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# Summary Report

## Developing Competence: Early and Mid Career in Community Learning and Development

The University of Edinburgh

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### Aims and objectives

The aim of this research has been to contribute to, and support, the early career development and continuing professional development of CLD practitioners through an investigation of practice and to contribute to theories of informal/ non-formal learning.

The specific objectives were to:

- 1) Discover what is being learned and how it is being learned by those in early and mid career in community learning and development.
- 2) Identify what factors affect the level and direction of learning effort.
- 3) Assess how prior learning and understanding from higher education and other life experience is applied in employment.
- 4) Outline key lessons for the CLD sector in developing continuing professional development, and support mechanisms.
- 5) Identify key issues in the CLD context and make recommendations on how these should be addressed.

These objectives were addressed through a short *literature review*, a *structured questionnaire* (completed on-line by a sample of 125 early and mid career staff) and through *individual semi-structured interviews* with a sample of 7 early career and 7 mid career staff drawn from those who completed the questionnaire. Analysis of job titles and staff management responsibilities showed that CLD is a field where professionally qualified staff are highly likely to be supervising unqualified staff and are often working alongside people from a different profession or background, sometimes as the only CLD worker in that organisation.

This report was commissioned through the interim Standards Council for CLD in Scotland, chaired by Duncan Simpson. The purpose of the Standards Council is to establish and maintain high standards of practice in CLD across Scotland. The Council's main functions are:

- To deliver an approvals structure for professional qualifications, courses and training and development opportunities for everyone involved in CLD.
- To consider and establish the registration system available to practitioners delivering and active in CLD practice.
- To develop and establish a model of supported induction, CPD and training opportunities.

The interim Council's remit is to present a sustainable model to Scottish Ministers outlining the longer-term operations of an established Standards Council.

## **What is being learned and how is it being learned?**

The research has revealed how the following factors affect learning.

### *Structure of the work*

Respondents reported that having a good balance between the competing demands on their time was important but over half of the early career workforce would have liked to spend more time on face-to-face work.

### *Impact of taking part in group activities and working with others*

Respondents learn with and through colleagues by 'asking questions of others to improve understanding, knowledge and skills' and 'sharing ideas through discussion with colleagues and then implementing them'. The importance of a supportive working environment where staff are working alongside others was highlighted and membership of a team was seen as very important in supporting colleagues. However, some staff do not have easy access to CLD colleagues and are professionally isolated.

### *Opportunities to broaden and extend experience beyond the job*

The most important opportunity cited in the on-line questionnaire was 'fact-finding visits to other agencies' and in the interviews, respondents reported they had learned from working and collaborating with others from outside their own organisations and from taking part in international collaborations and exchanges.

### *Learning from working directly with people in communities*

Face-to-face work was a highly valued aspect of CLD work and staff had a great deal of respect for the knowledge and expertise that exists in communities. Some, however, expressed concern that what communities have to offer may have become marginalised. Engaging with communities requires professional experience and knowledge and highlights a distinctive role for CLD staff as a catalyst for learning and development. The interaction between communities and CLD practitioners clearly leads to productive learning for both parties but also requires conditions that give sufficient time to enable this learning to happen.

### *Relationship between challenge, support and confidence*

Personal commitment to the work and time available were seen as the two most significant factors helping CLD practitioners to learn in the workplace. Early career respondents found that support and advice from colleagues was important whilst mid-career respondents suggested that workload was more important. CLD practitioners were in general highly committed to the work and this was a strong motivating factor for them. However, many respondents felt that unstable funding was making their commitment to the people they worked with difficult to sustain.

### *Staff development and continuing professional development (CPD)*

The responses to the survey showed that for all forms of CPD and staff development, experienced staff had more opportunities than early career staff, with a small percentage of this latter group finding it very difficult to determine their own learning needs. In addition there was limited availability of most forms of formal CPD for all staff. The individual interviews suggested that staff preferred development that builds on and enhances collegial relationships and collective identities, and respondents wanted open, rather than too prescriptive, training opportunities. However, for many the current climate did not encourage staff development because of the pressure on time and budgets.

### *Summary*

The factors that contribute to an effective learning environment through building confidence and competence are providing a supportive and collegial workplace environment, opportunities to

broaden and extend people's experience beyond the day-to-day demands of their job and opportunities to engage with the communities in which staff work. All of these require time and resources but there appear to be limited opportunities available especially for early career staff.

