final determination of the evaluation design.

As a result, the decision was made to use the NLCs themselves as the case and to focus on their journey and what makes an effective NLC; rather than on school level changes. However, data were gathered considering the reported extent of school level changes through the school leader survey and the case studies and it is these self-reported data which are used in the initial section of this chapter. These data suggest that there are likely to be examples of schools where the work of the NLC has had a marked influence on what is occurring within schools. Further, the data suggest these would be schools participating in NLCs with strong sector leaders, internal accountability processes and a strong focus on changes to teaching and learning.

A further limitation to the answers to the initial evaluation questions has been the disappointing response to the school leader survey. Again the evaluation was hindered by the lack of direct access to the schools involved in NLCs. While the advisors were able to provide contact details for sector leaders they were not able to do so for the other participants. As a result, the evaluation team relied on the sector leaders to forward the survey to their participants and to encourage them to complete it. There is no evidence of the extent to which this occurred. Further the survey was called the school leader survey based on the initial evaluation documentation. On reflection this may have caused some confusion for those participants who are not school leaders. While the definition of the term as it pertains to the NLC initiative was explained in detail to the sector leaders there is no way of determining whether they passed this information on to the other participants in their NLC.

Despite these limitations the evaluation has provided a wealth of descriptive data regarding the implementation of the NLC initiative in 2010 and it is these data that are discussed in the final section of this chapter.

School leaders' understanding of The New Zealand Curriculum

Respondents to the school leader survey were asked about their knowledge and/or expertise with regard to The New Zealand Curriculum at two different points in time. Prior to joining the NLC the reported overall mean level of knowledge and/or expertise across a range of areas related to *The New Zealand Curriculum* suggests that respondents to the school leader survey were either beginning to work through and think about the implications of *The New Zealand Curriculum* for their practice including some initial planning, or were including concepts and processes related to *The New Zealand Curriculum* into their practices. At the time of the survey their level of knowledge and/or expertise had increased across all areas indicated in the survey. Their responses suggest that they were regularly including the concepts or processes into their practices at this time.

On average, the school leader survey respondents attributed this reported increase in knowledge and/or expertise to their participation in an NLC to between 'some extent' and 'a large extent'. The extent of attribution varied by area of knowledge and by respondent with wide standard deviations for all areas. These findings suggest that the NLC has primarily increased the understanding of respondents in conjunction with other activities, rather than as a stand-alone initiative.

Further, in the case studies, among the commonly identified benefits for individuals were the professional development they received, access to external experts and a wide range of resources, and being able to share ideas and practices. These benefits suggest that the NLCs have provided opportunities for increased understanding of The New Zealand Curriculum, where that is the focus of the NLC.

From these data it would seem that belonging to an NLC has had a positive influence overall on the understanding of aspects of *The New Zealand Curriculum* of many of the participants in this evaluation. However, the wide standard deviations reported indicate a wide variance in the extent to which this has occurred. Comparative analysis of responses across different sub-groups of school leaders suggest that this is due to the diversity of the NLCs themselves. Certainly those comprised of smaller schools or low decile schools appear to have been more efficacious in this area²¹.

Another key factor is the extent to which understanding *The New Zealand Curriculum* is the desired goal of the NLCs and what they focus on. In the sector leader survey respondents were asked to identify the goals for their NLCs at the time of the survey. Half the respondents reported that the goal of their NLC was directly related to developing a better

²¹ Note that the statistical significance of these differences was not determined due to the sample sizes.

understanding of *The New Zealand Curriculum* and/or implementing it in their schools. This response reflects the change in focus for many of the NLCs by 2010.

Supporting schools in designing their local curriculum

The design of local curricula was a key focus of the 2008, principal-led, professional communities. By 2010 the data from this evaluation suggest that the focus had broadened and it was not clear how many were still focused on this particular goal. The development of a local curriculum was the focus for only three of the ten case studies.

The data collected suggest that where local curriculum was a focus of the NLC there has been benefit for schools in designing their local curricula. Evidence for this can be found in those case studies, *Family Ties*, *Country Calendar* and *The Sky is the Limit*, where this was an explicit focus. In all three instances participants provided concrete evidence of the extent to which the design of their local curricula had been influenced and supported by the NLC.

Further, respondents to the school leader survey reported that, overall, they were able to influence the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* in their schools to a 'large extent' as a result of their involvement in the NLC. This seems to have been due primarily to the large number of respondents who were school principals. Where respondents reported being classroom teachers the mean reported level of influence was only 'very slight'.

Another question in the school leader survey asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they believed the NLC had helped meet their school's needs in implementing *The New Zealand Curriculum*. The reported overall mean level of help provided was rated as to 'some extent.' Primary school respondents reported more help than secondary, which may be a product of the different foci in the secondary clusters. Many of the primary respondents are likely to have been part of original 2008 clusters.

