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THINK PIECE

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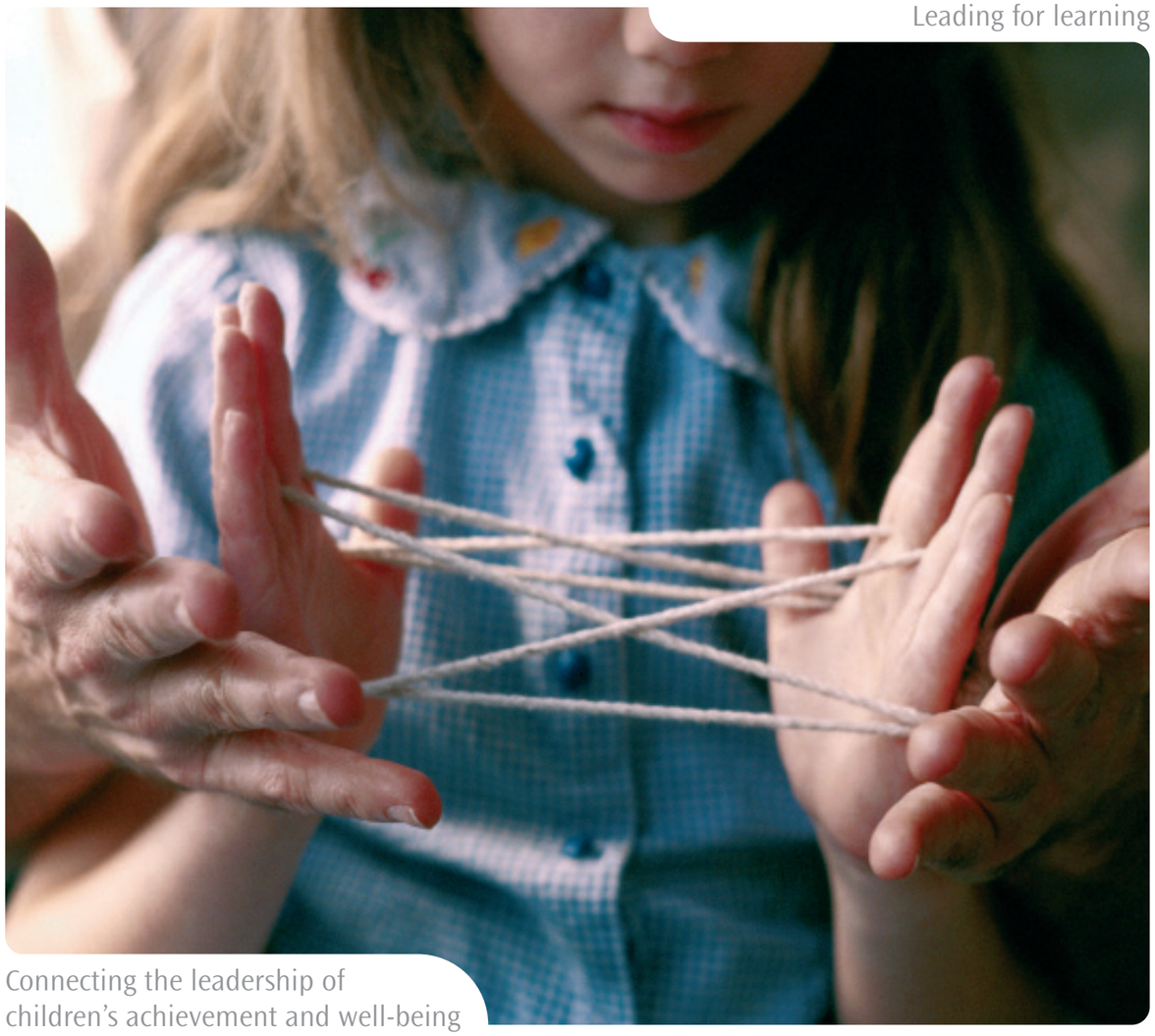
Collaboration for transformation; why bother?

