

Connected and Collaborative Systems Leadership 2024 -2025

Think Piece Summaries



Connected and Collaborative Systems Leadership (CCSL) is founded upon the latest national and international policy context and research and builds on the previous iteration: Excellence in Headship Stretch.

The programme presents a pathway of professional learning for headteachers in collaboration with system leaders including colleagues from local authorities and national agencies. A major element of the system leadership learning is a collaborative professional enquiry around key areas of educational policy and theory identified by enquiry groups. The purpose of the enquiry is not simply to research and deepen shared knowledge but also to inform future action and improvement. The collaborative enquiry groups seek to ‘nudge’ the system at the most appropriate level(s). Groups are then tasked with developing a ‘Think Piece’ that highlights their collaborative enquiry findings in the form of observations and recommendations. These are then shared with colleagues across the Scottish education system, including Scottish Government, Local Authorities, Professional Associations, in addition a range of key stakeholders to support leader influence, representation and participation in the policy making process.

Lead Specialists: Our role in facilitating Connected and Collaborative Systems Leadership.

Professional Learning and Leadership Lead Specialists have acted as facilitators and connectors; signposting participants to relevant contacts, resources and networks, related to their area of collaborative enquiry. Through the exploration of collaborative enquiry we have supported our colleagues in developing a shared understanding of collaborative professionalism, enquiry and system leadership. The Think Pieces are representative of the learning of participants through the enquiry process and therefore are not attributed to the views of Education Scotland.

This system leadership learning has been designed with the National Model of Professional Learning at the heart: The communication of these Think Piece summaries is an important stage in this process as experienced leaders communicate their learning journey, findings and further explore agency. “Leaders in the widest sense understand that people are the drivers and enactors of change for improvement. Professional learning and development is the means by which this is put into action.”

[National model of professional learning1](#)



Think Piece Summaries

What needs to change to ensure a curriculum which cultivates joy and a love of lifelong learning for children?

This enquiry explored how the Scottish curriculum can be reshaped to foster joy and a lifelong love of learning among children. It examined the systemic, cultural, and pedagogical shifts required to move beyond compliance-driven models and create meaningful, engaging learning experiences. The study considered the role of educators, policy frameworks, and learner voice in cultivating environments that prioritise curiosity, creativity, and wellbeing. The enquiry found that current curriculum structures often limit opportunities for joyful learning due to rigid accountability measures and narrow definitions of success. Participants identified the need for greater autonomy, relational pedagogy, and values-driven leadership to support a culture of lifelong learning. Professional learning empowered educators to challenge existing norms and advocate for practices that centre learner agency, creativity, and wellbeing. Recommendations include reframing curriculum design to prioritise purpose and relevance, embedding play and exploration across all stages, and aligning policy with the principles of equity and inclusion. The study calls for a collective commitment to reimagining education as a joyful, empowering experience that nurtures the whole child and prepares learners for a dynamic future.

How can we create more meaningful opportunities for learner engagement in school?

This enquiry focused on addressing systemic barriers to meaningful learner engagement, particularly for vulnerable learners, and explored strategies for creating inclusive, participatory educational experiences. The enquiry revealed that traditional engagement strategies often fail to address the complexity of learners' needs. Findings emphasized moving beyond short-term interventions toward systemic change that prioritises learner agency and co-created solutions. Professional learning strengthened leaders' ability to challenge entrenched norms and foster inclusive practices. Recommendations included reframing expectations, creating adaptable pathways, and embedding learner voice in decision-making. Ultimately, the study advocates for a shift from compliance-driven models to approaches that value participation, flexibility, and wellbeing, ensuring education systems remain relevant and responsive.

What is the influence of Head Teachers and influence on Head Teachers in shaping policy and practice?

This collaborative enquiry explored the dual influence of Head Teachers: their impact on shaping policy and practice, and the influence exerted upon them by governance structures and stakeholders. Head Teachers' influence is significant yet fragmented, constrained by hierarchical norms and political structures. Collaborative enquiry revealed increased confidence and capacity to lead change without waiting for permission, fostering bolder and more intentional leadership. Participants advocated enhanced empowerment, agency, and ability to challenge entrenched norms. The enquiry highlighted the importance of connection and collective action, enabling Head Teachers to navigate complex systems and advocate for meaningful reform. Ultimately, the study underscored the need for systemic flexibility to allow Head Teachers to exercise professional judgment and drive improvement.

