‘A Learning History Department’: How effectively can teacher knowledge be developed through a collaborative professional learning group?

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A Research & Development Project

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Abstract

This inquiry will examine whether the participation of history teachers in a professional learning group can lead to effective professional learning and specifically have an impact on teacher subject knowledge. Teaching history presents distinctive challenges because of the vast expanse of subject knowledge that teachers are expected to master. Yet, there has been criticism of the professional development provision for teachers; courses are often costly and found to have limited impact on teaching practice. Meanwhile, In-Service Training within school settings tends to focus on generic educational and child welfare issues rather than developing the disciplinary and content knowledge needed to teach specific subjects. To overcome this shortfall, collaborative professional learning within departments has become prevalent in schools in recent years, with the benefits for participants said to include the chance to reflect on their practice in a non-judgemental setting, better collegiate relations and strengthened professional capital. This study will examine the experiences of a group of history teachers who formed a professional learning group within their department, and whether the claims about the benefits of professional learning groups can be substantiated.

Drawing on issues in the literature concerning the professional development of history teachers, and the importance of subject knowledge, this small-scale study involved experienced history teachers from an independent boarding school who participated in both face-to-face and online collaboration. In the first cycle of the project, the focus was on the identification and sharing of relevant scholarship and resources to enhance subject and pedagogical content knowledge. In the second cycle, the group identified a collective development need and focused on improving this aspect of their praxis through sharing their knowledge and teaching experiences using online collaborative tools.

Results from interviews with colleagues, questionnaires and group meetings indicated that the levels of collaboration within the group were dependent on the learning needs of teachers, their perceptions of the value of the professional learning offered, and the wider learning ethos of the school. Participants reported that their involvement in a professional learning group made them more aware of gaps in their subject knowledge which in turn motivated them to make improvements. Moreover, by setting aside time to discuss how to apply knowledge in a lesson context, teacher craft knowledge could be shared. Although low intensity, one-to-one collaboration, as opposed to higher intensity whole-department collaboration, was perceived by

the more experienced history teachers as having a greater impact on their day-to-day practice than working together in a larger group setting, beneficial discussion about disciplinary subject knowledge still took place within the professional learning group, suggesting this was a useful way of history teachers developing the knowledge they need.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Teacher Knowledge and collaborative learning

Much has been written about the types of knowledge teachers require to successfully teach and motivate students. Following a period where considerable focus was placed on the importance of pedagogical knowledge, the last ten years have witnessed greater emphasis once more on the importance of teachers having a secure depth of academic subject knowledge. The 2012-14 English National Curriculum reforms have been largely responsible for bringing the issue of teacher subject-specialism into greater focus. The recently revised History GCSEs, first examined in 2017, have created new challenges for teachers, not least the need for many to update their subject content knowledge, as well as find ways of engaging young people with a more content-heavy curriculum. *The Historical Association Annual Survey of History in Schools in England 2017*, by Burn & Harris (2017), reported that 88% of teachers surveyed had found the need to update their substantive knowledge to teach the new syllabi.

However, a Wellcome Trust report published in 2018 revealed that much of the CPD that teachers receive post-qualification in the UK concerns generic, whole-school educational issues, rather than providing subject-specific knowledge updates. Subject-specific training for UK teachers compares unfavourably with other countries, and underperforming schools are less likely to prioritise subject-specific CPD (Cordingley et al., 2018). For history teachers, the study of history as an academic subject usually stops at degree level, with subsequent training for history teachers tending to focus on communicating history to pupils and motivating learners, rather than knowing "a lot of history" (Husbands, 2010, p. 84). Those teachers who want to develop their substantive historical knowledge are largely left to accumulate this in their own time and at their own cost, for example through purchasing their own history books or through the completion of further degrees. The lack of time and support for the development of teachers' knowledge is surprising given the fact that the research supporting the link between subject knowledge and effective teaching has a long standing (Schwab, 1964, Hirst & Peters, 1970, Turner-Bisset, 2001). In the 1980s, Shulman (1986) set out the importance of teachers knowing the specific ways to teach subjects, referring to this as 'pedagogical content knowledge' (PCK). However, this was dependent upon them having a secure grasp of their subject content knowledge, without which teachers would be unable to develop the pedagogical content knowledge, which in the classroom allows them to use:

> the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations and demonstrations – in a word, the most powerful ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible for others. (Shulman, 1986, p. 9)

It is worth noting that Shulman was writing in an American educational context in a period when American teachers were being criticised for lacking sufficient depth of subject knowledge. However, more recent research pertaining to history teachers in England supports Shulman's belief that teacher knowledge is essential (Ford & Kennett, 2018; Hawkey & Snelson, 2019).

The term 'teacher knowledge' encompasses several different meanings, from subject content knowledge to knowledge of a subject as it is represented in the curriculum. Building on Shulman's (1986) conception of teacher knowledge bases, researchers have sought to determine the specific professional knowledge required in different subject fields. For example, within the field of primary school mathematics teaching, the 'knowledge quartet' tool has been developed as a way of supporting novice teachers reflect on their use of subject knowledge in the classroom (Rowland, T. et al, 2013). Although most studies of 'knowledge bases' have focused on the core subjects of Mathematics and English, attempts have been made to codify the knowledge that history teachers need to acquire. John (1999) has presented a history teacher cognitive knowledge structure model which identifies five knowledge components – knowledge of history, knowledge of teaching history, knowledge of the institution, knowledge of education and knowledge of how children learn history. Similarly, Heuer et al. (2017) has tried to spark an international debate about what history teachers need to know through the development of the Heidelberg Model for Competence in History Teaching (HeiGeko). This model focuses on two domains – 'historical knowledge' (which includes historical grammar and an understanding of the nature of history) and 'historical didactics knowledge' (which includes how to make historical content understandable, knowledge about student perceptions and the ability to give feedback). Harris & Bain (2010) have gone beyond these general knowledge bases for history teaching and have explored the notion that history teachers in fact require different knowledge bases to teach specific topics. In particular, they have examined the knowledge needed to teach world history as opposed to national history and have identified knowledge of how to make comparative connections across periods of time and places as a particular requirement for giving students effective world history instruction. This work illustrates that educational researchers have been eager to formulate a professional knowledge base of history teaching which would allow teachers to reflect on and develop their practice. However, knowledge bases have also come under criticism for being too mechanistic and for failing to

consider adequately the complexity of what makes effective teaching (Doyle, 1990; Verloop et al., 2001) It is argued that knowledge bases must be viewed as flexible and capable of being adapted to shifting educational priorities and beliefs; for example, although Michael Gove's 'knowledge-rich', Hirsch-influenced approach to history teaching is favoured currently, it is already being argued (Pearcy & Duplass, 2011 and Sossick, 2020) that knowledge should not overshadow other aspects of the history curriculum. Therefore, although Schulman's seminal contribution to understanding teacher knowledge remains useful in 2020, there is much more to consider to fully understand what effective history teachers need to know.

In the past 20 years, there has been a shift away from the concept of knowledge bases as a way of training teachers to 'teach well'. There is now a new emphasis (Garet et al., 2001; Verloop et al., 2001) on better understanding the complexity of teacher knowledge and beliefs, rather than simply observing teacher behaviours as a way of determining what makes effective teaching. Increasingly the knowledge and beliefs of 'expert teachers' is being studied alongside formal teaching theories to reach a richer understanding of what teachers know and need to know. Garet et al. (2001) asserts that developing teacher knowledge should be the key focus of teacher professional learning, with subject content knowledge being a priority. How teachers best acquire this knowledge is a topic of ongoing research (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Professional update for teachers has traditionally taken the form of infrequent and costly one-day courses, often run by examination boards, where subject knowledge and subject pedagogy are usually a secondary consideration to assessment knowledge. Teachers are all too familiar with what has been termed 'the workshop problem' (Ball & Cohen, 1999) whereby training takes the form of "isolated events without follow-up sessions or ongoing support" (Callahan et al., 2016). The decision in this project to use an in-house professional learning group as the means of facilitating teacher learning was intended to overcome the shortfalls of isolated professional development and to move towards an ongoing system where ideas can be tested, discussed, and refined. The plan was to tap into the collective teacher knowledge within a department, which is context-relevant and costs only the time devoted to it.

The UK government concurs that teachers should not have to rely on textbooks to fill in the gaps in their subject knowledge, acknowledging that ongoing subject knowledge update is vital if teachers

are to engage properly with learners, for example by exploring the debates that exist within their subject (DfE, 2013). However, although teachers new to the profession have been offered the opportunity of free Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE) courses, these are only available in a limited number of subjects, of which History is not one (Gibson, S. et al., 2013). Due to the multifarious routes into teaching today, there can be no guarantee that all initial history teacher training (ITT) courses put the necessary emphasis onto subject knowledge, and therefore new entrants to the history teaching profession would undoubtedly benefit from the extension of SKE courses. A positive change is the creation of the Early Career Framework which will launch in September 2020. This will allow newly qualified teachers access to funded CPD and give them a further 5% timetable reduction in their second year of teaching, extending the 10% reduction already provided in their first year. The new framework emphasises the importance of subject knowledge, and the part it plays in increasing early career teacher efficacy (DfE, 2019). It also provides the time needed for teachers to learn from their fellow professionals, thus encouraging collaborative practice.

Beyond the training and support for early career teachers, there is recognition by the DfE that teachers at all stages of their career need to continually update their subject knowledge and identify their own development needs (DfE, 2016). Ofsted have linked increased depth of teacher subject knowledge to higher attainment for pupils (Ofsted, 2019). Influenced by the research of Young (2007; 2014) and Hirsch (1988; 2016) and a new Ofsted inspection framework (2019), schools have been encouraged to shift towards a 'knowledge curriculum' (Lambert, 2011). This shift has required teachers as well as pupils to improve their content knowledge. Treating teachers as learners too commits schools to continued professional development, and necessitates the allocation of enough time to the process to enable meaningful professional dialogues to take place. One way in which some schools have facilitated knowledge-sharing is through the creation of in-house professional learning communities (PLCs). The research (Bolam, 2005; Stoll et al., 2006; Lassonade & Israel 2009) suggests that teacher-led PLCs have noticeably positive effects on teacher knowledge, motivation, and efficacy. Furthermore, technology is offering new opportunities for teacher collaboration which can surpass time constraints and allow teachers to engage in professional learning when they choose (Duncan-Howell, 2010; Spires, H. et al., 2012). Collaborative teacher learning has been found to have a positive impact on subject knowledge (Cordingley et al., 2018), and the concept of 'learning departments' (Childs et al., 2013) has been

realised in some institutions. The aim of this study is to further corroborate whether a teacher-led, professional learning group within a secondary school history department is an effective and feasible mechanism for developing teacher knowledge.

1.2 Rationale

This study was mainly borne from a wish to have the opportunity to collaborate on a more formal basis with the colleagues within my department. I work in an all-girls, selective boarding school, where all members of the department have at least ten years teaching experience, and most hold additional positions of responsibility in the school. This includes four members of staff who have been or are currently Heads of Department, two members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), and three housemistresses. Given the fact that the teachers in the department are all experienced, the culture of the department is very individualistic, which research shows is a common feature of experienced departments (Burn, 2012). Due to holding other positions in the school, it is often quite difficult for all members of the department to come together for a departmental meeting. Considering this, the notion of setting aside protected time for the discussion of issues to do with the teaching of history was welcomed by most members of the department. Additionally, the department lacks a departmental base large enough for all members of the department to meet. This makes day-to-day collaboration rare, with several members of staff only coming into the department to teach their lesson and basing themselves in offices elsewhere around the school. However, the recent construction of a new 'Learning Centre', with collaboration space, and a new staff room with meeting rooms, has created an environment more conducive to collaboration.