Professor Charles Desforges, University of Exeter

Leading for learning



Connecting the leadership of children's achievement and well-being

Collaboration for transformation; why bother?

"No one person can educate a child in the modern context. The pedagogic knowledge necessary is spread across a number of minds…"

Schools are working hard to transform the quality of the pupil learning experience and hence to raise standards of achievement broadly conceived. Some institutions are ploughing a solitary if not lonely furrow in their development whilst others have formed networks to co-operate in this endeavour. Given the immensity of what is at stake it is perhaps timely to rehearse the advantages of the network option.

Here, **Professor Charles Desforges** sets out why collaboration between schools is essential for transforming learning and achievement.

Common knowledge, often expressed in aphorisms such as 'two heads are better than one', speaks to the value of co-operation in the common good. Schools facing the challenges of delivering on 'personalised education' do have more in common than they have difference, so collaboration looks attractive.

Proverbs v pragmatism

For those who are sceptical about the sagacity of proverbs, there are more pragmatic reasons for co-operation. We will need to be innovative to create the new knowledge and practices needed. The greater the diversity of minds around the table, the greater the likelihood of new ideas being aired and disseminated. Diversity is also a challenge to cosiness.

It has frequently been my experience to observe that what is impossible in one school is common practice in the school across the street. Networks of schools can provide a diverse forum of experience in which a wide range of ideas can be created, debated and challenged. The schools in a network also provide a broader test bed for the quicker and more thorough testing of ideas.

Networks also provide a direct mechanism for knowledge transfer. It is difficult to learn from others when we are cloistered in our own classrooms or staffrooms. Reading about the practice of others is no substitute for direct and practical collaboration in professional development. If our collaborators are from a different parish, so much the better for progress. We learn more about practice through shared development than through reading.

If these pragmatic arguments in favour of collaboration across networks are not persuasive, then there are more fundamental epistemological reasons that necessitate such co-operation. Teaching calls on a broad body of knowledge about curriculum, children, classrooms, communities and cultures (at least). It is unlikely that we will transform educational experience without a correlated transformation of our knowledge base. The knowledge base in question has been characterised as distributed, socially constructed and situated.

Distributed knowledge

Knowledge is distributed in the sense that no one person can educate a child in the modern context. The pedagogic knowledge necessary is spread across a number of minds, including those of teachers, ancillaries, parents, educational managers and so on. Transformation of this distributed knowledge base cannot occur through acts of learning of individuals. If it is to be coherent, transformation of a distributed knowledge base entails collaboration.

Pedagogic knowledge is socially constructed in the sense that it is invented and validated in the common social practices of participants. We cannot possibly teach algebra to pupils under the age of 11. Ex-Soviet bloc countries taught algebra to six year olds. There is nothing objective about either stance.

Each is socially constructed. Changing social constructions, which run very deep, entails widespread collaboration in the challenge to common knowledge and the invention and validation of new ideas. Parochial forces are far too conservative to promote this.

Blinded by familiarity

Our professional knowledge base is situated in the sense that it is embedded in our practices and is inseparable from those practices. Teaching is what teachers do. Much of what we know and do is beyond our immediate consciousness. Embedded in the 'taken for granted' social constructions of particular classrooms and schools, our professional knowledge is almost beyond our description, let alone open to serious internal challenge. But thorough examination of our knowledge base is essential to transformation. We need the informed help of professionals beyond our parish to achieve this transformation effectively because they share our goal, understand our context, but are not blinkered by our assumptions about our immediate settings.

In summary, we are all committed to an agenda for the transformation of educational practice. I have argued that this requires a transformation of the knowledge base underlying practice. There are common sense and pragmatic reasons for schools' collaboration in learning networks to achieve such a transformation. A proper understanding of our knowledge base reveals it to be distributed, constructed and situated in our working practices. This means that collaboration across schools is a necessity rather than an optional extra in the transformation project.

