EXCEL NLC: Excellence through Collaboration and Enabling Leadership

Christopher Noden

Networked Learning Communities
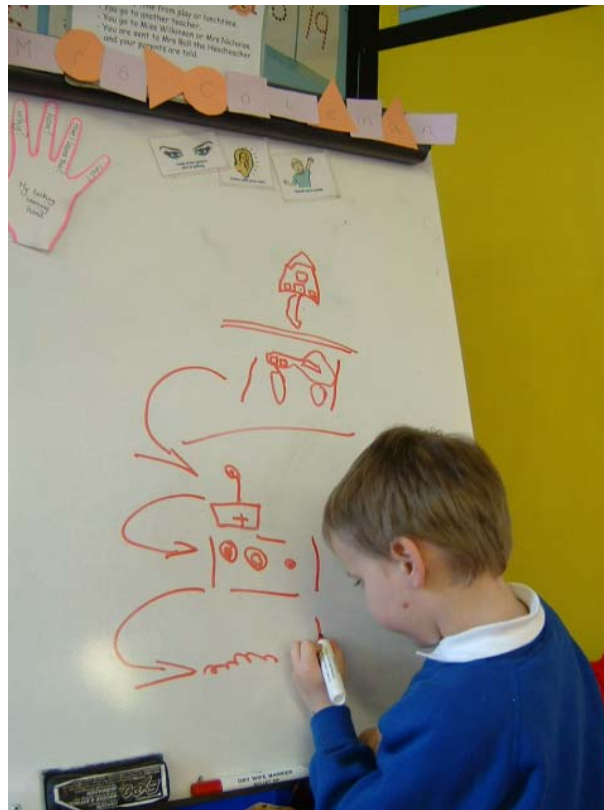
"I cannot sing the story-making project's praises enough, I really can't. I really wish it could be in every school. I think teachers would benefit from being broken out of the boundaries."

Reception teacher

"Networking does breed over time. It's almost like a little web: you can't find the beginning of it."

Headteacher

Story-making

Impact on children

This case study considers the impact of the Excellence through Collaboration and Enabling Leadership (EXCEL) Networked Learning Community (NLC). The overall focus of this research addressed the following overarching question: 'To what extent can a network work cross-phase, cross-authority and cross-nationally in a coherent and impactful way?' In particular, the fieldwork and subsequent report focused on two main projects that were investigated through the following questions.

- To what extent has the EXCEL story-making (Key Stages 1 and 2) project impacted both on pupils' motivation to learn and their literacy skills?
- How has the UK-Malta arts project with an ICT focus led to improvements in student engagement with, attitude to, and achievement in learning?

The two projects that were examined in detail for this report provide fair and accurate representation of the kind of learning-based activities that the EXCEL network has generated. A brief description of the two projects is included in the appendix at the end of the report. The following section summarises the key areas in which the projects have impacted most significantly on pupils' attainment, achievement and engagement.

Story-making project

The development of the story-making project and framework relied on research and enquiry in a number of schools and with a range of different groups of pupils. This report has selected some key examples of the data that was provided, largely by Frogwell Primary School, to exemplify the impact of the project.

Impact on children: attainment through story-making

"The [English] strategies put in place … are beginning to raise standards. These include involvement in a story writing project … These initiatives are focusing rightly on expanding the opportunities for pupils to write at length, in more detail and for different audiences."

Ofsted Inspection Report, Frogwell Primary School, September 2003

As part of the action research supporting the development of the story-making framework, five Year 5 lower-achieving Level 3 students from each of the six schools involved in the research were sampled. These 30 pupils were each asked to spend 45 minutes writing a traditional tale in October 2003 and then again in March 2004. The samples of work were assessed and moderated in terms of pupil achievement in punctuation, writing style, and purpose and organisation. The results are summarised in Figures 1-3.

Figure 1: EXCEL NLC: measurable performance in punctuation of Year 5 lower-achieving Level 3 students, as assessed prior to and post exposure to the story-making strategy
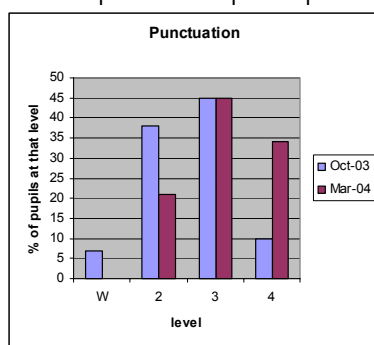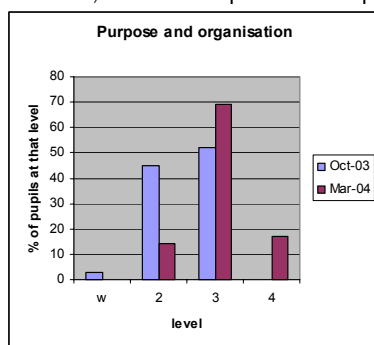