On a wider school level, this project also seemed to marry well with the current school aims. A recent inspection report recommended that teachers within the school should share the best features of outstanding teaching with each other. Previously, there has been little time put aside to allow teachers to collaborate in this way. Whole school INSET has tended to focus on generic issues such as preparation for inspection, safeguarding and pupil well-being. Although there are now some initiatives to bring the voices of teachers to the fore, such as through 'Teachmeet' sessions and a newly formed Educational Research working group, much of the professional development for teachers centres on Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), of which there are none in the history department. The creation of a professional learning group within the history department seemed

an appropriate way to develop the new collaborative 'show and tell' ethos the school wanted to promote.

The focus on teacher knowledge, particularly subject content knowledge, came from informal discussions with colleagues within the school. Most colleagues identified this as the area they felt they most needed to develop, and this was later confirmed in my whole-school teaching staff survey. The specific content knowledge development need identified within the history department was that very few of the teachers had a background in medieval history. Having taught Modern World History for many years, the department recently changed to the AQA GCSE syllabus, which requires a British study as well as study over a 1000-year span. The Head of Department selected medieval Britain and the reign of Edward I from the available topic options based on his own personal interests and specialism; however, the other teachers in the department were largely unfamiliar with this period. I decided that a peer learning group was the method of professional learning I wanted to use to develop our departmental subject knowledge due to the empirical evidence on the effectiveness of professional learning activities for teachers. I drew on the research of Garet et al. (2001) who conducted a large-scale study which compared the effects of different types of teacher learning and concluded that:

> Professional development that focuses on academic subject matter (content), gives teachers opportunities for 'hands-on' work (active learning), and is integrated into the daily life of the school (coherence), is more likely to produce enhanced knowledge and skills. (Garet, et al. 2001)

A professional learning group seemed to meet this criterion as well as provided the scope for the collaboration I sought. Additionally, further literature on teacher knowledge (Stoll et al. 2006; Vescio, 2008) suggested that increased teacher knowledge and efficacy leads to higher attainment for pupils, and indeed as a department our ultimate goal was to ensure that we enabled pupils to achieve highly by securing our own subject knowledge. The project will contribute to reaching a better understanding of the impact of collaborative professional learning on teacher knowledge.

1.3 Collaborative Research

Collaboration with colleagues was at the heart of this project. This took several forms including teacher discussions within the history group (both face-to-face and online), the sharing of knowledge, ideas and resources, and cooperation with other teacher-led groups within the school

such as the Research Group and IT department. Before the learning group had its first meeting, I conducted formal interviews and had informal chats with colleagues. This provided a valuable insight into the types of INSET training they had received during their careers, their perceptions of the learning culture within the department and wider school and their own personal learning needs. At each phase of the project, those involved had the opportunity to reflect on what had been achieved and to determine the next steps for the group. The intervention itself relied upon the participation of colleagues and their willingness to give their time to meeting as a group. The challenges and opportunities this presented will be critically examined later in this study.

2. Literature Review

This literature review will examine the debates in the literature concerning the professional learning of history teachers, and the effectiveness of professional learning groups within schools. The specific focus will be on the ability of such groups to develop history teacher subject knowledge. The questions that will be explored are:

1. What types of teacher knowledge are important for effective history teaching?
2. Do the ways in which history teachers are trained allow them to develop the knowledge they need?
3. How can practicing history teachers best develop their subject knowledge both generally and within schools?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of teacher-led, subject-specific professional learning groups both generally and within schools?

2.1. What types of teacher knowledge are important for effective history teaching?

The literature reveals that effective history teaching has several common qualities, namely knowledge of substantive content, disciplinary knowledge, and knowledge about how pupils learn history.

First, in relation to substantive content, such as having knowledge of the past, of people, events, and ideas, Counsell (2016) has made a strong argument in favour of teachers having sufficient depth of subject knowledge. She argues that both teacher historical substantive knowledge and

understanding of conceptual second order thinking skills play an important part in helping raise pupil attainment. Counsell (2016) asserts that high levels of teacher subject knowledge is crucial to the effective teaching of lower as well as higher attainers. This implies that there are both direct and indirect benefits to history teachers having a good depth of subject content knowledge; directly, from the ability to help high attainers obtain top grades through detailed instruction, and indirectly, through increased ability to use knowledge effectively and to break it down for lower ability pupils. Moreover, security of content knowledge increases teacher confidence (Wilson, 1991) and Counsell (2016) implies it also has a positive impact on pedagogy as teachers can focus less on *what* they are saying, and more on *how* they are saying it. In a similar vein to Counsell (2016), Husbands et al. (2003) identifies' knowledge about history' as vital. Husbands describes 'knowledge about history' as both a 'broad conception of what history is' and a 'detailed understanding of both the substance and procedures of history' (p. 72). Husbands research was conducted in eight UK secondary schools over the course of a whole school year, with the aim of illuminating the knowledge and skills of practising teachers, and 'why they work in the way they do'. (p. ix) It was found that a teacher's content knowledge plays a significant role in their ability to convey the subject to learners, with the teacher's knowledge being the most valuable source of knowledge to pupils. These findings support Wilson (1991) and Wilson & Wineburg's (1993) earlier research into the knowledge of US history teachers. Comparisons were made of the efficacy of both experienced and novice teachers, each teaching topics for the first time and outside their degree expertise. These studies concluded that the depth of teacher subject knowledge can have a crucial influence on teacher confidence, and on their ability to clarify and explain topics to pupils.

Renewed emphasis on the subject content knowledge of history teachers has been prompted by the curriculum reforms which place greater weight on pupil knowledge. As argued by Mitchell (2015), teachers have not merely to be 'skilled technicians' but 'intellectuals' (p. 367.) Writing in response to the curriculum reforms in England, Mitchell believes that these reforms equate to a 'knowledge turn' and points out that there is currently a need for teachers to put more emphasis on developing their subject content knowledge. Mitchell asserts there is a misguided assumption that teachers have detailed subject knowledge, but this is not always the case. Although examining the case from a geography perspective, he argues that subject knowledge is vital to teacher professionalism and this applies across the disciplines. He claims that there has been a marginalisation of teacher knowledge since the economic problems of the 1970s, which fostered a

belief that 'traditional' subjects were of no use to young people, and that transferable skills leading directly to work were more important. Mitchell is critical of government interference in the teaching profession and laments the demise of a knowledge-rich curriculum and the resulting impact on learners. Mitchell's stance supports the more recent work of Young (2010) who has written about the importance of all learners having access to 'powerful knowledge', which is gained through studying traditional content-led subjects rather than lessons focused on process. For Young, this is a question of social justice and he argues in favour of having a curriculum with knowledge as its starting point, rather than social context or the learner ability being held as a barrier to a knowledge-rich curriculum. Both Young and Mitchell would clearly support Husbands' (2013) belief that effective history teachers need to be subject specialists. However, the literature suggests history teachers must be far more than knowledge transmitters.

In relation to disciplinary knowledge, the historical knowledge needed by teachers is said to go beyond facts, dates, and chronological events, to a deeper understanding of the nature of the subject itself. This includes knowledge of historiography and how historical narratives are created (Achinstein & Fogo, 2015). Bain & Mirel (2006) argue that "teachers must be steeped in the disciplines they teach" (p. 213) and conclude that history undergraduates who have a firm understanding of historiography are best placed to "create experiences that help students learn content" (p. 214). Bain & Mirel (2006) further assert that history teachers need to know how to provide pupils with the sense the history involves multiple narratives. This requires them to "understand how historians frame historical problems, select and organise factual details, analyse and construct historical stories" (p. 213). Bain & Mirel's views were in response to deficiencies which they saw in the training of American history teachers and US educational policies, but they are consistent with John's (1991) views on effective history teaching in England where he argues that teachers need detailed knowledge to know how to make content meaningful to pupils using 'invisible structures'(p. 213). Likewise, Monte-Sano (2011) also argues that history teachers need to have an awareness of their students' disciplinary understanding, and the ability to anticipate the misconceptions pupils may have.

Bain & Mirel (2006) additionally argue that teacher disciplinary knowledge allows teachers to utilise classroom materials and history textbooks effectively and enables them to draw out the historical debates and understanding which pupils cannot derive from the textbook alone. This knowledge

allows history teachers to imbed source material appropriately into lessons, as well as enables them to bring history to life utilising online and media resources. Grant & Gradwell (2012) concur that successful history teachers "know their subject matter well enough that they can choose texts that not only represent the basic ideas of the lesson, but… also expose students to a range of perspectives on these ideas"(p. 261). Grant & Gradwell (2012) studied the source selection of two American history teachers over the course of a unit of work. Although they had limited teaching experience, they were found to be able to make creative use of a wide range of sources due to their subject matter knowledge. They also found that source selection was influenced by the beliefs of the teachers and their conception of history as a subject. For example, one had majored in social history and as a result source selection was intended to teach an event in American history from the perspective of the different people's experiences. This shows the importance of teacher knowledge and disciplinary understanding in how history teachers present their subject.

Finally, the literature shows that a third aspect of effective history teaching is having knowledge about how pupils learn history. Teachers need to be able to judge the knowledge and understanding levels of pupils and know how to build up learner knowledge over time, linking back to prior learning, and taking learners forwards at the right pace. Grant & Gradwell (2012) highlight the importance of teachers understanding how pupils perceive history. They argue that the resource selection of effective history teachers is informed by their teaching environment and knowing when the knowledge and interests of pupils converge with the subject matter. A limitation of Grant & Gradwell's (2012) study was that it focused only on two novice American history teachers teaching a single topic, reducing the validity of the study. However, the authors still make a convincing case for the dual importance of subject content knowledge and knowledge of learners - 'the marriage of content and children' (p. 258), and this is supported by the findings of Bain & Mirel (2006) who also stress the importance of history teachers being able to tune in to the historical thinking of their pupils, to establish "where their students are" (p. 215).

McIntyre & Cooper (1996) conducted an earlier study which aimed to establish the 'professional craft knowledge' teachers rely on. They identified having clear goals which teachers share with pupils as key. Their study focused on Year 7 English and History teachers, gathering data through both lesson observation and interviews with teachers. They found that effective history teachers instinctively draw attention to the connections between lessons, and recap prior learning before

moving forwards. The development of this type of knowledge could be considered a feature of the difference between the 'novice' and 'expert' teacher (Schempp et al., 2006).

Husbands et al. (2003),Reitano & Green 2003, and Gudmundsdottir & Shulman 2006 also emphasise the importance of teachers knowing how pupils learn in history. Gudmundsdottir & Shulman focus on history teacher PCK, describing it as "a form of teacher understanding that combines content, pedagogy and learner characteristics in a unique way" (p. 59). The ability to convey to pupils an enthusiasm for history, the skill of telling stories from the past to make connections to the present, an ability to sense topics that pupils will have difficulty in understanding, and the ability to teach pupils to think historically - all of this contributes to the pedagogical content knowledge of a history teacher. In terms of the significance of PCK to history teaching, Berliner (1986) asserts that unlike the academic historian, the history teacher must be a 'history subject teacher' as well as a 'history subject knower.' The view that history teachers need to do more than simply convey information is shared by John (1991) who argues that history teachers need to know how to organise knowledge and how to "transform it for classroom use" (p. 10).

Therefore, knowledge about how pupils learn is particularly important in history teaching because history teachers frequently need to use creative and engaging analogies and explanations to represent ideas to pupils to instruct them effectively. However, Barnett & Hodson's (2001) study argues that although PCK is important, pupils in different context may approach their learning in history in different ways. They point to the complexity of teaching, arguing that what works for one teacher in one setting may not work for another:

> Good teaching becomes a matter of making an on-the-spot appraisal and choosing the most appropriate action in the particular circumstances, not a matter of applying a particular set of prespecified teacher attributes. (Barnett & Hodson, 2001, p.8)

The truth likely lies somewhere between Schulman (1986) and Barnett & Hodson (2001): having a framework to understand teacher knowledge is useful, but teachers also need to be ready and able to extemporise.