Further insights into perspectives on networked approaches to leading for learning can be found in the NCSL publication *On teaching and learning* by Professor Charles Desforges. This can be downloaded directly from **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

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A key ingredient: dialogic learning

Trish Franey, NCSL with Claire Clohosey, Similjana Pearce & Helen Sanday, Opportunity Zone NLC, Bristol

Leading for learning

Connecting the leadership of children's achievement and well-being

A key ingredient: dialogic learning

Polly Toynbee recently said, that a key ingredient in determining future social class is language. She describes language as 'the basic tool of thought, argument and reasoning'.

Opportunity Zone NLC exists within an Excellence in Cities Action Zone. The distinctive networked learning activity is located with and through the team of teacher researchers, who engage in coaching, collaborative enquiry and classroom observations. These leadership activities are clearly and explicitly focused on improving pupil learning.

The compelling idea, which bonds the network, is embodied in the vision 'every adult a learner, every child an achiever'. There is a genuine belief that schools working together schools can overcome endemic barriers to learning by engaging all adults in the network with a single pupil focus. The following account describes the network's experiences of bringing together professional development and leadership learning activities with a strong focus on pupil learning outcomes.

In preparing to be an NLC, headteachers and teachers were aware of the statistical evidence of the performance of pupils in literacy across the schools. While the network included two 'high performing schools', there was a pervading concern about the literacy data for the majority of pupils in the network. Further discussions with teachers teased out the salient barrier to the pupils' success in literacy as 'poor language acquisition' on entry into school, as the following quotes from some of the network schools show:

"…only 33% of the children have appropriate or above age language skills on entry into school."

"…reading and writing discrepancy in Key Stage 2 results: with a far larger percentage of pupils reaching Level 4 in reading than writing."

"At Key Stage 1 the results show a weakness in English with only 36% of pupils reaching Level 2b or above."

Establishing a focus

Building upon the professional interest of one teacher in the network around her reading of 'Philosophy through Stories' in developing language and literacy, the network engaged the expertise of Dutch educationalist Dr Karen Murris, to expand upon the theory, illustrate with case study and enter into a debate around how integrating philosophy would benefit pupils' literacy in the network.

Her demonstration modelled three distinctive strands: firstly a way of working in classrooms using picture books as a starting point for discussion; secondly, the development of questioning skills through dialogue as the basis for key speaking and listening skills; thirdly, through the use of questioning as a means of extending the attention span of pupils, leading to improvements in behaviour and overall ability to learn.

The enquiry team concluded that if there was to be short-term impact and long-term improvement for pupils, the initial focus should be with Reception and Year 3 pupils. Three teachers working within this age range and different contexts within the network (two in schools with significant deprivation factors and one in a high achieving school) agreed to introduce 'Philosophy through Stories' to improve the speaking and listening skills of pupils. They would take a collaborative enquiry approach by working as a team of three to research the two questions: 'how does Philosophy through story telling improve pupils speaking and listening skills?' and 'how does 'Philosophy through Stories' improve higher order thinking skills?'

Extending professional and leadership learning

A key ingredient was the enquiry team's decision to engage in a range of activities to extend their own learning to benefit the pupils across three schools within the network.

Professional learning activities included:

- Coaching in the questioning skills, which scaffolded the philosophical approach.
- Developing a baseline measure for pupils in speaking and listening.
- Videoing each other and pupils at the start, midway and at the end of the enquiry as a visual record of improvement and as a means of gathering data.
- Peer coaching to improve their skills.
- Visiting 'case study' schools to meet practitioners experienced in the approach.
- Leading staff within and across the network through INSET and staff meetings.
- Contributing their collaborative research towards achieving a BPRS award.