Influencing the way teaching and learning has changed in the school.

The advisors generally felt that there had been insufficient time for the NLC model to influence teaching and learning, believing it requires three to five years for changes to occur. However, the majority of respondents reported that school wide changes had occurred to teaching and learning in their schools with smaller numbers reporting changes at some year levels or within specific subject areas. Nearly half of the respondents reported that these changes could be attributed to the NLC to at least 'some extent', a rating of 3 out of a possible 6.

When asked whether they would choose the NLC model as an effective professional development tool to influence changes to teaching and learning both the sector leaders and school leaders reported, on average, that they would 'probably' do so. Amongst the school leaders approximately half said they would either 'very probably' or 'definitely' do so.

While no one attributed changes to teaching and learning entirely to the NLC, it does appear to have played a small part in any reported changes, reflecting the extent to which this initiative is likely to be one part of a wider change process in schools. Again, the extent to which teaching and learning are influenced is likely to be dependent on the efficacy of the individual NLC and the extent to which those participating perceive such influence to be an important outcome.

Contributing to cluster success, both in terms of the curriculum work and more broadly

As discussed in Chapter 3 it is difficult to define one criterion for success across all NLCs. The most common criteria appear to be related to the operation and culture of the NLCs rather than school-based outcomes, although these were also frequently mentioned.

The original policy intent was that the NLCs would support schools in implementing *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Broadly defined success criteria at a policy and regional level include the desire to raise leadership capacity within the education sector and to develop self-managing and autonomous clusters of schools able to support their own professional learning.

For the advisors a key feature of success was that the NLCs operate effectively as learning communities and that they meet their individual goals. To achieve this they support the development of the sector leaders. For the sector leaders the most commonly reported success criteria were related to the operation of the NLC. The next most commonly reported category included criteria with a focus on teaching and learning, in particular changes to practice. There were also comments related to the provision of professional development.

When asked to rate the success of their NLC, based on their own criteria, the overall mean level reported by the sector leaders was very good” (a rating of 4 out of a possible 6) with 10.1% reporting that it was ‘excellent’. Throughout the survey results similar means were found for a number of questions suggesting an above average response for the initiative, but not an excellent one. Again the large standard deviations for this question, as with others, needs to be noted reflecting the different experiences of the participants.

For the sector leaders the professional development provided and the opportunity to engage with new readings and resources also appears to have been viewed as a success. Most reported they had grown in their own leadership and in their knowledge of teaching and learning. For others, the NLC had provided the impetus to achieve things that would otherwise have taken longer. In some instances the pressure of reporting to their colleagues, of having deadlines to meet, seems to have moved curriculum processes along further than if the school leaders involved had been working in isolation.

Arguably networking has been seen as the biggest success of the initiative. Those involved have reportedly enjoyed the opportunity to meet and work with colleagues; sharing practice and supporting each other. In the case studies the most commonly reported benefits for participants related to networking, to sharing ideas and resources in a collegial and safe environment. This is a very broad, largely social definition of networking. Learning what others are doing and measuring one’s own achievements against that seems to have been a valuable outcome of being in an NLC for many.

More specifically, the NLCs appear to have been highly successful in providing collegial support for the leaders of smaller schools who feel marginalised in other clusters. The ability to choose who is in their cluster and to engage with similar schools has enabled some NLCs to become strong support networks. Similarly, where secondary subject areas have felt marginalised the opportunity to network with colleagues, to share practice, appears to have been a powerful motivator.

Discussion and Implications

When considering the findings from this evaluation, and the implications for the initiative moving forward, it must be remembered that *The New Zealand Curriculum* is an expansive document; reflecting the multi-faceted and complex nature of teaching and learning. There is any number of potential foci in it for a group of schools to work on. There is also a wide range of professional development initiatives and opportunities available to them to support their professional learning. One of the key issues schools face is determining what to prioritise and how to most effectively meet the needs of their students.

Further, the New Zealand education system is one of the most devolved in the world with schools having a large degree of autonomy with regard to their local curriculum and how it is delivered to their students. This is based on the belief that schools are best suited to determine the needs of the students they teach²². However, this has the potential to leave many schools feeling isolated and unsure of what to do next or what to prioritise. There is also the danger that many are simply reinventing the wheel.

The NLC initiative, as it has been implemented, appears to support this view of New Zealand schools as autonomous and largely self-determining. As with much of the policy implemented in the New Zealand education system there is a heavy reliance on the professional and moral accountability of those within the schools and a leap of faith that the intent of the policy will be implemented²³. In this initiative the tension appears to be always present between autonomy and accountability; between allowing the NLCs to choose their own path and work independently and expecting them to provide detailed action plans and report against them in a way consistent with a wider policy imperative.