In conclusion, effective history teaching occurs when teachers are subject specialists, teaching topics which resonate with and are relatable to pupils and their teaching contexts. These teachers are sensitive to the misconceptions of pupils, and regularly check and build on prior learning. They

have knowledge of the discipline as well as the content of their subject, and through task and resource selection can motivate pupils. The literature on history teacher knowledge confirms that history teachers need mastery of integrated forms of knowledge, and that their 'effectiveness' in the classroom is determined by a combination of subject expertise and responsiveness to the needs of learners.

2.2 Do the ways in which history teachers are trained allow them to develop the knowledge they need?

Some of the literature on how history teachers develop the knowledge they need raises concerns about the preparedness of teachers to teach history. Several themes emerge including a lack of subject content and disciplinary knowledge, inconsistencies in initial teacher training provision (ITT), and missed opportunities for professional development following ITT and probation.

Rollison et al. (2012) cite a lack of subject knowledge as a prominent reason for heightened anxiety among history teachers. Although writing in an American context, specifically about concerns that history teachers had about explaining aspects of economic history to pupils, the issue of how well teachers understand their subject discipline also appears in the context of history teaching in England. Deficiencies in teacher knowledge have been raised by Ofsted (2011), particularly in relation to the teaching of historical interpretations. Falace & Neem (2013) have called for greater historiographical training for new teachers, arguing that without grounding in areas such as how historical narratives are constructed and in the debates surrounding key historical events, history teachers are unable to teach pupils in ways that develop their historical thinking and appreciation of multi-perspectivity. Although writing in response to criticisms of how American history teachers are trained, similar calls have been made about the need to deepen the disciplinary knowledge of history teachers in England. Burn (2007) has explored the attitudes of newly qualified history teachers and found that new teachers falsely regarded themselves as 'subject specialists', despite having had little training about how historical interpretations are constructed. Bain & Mirel (2006) suggest that engagement with historical scholarship can provide useful preparation for those entering the profession:

> Just as historians read the works of the great practitioners of their craft to identify and criticize ways to frame historical problems, build historical cases, and represent historical knowledge, beginning teachers also need to develop familiarity with history-specific scholarship on teaching and learning. By examining the specific problems in teaching and

> learning history, beginning teachers will be able to join and contribute to the ongoing professional conversation about history instruction. (Bain, p. 216)

This suggests that initial teacher training courses need to do more to address trainee teachers' knowledge gaps and assumptions about the discipline.

Another reason for unsatisfactory levels of teacher subject knowledge is that many schools in the UK must rely on non-subject specialists to deliver aspects of the history curriculum, particularly in the most disadvantaged schools where teacher shortages are more common. Non-specialists refers to teachers who do not hold a degree in the subject. A report by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) in 2016 found that 14% of history teachers working in state secondary schools in the UK were non-specialists. The Historical Association (2018) point out that non-specialist teachers may have limited knowledge of where to go to for resources, as well as only a basic understanding of the discipline and how it is taught. Additionally, considerable concern has been raised about the ability of teachers to teach outside their comfort zones, and the impact which this has on pupil progress (Ofsted, 2011). It is common for a history teacher to spend 5% of their teaching timetable each week teaching another humanities subject such as geography or religious studies (DfE Report, 2016). Newton & Newton (1998) argue that if practitioners have a misunderstanding of the discipline of a subject then this will have a negative impact on the understanding teachers impart to pupils. Their study was based on the interviews conducted with university lecturers and teachers, rather than on analysis of pupil outcomes, thus reducing the validity of their findings. Nevertheless, the Historical Association (2018) have reported that in response to the more rigorous GCSE History course, 88% of state secondary schools were now using history-trained specialists to teach GCSE groups, often at the expense of Key Stage 3 where the number of non-specialists had increased. This implies that there is at least a perception amongst departments and school managers that maximising pupil attainment in national examinations is most likely to be achieved by those trained in the discipline of the subject.

In terms of criticisms of Initial Teacher Training courses, it has been argued that ITT courses focus too much on what teachers should do, rather than what they should know (Perry, E. et al., 2019). As Fordham (2016) has pointed out, there is a lack of research into the curricula of history education courses in the UK, and therefore whilst some graduates gain the benefits from studying the body of professional knowledge that constitutes the discipline of history teaching as part of

their ITT, this is by no means uniformly the experience. Fordham is not the only one to criticise the imbalance between content delivery and conceptual understanding in ITT courses. The problem of separating theory and practice is addressed by Burn & Mutton (2015) who argue that one needs to inform the other, rather than being treated as two distinct elements of teacher training. Burn and Mutton (2015) use evidence drawn from practice in several countries including Australia, the USA and the Netherlands to support their case for the effectiveness of 'research-informed' ITT. They conclude that ITT courses need to equip prospective teachers with knowledge and understanding of evidence-led best practice, and during teaching placements this needs to be explored, tested, and discussed with the support of experienced classroom teachers.

Following the completion of probation, history teachers also need to continue to extend their knowledge as their careers progress. This can be problematic as early career teachers often find it difficult to get the time or funding to increase their knowledge. Cruse (1994) advocates taking a master's degree in history as a way of having more depth of subject knowledge, as well as increased understanding of the nature of the subject itself, particularly the interpretative aspects. However, Harris et al. (2014) are critical of the fact that professional learning for history teachers is often left to the vagaries of the individual teacher. A common professional development activity for history teachers new to teaching national qualifications such as GCSEs is to apply to become an examiner with one of the UK examination boards. This can lead to a better understanding of the standard which pupils must reach by allowing teachers to glean a more detailed explanation of mark schemes and clearer knowledge of the depth of knowledge required. However, a survey carried out by Ofqual in 2018 found that only 61% of teachers who worked as examiners found their school was supportive of their work. This is even though the survey found that the main reason for teachers to become an examiner in the first instance was to improve their teaching. Workload pressure is one of the main reasons why teachers do not maintain their examining roles, and examiner recruitment has suffered as a result, with teachers in turn unable to benefit from the knowledge that working in an assessment role provides.

Finally, the literature on the development of history teachers' knowledge explores the issue of teacher mentoring. For example, Achinstein & Fogo (2015) conducted a study of American history teachers who for two years each had weekly professional learning meetings with an experienced history teacher who acted as an external mentor. They found that subject-specific mentoring, as

opposed to assigning generic teaching mentors, better enabled history teachers to develop their historical reasoning and PCK. This was a very small-scale study which looked only at two case studies. The issues of how beginner history teachers develop their PCK over time, and how best to nurture this development, are still not fully understood. However, a larger longitudinal study involving six novice history teachers was conducted by Monte-Sano & Budano (2013) and also showed that the right type of mentoring, within a supportive department, was a key part in the successful transition from trainee to practicing teacher.

In conclusion, history teachers do not necessarily have sufficient subject disciplinary grounding to confidently teach the content and disciplinary knowledge required by the history curriculum. Reliance on non-specialists results in increased teacher anxiety and poorer outcomes for pupils. There are inconsistencies in the provision provided by ITT, with some novice history teachers lacking adequate grounding in the body of scholarship that exists. Meanwhile, others are given insufficient time to reflect on how the theory relates to practice. Subject-specific mentoring seems to aid the development of PCK of newly qualified teachers, however this is not universally offered. Therefore, improvements in the training for new history teachers would have marked benefits for those entering the profession, and - with the right kind of mentoring support from experienced teachers – it is possible that both teacher confidence and pupil performance would improve.

2.3 How can practicing history teachers best develop their subject knowledge generally and within schools?

The literature reveals that practicing teachers develop their subject knowledge both within school settings and through personal engagement with history knowledge bases outside schools. The main avenue for professional learning within schools is through collaboration with departmental colleagues within departments and through the formation of departmental links with the wider history education community. Outside schools, history teachers further their knowledge through joining professional associations, attending subject conferences, and reading historical scholarship and educational research.

Regardless of where teacher learning takes place, research shows that collaboration with other professionals is key. Garet et al. (2001) examined the specific activities that led to noticeable changes to teaching and found most change occurred when teachers were involved in collaboration

with other professionals and 'immersed in the subjects they teach' (p. 916). Although their study was not focused specifically on history teaching, their findings support the claims of those working in the field of history education. For example, Burn et al. (2007) have emphasised the importance of the conversations that take place between teachers within departments, arguing that where teachers have the confidence to 'admit to problems and seek advice' (p. 442) this provides valuable learning opportunities. However, studies have shown that there can be great variety in the levels of collaboration that takes place within departments; teacher motivation, leadership, personalities and career stage all play a role. The resulting group dynamics influence the nature and extent of the learning culture established among that group of professionals. Childs et al. (2013) has studied how conducive different departmental set-ups are to professional learning and found that those with a higher proportion of 'novice' teachers are more likely to work collectively, whereas those with a high number of more experienced teachers work more individualistically. Childs (2013) also found that the most effective professional learning can happen on a one-to-one basis between colleagues, rather than at whole department level, with informal conversations between teachers often proving to be the most beneficial. Little (1990) likewise has reservations about how much voluntary collaboration really takes place between teachers, arguing that "at one extreme, teachers conduct their work as fully independent entrepreneurs" (p. 523). Little (1990) has analysed the varying intensities of the collaborative interactions between teachers, identifying four progressively intense stages. She classifies the least intensive stage as 'storytelling and scanning', which is essentially where teachers relay a story from their classroom in the staffroom, and this is followed by stage 2, 'aid and assistance', whereby teachers offer each other support and advice when asked. A third form of collaboration, described as 'sharing', might involve making teaching resources available to colleagues and finally the most intensive form of collaboration is labelled 'joint work' whereby teachers rely on each other to carry out their teaching duties. Little (1990) argues that this most intense form of collaboration is relatively rare in the teaching profession, and that unless teachers find their teaching is interdependent on the work of others, they will not sustain collaborative endeavours, choosing to be self-reliant instead. Fostering departmental cultures which promote professional collaboration is clearly then not without challenge. Hargreaves (2001) has studied collegial relationships and found that although teacher collaboration does promote well-being, colleagues who are either too friendly or too distant will naturally avoid conflict, and therefore this can limit the effectiveness of departmental collaboration. Nevertheless, Cordingley

(2015) maintains that sustained collaboration with colleagues is one of the professional learning activities most likely to have a positive outcome on teacher learning.

One increasingly popular method of departmental collaboration is the carrying out of an action research project. This type of research into practice is advocated by Burn (2007), particularly where teachers work in partnership with educational researchers. Burn believes there is a need for more collaboration between schools and universities to support teachers as they adopt a research-based approach to their professional learning. Burn (2016) acknowledges that not all history teachers seek to be teacher-researchers, but considers that, at the very least, they require "the capacity to interpret and make sense of what is happening within their own classroom". (Burn, 2016. P. 238). Ross & Bruce (2012) conducted a study involving Canadian teachers engaged in action research and found that participation led to increased teacher self-efficacy for early and later career teachers, as well as for non-specialists. They concluded that action research projects were most effective when rigorous in their approach and facilitated by academic researchers. This supports Burns' (2007) belief in promoting greater collaboration between teachers and professional researchers, as well as Hall and Scott's (2007) calls for the 'closing the gap' between academics and teachers.

Outside of the professional learning taking place within school departments, history teachers can also enhance their subject knowledge through their engagement with professional associations. Barnett & Hodson (2001) believe that professional learning usefully happens through interactions with other professionals in what they call "professional socialisation". Teacher networks are said to be useful as they allow teachers to talk and share experiences:

> Teachers can (and should) engage in critical reflective research in collaboration with educators in order to extend and enhance [their knowledge about teaching and learning] (Barnett & Hodson, 2001, p. 429)

Professional learning communities in the past relied on teachers travelling to conferences, such as those provided by the Historical Association, Schools' History Project, or regional teaching associations such as the Scottish Association of Teachers of History (SATH). However, the internet has opened new networks for history teachers, with teachers now regularly engaging in discussion with fellow teachers, historians, and history educators about learning and teaching issues on twitter and through online blogs. In addition, many teachers regularly share resources through online platforms such as TES and exam board forums. Although the purpose of these interactions is not solely to increase subject knowledge – for example, participation is said to increase teacher

confidence and alleviate the sense of isolation - research has shown that online communities can have positive benefits on teacher knowledge, through the sharing of resources and participation in debates and discussions (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016).