The core purpose of this range of professional learning was that it would, over a relatively short period, have a direct impact upon the pupils in the classrooms of the three teachers. Additionally, and over time, this adult learning would extend their professional motivation, confidence and skills to lead others in the philosophical approach, thereby widening the impact upon pupil learning and influencing future planning and practice within school and across the network.

Engaging in enquiry

"Through working in partnership with colleagues we have been able to plan, monitor and discuss our own and pupil learning throughout the research process. Formulating a baseline measure across three settings in the network has given us the ability to analyse our own, each others' and pupils' learning."

Two important tools were used in documenting the progress in pupil learning over the two terms: the establishment of baseline data to be used across the schools and the use of video. This was used by the teachers to analyse and record questioning skills as well as a means of identifying aspects where they could coach each other. Significantly, the videos have now been made into DVDs and are used for training within the network.

In measurable terms, the baseline assessment provided evidence of positive impact over a short period. In one instance, in a Reception class where pupils did not understand what a question was, the video and analytical data shows pupils being able to ask questions, discuss and engage in learning. An HMI observing a philosophy session with these pupils towards the end of the enquiry period was impressed by the standard of spoken language, turn taking and ability to reflect, question and absorb what had been read to them.

Assessing the impact on pupil learning outcomes

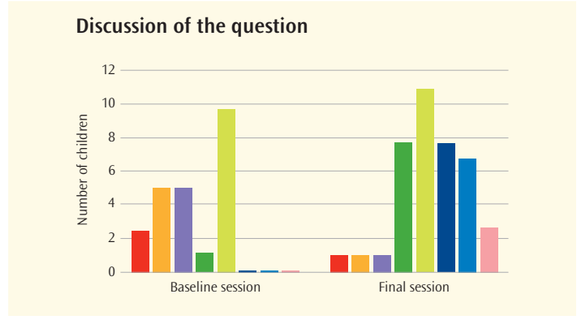

fig 1: This chart shows how this intervention boosted children's abilities to initiate and independently express original ideas and apply them in group discussions. Non participation fell dramatically.

Using the baseline assessment common across the schools, progress was charted in the form of a graph (see *fig 1*). Teachers attributed the outcomes to a greater understanding of questioning skills and discussion techniques and the benefits to pupils:

"I am now convinced that Philosophy is a powerful tool in the teaching of thinking and also improves speaking and listening…
it has improved the pupils' personal and emotional skills as well
as their comprehension of stories."

There is no doubt for the team of three teacher researchers within the network that planning a structured approach to improving pupil learning has been effective in the

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Getting it right by working together

Anne Clarke & Rachel Nesbitt,
DASP NLC, Dorchester

Leading for learning

Connecting the leadership of children's achievement and well-being

Getting it right by working together

"All we hear about at home is 'Stop, Think, Make the Right Choice' … Jack is really keen to share the things he is learning at school with us."

The Dorchester Area Schools Improvement Partnership (DASP) NLC have developed an Early Years Intervention Programme designed to nurture network children thought to be at risk of failing because of learning or behavioural problems. It has formed a close working partnership between home and schools and developed a curriculum which promotes self-esteem, emotional awareness and interpersonal learning skills. Network school leaders, teachers and other staff are improving their professional expertise and extending their leadership experience through practical involvement and research which is connecting up the leadership of both children's achievement and well-being.

The network commitment

DASP NLC consists of 13 first and three middle schools with one special and one secondary school. We've worked together for 11 years. When we became a networked learning community we decided to use the opportunities this new venture offered to set up the Early Years Intervention Programme. For the NLC, it seemed a natural progression from all the diverse work we'd done together in the past to this co-ordinated and structured network-wide initiative.

We are changing perceptions of how 'difficult' children can be helped to learn more effectively and we've done it by working on our partnerships across and within schools and with families. We've created new roles and understandings across the network.

