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What are we
learning about...?
Sustaining a network of schools

Features of sustainability: 2

Oldham Network Learning Community

An illustrative account of what sustaining
a network looks like in practice.

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National College for
School Leadership

Features of sustainability: 2

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of sustaining a network of schools. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when developing effective and, therefore, sustainable networks.

> ❝ *Constant change, both at the school level and the system level is a given in our education system. Sustainability of a network of schools is therefore best and most usefully understood as being dependent upon a number of capacity building functions within the network's design. Sustaining a network is not about maintaining the status quo, it is about building the capacity to respond to change.* ❞

<div align="right">NCSL, 2006</div>

There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally, that are benefiting from working together as a network. By drawing upon their experience and that of others who are actively involved in creating sustainable school networks, it is possible to identify what sustainability within networks looks like in practice and look at how it involves three key dimensions of capacity building for sustaining collaborative activity.

Three dimensions of capacity building for sustaining collaborative activity:

1 Network development

2 Adaptive change

3 Network leadership

The accounts of practice explore, in different ways and with differing emphases, these key characteristics of sustaining a network of schools. In so doing they help to explain what sustainability looks like in practice. Considering these dimensions of activity in the process of developing sustainable networks will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is know from current thinking and practice. We hope that they will be of practical use to you if you are considering setting up a network, are part of a newly formed or more established network, or are simply interested in finding out more about sustainability within networks. ☐

Acknowledgements

A network case study: background

The Oldham Networked Learning Community has come a long way and developed a great deal since its original submission to the Networked Learning Group in March 2002. It began with 11 primary schools and 1 special school, with an initial focus on *'learning and teaching through multiple intelligence'*. It was designed to be a vehicle to *'extend and develop the innovative work currently being conducted at the special school across all the schools'*.

Over three years the network has reduced in size, now incorporating 6 of the 12 original schools. One of the network headteachers acknowledged that *'the schools that remained were able to make a commitment. Twelve was tough, it was always too many'*. The six remaining primary schools serve diverse communities within Oldham, with conspicuous patterns of ethnic division. For example, one school in the network has an almost wholly white pupil population, whilst in another the vast majority of the pupils are of Asian origin. There was some history of collaboration between the schools prior to the formation of the network, through School Improvement Projects (SIPs) and cultural 'linking projects' established by the local authority.[1]

Three years into its work, the Oldham Networked Learning Community and its members have sustained successful relationships over time which evidently had made a difference to children in their schools. This account of practice has been structured to make sense of the various factors that have enabled this network to thrive and succeed. At the same time, the account demonstrates the way in which the relative influence of these factors is difficult to determine. The network's success lies, arguably, in how the members and their activity interweave to create a coherent whole from separate, interrelated strands.

This account of practice addresses the three identified characteristics for sustaining collaborative activity through illustrative descriptions of network practice as follows:

Network development
- finding a focus
- making a difference

Adaptive change
- building capacity for change

Network leadership
- strategic and distributed leadership

[1] For the full enquiry report from which this case study is drawn see Stott, A & Woods, R, 2006, Annual enquiry 2005: Oldham NLC case study. Available at http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk/knowledge-base/research-papers/annual-enquiry-2005-case-studies/cs06-oldham.pdf

Network Development

Finding a common focus

Emerging from conversations with teachers and headteachers was a sense of a network continually evolving, that a significant journey had been travelled to get to their current position. The headteachers, who form the network steering group, talked of frequently re-evaluating where they were, of reflecting upon where they had got to. This has enabled the group to find common focus to which all are committed.

❝ *We found a commitment. We evaluated where we were and found a common focus.* ❞

Headteacher

Achieving the right membership and finding the right focus has been a challenge. The importance of compromise was stressed, particularly as part of the process for finding a focus. The focus was identified as needing to support the needs of all of the schools.

❝ *It was hard to find compromise in the early days. Schools only have so much capacity to take on change. Our capacity was taken up by the priorities within our schools. It's only with time that we've been able to find common purpose that fits the needs of all of our schools.* ❞

Headteacher

Following this extensive process of reflection and re-alignment, five key strands of inter-connected network activity have been established:

1 teacher enquiry

2 pupil enquiry

3 pupil co-coaching

4 adult co-coaching

5 Philosophy for Children

One of the teachers deeply involved in the work of the network described how finding a focus around Philosophy for Children (P4C) had emerged.