In addition to professional networks, history teachers frequently turn to historical scholarship and educational research to support their ongoing professional learning. Fordham (2016) has found that of those teachers engaged in reading around their subject, 42% of them read work by teacher-researchers (for example an article in *Teaching History* magazine where a teacher reflected on their own practice), 21% of teachers use materials produced by those employed in the field of history education (for example research undertaken by those working in university education departments) and 22% read the work of academic historians. This reveals that history teachers actively seek ideas that they can apply in their classrooms, rather than simply extending their historical subject knowledge. Nevertheless, Burn (2016) sees a role for the work of historians in the professional development of history teachers and argues for greater collaboration between academics and teachers. Similarly, Seixas (1993) asserts that the more history teachers are connected to historical scholarship, the less likely they are to present history as an inert body of knowledge to their pupils. The argument for improving the disciplinary knowledge of history teachers prompted the Historical Association (2020) to release an updated reading list for history teachers earlier this year, so there are clearly calls for some guidance on suitable materials. Nevertheless, an ongoing concern for history teachers is finding the necessary time to read around their subject.

There are therefore several avenues practicing teachers can explore to increase their subject knowledge. However, it is worth noting that the literature points to a professional development gap for later career teachers. Whilst there tend to be support groups (both online and face-to-face) for early career teachers, for those who choose to remain in the classroom without progressing to Head of Department or beyond, with full teaching timetables, there is a danger of falling into set routines and of a decline in motivation. Day and Gu (2007) undertook a longitudinal study and found that teachers are at greater risk of being ineffective in the later part of their careers, and secondly that experience did not necessarily equate to expertise. To keep morale high, they advocate 'personalised' professional development opportunities for later career teachers, which address their specific needs.

In summary, effective ongoing professional development activities for history teachers recognise whether the teacher is 'novice' or 'expert' and lead to the development of new knowledge which can be shared with colleagues, recontextualised and implemented. Access to online professional learning has created wider dynamic interactions between groups of professionals, although more research is needed to understand the value and nature of these. Reflection on own practice and engagement with research is an effective form of professional learning, particularly when conducted with the guidance of academic researchers. Collaboration with colleagues and the wider history education community facilitates teacher learning resulting in changes to practice. However, collaboration must be undertaken with careful consideration to school context, teacher needs, format, and collegiate relations to be effective.

2.4 What are the advantages and disadvantages of teacher- led professional learning groups generally and within schools?

In this final section of the literature review, I will examine a specific format for teacher learning, namely professional learning groups within school departments. This was the intervention I chose to implement in my own study following discussions with colleagues which revealed that many of them had found participation in such groups an effective way to collaborate in the past.

Most of the literature on professional learning groups agrees that in-house, subject-specific teacher communities can both benefit the practice of individual teachers and raise attainment of pupils (Cordingley, et al. 2018). This method of teacher development, commonly referred to as 'professional learning communities' or 'PLCs' is now used across the UK, with the Welsh Government defining this method of professional learning as "a group of practitioners working together using a structured process of enquiry to focus on a specific area of their teaching to improve learner outcomes and so raise school standards." The Scottish government's national model of professional learning for those employed in education also emphasises the role of learning by enquiry, collaboration and reflective and strategic thinking or metacognition (Education Scotland, 2017). In this study, I will use the term 'professional learning group' to describe what will be very simply a group of professionals coming together to learn (Hord, 1997). I will use the term 'group' rather than the more widely used phrase 'community' as there will be a small group of six

teachers working together, exchanging their expertise and engaging in professional dialogue in order to enhance their own knowledge and improve outcomes for pupils.

A DfES report published in 2005 concluded that for a professional learning group to be effective it requires eight characteristics:

> shared values and vision; collective responsibility for pupils' learning; collaboration focused on learning; individual and collective professional learning; reflective professional enquiry; openness, networks and partnerships; inclusive membership; mutual trust, respect and support (DfES Report 637, 2005, p. 5)

However, some research has shown that creating an effective group which fulfils these criteria is problematic. Watson (2014) focuses on the features necessary for these groups to work – having a shared vision, collective learning and open and trusting communities - and sees these as somewhat idealistic. Watson contests the claims that teacher learning in such groups is effective, questioning the commitment of participants and the ability of shared endeavour to create educational solutions that work for all. Servage (2008) agrees that PLCs are not as transformative as some literature claims, rarely providing answers. She suggests that for such groups to work, they need to be focused on wider educational issues rather than specific ones, and says that ultimately what the group will do is merely help teachers to raise questions and reflect rather than find solutions. In terms of teacher commitment to collaborative professional learning, Bolam et al. (2005) have explored the factors which can enhance or inhibit teachers from participating; age, gender and career stage were all found to have some influence. Likewise, Watson (2014) asserts that the success of a professional learning group may be dependent on the professional learning culture of the school, for example whether sufficient time and space is provided to allow staff to engage properly, whether there is a supportive senior leadership team, and whether the rate of staff turnover is high or low.

Despite these barriers to effective professional learning groups, there is nevertheless strong evidence to support the claim that they can lead to positive outcomes, with Voelkel & Chrispeels (2017) arguing that they lead not only to individual teacher development but to better collective department knowledge and efficacy which can in turn enhance pupil performance. Monroe-Baillargeon & Shema (2010) have conducted research focusing on how teachers can engage with

professional literature within the context of a professional learning group. They found that literature circles are good for teachers as they stretch and engage them intellectually, allow teachers a forum in which to reflect on their own practice and introduce teachers to new ideas to try with their classes. Additionally, there are benefits in terms of strengthening the collective identity of the participants within the school. Their study was conducted in a large urban US elementary school, where teachers had to do a set number of hours of compulsory CPD. This is perhaps one reason why the participants were so positive about their experience, as in this instance it was something they felt they had signed up to and could take ownership of, yet still contributed to their compulsory number of CPD hours. If they had not already been contractually obliged to undertake CPD, they may have been less willing to spend their time in discussing educational literature. Nevertheless, the collaborative nature of their professional development clearly did have benefits, with the fact that they could read theory but come together to discuss practical usages emerging as particularly beneficial.

A further benefit of a professional learning group is identified by Bullough (2001) who makes the point that a professional learning group crucially allows teachers to share ideas and problems with colleagues teaching pupils from the same school and background. The ability to consider contextual and situational issues means that pedagogical and subject content knowledge can be set against the practicable background of a teacher's own school, thus making the application of theory to practice more likely. Another factor that emerges from the literature is that effective learning groups are those where teachers at similar stages of their career work together. Hawkey & Snelson (2019) set up a group to support teachers in the period after NQT completion until Year 5 of teaching. Those teachers who took part were able to share their experiences and current concerns in a supportive environment, with teachers who were facing similar challenges. Additional benefits included being inspired by other professionals, the ability for the teachers involved to develop their ongoing practice, and a shared sense of purpose. In terms of effectiveness, a key lesson emerged for ensuring that learning groups work: to have a clear purpose, which in this case was to create a group focused on sharing resources, discussing what works and providing practical solutions. The researchers also found that the success of the group was dependent on having someone to take the lead and organise the meetings, a suitable space to work, and always having the impact on pupil learning in mind.

Although the participants in Hawkey and Snelson's (2019) research perceived the professional learning community they were involved in to be beneficial, there are relatively few studies on the effectiveness of teacher learning communities, or their impact on teacher agency. Philpott & Oattes (2015) did try to address this by looking at the effects of learning groups in practice. They were researching within a Scottish context, where professional learning communities are firmly imbedded. They concluded that whilst participation in professional learning groups may have a positive impact on agency, there is no guarantee that this will be the case, and therefore group work must be combined with other methods of enhancing teacher agency. They also claim that in the case of the most effective professional learning groups, it may be that those involved also have a high degree of efficacy to start with. This claim is supported by data obtained in the 2013 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) which revealed that "teachers who had positive views of their self-efficacy and job satisfaction are more likely to engage in more school embedded professional development activities" (p.19). Philpott & Oattes (2015) conclude that teacher collaboration needs to be sustained in the long-term, and facilitated by experts in collaborative practice, rather than the process simply being handed over to teachers themselves, as this is "no guarantee of ownership and teacher agency". (p. 332).

Finally, the literature on professional learning groups has examined the impact on schools who make use of this form of professional development for staff. Giles & Hargreaves (2006) argue that they can be particularly beneficial to secondary schools, where management structures tend to have a top-down approach, and where the subject-based department structure means that teaching staff can feel disconnected and lacking a collective identity. Professional learning communities can help teachers to feel empowered within the school structure, can improve collegiality and drive school innovation. However, Giles & Hargreaves (2006) highlight that these groups can be short-lived, with both internal and external difficulties. Internally, for example, they can fail to tackle contentious issues due to the need to maintain positive relationships, instead succumbing to 'group-think' rather than providing a legitimate forum for debate. Externally, teacher good-will can be eroded due to constraints on teacher time, such as the weight of educational reforms that need to be implemented. The result can be the demise of the learning culture within a school, and a return to individualism.

However, the key claim in the literature regarding the impact of professional learning groups on schools is concerned with improved outcomes for pupils, rather than improved cultures and social relations. Visceo et al. (2008) points out that this belief rests largely on teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of professional learning groups, and that only a few studies have explored the actual impact on teacher performance and subsequent pupil learning. Visceo advocates that future studies on the impact of professional learning groups should focus on finding out specifically how participation leads to changes in teacher practice.

In summary, the literature on the effectiveness on professional learning groups focuses on the impact on teachers' practice, school cultures, collaboration, teacher agency and pupil achievement. Teachers certainly say that they have an overall positive perception about using professional learning groups as a method of professional development, with improved collaboration and pupil performance, and teacher empowerment all suggesting there is much to be gained. However, creating long-lasting cultural change to organisations is a gradual process, and professional learning communities may fail in their objectives if they do not remain pupil focused and if the participants do not draw on new knowledge to enrich their shared experience:

> learning communities also cannot be insular, focused only on making explicit the practical wisdom teachers already possess about teaching. Instead learning communities should support teachers in making decisions based on their contexts, their goals, current and new professional knowledge, and the needs of their students. (Vescio, 2008, p. 89)

In conclusion, the existence of professional learning groups does not guarantee effective professional development for teachers. Factors such as group dynamics, school leadership, group aims and the amount of time allocated for collaboration all play a role in determining how successfully teachers can interact with each other to share knowledge. The following study will take these principles into account, integrating the previous research on teacher knowledge and professional development, and examining the impact of the creation of a history department learning group on the individual and collective knowledge of a group of history teachers.

3. Project Design

3.1 Research Questions

The key aim of this study was to explore strategies for increasing levels of collaboration and professional learning amongst a group of history teachers, particularly in relation to building teacher knowledge. The aspects of teacher knowledge focused on by the learning group were subject content matter and how to instruct learners on this content. The literature on the effectiveness of teacher professional learning had suggested that these were especially important in leading to changes in teacher practice and improved outcomes for pupils (Garet, et al., 2001). Through the creation of a history department professional learning group, the participants shared pedagogical knowledge, discussed relevant research and how this might affect teaching practice, operated as a reading group to improve subject knowledge and collaborated on improving an aspect of practice within their department. Bearing in mind the issues raised in the literature review, the following research questions were devised:

1. What factors influence the levels and types of collaboration taking place within a school history department?
2. Do history teachers regard a professional learning group as an effective way to develop and share their subject knowledge?
3. What support can be put place by school leaders to facilitate professional learning opportunities within schools?