Notes: w= working towards Level 2

Figure 2: EXCEL NLC: measurable performance in writing style of Year 5 lower-achieving Level 3 students, as assessed prior to and post exposure to the story-making strategy
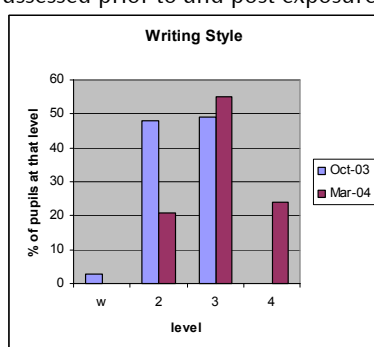
Notes: w= working towards Level 2

Figure 3: EXCEL NLC: measurable performance in purpose and organisation of Year 5 lower-achieving Level 3 students, as assessed prior to and post exposure to the story-making strategy

Notes: w= working towards Level 2

Figures 1-3 indicate improvement in all three areas of literacy for this cohort of pupils. There is a reduction in the numbers of pupils assessed at Levels W and 2, and an increase in the number of pupils performing at Levels 3 and 4.

A senior teacher researcher also carried out research into the impact of the story-making project on pupils in Reception. Table 1 shows extracts from a research log that looked at the added-value nature of the story-making approach for low-achieving pupils in the reception class (Rogers, 2003).

Table 1: Research log for Reception children involved in story-making project

Reception child	Child's learning difficulty or special need	Child's response to the story-making project	Teacher observations and strategies that have improved learning and performance
Child F	Very low baseline assessment on entry. Poor focus and concentration.	She uses puppets often and always retells the Little Daisy story. She takes the lead in this play, conversation flows and the language is confident.	The strategies of regular retelling and group chanting have been effective for her. Her involvement in class talk-time is total now – with enthusiasm and lots of expression.
Child K	Poor vocabulary and language range on entry.	She began to narrate the story, leaving out very few words from phrases.	Her language is still developing and not always in full sentences, but she is able to relate many or most of the phrases from the story.
Child D	On entry she found it hard to engage with class activities and lacked involvement.	She was confident to meet and talk with me in the classroom situation, happy to make eye contact.	The project had had a dramatic impact on D; she has benefited most from the inclusive repetition and retelling, and has memory of the visual story map.
Child L	She has lacked confidence in school and showed poor concentration.	She was able to maintain the narrative, ending with "then she had stone cherries".	Her confidence has been hugely enhanced by this work; the actions have greatly helped her learn the stories.
Child S	He showed a lack of focus and confidence on entry.	He shared with me that he likes the "three little pigs story best because he likes the wolf".	Visual reference and story maps have helped him track the story.

The Reception teacher at Frogwell Primary School expressed a firm belief that the story-making framework had increased both pupils' interest in reading and their motivation to read. This perception is borne out by the improvement in reading scores recorded during the year (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Frogwell Primary School: comparison of Reception year reading scores with national data, 2004-05
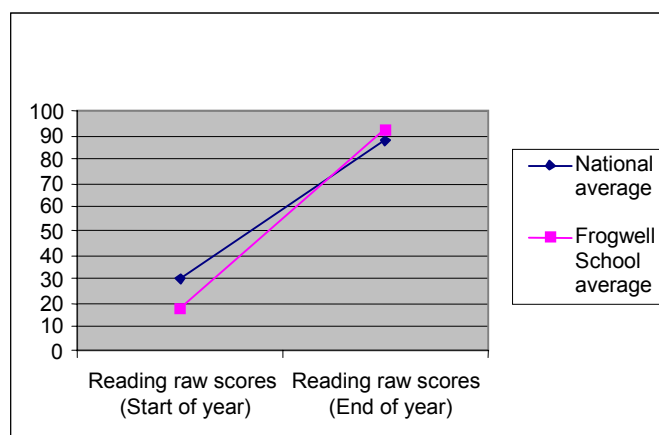
Interviews conducted with five teachers, the headteacher and a governor at Frogwell Primary School revealed a strong belief that the story-making project had positively impacted on the attainment of all pupils, regardless of age or level of ability.

> "Our self-evaluation shows that the focus on literacy is working – at Key Stage 1 far more children can generally start and finish a story. At Key Stage 2 the improvements in literacy at Year 5 have definitely impacted on the confidence levels of many children. One pupil I teach said, 'I can't write' at the start of Year 5 but by the end of the year is confidently writing three paragraphs."
> Year 5 teacher, Frogwell Primary School

Furthermore, there was some indication that the story-making project has had particular impact on lower-attaining pupils and those with special educational needs (SEN).

