This paper sets out the policy, practice and theoretical backdrop to the MEP, and for the subsequent papers in the symposium. It draws upon qualitative data, including case studies and interviews, alongside broader quantitative data concerning school performance and the early career trajectories of new teachers in Wales.

The MEP was developed in a policy context marked by a resurgence in concerns over the Welsh system's relative underperformance in comparison with the rest of the UK, and internationally, and a growing self-belief in the desirability of a more distinct national response. The practical backdrop to the MEP included major changes to school improvement and CPD provision in Wales, including a re-organisation of support services from twenty-two local authorities to four consortia. These policy and practice shifts framed the MEP programme's ultimate aim, the development of groups of early career professionals who would support each other to innovate and to engage with capacity-building from within the teaching profession.

The overall process for achieving this aim was broadly prescribed by the original tender specification for the MEP. It was to be practice-based and enquiry driven, utilising a ‘blended’ programme involving a combination of learning relationships, including external mentors and academic tutors, and school-based enquiry tasks combined with online learning resources that would provide access to the existing knowledge base around effective teaching and learning, enquiry and leading school-based change. The design of the MEP has drawn heavily on research into supporting and developing novice teachers that has highlighted career stage and related organizational and professional factors that might limit their ability and enthusiasm to engage in sustained programmes of innovation and enquiry.

The theoretical backdrop for the MEP draws upon a range of sources including new forms of social pedagogy for professional learning and school improvement (Siemens, 2005) that are responsive to the fragmented, networked, and distributed nature of the profession and the knowledge it holds and creates around effective learning and school improvement. This theoretical perspective is therefore concerned with developing individuals' ability to construct, traverse and lead networks and groups; utilise networks of learning relationships to transfer professional practices and create new ones; and build a collective sense of professional identity in order to facilitate collective action and improvement.