These questions will be partly answered through consideration of the literature on this topic, partly through interviews with colleagues and partly through assessing the effectiveness of the activities of the professional learning group. The literature review has begun to address the first question. Given the fact that the culture of history departments tends to be described in the literature as more individualistic than other subject departments (Burn, 2012), I anticipate that departmental leadership, the balance of experienced and novice teachers and the role of physical space within the department will be important factors in the levels of collaboration taking place. In relation to the second question about the effectiveness of teachers sharing subject knowledge through the creation of a professional learning group, I aim to assess this by analysing the types of collaboration that took place and the participation of group members, by looking at levels of resource-sharing and through reflections on the process recorded in my research journal. I expect to find that the closer collaboration afforded by a professional learning group has benefits for professional learning,

however changing the culture of a school history department requires prolonged effort. Finally, my third research question will look at the role of school leaders and organisational structures in cultivating teacher-led positive learning cultures within schools. Using the results of my whole-school questionnaire, as well as the literature, I will examine the implications that the use of professional learning groups have for CPD practices within schools. I anticipate that school leaders will be vital in validating their role and creating an ethos where:

> the mutual trust and respect from distributed leadership create[s] a positive school culture as a learning place for teachers, administrators and students. (Carpenter, 2016, p. 690).

3.2 Methodology

This study takes the form of a piece of practitioner research. It makes use of qualitative data, which although can be criticised for its subjectivity, appears appropriate in the context of this project which focuses on relationships between a small group of teachers. Further criticisms of qualitative research are it is not reproducible and it is highly influenced by the biases of the researcher. With an awareness of these pitfalls, it is my hope that the qualitative methods will at least reveal something about the complexity of teacher relationships and the issues around knowledge-sharing. Additionally, because this practitioner research was borne out of a real-life development need within my department, it fits the model of Stenhouse's vision for practitioner research (Stenhouse, 1981). The study also deals with a small number of participants (six) which would produce insufficient data for a valid quantitative study. Finally, qualitative methods will allow me to explore the thinking behind teacher perceptions and values. Thus, the key research methods used will be questionnaires, structured interviews, and the keeping of a research journal to record the interactions of the group. It is very difficult to measure how effective teacher collaboration is in increasing subject knowledge, but it is my expectation that the richness of data provided by qualitative research will capture the views of participants and provide some insight into the efficacy of the process. My aim was to better understand the culture of the department I work in, and to facilitate greater collaboration amongst members of the department. To this end, I structured my project on the stages of Kemmis & McTaggart's (1988) action research model 'plan, act and observe, reflect'. I chose this research model due to the weight placed on reflection, and the notion that this should be participatory, thus allowing my colleagues in the professional learning group to be able to contribute to deciding the group's next direction. Kemmis & McTaggart's

definition of action research seemed very applicable to the activities to be undertaken by the professional learning group:

> Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality…of their own…educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2013, p. 87)

Here is a summary of the reflective action steps taken in the study:

Kemmis & McTaggart's Research Model	**Research element**	**Method**	**Data**
Plan	Assess the levels of professional learning and collaboration taking place within my department	Informal discussions with colleagues; Interviews with colleagues	Research journal notes; Appendix A – History department Interview questions
Act and observe (**Phase 1** – building a professional learning group)	Create history learning group; share rationale for the group with the department; create online sharing platform; start to share resources and to discuss history scholarship	Making notes in research journal during meetings of the group	Research journal notes; evidence of sharing in OneNote and Sharepoint
Reflect Plan phase 2	Group reflection on Phase 1 and next steps; identification of an area of practice in need of improvement	Making notes in research journal during meetings of the group; informal discussions with colleagues;	Research journal notes
Act and observe (**Phase 2** – working together as a professional learning group)	Group project: development of online history teaching resources	Making notes in research journal during meetings of the group	Research journal notes
Reflect Plan phase 3	Group reflection on Stage 2; planning for stage 3	Research journal; interview with Academic Deputy;	Research journal notes; Appendix B – whole teaching staff

		Whole-school CPD questionnaire	questionnaire; Appendix C – Academic Deputy interview questions
<u>Future</u> Act and observe *(**Phase 3 and beyond** – embedding a professional learning group within the teaching community*	*History Learning Group subject CPD with university lecturer; Learning Departments CPD policy update; Dissemination of professional learning with wider teaching community, for example through staff Teaching and Learning Showcase or Staff Learning journal;*		

Figure 1: Project Research Plan

In the first 'plan' phase of the study, I held informal discussions with members of staff across a range of departments about the extent of professional learning taking place at departmental level. I followed this up with interviews with colleagues in the history department (Appendix A) to examine specific professional learning needs within the department, as well as to assess their attitudes to participating in a professional learning group. I was able to use this information to design my intervention.

I divided the 'act and observe' stage of the study into three phases. The aim of phase one was to create the group identity and purpose. I established a professional learning group consisting of six members of the department currently teaching GCSE. Based on the literature, I wanted to ensure that my professional learning group had a clear initial focus which, following discussion with colleagues and the Head of Department, we decided should be about improving our knowledge of the GCSE topic 'Edward I'. I created a professional learning group Team using Microsoft Teams and used this in conjunction with OneNote as a place for the group to share relevant resources such as reading materials, research articles and teaching materials. As administrator for the group, I took responsibility for encouraging the other teachers to share materials and ideas, as leadership was highlighted in the literature as important to the success of a professional learning group.

In the second phase of the study, we moved from building the learning group, to collaborating on specific areas of our practice that we wanted to improve. This phase coincided with the UK government's decision to close schools because of the coronavirus outbreak. This necessitated the group operating entirely remotely, rather than face-to-face. We decided on two aims which arose from the new challenge of online lessons and the cancellation of GCSE examinations. The first was to share pedagogical knowledge to overcome the challenges of online lessons. The second was to develop a bridging course for the Year 11 pupils which would spark their interest and develop some of the skills needed for A-Level study, but which was not part of the A-Level course itself. We decided on designing a series of lessons on the Holocaust and used our collective knowledge to determine the enquiry questions and historiography that would form this course.

In the third phase of the study, we wanted to share the professional learning and collaboration that had happened within the department with the wider school community. I sent a questionnaire to all teaching staff which gave a picture of the current professional learning culture within the school. This led to the group planning of the conclusion of project, which was to move towards embedding teacher-led professional learning within departments, and to create a school culture where there was dedicated time for this. I conducted an interview with the Academic Deputy of the school to better understand the role senior managers might play. This final stage lay outside the scope of this project, and it is more likely to take years to achieve as it would require support from school leaders and the wider school community. Nevertheless, the closure of the school had an unexpected benefit in the sense that it increased the levels of internal communication between teachers and different departments as we attempted to resolve issues caused by school closure. This positive period of innovation and exploration of new methods of collaboration provides the opportunity to look at how we share knowledge as a school, and how we can sustain this moving forwards.

3.3 Research Instruments

Various research instruments were used to gather data for the study. My whole-teaching staff interview was based on the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 as the findings for this survey were available for comparison with the findings from my own school. This gave me the ability to draw comparisons between the professional learning in my school and the national picture. The results provided a useful basis for identifying areas of strength and weakness in my

own context. When it came to the design of my history department interview questions, there were specific areas that I wanted to explore in detail in order to help shape my intervention, and therefore I opted for a semi-structured questionnaire. This allowed me to look for themes in the responses, and also provided the flexibility to follow-up with additional questions in certain areas. I was able to use my Surface device to record the interviews, and then used transcription software to create written transcripts. I used IT solutions throughout my project, not least OneNote to keep my research journal. This allowed ease of access as I always carry my Surface device with me throughout the school day; this enabled me to capture my thoughts when relevant material arose. To create the online collaboration group, I used Microsoft 365's Teams, which members of my department were used to working with in other aspects of their working role. This method of communication became even more important half-way through the project due to enforced school closures in the UK because of the coronavirus pandemic. We also configured the video conferencing feature (which we had not used before) to allow us to continue having meetings and to share ideas online. Given the lack of time for face-to-face meetings within school, this proved to be a popular way of working, and one which presents opportunities for the future.

The teachers involved in the history learning group were asked to reflect on the collaboration process at each stage of the project, and I was able to record these thoughts in a research diary. As suggested by Cohen & Manion (2007), the fact that we were working within the context of a small group meant that a diary proved to be a useful way of recording observations about participation and relationships within the group. I had considered recording these sessions; however I was mindful of the fact that only three of my nine history department colleagues had agreed to be interviewed and for these to be recorded. This revealed a reluctance on the part of my colleagues to disclose their views and ideas, which was possibly heightened by the fact that within the department there were teachers from the SLT and other management roles. The well-known 'Hawthorne effect', where participants alter their behaviour when being observed, would in all likelihood be compounded by recording the meetings, and therefore making notes during the meeting seemed a less obtrusive way of noting the discussions and one which would encourage more spontaneous interactions.

3.4 Participants

Initially, I had hoped that the professional learning group could encompass all members of the History Department. However, given that teaching history was not the main role of some members of the department, it would have proved difficult to get these teachers to commit to taking part in the activities of the group. I therefore decided to focus on those members of the department for whom teaching history was their main role and hoped that they would consequently engage better with the project. All the teachers involved in the group taught at GCSE level, and had varying degrees of experience. An overview of the participants in the history learning group can be found in Figure 2: **Participants in the History Learning Group**

Teacher	*Role within the school*
A	Head of Department
B	Experienced teacher
C	Experienced teacher – Head of Scholars' Programme
D	Former Head of Department
E	Experienced teacher – Overseas University Director and Housemistress
F (participant researcher)	Experienced teacher, Housemistress and former Head of History

Figure 2 = Positions held by learning group participants

In total, the professional learning group comprised six GCSE History teachers, of which I was one member. Clearly my participation in the group made it impossible for me to act as an independent researcher and is bound to have affected the interactions of the group. Moreover, my analysis of the interactions amongst the group and the success of the collaboration may be interpreted less positively by someone without such a vested interest in the project. Participant observation did have some advantages, however. I already had a rapport built with the participants, and they were more likely to be open in voicing their teaching and knowledge insecurities than they would have been with an outsider. Knowing the context in which we work also enabled me to ask questions relevant to our setting. Nevertheless, the small scale of this study makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of professional learning groups for all teachers in all settings. In combination with the literature, however, some useful insights may be drawn, on which further study could be built.

3.5 Methodological Limitations

As highlighted above, one of the key flaws in my research stemmed from that fact that I was an active participant in the professional learning group. This certainly influenced my own assessment of the effectiveness of the group as well as the reaction of my colleagues and their willingness to participate. Had I been able to observe the actions of a separate group of teachers and how effectively they were able to operate as a group this would have let to more objective results. The fact that this study involved only one small group of teachers, from a single department in a single school, working together over a short period of time, also makes it impossible to generalise about the effectiveness of professional learning groups over longer periods and in other contexts. Opfer & Pedder (2011) stipulate that teacher collaboration needs to be sustained over time to result in any substantial benefits to teacher performance or pupil attainment. Additionally, the unique set of circumstances in which the group operated during the school closure because of coronavirus means that the incentive to communicate and share ideas was greater than under normal circumstances and could not be replicated. Communication via video conferencing as opposed to face-to-face collaboration most certainly had both positive and negative impacts on the types of collaboration that took place, and the level of teacher engagement. Finally, to see the results of the third phase of the project would require much more time than afforded in the study, as ultimately it aimed to create a culture shift to one whereby engagement with professional learning within the school community became the norm.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval from CUREC was sought and granted at the outset of this project, and the Headmistress also gave her permission for the study. Information about the purpose of the project was sent to all participants, and questionnaire completion was anonymous and on a voluntary basis. Interviews were also conducted on a voluntary basis, with participants giving their permission for them to be recorded and transcribed. This information was kept password-protected for the duration of the project. In the discussion section, the identity of all participants was protected. The whole teaching staff questionnaire was checked by the Academic Head before it was sent to all staff, to ensure that the questions were appropriate and clear.

Important considerations were the investment of time and additional workload placed on the teachers who participated in the history learning group. This was particularly pertinent when lockdown necessitated new ways of working, and the re-planning of lessons to take account of

online feasibility. At the beginning of the project, I set out the purpose of the project and the proposed phases of study. This allowed colleagues to ask questions as well as to have an input into the time-scale and practicalities of the study. The project was designed to imbed itself alongside the department's development plan for the year, which included the objective of imbedding the new GCSE course, and utilised existing means of communication such as Microsoft 365's OneNote, Teams and Sharepoint.