### **What factors affect the level and direction of learning effort?**

In this part of the research respondents were asked to comment on how contextual factors and the changing policy context affected their practice. CLD staff reported the following impacts on their work:

- Fewer but more targeted resources that generally narrowed the focus of the work
- Greater emphasis on providing evidence and measuring the impact of practice
- Changes in the groups and issues that are targeted
- New policies for adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL that provided greater structure to the work
- Less autonomy for CLD workers and more direction from above
- Changes in the expectations of CLD from other professions and more partnership working
- Impact of newer legislation ranging from the equalities agenda to the impact of the no-smoking policy on hard-to-reach groups
- Lack of time to systematically reflect on practice
- A preoccupation with securing funding that could detract from the more substantive elements of the work
- Some distortion of the focus of practice caused by operating within a more competitive environment and entrepreneurial culture
- Learning from communities that included the distinctiveness of this kind of work, the importance of supporting collective learning and action, what empowerment and capacity building could really mean and the danger of becoming distant from the reality of people in communities.

#### *Summary*

Practitioners are developing a reflexive and self-directed type of learning, particularly by comparing what they think they should be doing with what they are actually required to do. CPD should foster and support this kind of critical and engaged practice. The prioritisation in policy of particular target groups draws workers into new kinds of work-related learning and development and this may lead to a degree of specialisation, e.g. literacies work, family learning, capacity building. Confronting the experience of socially excluded groups has extended and enhanced professional understanding of both community cohesion and social inclusion but respondents were concerned that the pace of policy change made it difficult for them to keep up to date. Learning in the workplace is strongly influenced by a positive commitment to the work and being in a supportive environment that makes such commitment possible. Respondents expressed a strong commitment to working with communities and it is important that the factors outlined above do not detract from this.

### **How is prior learning and understanding from higher education and other life experience applied in employment?**

#### *Role of higher education*

Respondents were asked in the on-line survey how they kept in touch with the latest developments. Using the Internet was the most frequent response followed by reading journals and newspapers. They were also asked about reading that had influenced how they thought about work and there was a large diversity of responses with the most cited being WALT and HGIOCLD2, the two documents that have framed recent developments in practice. In the interviews several respondents referred to the value of theoretical frameworks they had been exposed to in their HE studies and these had enriched their subsequent learning through developing an orientation to theoretical understandings. However, most respondents felt that their

pre-qualifying course could not do everything particularly in relation to the 'practicalities' of partnership working, management and fundraising. The findings from the interviews made it clear that prior learning and understanding from higher education inform approaches to practice but further CPD is necessary to develop understanding of the particular context and setting in which people work.

#### *Role of previous experience*

Learning from experience is not straightforward since all experience is shaped by concrete social conditions and is influenced by individual histories. Respondents emphasised the importance of being valued and supported in being able to learn from their work experience and using their life experience to develop current work. The CLD profession is unusual in that most practitioners have considerable experience of the field before they gain their professional qualifications and respondents used this experience gained in equalities work, for example, to develop more specialised work.

#### *Reflection as a means of learning*

A great deal of research has shown how important structured reflection is for learning and respondents were asked if and how they learnt through reflecting on their work. In the on-line survey the highest proportion of respondents chose 'transforming your existing knowledge, skills and understanding to fit a new situation' as a way of learning through reflection. In the interviews some people reported that reflection could be built into everyday work. Others found that the pace of work meant that there was no time for reflection.

#### *Summary*

CLD workers need opportunities to reflect on their learning from practice, higher education and previous life experience in order to develop their expertise. This, in turn, requires workplaces where the pace of work is not too intense and where there are opportunities to learn from supportive others in a relatively safe environment where mistakes can be made and learnt from. The data show that practitioners had a willingness to engage in learning and a commitment to use the resources that were available to them. However, their experience of the intensification of work and the lack of time for reflection shows that this is not an easy task.

### **Key lessons for CPD and support in the CLD Sector**

This objective is considered under the headings that the research literature has shown impact on learning at work.