What the data presented in this report show is that the NLC initiative has been successful, if one considers the meeting of individual NLC success criteria as sufficient. The majority of the responses to the questions have been positive. The opportunity to network and to share practices and ideas is welcomed by everyone. There are concerns with the operation of the NLCs and awareness of the challenges they face, yet few would seem to want the NLC initiative to end. In fact, across all the case studies the clear message was that they would continue the NLC in some format regardless of funding²⁴.

The key question moving forward is whether the outcomes achieved are sufficient to warrant the initiative continuing in its current format? It was beyond the scope of this evaluation to look at questions of value for money. To answer this question may require more of a focus on what is happening at an individual school level than has been possible for this evaluation.

The idea of Networked Learning Communities, as described in the British literature, is an attractive one with the potential to support sustained growth and learning across and within schools. One consideration for the future is the extent to which the current NLCs should be purposively implemented in a way that is more consistent with Networked Learning Communities²⁵. To do so would require greater emphasis on networking between learning communities and on ensuring that the NLCs, and the schools within them, are learning communities; communities that critique and

²² The New Zealand governance system features in a large body of literature related to developed systems of governance. For example, see Robinson, V.M.J. & Ward, L. (2005). Lay governance of New Zealand schools: An educational, democratic or managerialist activity? *Journal of Educational Administration*, 43 (2).

²³ For an example of the discussion of the implementation of policy see Ward, L. & Parr, J.M. (Under Review). Digitising our schools: The need for coherence and clarity in policy. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*.

²⁴ During the finalisation of this report one of the sector leaders communicated to the evaluation team that their NLC would not be continuing. This was because of a belief that the work of the NLC had been completed.

²⁵ For a discussion of networked learning communities see Katz, Steven & Earl, Lorna. (2010). Learning about networked learning communities. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement (21)* 1, 27-51.

challenge practice, that are firmly focused on improving student outcomes. Discussions with the advisors suggest this would require significantly more external input and resource. Again it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to determine the validity of this perception. It may be that what is required is a shift in the focus and nature of delivery, rather than an increase in resource per se.

Currently, the focus of the NLCs appears to be on sharing practices, ideas and resources. This was consistently reported as a key benefit of belonging to an NLC. The extent to which this sharing influences teaching and learning in schools is less evident. Merely sharing resources does not guarantee change and it is possible that collegial support can affirm the status quo. The culture of the NLCs appears to operate on what is essentially a volunteerism model. That is to say people share what they are willing to share. What and how others choose to use this material is up to them. There appears to be little accountability beyond attending the meetings. There also appears to be little evidence of the critique and challenge, of the professional learning conversations that epitomize learning communities.

It could be argued that the time spent setting up the NLCs and ensuring buy in has been too long and that there is a need for more external input in the initial stages of the NLC along with more clarity of expectation and accountability at a practice level. One of the advisors did suggest that it is possible to force the development of a learning community with a robust programme; while the *Dream Sleepers* NLC suggests that it can be done. Perhaps, in 2011 it is time to raise the bar in terms of expectations and to implement actively the Networked Learning Community model focused on classroom practice and on enhancing student outcomes.

It is often stated that it takes time to develop sufficient trust for a learning community to develop and that there are no short cuts. Whether this is true is beyond the scope of this evaluation to determine. However, consideration should perhaps be given to how the learning from the NLCs and other cluster work can be utilised to provide sector leaders and the school-based participants with a model for fostering and instilling the necessary professional trust and willingness to critique and challenge practice. In schools children are often told they will be trusted to behave in certain ways; if they break that trust there are consequences. It may be that a similar model with clear expectations and protocols would work for professional groups. A further concern is that an emphasis on collegiality and positive relationships can hinder the development of a professional relationship where challenge is the norm rather than soft collegiality.

Further, given that clusters have been part of the educational landscape in New Zealand for some time one could question why it still takes so long to develop a culture of open and honest sharing, review and critique of practice. Is it that it has never really developed in any of the cluster work without significant external facilitation, something lacking in the current NLC model, or is it simply that it has not been made clear that this is what was expected.

Another point to consider moving forward is the extent to which the NLCs are viewed as a stand-alone initiative rather than as a learning hub through which information, knowledge and practice are channelled, challenged and critiqued in order to develop new knowledge and new ideas. In this way they would better serve to both broaden and deepen the impact of other initiatives and professional development opportunities. They could provide a forum for the transference of learning between communities and between initiatives much as an integrated curriculum does in schools. There is no doubt that the policy intent of this initiative was to enable the pooling of resources, learning and expertise and on some level this has occurred.

Beyond all else what it would require to move the NLCs forward into a more robust learning culture is for the NLC participants to be willing to engage at a level beyond collegiality and beyond sharing practice. The data in this evaluation suggest many of those who participated in the NLCs see value in a cluster that enables these activities. They may arguably be reaching for low hanging fruit but getting them to reach higher up the tree could be the biggest challenge of all.

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