4. Results and Discussion

In the discussion that follows, consideration will be given to the three research questions through analysis of the project findings and the related literature. Firstly, I shall assess the factors that determine the levels and types of teacher collaboration within a secondary school history department. This will be addressed through the history teacher interviews and by reference to existing literature. Secondly, the discussion will focus on how effectively a professional learning group can help history teachers to develop and share their subject knowledge. This will be gauged through the levels and types of engagement that took place both in the face-to-face and virtual professional learning group, and through analysis of the research journal notes made during the history learning group meetings. Thirdly, consideration will be given given to the types of support and structures which school managers can put in place to increase teacher engagement with professional learning within school settings. This will involve an analysis of the literature and feedback from teacher questionnaires and interviews.

4.1 What factors influence the levels and types of the collaboration taking place within a school history department?

Teacher Interview Findings

Factors encouraging collaboration	*Factors limiting collaboration*
The desire to learn from best practice and improve performance Shared classes	Lack of time Lack of space and facilities

The need to moderate work The development of IT tools such as Microsoft 365 The Head of Department creates an ethos of teamwork The desire to increase confidence To solve problems or accomplish specific tasks	High volumes of administrative tasks taking away the focus on teaching and learning initiatives Lack of subject-specific departmental time Teachers with primary roles outside of the history department Lack of trust or willingness to accept feedback Experienced staff who are more self-reliant Departments with experienced teachers who are trusted to 'get on with it'

Figure 3 = Teacher views on factors determining levels of collaboration with colleagues

At the start of the study, I conducted interviews with three of the six teachers participating in the history learning group (those willing to be recorded – Teachers A, B and C). The aim was to gain their perspectives on the current levels of collaboration within the department and their perceptions of the opportunities for professional learning this afforded. One of the teachers interviewed (Teacher A) was the Head of Department. Eight core questions were asked, pertaining to their attitudes to collaborative learning and how effectively this was conducted within the department. There were different perceptions of the levels of collaboration taking place in the department, as well as views about the desirability of increased levels of collaboration. An individualistic culture was apparent, with most teachers thinking more in terms of what they could gain personally from collaborating with their colleagues, rather than the overall benefits to the department or wider school. It was clear that the Head of Department's leadership style had largely driven this individualistic culture by placing a high value on the experience and knowledge of the teachers within the department and taking a hands-off management approach. To some extent, this was welcomed by the teachers interviewed, with considerable value placed on informal and brief one-to-one collaboration, rather than more formal and lengthy departmental collaboration. The lack of time for discussion and sharing knowledge was, however, acknowledged as a potential weakness by the Head of Department.

The first two interview questions focused on how much collaboration teachers perceived was happening within the history department, and the nature of this collaboration. There was a general

sense that informal collaboration was taking place, however there was a perception that there would be more given more time:

***Teacher A (Head of Department)**: I think we collaborate all the time, informally – I think maybe it is a weakness that we don't collaborate more formally, more often…that's partly a time problem, but also I think we can trust everybody…we don't need lots of interventions… but I think that informally we collaborate all the time – we share ideas, we observe each other - we just talk about the teaching all the time.*

Types of collaboration included sharing resources, recommending useful books and documentaries, and moderating pupil work. However, there was an overall sense that at least some members of the department wanted to see more collaboration.

Participants were thirdly asked about the physical teaching spaces and the part this played in facilitating collaboration. There was a consensus that the physical layout of the department, and the lack of a proper history department base, was one factor preventing daily face-to-face discussions with colleagues:

***Teacher B:** We do have an office which two of us share, and I guess that in that sense, me and my colleague do bounce ideas off each other, and ask for advice - 'And where are you on that particular scheme of work?'- for reassurance. But it is more snatched conversations amongst other work…So though there is a shared office, it's not throughout the department because there is only one office, and there are only two of us in there. Other members of department are in different areas of the school and therefore there is no breakout space.*

Childs et al. (2013) also found in their study of four secondary school departments that having a shared departmental base was important in facilitating collaboration. Nevertheless, a shared team base did not in itself guarantee that collaboration would ensue, with Childs et al. also pinpointing the levels of staff experience and leadership of the department as important factors in the nature and effectiveness of collaboration. Similarly, the teachers I interviewed agreed that these factors were just as important as the physical space, with the Head of Department described as the one to 'set the narrative' on the levels of collaboration, and having to navigate 'the dynamics in a department when you have different experiences, different levels of expertise and different values'.

In response to the fourth question about the importance of the leadership of the department, it was clear that all of those interviewed believed that the Head of Department played a critical role in setting the tone for interactions within the department, although as highlighted in the existing

literature, within a history department setting this tends to take a macro rather than micro-management approach:

Teacher A (Head of Department): *Well, I think…I hope, that the way I like to run the department is to make it clear what we are trying to achieve, and to lead by example in terms of my performance in the classroom; but then give people the autonomy to just get on and do things in the way that they want to, things like schemes of work to me are guidelines, but no more than that – provided you get through the material, and get through it in an interesting and creative way that the kids enjoy, then that's fine by me.*

Childs et al. (2013) suggests that the nature of history as a subject, and the solitary way it is often pursued, perhaps lends itself to more individualistic department cultures. One-to-one collaboration as opposed to collaboration at departmental level is suggested by Childs et al. (2013) to be a more common feature of history department cultures, which tallies with my own findings where teachers talked about the importance of 'informal chats' with colleagues as well as the collaboration that occurs when teachers share a class.

To establish the effectiveness of formal collaboration within the history department, participants were asked a fifth question about the use of departmental time. A common sentiment was that meetings felt perfunctory. Comments such as 'we have got into a pattern of getting through things as quickly as possible' and 'things need to be ticked off' give a sense of the perceived superficial collaboration taking place in designated meeting time.

The next two interview questions looked at how the participants felt towards different types of collaboration. They were firstly asked to comment specifically on the collective use of scholarship and educational research, as this was an area of professional development that had been raised as a feature of effective training for novice teachers in my earlier literature review (Burn & Mutton, 2015). I wanted to investigate the perceptions which experienced teachers had of this as a method of increasing teacher knowledge. Whilst there was an acknowledgement of the value of this type of learning, lack of time was cited as the reason why it was not currently discussed collectively in department time. It was felt that that this type of professional learning should take place outside scheduled meeting time and could then result in a group discussion after individual study, but with the emphasis very much on the practical application of the theory to lessons.

Although the Head of Department felt the lack of current engagement with educational research and historical scholarship was a weakness within the department, there were other areas too where teachers clearly wanted to work more collaboratively. The main types of collaboration teachers wanted to see are summarised below:

Teacher Interview Findings

Desired areas for collaboration
Shared teaching resources – what works well? Extension materials
Book and film recommendations
Team teaching
Exam moderation
Curriculum design
Debates about teaching ideas from educational research
Knowledge sharing
Lesson feedback
Online discussion forum
Developing schemes of work

Figure 4 – Teacher views on areas for increased collaboration

Finally, the teachers I interviewed were asked about their views on increasing the amount of subject specific CPD currently offered within the school. This elicited uniformly favourable responses, particularly regarding the idea of bringing in a subject-specialist such as a medieval historian to work with the department. Due to the consensus that this would be 'a good use of time', combined with the literature on effective CPD which reveals that one of the factors in effective teacher learning is teacher perceptions of its usefulness to their own learning needs (Garet et al. 2011), bringing in an expert to run subject-specific CPD was originally going to be one of the collaborative activities of the history learning group in this study. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic meant this had to be deferred beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm to explore this avenue of professional learning means that it will take place when possible.

It was clear from the interview responses that there was a shared perception that the history department had a great deal of expertise within it, but there was a desire to tap into this collective

knowledge more frequently. Having examined the current ethos within the department, I set about creating a history learning group as an intervention designed to increase levels of collaboration, particularly levels of knowledge sharing, but also encompassing the feedback on desired collaborative activities.

4.2 Do history teachers regard a professional learning group as an effective way of developing and sharing their subject knowledge?

Analysis of the first phase of the history learning group

The first phase of the intervention focused on setting out the rationale for the group, creating the group identity and discussing current teaching and learning concerns. One of the first challenges was finding space in the school calendar to meet as a group. I persuaded the Head of Department to put teaching and learning as a regular feature at the end of scheduled fortnightly departmental meetings. This allowed for about 20 minutes of discussion time each time we met. I felt that keeping the meetings short and infrequent would reduce any negativity which might arise from having to sacrifice time to meet, which might subsequently reduce the perceived benefits of collaboration. There was some initial awkwardness when it came to sitting down together to discuss the collective knowledge we wanted to improve. It was unusual for us to discuss weaknesses in our subject knowledge in front of the whole department. The usual format for this would be individual discussion with the Head of Department following a lesson observation or as part of the annual performance review. Cordingley et al. (2015) have likewise described the initial discomfort of teachers at the outset of a professional learning group but argue that with sustained collaboration those involved are increasingly willing to work together. The issue of trust was clearly of importance to the teachers involved in this project, and was raised by one of the teachers I interviewed before the group began:

Teacher B: *For me, collaboration would actually be…talking about lessons that went well and particular topic lessons that didn't go well – looking at why that was, how we can make it better – and having that really open discussion about - you know - what can work well, and what hasn't worked well, but without that feeling of judgement; and so that's how I see collaboration…I think in terms of feedback. Feedback can be hard to receive, and sometimes it can feel judgemental, so even if something can be really helpful and constructive, it has to come from a place of you being willing to listen to what's gone wrong, and also being open-minded enough to listen to other people's ideas and not feel that shame, and that can be hard as well, being open and honest about your flaws, and about taking feedback.*

A notable aspect of this section of interview was the way this teacher defined collaboration, in a similar fashion to Little (1990) who emphasises the importance of low intensity collaboration, and also Childs (1993) who stresses the importance of informal discussions with colleagues.

Following our initial group meeting, we decided our immediate focus should be on sharing reading suggestions on Edward I as teaching this aspect of the GCSE course was a common concern. Having identified relevant books, we discovered we already had copies of most of these in the department, or members of the group had them at home. It was revealing that some members of the group were familiar with the scholarship on Edward I, whilst others had little or no knowledge of the writers in this field. This highlighted one benefit of staff collaboration which is the value of pooling the experience and knowledge of teachers within a professional learning group. Following several author suggestions and book recommendations, everyone was able to read something which matched their level of knowledge, be it advanced or beginner. At a subsequent meeting, we were each able to give a summary of what we had read. All of the group members they enjoyed the reading they had undertaken, and the ensuing discussion where knowledge was shared. Despite the multiple roles occupied within the school, it was clear that this group of teachers still enjoyed feeling connected to their subject as well as valued being part of what Seixas (1993) described as a 'community of inquiry'. However, it was acknowledged at the meeting that engagement with scholarship was something that normally had to take place during the summer holiday as there was little time to devote to this in term-time. Given the existing literature on the importance of history teacher subject knowledge (Mitchel, 2015; Counsell, 2016), it is surprising that there is not greater time allocated to allowing teachers to pursue this part of their professional learning.