> "The lad who is autistic in my class is only seven and he would never have been able to sustain the telling of a story, but because autistic children are so strong visually he went through a phase of

drawing the story-map. We then recorded him telling everybody the story, and it's been so good for his self-esteem and confidence because the other children were amazed that he could do that. He's now using drawings to communicate stories that he is making up on his own, definitely using imagination now … I didn't realise how easy the children would find it to learn the stories off by heart - it's something I don't think I'd considered, to be honest."

<div align="right">SEN teacher</div>

Impact on children: achievement through story-making

Another area of impact relates to pupils' learning about organisation and story structure. This impacts on vocabulary and sentence structure.

"The children learn a lot about the structures and patterns of writing a story from this project. If I was going to leave here and teach somewhere different, I would try to use these strategies and not go back to what I was doing."

<div align="right">Year 5 teacher</div>

"Today I was doing ICT and I had a child say, 'First we need … next we need … and finally …'. That child was not saying that in September, that wouldn't have happened before … We have also done report writing using the story-mapping. They wouldn't have done that or used the mapping previously."

<div align="right">Reception teacher</div>

Impact on children: engagement through story-making

The story-making framework has also resulted in a general increase in pupils' motivation to write.

> *"The children really enjoy the story-making and I think their language really improves. I see children writing when they are not asked to write … They want to write; even in 'golden time' some of them ask, 'Can I write in my journal?'"*
>
> Year 5 teacher

> *"I was cynical to start with, but am now a believer. Will never teach literacy the same again – it's made it fun and the children enjoy it."*
>
> Teacher

UK–Malta arts project

The UK-Malta arts project was a collaborative arts project that culminated in two seven-day reciprocal international visits by students and teachers, during which the drama pieces were performed. Further details are given in appendix 1.

Student, parent, and teacher interviews demonstrated that the project had had a profound effect on many students and at many levels. This high impact appears to be as a result of the specific nature of the project, in that it included an international cultural exchange and also that it incorporated a piece of high-quality, ICT-based dramatic performance.

Impact on children: engagement through arts project

Without exception, there was extremely high praise for the collaborative and international elements to the project.

> *"The best bit was meeting the Maltese, seeing how different their lives are. We stayed with their families for a day, which was great."*
>
> Year 8 pupil

> *"A couple of my friends told me I had changed when I got back. You just realise how things could be – it's your attitude which has changed, I think. You know you could do better, if other countries can be like polite then so can we. Yeah, they are not lazy like us. They pick litter up and stuff where we just chuck it out of the window."*
>
> Year 8 pupil

All the parents interviewed and all those who completed the questionnaire highlighted the collaboration with other schools and the cultural element of the project as being the main strengths.

Many of the students reported a change in their attitude to learning and their engagement in certain subject areas.

> *"I get more involved in drama now – I just used to sit there."*
>
> Year 8 pupil

> *"Initially, for the first few lessons back [student G], who is not in the best of classes, she actually turned round and told people to be quiet. She would never have done that before she went away. That might slip a bit with the peer group but she won't forget that we had this whole thing out there about trust."*
>
> Teacher, head of Key Stage 3

Reference was frequently made to the improvements in self-confidence among the pupils.

"I know I've changed since I've come back [from Malta]. It changed the way we think about things. My family say I am more confident now and I just seem happier."

Year 9 pupil

The project also appears to have exposed the pupils to behaviours and attitudes that they view as positive and that some of them would like to develop. The week away also gave pupils opportunities to take on additional responsibilities and the chance to exhibit different behaviours.

"Before we went we'd have been like horrible to people and that, but you just grow up and we get on with people now. Before we would just judge people before we actually spoke to them. But they [the Maltese] don't do that, they talk to you straight away."

Year 9 pupil

"One of the older lads was the biggest problem at the start, by the end he was the biggest help, supporting the younger kids, using his self-awareness and knowledge. By the end of the week we could trust him to look after some of the younger kids."

Teacher

Exposure to a real project requiring teamwork over an extended period of time was also identified as important in developing team-working and communication skills.

"They learned that, even though they were different and spoke different languages, they could work together."

Parent

Impact on children: achievement through arts project

The central element of the project was the creation and performance of an original dramatic piece, incorporating digital images, sound, music and drama. The process of producing this piece exposed the pupils to some new learning. The theme of 'our culture' also required the pupils to do some learning about their local history and culture.