❝ *Looking right back at the beginning, each school came up with an aim for the network... each school had something different, but the Philosophy fitted in really well with all of the schools' goals and aims for the network, and that was probably one of the defining reasons why it was chosen to be taken further.* ❞

Deputy Headteacher, lead learner for P4C

The challenge of finding a focus that fitted the imperatives of each member school allowed the network leadership team time to plan how they would use that focus to lever positive change in their schools.

Making a difference and measuring it

Oldham NLC has engaged in self-review in different ways, recognising its value at an early stage. With competing pressures on time and resource it is easy for networks of schools to become quite deeply involved in activity without knowing for sure what difference, if any, the activity is making.

The headteacher group in Oldham meets regularly and a key part of every meeting is to ask 'how are things going?', 'is this bit of work worth continuing to work on?'. The group is sufficiently self-confident and self-challenging to sometimes agree that a certain piece of work is not having the desired impact and should be stopped. Part of the self-evaluative process is also the relationship of the cadre groups to the headteacher group. The headteacher group invites contributions from representatives of those groups' leadership meetings, meaning that the planning of the network's future direction of travel is something the groups do together.

During 2005, as part of their self-evaluative work, Oldham agreed to participate in the NLC annual enquiry, specifically looking at network impact on pupils. In order to explore further the difference that networked activity made, especially with regard to P4C, two levels of questioning were used:

1 What do adults do differently in their schools as a result of networked activity?

2 What difference does that make to the young people in their classrooms?

What do adults do differently?

This question was asked widely across the network. At different levels and in many classrooms the dynamic of teaching and learning had changed. From the head teachers' point of view there were some quite profound changes:

❝ Staff have had opportunities to learn and what's been really powerful is that the training has come in waves. As each wave has come back into school hey have brought new ideas, new thinking, new stimuli. As new ideas keep coming back we are reinvigorated by that. We've mapped the impact of P4C in our classrooms and we can see the difference in the children's questioning skills. It's harder to see in other subjects but we see it as a way forward in AT1 Maths (applying and investigating) and AT1 Science (process and enquiry). ❞

Headteacher

From the teachers' point of view, reflecting upon what they did differently, there were some interesting comments:

❝ It has improved my questioning skills. I have a better understanding of children's thinking/reasoning skills. As a consequence, I encourage children to explain thoughts/thinking across other subjects. ❞

Network teacher

Classroom support staff have also been involved in the network evaluation.

❝ It has given me more confidence when dealing with children, it has highlighted children's individual differences. ❞

Network classroom support assistant

As much as these responses indicate that things are done differently, they also reflect something of the way in which debate about teaching and learning has changed in the network schools and how teachers engage in conversation about their practice.

What difference does that make to children?

A focus on on-going self-evaluation forces teachers routinely to consider what the impact on their pupils has been:

❝ It really makes a difference to their speaking, and being able to speak like that it's obviously changed their listening and reasoning. They are answering now rather than shouting others down. ❞

Headteacher

❝ My school has a high proportion of E2L (English as second language) pupils too and it's changed the curriculum for them... Lessons are no longer always teacher led – children are no longer passive learners. It's made such a difference to those E2L children, especially their confidence in speaking. ❞

Headteacher

An essential part of a thorough evaluative process must include the voice of the young people themselves.

❝ I think the good thing about [Philosophy] is hearing other people's thoughts, and hearing what they say, in case they have the same answer as you, and then you won't feel uncomfortable. ❞

Year 5 pupil, Beal Vale

Having such evaluative mechanisms in place which can establish whether or not the network is making a difference is vital to sustaining this activity within and across schools. Its is by identifying and celebrating successes, in confirming to members that they are making a difference that commitment to networked engagement will grow and thrive. ☐

Adaptive change

Building capacity for change

In order to maximise impact of the network the steering group agreed that they needed to draw upon some external expertise. Intriguingly a two-pronged approach emerged. The group recognised a need for expertise both in the pedagogic focus they had chosen (ie P4C) and in developing a mechanism for implementing that focus. They chose to adopt co-coaching as their adult learning strategy, the means by which P4C would be implemented. This model would hopefully ensure teachers learned with and from one another as it was implemented.