During phase one of the project, the group also started to make use of the Microsoft 365 facilities within the school to create a OneNote and Sharepoint for the group. This enabled us to share resources and book recommendations. Although this technology already existed within the department, and was used extensively by pupils, the teaching staff in the history department had never utilised its collaborative functions to share ideas and to have conversations. During the first phase of the intervention, the younger teachers in the group were the most regular contributors to this. On one level, this was due to their increased confidence and familiarity with using the ICT, but they also plainly had a greater readiness to share and a keener desire to learn. This supports the findings of Letman (2005) who studied the interactions between his history department colleagues over the course of four years and found that less experienced teachers were those most likely to

value the opportunities to reflect on their teaching with more experienced colleagues. Within my own department, it was also clear that some of the most experienced teachers in the department found the process of reflection most problematic, for example finding it difficult to explain exactly how they use resources in the classroom or how they teach certain topics. It may be the case that they are working instinctively, using their 'craft knowledge', which is difficult to put into words and share with others. The findings of Brown and McIntyre (1993) also identify this problem and suggest that teachers can be unaware of what they do in the classroom:

> Most of what has happened in their lessons, and especially almost everything which they themselves have done in the classroom, is so ordinary and so obvious as not to merit any comment…They are seldom asked to articulate and elaborate on what they do in their ordinary, everyday teaching. (Brown & McIntyre, 1993, p. 13)

This highlights a limitation of teachers learning from other professionals. Verloop et al. (2001) identify 'personal knowledge' as a form of craft knowledge rarely shared. There may also be many complex factors explaining the mixed response to collaboration in this study, ranging from the degree of enthusiasm for teaching to individual learning needs (de Jong et al., 2019). Those who did contribute to both face-to-face and online discussion engaged in a range of teaching issues from how to cover aspects of the GCSE scheme of work, to the application of mark schemes and resource and book recommendations. This was essentially just an extension of the conversations that had been happening in the staff room and the informal sharing of information that was part of the departmental culture. However, it was a notable feature of the learning group that the longest-serving teachers contributed the least to the collective knowledge of the group during meetings, and they seemed to prefer the informal, one-to-one method of collaboration. This reinforces the findings of Pedder & Ofner (2011) who examined the characteristics of effective collaboration and found that preferences regarding the intensity of collaboration with colleagues varied, often in relation to the levels of experience teachers have.

Having started the process of purposeful sharing of teaching and learning ideas and resources, we went on to discuss an area of practice we could work on jointly. We decided to develop a new history-based course to offer as part of the school's Elective Programme for more able pupils. However, this was interrupted by the school closure, and we subsequently had to adapt our plans.

Analysis of the second phase of the history learning group

Although this study started out with face-to-face collaboration within a school department with the purpose of creating an extension course for pupils, school closures due to coronavirus necessitated that the group move to online methods of communication and our departmental priorities changed. This raised questions about the methods teachers can use to communicate remotely, their effectiveness, and whether professional learning can take place in this way. Online platforms for teacher communication are hardly new, as the technology has been available for over two decades; yet enforced school closure undoubtedly resulted in the teachers involved in this project having to embrace the technology to collaborate in ways they had not done previously. It did, however, ultimately support the argument that collaboration is not dependent on having a physical shared departmental base (Childs et al. 2013). The need for practical knowledge such as how to utilise video conferencing and online whiteboards to prepare online lessons and teaching resources provided an additional need for collaboration. Therefore, in the second phase of the project, the history learning group made the development of online teaching resources its focus. In terms of subject knowledge sharing, this took the form of us pooling our knowledge of the Holocaust to create a GCSE to A-Level bridging course for pupils whose examinations had been cancelled. The subsequent online collaboration was borne from the need to quickly resource and teach a topic of which not all teachers had deep subject knowledge. However, with the collective knowledge of the group, it was possible to identify engaging enquiry questions for each lesson with a range of historiographical materials, and to plan how these could be conveyed to pupils working outside a classroom setting.

The merits and effectiveness of teachers collaborating through online platforms has been an increasing subject of research. It has been claimed that online communities of teachers can aid individual teacher motivation by making it a social activity, and that collective learning can take place, with 'distributed' learning occurring within online communities (Won Hur & Brush, 2009; Carpenter & Krutka, 2015). The reasons for teachers engaging in large numbers in online educational discussions, often on a voluntary basis rather than directed by their schools, has been examined and several studies have identified similar motivations. For example these include to decrease feelings of isolation, to share positive and negative emotions, to discover new teaching ideas which they can apply to their classrooms, and for the sense of camaraderie (Booth, 2012; Macia &Garcia, 2016). However, this present study would seem to suggest that teachers using

online platforms often do so to get short-term solutions to resource needs, rather than to substantially deepen their own subject knowledge. My school-based interviews with colleagues showed similar motivations when discussing the desired outcomes of professional learning. For example, one teacher talked about wanting 'ready to go knowledge and resources'. This suggests that the nature of the collaboration taking place within the learning group was low intensity, and of a 'shared' rather than 'joint' nature. (John, 1990). It likewise corresponds with existing literature which argues that what teachers want from professional learning is not "theoretical propositions but formulated...suggestions for practice" (Burn & Mutton p. 225)

The absence of face-to-face interactions with colleagues in Phase 2 of the study meant that all members of the professional group were grateful for the online conference calls we were able to have. It emphasised the fact that although interactions with colleagues tended to be infrequent and informal when working in the physical department, these were taken for granted and more important than we realised. This could be recreated to an extent by taking part in online conversations, posting resources and links, and virtual team meetings. However, it needs to be noted that it was no substitute for the greater creativity of face-to-face meetings and we found it much harder to debate ideas in a conference call. Nevertheless, the necessity to adapt to the circumstances of online teaching meant that there was an added incentive for online collaboration, which had never happened in the past, despite the existence of the technology.

4.3 What support can be put place by school leaders to facilitate professional learning opportunities within schools?

Analysis of the third phase of the history learning group

To continue the closer collaboration which has developed as a result of creating a learning group within the history department, plans have been made to schedule subject specific CPD in the history department in the new academic year. This will initially involve a visiting university medieval history lecturer running a seminar with the department. In addition, colleagues have planned several one-to-one collaborative projects including an exhibition to mark Black History Month and the creation of a new elective course. Beyond the history department, it is also

hoped that other subject departments will be given the chance to determine their own professional learning needs, and that more time can be set aside for this. This would allow the school to follow through on plans to embed a 'learning department' culture within the CPD policy of the school. The history learning group discussed the idea that the NQTs within the school could benefit greatly from being involved in these, based on the research of Hawkey & Snelson (2019).

The results of Stage 3 lay outside the timeframe of this project, however these plans in themselves highlighted the necessity of having the support of the school management team to manage what would be a culture-shift in my school, from generic, whole-school professional learning, to subject-specific learning within departments. One of the distinct challenges for school managers implementing any innovation to CPD is convincing staff of the benefits of in-house professional learning. This may be in part due to the way professional learning has been approached historically, as something teachers have imposed on them, with hints of underlying criticism of practice, rather than something that teachers themselves identify and explore. To better understand teacher attitudes towards current CPD in my school setting, I sent a questionnaire to all teaching staff. Additionally, I interviewed the Deputy Head responsible for CPD across the school to determine his views on the effectiveness of current provision within the school, and to gauge his views on the use of professional learning groups.

A total of 39 questionnaires on professional learning were completed by teachers from across the school across a range of subject disciplines; most of those who responded were well-experienced rather than newly qualified teachers. Almost all had engaged in professional learning in the past 12 months. Reading academic literature and educational literature were the most common types of learning undertaken. The consequence of this learning was typically an increase in assessment knowledge and an improvement in ICT competency. However, in only 21% of cases had this training taken place within school. While reading and researching and collaborating with colleagues were regarded as the most effective types of learning for their professional development, only 23% of teachers said they had dedicated CPD time to develop their subject knowledge. In terms of departmental discussions about teaching and learning, 40% of participants said that this happened no more often than once a term, and 20% said they never took part in collaborative professional learning. However, the majority kept up

to date with developments in their subject field through reading educational journals and publications. Although participants felt that there was an impressive level of knowledge within the school, there was a lack of protected time to share this. About a third of participants had taken part in a professional learning group in the past, with most citing the support and guidance offered to teachers as very beneficial, but with some reporting that these groups quickly 'ran out of steam' due to insufficient time for planning and an inability to see through goals.

The survey results for my school revealed similar patterns of CPD to those in the official OECD results for 2018. The most common type of professional development undertaken by teachers is attending conferences (76%) and reading professional literature (72%), while peer collaboration within a school setting is less common (44%). This is despite research suggesting that school-rooted professional development can have a larger impact on teaching practices than traditional out-of-house CPD courses. In terms of the professional development needs of my colleagues, there was some disparity between my school results and the OECD results, as enhancing subject knowledge was prioritised in my setting, whereas behaviour management, teaching pupils with special needs and ICT training were highlighted in the OECD survey. This can be explained by the fact that my school is a selective independent school, where the pressure for teachers is to ensure that they have the subject knowledge to help pupils attain the highest grades, whereas the educational priorities of other schools may differ substantially. However, a similar finding to the OECD results concerned the barriers to undertaking CPD, where a lack of time for in-house collaboration was identified together with clashes with other work commitments.

My questionnaire results overall revealed that whilst there was appreciation for the CPD opportunities already offered by the school, the overall consensus was that school-based CPD time could be used more effectively, specifically with more time given to departmental, teacher-led training. I was able to use these comments from staff about how the school could enhance the CPD opportunities offered as the basis for an interview with the Academic Deputy.

I started by asking about his perception of the levels of collaboration taking place between members of the teaching staff within the school. His view was that whilst there was a lot of

desire for collaboration amongst staff body, that this needed further development in terms of both time and resources. He felt that the types of collaboration taking place were providing value to the organisation, however this was happening as a result of the goodwill and interest of teachers rather than as a result of the way professional learning was managed by the school. He felt that although the school closure due to the pandemic had resulted in teachers sharing practical knowledge to support each other, he was sorry that the informal subject conversations between teachers on a day-to-day basis had been lost. This corresponded with the attitudes of the history teachers in my study who believed that some of the richest forms of collaboration came out of what the Academic Deputy described as the "informal discussions" and "chance conversations" that take place in a school setting. In relation to the effectiveness of the school's formal 'in-service training' he felt that even the title of this was misleading, and that in its current format it was in fact information dissemination. In his view, this information should come out as bulletins, and staff should be trusted to read these. Additionally, he was in favour of training taking place in smaller groups, such as within subject departments. Ideally this would take the form of staff identifying a collective as well as individual learning need, linking this to the department and school aims, and planning how to achieve this. The role of SLT in this process would be to provide an overarching framework, but in his view people such as the Heads of Department would play a crucial role in managing this as they have the subject expertise. As for teaching staff, his belief was that school managers need to "trust the academic professionalism of colleagues." Finally, I asked about how schools would measure the effectiveness of this model of professional learning. He recognised that using pupil data such as examination results and comparing this against baseline data is an ineffective way to test the impact of teacher professional learning. However, in his view there was no easy answer to measuring the qualitative aspects of the impact of teacher professional learning.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Answering the research questions

This study revealed that a key factor in the lack of formal, whole-department collaboration was the fact that my department consisted entirely of experienced staff with wider responsibilities that take their focus away from history teaching. Whilst the lack of a departmental base to accommodate all

members of staff hindered group collaboration, it was not the key factor limiting the levels of collaboration taking place, as demonstrated by the success of online approaches when the school building closed because of the pandemic. A more important issue in explaining the levels of collaboration was the tone and expectation set by the Head of Department, and the relatively solitary nature in which historical knowledge is traditionally acquired. A further crucial factor was the benefits which teachers saw in collaboration for their own teaching. Finally, the professional learning culture of the school and the department influenced how willing teachers were to open themselves up to the potential criticism that open discussion and collaboration with fellow professionals brings.

In relation to the question about the value history teachers place on a professional learning group as a means of developing their history subject knowledge, it was clear that after initial scepticism and reticence, the teachers involved started to see the value of being able to pool their collective knowledge. This was especially evident during the exceptional circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic which necessitated a move to remote teaching. Collaboration with colleagues through the establishment of a formal professional learning group created greater willingness to share resources and to reflect on the collective strengths and weaknesses of the department. The main aspect of teacher subject knowledge that was affected by closer collaboration with colleagues was that the teachers gained a greater awareness of gaps in their subject knowledge. Reading historical scholarship and discussing it with fellow subject practitioners helped bridge the gap between historical knowledge and how it is used in the classroom. Through encountering historians' work, the participants were exposed to the debates within the subject matter and this consequently generated new ideas for classroom teaching of the topic. Being part of a learning group also had unexpected dividends such as greater departmental cohesiveness through the increased regularity of contact. This created an additional 'bridge' between the teachers in the department. Working with teachers within the same setting also allowed for exploration of how ideas will look in practice, and the impact and value they would have. However, despite the advantages of more formal collaboration within my department, it was apparent from the discussions with colleagues at each phase of the group project that informal, low intensity collaboration was the preferred way of knowledge sharing for this group of teachers. This would likely differ in a different context (and if the project had not taken place partly during school closures) but in a department consisting wholly of experienced staff, lower intensity collaboration was favoured. Nevertheless, professional

development focused on subject teaching reminded participants of their original subject passion, even though their careers had now extended into other areas of education.