"I did learn a lot more about professionalism: about being more serious, like how to be on the side of the stage, staying in role and professional – boiling heat, we just had to stand there. It was the most serious performance we've done, in front of a lot of important people in Malta, loads of headteachers."

Year 9 pupil

"I didn't know anything about Bristol before – the slave trade, suspension bridge, and the boat. One day it will come in useful: it's good to know about where you are from. The Maltese know all about their own history, and about ours."

Year 9 pupil

School processes: what contribution has the network made?

Schools within the network employed a range of successful strategies that could be described as high leverage in terms of advancing the achievement of the network's aims. These have been gathered under four broad headings:

1. planning and piloting
2. retaining a strong pupil focus
3. making projects whole school
4. developing staff as part of the process

Networked Learning Communities

Planning and piloting

Preparation and planning feature as a strong characteristic of all EXCEL's activities, along with the individual network schools that were visited by the research team. The learning aims and objectives of network-based activities are thought through clearly and the operational details of initiatives are planned and piloted appropriately before going school-wide.

> *"In this school we've gone a long way towards defining both distributed leadership and capacity-building as terms in relation to the work we are trying to do. Capacity-building for students and teachers has to include intellectual and emotional capacity-building."*
>
> Headteacher

The model of delivery for the UK-Malta arts project was a sophisticated one. Digital images were taken and used by different groups of pupils to stimulate thought about culture and to help them story-board the final performance (see appendix 1 for further details). This process was piloted with a Year 9 class during the term prior to the start of the international project.

> *"It [the pilot project] was the best thought-through piece of work all year in the way that the pupils learned to think at higher levels over a long period of time. They were able to think because we gave them time, and often we don't give them time. It's changed my teaching style: I'm much more aware and conscious of giving structured thinking time to students now."*
>
> Teacher and head of Key Stage 3

At Frogwell Primary School, there was also evidence to suggest that the introduction of the story-making project had been planned effectively and with equal rigour. The school supported the research and development phase of the project strongly with high levels of involvement of Reception and Year 5 teachers. A well-planned dissemination strategy is also in place to support the effective implementation of new literacy frameworks and key learning outcomes across the school.

In-service training (INSET) has been provided for all staff, along with the opportunity to be involved in project planning.
Those staff who have been more actively involved in leading this work have also been able to support colleagues by working with them in classrooms.

There was also evidence of flexibility and a willingness to challenge each other and improve practice.

> *"Another thing the NLC has done has enabled us to have an insight – it's given us an opportunity to reflect and sit and talk about what is making a difference. For example, we know we need to improve certain things in the story-making, not sit on our laurels."*
>
> Headteacher

Retaining a strong pupil focus

The two EXCEL schools visited declared that pupil learning lay at the heart of the work in schools. Indeed, the pupil-centred activity researched does appear to be having direct and immediate effect on pupil attainment and achievement. The story-making project has been structured around producing a framework, which was finalised in July 2005, for use in all primary schools. The research and development phase of activity led by Frogwell Primary School meant that many strategies were trialled and tested in the classroom, a practice clearly encouraged by school leaders, who are keen to engage and motivate this approach to school improvement:

> *"That's the other thing about the story-making. It has come up with short, five-minute activities on word, sentence and text structures which tag back to your literacy strategy. There are a lot more oral drama-based activities that allow you to do your word, text and sentence structure stuff so you don't lose the learning."*
>
> Reception teacher

As well as being hugely enjoyable, the UK-Malta arts project had significant learning outcomes. Pupils, parents and teachers involved pointed to the structured work element of the project at its heart. The pupils worked hard before and during the exchange visits to prepare their production. The project was far more than a cultural exchange, and its learning outcomes had been carefully thought through following the experience of the pilot phase.

> "Other school trips are all very well but this was not a holiday. The buzz at the end of the trip was incredible, the kids rose to the challenge fantastically. You wouldn't think a week would make that much difference, but it did. Personally I would scrap holiday trips and institute 'work trips'. The biggest thing that came out was the mixing of the kids, all working towards the same goal."
>
> ICT teacher

Making projects whole school

Frogwell Primary School has managed to embed the story-making project to the extent that a number of teachers described it very much as a whole-school project. Over three years, school leaders have managed to engage all staff in the project. A number of strategies have been used to achieve this, ranging from informal one-to-one peer coaching through to formal training sessions.