To what extent can the Scottish Education System deliver equity for all learners? A consideration of: Culture, Systems and Practice

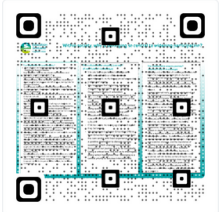
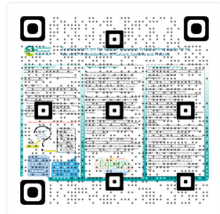
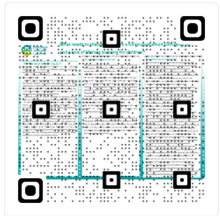
This enquiry explored systemic, cultural, and practical barriers to achieving equity in Scottish education. It examined how definitions of equity influence policy and practice, and considered the impact of funding, resource allocation, and accountability measures on schools' ability to support all learners effectively. The enquiry found that equity remains a stated priority but is undermined by insufficient funding, rising additional support needs, and inconsistent approaches across local authorities. Current tools for measuring success, such as HMIE inspections and attainment data, fail to capture the complexity of equity and often reinforce narrow definitions of achievement. Professional learning highlighted the need for systemic reform, including context-sensitive evaluation frameworks, greater collaboration among educators and stakeholders, and dynamic strategies to address emerging trends. Recommendations call for a shift from compliance-driven models to inclusive practices that prioritise wellbeing, adaptability, and learner agency. The study advocates for a collective commitment to equity as a guiding principle for educational transformation.

Within society, why is belonging so central to widening participation?

This enquiry explored the centrality of belonging in efforts to widen participation within education. It examined how societal structures, school cultures, and leadership practices influence learners' sense of inclusion, particularly those from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds. The study aimed to understand how belonging can be cultivated as a foundation for equitable access and sustained engagement. The enquiry found that belonging is a prerequisite for meaningful participation, especially for learners who face systemic barriers. Participants identified that traditional models of inclusion often overlook the emotional and relational dimensions of belonging. Professional learning enabled leaders to reflect on their own practices and challenge assumptions about equity and access. Recommendations include embedding relational approaches in school culture, prioritising learner voice, and fostering environments where all individuals feel seen, valued, and connected. The study advocates for a shift from transactional inclusion to transformative belonging, emphasising the role of leadership in modelling inclusive values and creating spaces where participation is not only possible but purposeful.

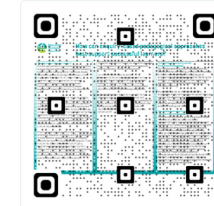
How do we improve the curriculum from P6 to S2 in a context-based enquiry with skills as the driver?

This enquiry examined how to enhance curriculum design for P6–S2 by prioritising skills development within a context-based approach, addressing systemic challenges and future workforce needs. The enquiry identified a pressing need for a curriculum that embeds skills as a central driver, moving beyond traditional subject-based models. Findings emphasised systematic review of skills and knowledge through radical professional development and policy change. Professional learning strengthened leaders' confidence to challenge entrenched norms and design context-rich learning experiences. Participants highlighted the importance of adaptability, cultural capital, and wellbeing as core principles. Recommendations included reframing progression pathways, integrating skills stacking,



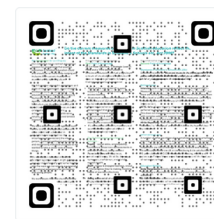
How can enquiry-based pedagogical approaches best support successful learners?

This enquiry explored how enquiry-based pedagogical approaches can enhance learner success. It examined the role of curiosity, learner agency, and contextual relevance in shaping meaningful learning experiences. The study aimed to identify strategies that empower learners and foster deeper engagement across diverse educational settings. The enquiry found that enquiry-based pedagogical approaches foster deeper engagement, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. Participants highlighted the importance of creating conditions that support curiosity, collaboration, and contextual relevance. Professional learning empowered educators to reflect on their practice, challenge traditional models, and embrace flexible, learner-led methodologies. Recommendations include embedding enquiry-based learning across the curriculum, providing time and space for professional dialogue, and aligning assessment practices with enquiry principles. The study advocates for a cultural shift towards pedagogies that prioritise exploration, relevance, and learner voice, enabling all learners to thrive in complex and dynamic environments.



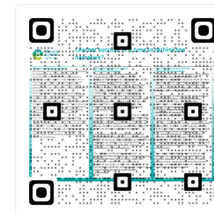
Do the current measures of success in Scottish education reflect the intent of the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000?

This enquiry examined whether current measures of success in Scottish education align with the Act's intent to promote holistic development—covering personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities—rather than focusing narrowly on attainment data. It explored systemic reliance on ACEL and SQA results and considered broader indicators such as wellbeing, creativity, and learner voice. The enquiry found that while policy frameworks increasingly reference wider achievement, practice remains dominated by attainment measures. Wellbeing and creativity are recognised but inconsistently applied in inspections and curriculum planning. Professional learning encouraged critical reflection and highlighted the need for systemic change to embed holistic indicators of success. Recommendations include integrating wellbeing and creativity into national improvement frameworks, reducing overemphasis on standardised testing, and fostering inclusive approaches that reflect the aspirations of the Act. The study advocates for balanced, future-focused measures that support the development of the whole child and prepare learners for life beyond school.



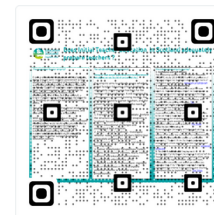
Learner success—Is it time to rethink the narrative?