Finally, it is clear that school managers play an essential part in facilitating meaningful professional learning in schools. The activities of professional learning groups within departments require the support of school managers as this work does not take place in a vacuum. The learning culture of the school is also key if such initiatives are to flourish. Allowing subject departments the autonomy to use school CPD time to focus on the subject-specific learning needs of teachers can create professional learning opportunities for teachers that are perceived as more meaningful. Within a busy school environment, teachers need to be given time to focus on their development needs; however, it is clear from this research and the literature that simply putting CPD in the hands of teachers is no guarantee of success. There is a need to have clarity of focus and measurable outcomes. Raising the profile of professional learning so that it is an embedded part of the life of the school, organised centrally rather than just pursued by enthusiastic individuals, will also be an essential part of building the structure to support staff collaboration. My school is surely not alone in having an impressive level of knowledge and expertise within it, and therefore more in-house training and opportunities for staff to share this knowledge with colleagues would provide considerable benefits as well as increase teacher empowerment. This could be as simple as ensuring that there is time in departmental meetings for learning to take place, for example through teachers cascading ideas to their colleagues. More ambitiously, showcasing teacher creativity and collaborative endeavours through platforms such as 'Teachmeet' sessions is a way to ensure professional development is embedded within schools, and that teachers feel they are the driving force behind this. The cultural framework needs to exist, however, for learning groups and other ventures to thrive.

In conclusion, this small-scale study set out to establish whether a professional learning group was an effective way of developing the knowledge of history teachers working within the same school department. Overall, this study, with its previously mentioned limitations, does suggest that being involved in a professional learning group can make history teachers more aware of gaps in their subject knowledge, and can support and motivate their efforts to make improvements. A subject-based learning group which focuses on the development of teacher knowledge can be a useful way to keep teachers connected with their subject, maintaining their enthusiasm and confidence.

However, the wider ethos of school in which a learning group is operating, as well as the motivation of the group members, the clarity of the group aims and the leadership within the group, all contribute to how successfully professional learning takes place within schools. Allowing teachers to set their own professional learning agendas, and the time to knowledge-share in a forum that matches their experience, is more likely to result in significant changes to their practice.

5.2 Implications for future practice and research

In the coming academic year, the history department professional learning group intends to work towards stage 3 of the group aims. For example, we have planned face-to-face CPD with a medieval historian when the school reopens. Bringing someone from the wider history education community in to work with the group is not only a cost-effective way of developing teacher knowledge, but also provides an opportunity for the history department teachers to receive subject-specific training which addresses their disciplinary thinking. We also want to keep teaching and learning as a regular item in our departmental meetings, and to continue to make use of the ICT we utilised during school closure to share resources and work collaboratively. I will be presenting on knowledge-sharing initiatives within the department at an upcoming 'Teachmeet' session with teachers from visiting schools, and with the support of the senior management team would like to contribute to entrenching the notion of 'learning departments' within our current CPD activities. Ideally, time will be set aside for this type of departmental peer collaboration during the school day, taking into account Garet's (2001) argument that embedded training makes it more likely links will be made with classroom practice.

In terms of my own subject and disciplinary knowledge, I am now more aware of the important part this plays in my teaching. I plan to explore the debates surrounding the substantive content I need to teach the medieval GCSE topics, making use of the scholarship of both historians and practitioners. As mentioned by one of my colleagues, teaching and learning is 'our core business', and although I am now a middle manager in a largely pastoral role, this does note negate the fact that I want to be the best history teacher I can be. As Burns (2012) notes, 'if I wasn't learning anything new about teaching, I would have left it by now!' My own involvement in the history learning group has rekindled my interest in history as a subject, made me feel more involved in the

department in which I teach, and has given me reassurance that I can still strive for excellence in the classroom even if history teaching is not my primary role.

In terms of further research into the effectiveness of teacher professional learning, the literature review revealed that there are few studies which look at the long-term benefits of teacher collaboration, both for teacher professional development and pupil attainment and outcomes. My own findings and that of the existing literature suggests that teachers themselves have a strong preference for subject-specific professional learning, and that collaborative learning does have a positive impact on teacher knowledge. However, more empirical evidence is needed to understand whether this method of knowledge-sharing and collaboration would work in every school setting. Moreover, the needs of inexperienced as opposed to experienced teachers are likely to differ, and therefore although this largely homogenous group of history teachers were happy to prioritise subject knowledge, prioritising one teacher need over another may not work with a more diverse group of teachers. It also needs to be noted that this was a short-term study, and much more research is needed to understand the impact of peer group collective professional learning over time (Garet, 2001).

Further research is also needed into how teachers within history departments can contribute to debates within the academic history community. The creation of what Seixas (1993) describes as 'communities of inquiry' offers scope for school history departments to emulate the more dynamic academic discussions that take place within university history departments. The impact that a more disciplinary approach to the teaching of secondary school history would have on pupil understanding of the nature of the subject is also worthy of research. As argued by John (1991) and Grant & Gradwell (2005), teacher concepts of history as a subject can have 'important practical teaching outcomes' (John, 1991, p. 11) Additionally, how school departments can utilise educational research, and bridge the gap between educational theory and practice is an important area for research.

In summary, this study has shown that a professional learning group can provide a potential avenue for extending history teacher knowledge. By providing a school framework of 'learning departments', and then through giving teachers the time to reflect upon the aspects of their practice they want to develop, everyone can benefit – the teachers, the school and the pupils.

6 References

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7 Appendices

Appendix A – Interview Questions (with history department colleagues)

1. Do you feel there is a lot of collaboration taking place within the history department?
2. When collaboration does happen, what sort of areas do colleagues collaborate on?
3. Thinking about the physical department, do you feel this aids collaboration?
4. How important do you feel leadership is in facilitating collaboration?
5. How does the department use departmental time, and do you think this is effective?
6. Are there any specific aspects of your teaching that you would like to collaborate with your colleagues about? Why?
7. Do you think that discussing research with colleagues would be a good use of time?
8. Would you welcome subject specific CPD within school?

Appendix B – CPD Questionnaire (whole-school teaching staff)

1. Which subjects do you teach at this school? *

Enter your answer

2. What qualifications do you have in the subject(s) you teach? *

- [ ] Undergraduate qualification
- [ ] Postgraduate qualification
- [ ] Other relevant qualification
- [ ] No formal qualification
- [ ] Other

3. How many years of teaching experience do you have? *

- ○ 1-2 years
- ○ 2-5 years
- ○ 5-10 years
- ○ 10-15 years
- ○ 15-20 years
- ○ Other

4. During the past 12 months, did you participate in any of the following professional development activities? *

- [ ] Attended an external course in person
- [ ] Took part in an online training course
- [ ] Attended an educational conference where educational issues and research was discussed
- [ ] Undertook further study e.g. degree course
- [ ] Observed in another school
- [ ] Observed someone else in your department or your school
- [ ] Participated in a teacher-led professional learning group within your department
- [ ] Participated in a whole-school teaching and learning group
- [ ] Attended an exam board meeting
- [ ] Read professional literature on education
- [ ] Read academic literature to enhance your own subject knowledge
- [ ] None
- [ ] Other

5. If you answered positively to any of the above professional learning options, which aspect of your learning was enhanced:

- [ ] Your subject content knowledge
- [ ] Your subject assessment knowledge
- [ ] Your subject pedagogical knowledge
- [ ] Your general teaching pedagogical knowledge
- [ ] ICT skills for teaching
- [ ] Student behaviour and classroom management
- [ ] Teaching students with special needs
- [ ] School management and administration
- [ ] I undertook no relevant professional development
- [ ] Other

6. Thinking of the professional development activity that had the biggest impact on your teaching, did it have any of the following characteristics?

- [ ] It built on my prior knowledge
- [ ] It focused appropriately on the content needed to teach my subject
- [ ] It provided opportunities for collaboration
- [ ] It took place at my school
- [ ] It focused on innovation in my teaching
- [ ] I undertook no relevant professional development
- [ ] Other

7. Which professional learning activities do you feel have the biggest impact on your teaching? Please explain why. *

Enter your answer

8. Do you have any dedicated CPD time to work on your subject knowledge? *

- ( ) Yes
- ( ) No

9. Arrange the following development needs so the most important areas in your own professional development are at the top (1): *

- Subject content knowledge
- Subject-specific pedagogical knowledge
- Knowledge of the curriculum
- Assessment
- ICT skills for teaching
- Student behaviour and classroom management
- School management and administration
- Approaches to individualised teaching
- Teaching students with special needs
- Teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting

10. Which of the following do you perceive to be barriers to your professional learning development? *

- [ ] Family commitments mean I do not have time
- [ ] Professional development courses are too expensive
- [ ] Lack of incentives for taking part in professional development
- [ ] There is no relevant professional development offered
- [ ] There is a lack of opportunity to do this within departments or the wider school
- [ ] Other

11. How often does your department meet to discuss teaching and learning ideas in your subject-field? *

- ( ) Daily
- ( ) Weekly
- ( ) Monthly
- ( ) Once per term
- ( ) Yearly
- ( ) Never

12. Thinking of all the professional learning activities in the past year, which of the following have been developed as a result: *

- [ ] Knowledge and understanding of my main subject
- [ ] Pedagogical competencies in teaching my subject
- [ ] Use of student assessments to improve learning
- [ ] Classroom management
- [ ] Methods of teaching pupils with special needs
- [ ] Methods for teaching in a multicultural setting

13. Thinking about the teachers at your school, how strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? *

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Most teachers in this school strive to develop new ideas for teaching and learning	○	○	○	○
Most teachers in this school are open to change	○	○	○	○
Most teachers in this school provide practical support to each other for the application of new ideas	○	○	○	○
Most teachers work collaboratively, sharing resources and ideas	○	○	○	○

14. On average, how often do you do the following in your department? *

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Once per term	Never
Teach jointly as a team in the same class	○	○	○	○	○
Observe other teachers' classes and provide feedback	○	○	○	○	○
Engage in joint activities across different classes (e.g. projects)	○	○	○	○	○
Exchange teaching materials with colleagues	○	○	○	○	○
Engage in discussions about the learning development of specific students	○	○	○	○	○
Engage in assessment moderation	○	○	○	○	○
Engage in work scanning	○	○	○	○	○
Take part in collaborative professional learning	○	○	○	○	○
Producing a scheme of work	○	○	○	○	○
Designing assessments	○	○	○	○	○
Sharing subject knowledge	○	○	○	○	○

15. Do you read around your academic subject, making use of the scholarship in your field? If so, what does this involve and which resources do you use? *

Enter your answer

16. Do you keep up-to-date with the latest educational research in your subject? If yes, what does this involve and which resources do you use? *

Enter your answer

17. Have you ever been involved in a subject-specific, teacher-led professional learning group? If yes, what format did this take, and what were the advantages and disadvantages? *

Enter your answer

18. How could the opportunities for professional learning be enhanced in your school? *

Enter your answer

Appendix C – Interview with Senior Manager

Q1. How much collaboration do you feel there is between teaching staff?

Q2. What impact do you think the school closure due to the pandemic had on teaching staff collaboration and professional learning?

Q3. How effective do you think our current in-house CPD provision is?

Q4. What are your views on subject-specific professional learning within the school?

Q7. What role do you feel senior leadership team plays in supporting collaboration and professional learning within the school?

Q8. How can the effectiveness of professional learning be measured?