CPD: Philosophy for Children

There was existing expertise in P4C within one of the network schools. This school had already adopted P4C as a means of working on children's confidence as speakers, improving their ability to articulate their thoughts and to engage in genuine debate rather than argument. This existing expertise was viewed as a resource for the network to draw upon. Each school was invited to nominate two teachers to become the key advocates for and experts in P4C within their schools. Drawing upon training from SAPERE[2], they were trained to level 1 as P4C practitioners. They were also formed into a cross-school support group so that they had a place to reflect upon their new practice, to share ideas, to co-plan lessons and to build their confidence. The network then provided this group with the opportunity to attend a level 2 P4C programme whilst at the same time beginning the process of training another wave of teachers at level 1. A number of training waves have followed so that all teachers and classroom assistants in all of the schools are trained to Level 1.

Co-Coaching

Running in parallel to the P4C training was a programme to develop teachers' skills in co-coaching. In this strand also teachers in each network school were nominated to take part in a co-coaching training programme delivered by an external organisation. Having attended the programme, the pairs became one another's co-coaches within their schools. As with the P4C cadre group, they continued to meet regularly, sharing their experiences, building their understanding of and confidence to enact the role.

The network then created an opportunity for the group to attend a further training programme, equipping them with the skills to form co-coaching partnerships with other colleagues in their schools. As the expertise to co-coach spread across the schools it became the key mechanism whereby all staff in all schools could share and develop their expertise in P4C and became a capacity which could be used to introduce other initiatives. One headteacher commented:

> ❝ *The co-coaching is definitely an internal capacity we have created. Really quickly it moved from them being coached by the external provider to coaching one another and drawing other staff into doing co-coaching.* ❞
>
> Headteacher

Capacity for sustaining change

The schools within the Oldham NLC have created a general capacity for sustaining change. The P4C project is a model for taking on any new initiative. A cadre group of lead learners from across the schools is identified in the particular area of focus, and a self-support group to sustain their collective development is established. The existing expertise in co-coaching, residing within each of the schools means there is a mechanism to learn across and within the schools however the focus changes. One network headteacher reflected:

> ❝ *...in our last review of our work we asked ourselves 'how do we distribute decision making?'. What opportunities do we give lead learners to lead? And in that discussion there was a 'big moment' – a realisation that we had, in the past, drawn upon external expertise but that within the network we had built internal capacity. The personal development of those people we had trained meant that they could lead future training.* ❞
>
> Headteacher ☐

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[2] In the UK, Philosophy for Children is supported by SAPERE (the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education). www.sapere.org.uk

Developing leadership capacity

The head teacher group plays a vital role as the steering group for the network. The NLC found it difficult to make joint decisions that fulfilled everyone's needs when it included twelve schools, but six has proved an easier number – sufficiently small for decision-making but large enough to continue if one school has other priorities for a while. The leadership group takes the wider strategic view on behalf of the network but interestingly research discovered that this strategic view was increasingly being informed by conversations within the other groups the network has created. One headteacher confirmed this:

❝ *...ownership and leadership within the network can now be seen to be moving both ways: down-up and up-down. There's still a place for strong head teacher involvement, but it's definitely moving both ways.* ❞

Headteacher

The importance of this distribution of leadership to the growth of the network was confirmed by all the head teachers, for example:

❝ *...the key moment in the development of the network was when the activity and the leadership of that activity moved outside this group. Suddenly it became real, real activity making a difference.* ❞

Headteacher

The network has come to recognise and value leadership contributions from a number of levels. There is a basic structure for conducting business but otherwise leadership and other roles have been allowed to develop according to need. ☐

End Note

❝ *One of the things our Ofsted report pointed out was the quality of both teacher and pupil questioning. I think the co-coaching has also contributed to that, making a place for regular professional conversation.* ❞

Network Headteacher

What has been created in Oldham is a model for disciplined collaborative innovation; a way in which curriculum change can be carried forward together. Staff support and learn from one another in the process and through their robust evaluative loop they know whether the time, effort and resource they put into networked activity is making a difference. What they are sustaining is not the particular focus of network activity itself – that must and will inevitably change as school priorities evolve – it is the capacity for collaborative innovation, for adaptive change and for leadership which are being sustained. ☐

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