This enquiry explored how learner success is defined and measured in Scottish education. It examined whether current narratives around success reflect the diverse experiences, aspirations, and needs of learners, and considered the implications of dominant attainment-focused models on wellbeing, inclusion, and equity. The enquiry found that prevailing definitions of success are too narrowly focused on academic attainment, often overlooking personal growth, creativity, and wellbeing. Participants highlighted the need to broaden the narrative to include diverse learner journeys and outcomes that reflect individual strengths and contexts. Professional learning encouraged critical reflection on existing practices and fostered a commitment to more inclusive, holistic approaches. Recommendations include redefining success in policy and practice, embedding learner voice in evaluation frameworks, and promoting values-based education that supports all learners to thrive. The study advocates for a shift towards a more flexible and compassionate understanding of success that aligns with the principles of equity and inclusion.



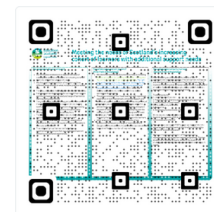
Does Initial Teacher Education in Scotland adequately prepare teachers ?

This enquiry critically examined whether Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Scotland equips new teachers for the realities of the profession. It explored confidence, classroom management, curriculum delivery, and systemic challenges impacting teacher preparedness and retention. ITE in Scotland provides a strong foundation in confidence and self-efficacy, but significant gaps remain. New teachers often struggle with classroom management and lack consistent systems for addressing poor behaviour. Curriculum delivery challenges, particularly in disadvantaged areas, limit teachers' ability to meet diverse learner needs. Professional learning highlighted variability in preparation across institutions and the need for consistent mentoring and induction support. Recommendations include integrating scenario-based training, strengthening partnerships with experienced teachers, and embedding restorative practices within ITE curricula. The enquiry underscores the importance of systemic alignment between universities, schools, and local authorities to ensure teachers are equipped for complex classroom realities and long-term retention.



Meeting the needs of Scotland's increasing cohort of learners with additional support needs

This enquiry explored how Scotland's education system can better meet the needs of a growing number of learners with additional support needs (ASN). It examined the systemic, cultural, and practical challenges faced by educators and local authorities, and considered how professional learning, policy alignment, and collaborative leadership can support more inclusive and effective provision. The enquiry found that the current system is struggling to meet the needs of an increasing number of learners with ASN. Participants highlighted significant gaps in funding, staffing, and training, which limit the capacity of schools to provide adequate support. There is a lack of consistency across local authorities in how ASN provision is delivered and evaluated. Professional learning empowered leaders to challenge assumptions and advocate for systemic change, including more equitable resource allocation and clearer national guidance. Recommendations include developing a national ASN framework, improving multi-agency collaboration, and embedding inclusive practices across all levels of education. The study calls for a cultural shift that recognises ASN as a central component of educational equity, ensuring all learners are supported to thrive.



Overall Impact

The CCSL programme has:

- Fostered a culture of courageous leadership.
- Strengthened cross-sector collaboration.
- Encouraged critical reflection and systemic advocacy.
- Reaffirmed the importance of wellbeing, equity, and lifelong learning in Scottish education.

“CCSL encouraged us to consider Scottish education through a critical lens, which is crucial for values-based leadership of change at both school and system levels.”

“CCSL has built confidence and capacity to lead change without waiting for permission.”

“Fundamentally, this professional learning experience has allowed for a group of busy, educational professionals, from varied sectors and local authorities to come together, for a common purpose.”

“This project has influenced our leadership by deepening our commitment to collaboration and aligning schools more closely with the needs of society. It has reframed education as a means of empowerment, focused on developing human capital and driving employability. By focusing on lifelong learning and equity, we have renewed our energy to lead systemic change that truly prepares young people for the future.”

The Impact of Connected and Collaborative Systems Leadership.

Leadership Confidence and Capacity

- Participants reported increased confidence and boldness in leading change.
- Leadership became more intentional, direct, and collaborative.

Empowerment and Agency

- A shift from waiting for permission to taking initiative.
- Recognition of the power within the system and the need to challenge assumptions.

Systemic Role Reframing

- Leaders gained new perspectives on their roles and influence.
- Emphasis on creativity and persistence in driving change.

Networking and Relationships

- Strengthened professional networks across sectors and authorities.
- Enhanced collaboration with universities, local authorities, and peers.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

- Deepened understanding of curriculum coherence and assessment.
- Renewed focus on learner engagement, inclusion, and wellbeing.

Equity and Systemic Challenges

- Shared frustrations around systemic constraints, budget cuts, and performativity.
- Stronger commitment to equity and advocacy for structural change.

Professional Growth and Reflection

- Safe spaces for critical dialogue and reflection.
- Increased morale, resilience, and clarity of professional values.

Collaborative Enquiry and Evidence-Informed Practice

- Use of research and enquiry to inform practice and policy.
- Empowerment to “nudge the system” and lead reform efforts.