#### *Provide an expansive range of opportunities for learning*

The CLD sector is highly diverse and so pre-qualifying training cannot prepare participants for the huge variety of settings and practices in which they will engage. It is therefore particularly important that there is access to appropriate CPD both for early and mid career staff. However, there are few opportunities for staff to take part in formal CPD courses of their own choosing and some had to pay for the academic courses that they did undertake. For early career staff there were fewer opportunities for all forms of support than more experienced staff even in relation to regular supervision meetings with a line manager. This was partly due to the pressure on staff to respond to changing policy directions and, particularly in the voluntary sector, to focus on gaining external funding. Given the variety of the work undertaken by CLD practitioners and the many changes of the focus of the work in recent years there is little evidence of an expansive range of opportunities for learning through an entitlement to CPD and appropriate support.

#### *Opportunities to broaden experience*

Research on expertise at work shows that opportunities to broaden experience are important so that staff can organise and extend their knowledge more effectively. However, the evidence from this research shows that the only opportunity the majority of respondents had was of undertaking

fact finding visits to other agencies and only one out of 125 respondents had attended a conference. This finding, together with the lack of CPD noted above, does show how limited the learning environment is for CLD practitioners.

### *Working alongside others*

Working alongside others enables staff to learn from each other, especially new practices and perspectives, and thus to bring fresh insights into their work. Research shows that participation in group-activities as part of a team is important in building confidence to take on challenging work so it is vital that staff development enables CLD practitioners to meet together for mutual support and development. A strong preference was expressed by many respondents for the kind of staff development that builds on collegial relationships and collective identities and this would enhance the availability of support and advice from colleagues.

### *Tackling challenging tasks*

CLD work is challenging of its very nature but research shows, particularly for early career staff, that work that is too challenging can lead to loss of confidence and a decline in the motivation to learn. Conversely, where staff are supported, have a reasonable workload and are given appropriate feedback they are able to respond reflexively to new challenges rather than developing coping mechanisms that might be inappropriate and ineffective. At times this research has shown that practitioners are experiencing a dissonance between the educational aims of the work and the managerial demands of the job. The data shows a perceived shift in emphasis from face-to-face work to various kinds of management, audit and measurement activity and demonstrates a growing concern that informal educational work may have moved from being a core component to an optional extra. This could have consequences for the development of competence, since lack of opportunities to practise inevitably results in a loss of confidence and becoming deskilled.

### *Commitment to the work*

The data shows the importance of the commitment to working with communities that CLD practitioners have and many spoke of their passion for their work. However, developmental work takes time and a realistic appraisal of the possibilities for engagement if CLD workers are to be effective in bringing to bear their professional experience and knowledge. For some, the commitment to working directly with communities was also diluted by the need to enable other professions to make similar engagements. If staff feel that the face-to-face work to which they are committed is not being done effectively then they lose morale. This issue of morale has recently been identified in a number of HMIE inspection reports as well as in this research.

## **Key issues in the CLD context**

### *Professional identity*

Striking a balance between professional values and the pragmatic requirements of the job is a continuing preoccupation for many workers. The data indicates that one of the most significant differences between early and mid-career practitioners relates to their sense of professional identity. Generally, mid-career practitioners have a fairly sound sense of themselves as informal educators whose primary task is to work in developmental ways with groups and individuals who self-define interests, aspirations and needs. Early-career practitioners, in contrast, tend to see their work primarily in terms of the immediate demands being made upon them and in relation to more narrowly conceived forms of accountability for 'performance' and 'outcomes'.

### *The work environment*

The extent to which practitioners can exercise autonomy to make strategic choices about their work is contingent upon both the wider context of policy and practice and on the particular culture of the workplace. This means that a great deal depends on the distinctive characteristics of specific work contexts, which may be either restrictive or expansive in terms of how practitioners

experience the problems and possibilities for development in their work. In addition, the current regime of inspection, audit, and consultation significantly affects patterns of work, motivation and learning. Whilst this regime has some positive features in underpinning CLD work, a consistent finding from this research is that it can seriously undermine the scope for workers to determine their own priorities and ways of engaging with people in communities.