The teacher

First of all, we appointed a network Early Intervention teacher, a full-time post taken up by a seconded early years specialist. She works in each of the first schools for a term at a time concentrating on a carefully selected group of about eight children. The school gives her the support of a full-time teaching assistant and they work in partnership with other school staff. When she moves on, the group disbands but the teaching assistant remains actively involved with the children throughout the following term, continuing the work which was tailor-made for their needs.

It's important for other teaching staff to see the Early Intervention teacher at work. Teachers and teaching assistants discuss the strategies developed in the small group with the Early Intervention specialist and that helps them to devise a comprehensive package of individual and whole class strategies which later become embedded in normal school practice.

"It's important to continue support after the children return to their class. The children selected to be in the 'special group' have been keen to take part and feel special."

The child

An individual programme is planned for each child, aimed at developing emotional intelligence. Developing these programmes benefits specific children and helps to improve awareness of learning needs throughout the schools.

The children really respond well to the structure and routine of the group. The main challenge they face is responding to clear and high expectations.

"I like being in the group because we can have a tick when we have done something good. We get ticks for loads of things like sitting carefully or being kind. If we get 50 ticks we can go to the Golden Bag."

They are encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and the group motto, 'Stop, Think, Make the Right Choice', is a constant reminder to them of how to manage their behaviour. To help children get it right, a series of very small, achievable, rewarded goals is set up throughout the day.

"The best bit about the group is having table time every day. We have toast or something else for a special treat. We take it in turns and we have to use good manners."

Children themselves can see the value of the changes. The pupils receive specialist help in areas they find difficult.

Everybody in the school recognises the importance of this special group, but the ultimate objective for every child is inclusion; a key aspect of teachers' work with the Early Intervention specialist is preparation for reintegration. Children report back to their classes every day. When the group finishes its eight week life they can make a smooth transition back to mainstream.

The parents

Parents of children selected for the Early Intervention project are often already worried about how their child relates to other children and about whether they are learning as well as they could. Inevitably they are concerned about their child's withdrawal from mainstream classroom activity. We invite them to meet the Early Intervention teacher and talk through these concerns. They are offered weekly feedback meetings, parents' tea parties and a discussion evening. They also have a home/school book which keeps us in regular contact with them and tells them what's happening and how they can support their child.

Many parents become more confident about discussing their concerns with teaching staff. They welcome the opportunity to help their children in partnership with the school and they enjoy the way in which the programme celebrates their child's strengths and achievements rather than just focusing on problems. Some have gone on to develop specific strategies to use at home.

"Oliver wants to come to school now and has only missed two days this term, he hates missing his ticks…"

The school leader

DASP network headteachers have supported the philosophy underpinning the project from the beginning, adapting practice as necessary to suit the needs of their own schools. They see the consonance of the project's aims with those of their own schools and with many other initiatives.

"Every teacher knows that truly effective learning and teaching focuses on individual children, their strengths, their needs and the approaches which engage, motivate and inspire them…"
The Primary Strategy

Any DASP initiative depends for its success on a genuine partnership between participating schools and only committed management can ensure that partnership at a strategic level.

We don't pretend that it has been an easy ride. Persuading teachers to allow children off timetable for several weeks at a time isn't easy. Some find it difficult to go along with the idea of special treatment for some children; it can look very unfair to the majority. There's a lot of soul searching about these issues as well as the practical problem of finding teaching space and facilities in small schools. It helps to remember how things were before we started the programme. Many felt they couldn't deal effectively with the needs of 'difficult' children.

Now they no longer feel they are dealing with 'their' problem in isolation. They are learning different strategies and approaches and can draw on the support of colleagues across the network. Teachers work more closely with each other and with children and their families.

Looking to the future we could be discouraged too easily by uncertainties over funding and the possibility of imposed changes, but we believe in the project and are determined to continue to overcome the obstacles. We'll go on 'getting it right by working together'.

The DASP network recently received the Investors In People award as a partnership of schools. For more information about the work of DASP please visit **www.dasp.org.uk**

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