### *Partnership working*

Partnership arrangements have brought opportunities to develop and learn from collaborative and inter-agency arrangements, but may also lead to confusion of purpose and a perceived dilution of professional identity. The legal obligation to consult with communities can offer new possibilities for effecting change but such partnerships can embody unequal power relationships. Although value is placed on the partnership approach, especially where it provides face-to-face opportunities to engage actively with communities, there is also a perception that administrative procedures may be driving out educational and democratic processes with the autonomy of community groups to pursue their own interests with support from CLD workers being reduced.

### *The policy context*

The nature of much funding for CLD can make difficulties for workers seeking to address the needs, aspirations and demands of communities in any systematic way because this kind of work requires a commitment to long-term objectives. In the current context only short-term financial support is likely to be on offer. Targeted funding can be used to steer learning towards priorities that may not be those of communities, and cuts in funding can reduce the range of options available to practitioners. The current trend towards short-term, targeted funding, moreover, has a direct impact on the capacity and willingness of practitioners to devote sufficient time to developing their own learning, as they can feel ineffective and demoralised. In addition, the general atmosphere of competition puts a premium on short-term gains rather than long-term aims. In overall terms, whilst some aspects of policy promote the aims of CLD and appear to provide a platform for the work, the evidence of this research is that diminishing resources, bureaucratisation and the over emphasis on planning and targeted delivery, are not conducive to sustained learning effort on the part of practitioners.

## Recommendations

In many ways this research is best seen as a precursor to more in-depth studies that would be needed to fully explore the many issues addressed in this report. This is because the data set on which the research is based is limited. It is nevertheless possible to draw some broad lessons from it, especially where the findings clearly resonate with those indicated in the wider research literature. The sections of the report in which the findings and research have been discussed are provided.

- 1) Given the absence of CPD opportunities that have been identified (Section 5), consideration should be given to establishing a standard for CPD and support that is equivalent in terms of quality and entitlement to that provided in allied professions such as school teaching.
- 2) Given the importance for learning so clearly associated (in Sections 5 and 8) with opportunities for practitioners to engage in systematic reflection through thinking and talking together, consideration should be given to how CPD and support could systematically enhance collegiality and teamwork.
- 3) Concern has been expressed about the impact of the increasingly complex environment in CLD including new commitments to planning, partnership working, funding and accountability (see Section 8). This puts considerable pressure on all staff and there are particular responsibilities placed on those in managerial positions to ensure that practitioners are supported in their core educational work. There is a need within this context for a new appreciation of the role of management in CLD in meeting the emerging challenges. Consideration should be given to the development, at an appropriate academic and professional level, of appropriate training for CLD managers in this respect. Possibilities could be usefully explored with the University sector.
- 4) Given the concern expressed about the changing focus of practice away from face to face work with groups and individuals (Section 5 and 6) CPD should provide continuing opportunities to develop and enhance educational work with groups as a priority. Possibilities could be explored with the University sector.
- 5) A cluster of findings point to the need to provide opportunities to stimulate debate and share good practice across the field that will promote learning. These include most respondents identifying the opportunity to ask questions and share ideas, to undertake fact-finding visits to other agencies (section 5), and for collegial spaces to develop thinking and the capacity for reflection (Section 7) as important. To support this need, consideration could be given to holding a major CLD conference annually, bringing together academics, practitioners, policy makers, voluntary sector staff and other stakeholders, to encourage a healthy climate of critical reflection and debate.
- 6) The current trend towards short-term, targeted funding has a direct impact on the capacity and willingness of practitioners to devote sufficient time to developing their own learning. Consideration should be given to commissioning further research into the claim that the CLD sector is losing the capacity, for example through short term funding regimes, to make long-term commitments to responding to the issues raised by communities (Sections 6 and 9). Long-term educational work needs to be supported by a closer working relationship between practitioners and community groups at grassroots level and CPD needs to respond to this.
- 7) Most respondents cited the Internet as an important source of information and ideas (Section 7). Whilst this should be regarded as only one resource for professional development, it would be valuable to build on the website development currently being undertaken on behalf of the Scottish Community Learning and Development Work-Based and Part-Time Training Consortium.
- 8) This research was based on a limited sample and so follow up work is needed to see if the findings from this project are more widely generalisable. Therefore two pieces of further



research should be undertaken: i) a thorough survey of the CPD and support received by early career practitioners in order to see if the pattern uncovered in this research is widely experienced; ii) a review of the focus of the work of CLD in the current context and what this implies for both pre-service and in-service training.