> "Next term everybody in the school will be doing a story with the new framework. The project and the way we use it are constantly evolving. In particular at the moment we are looking for better extension activities for the higher achievers."
>
> Year 5 teacher

> "It is whole school. I hear other staff talking about the story-making: 'What story are you doing? So-and-so, I am amazed what she wrote today' etc. I've got to the point now of saying, 'OK, what next? What are we going to do now for maths or whatever?'"
>
> SEN teacher

Developing staff as part of the process

All nine teachers interviewed for this report made mention of the in-school professional development opportunities that had arisen from network activity. The headteachers confirmed that they see professional development as vital to maintaining momentum for ongoing and continuous school improvement, and that whole-school projects led by the network are an important way of achieving this.

> "I have seen different staff change and move as a result of involvement in the story-making project. K [teacher] and two other members of staff have been involved in the research at different levels. As a head I've been able to let those teachers do continuing professional development [CPD] in school with others – just 10 minutes' coaching here and there, but planned in. The difference that can make is huge. We planned that structure for our school. The others did different things."
>
> Headteacher

At a school-wide level, network membership appears to have provided good opportunities for many more staff to develop, both personally and professionally.

> "Because of the Networked Learning Community, 37-40 staff have taken on new aspects of leadership. Will that in the end make a difference to standards for pupils? Yes, but cumulatively with other initiatives."
>
> Headteacher

Network characteristics

Context

EXCEL Networked Learning Community was established in 2002 as a partnership between four primary schools and two secondary schools across two local education authorities, South Gloucestershire and Wiltshire. The network serves approximately 3,500 pupils. A key partner of NLC is the International Learning and Research Centre (ILRC), which is located in one of the secondary schools. The network had an international strand woven into its work from its outset and this now most clearly manifests itself in that four Maltese primary schools and two Maltese secondary schools have become associate members of the NLC. The Maltese schools are involved to varying degrees in almost all of EXCEL's work. The University of the West of England was an early partner of EXCEL, providing a critical friendship role and support with self-evaluation. This relationship existed for the first two and a half years, until the network felt confident and able to fulfil this function independently.

EXCEL has a steering committee which meets six times each year, providing the strategic lead for the network. Since the beginning, the network has also formed a number of development groups, each of which has helped to shape particular projects and developments. Each network school also has a nominated EXCEL link teacher, providing another formal level of network structure. Link teachers are primarily involved in helping to shape the strategic and operational direction of EXCEL and disseminating information to colleagues back in their own schools.

The pupil focus of EXCEL's work has grown organically, moving from improving language and literacy skills to a more general focus on improving communication. There are three predominant principles and conceptual models through which EXCEL is trying to impact on communication.
A focus on pupil voice: the network ran a high-profile conference on pupil voice during 2003 which was responsible for kick-starting many of the initiatives that have followed since.

A culture of school-based enquiry and action research: teacher research activity is largely co-ordinated from ILRC, but is spread throughout the network schools.
A commitment to capacity-building: EXCEL has been committed to building the emotional and intellectual capacity of both its staff and pupils.
Internationalism
EXCEL has developed a deserved reputation as a uniquely international networked learning community. The international element of the network is spread throughout and manifests itself in many visible and influential ways. The co-leaders and management of EXCEL have developed genuinely strong links with the Maltese education authority. Adults and students in the network learn from each other in many ways and at all levels of leadership, from pupil to leadership learning.

The UK-Malta arts project had internationalism at its heart, being planned and delivered as an international collaboration. The project was generally successful and well received but it was the international dimension that was most praised by pupils, staff and parents. The network has been the driver for numerous visits from the UK to Malta and vice versa by staff at all levels over the past two years. These visits have always had a learning focus, whether in terms of planning future projects, exchanging practice, or learning through observation.

> *"The English teachers said with some surprise: 'We've learned so much' from international links. I think as teachers they have had to be clear and precise and nothing is assumed in communication, so then they have learned more from each other."*
>
> Network co-leader

The story-making project managed to include work with the Maltese schools in its research and development phase.

> *"What the Malta link has done in the story-making project is provide wonderful professional development for staff, because what happened was we had link teachers and they went out to Malta. They all heard the stuff about leadership, the CPD for teachers going to a very different culture was actually difficult but really I think they learnt an enormous amount. Our link teachers*

went there, they came here, then we went back for conference … Those kinds of development opportunities don't come round very often."

<div align="right">Headteacher</div>

Creating a shared purpose and ethos

EXCEL offers a powerful example of schools genuinely collaborating and learning from each other. This is partly the result of network leaders building on their own previous experience of collaboration: "I'm a very strong advocate of collaborative learning – between organisations – rather than competition," said one headteacher. EXCEL also demonstrates that successful collaboration relies on establishing and maintaining shared ethos and purpose.

"Yes, EXCEL is definitely different to other local clusters of schools. When you are clustered locally you don't necessarily as headteachers have the same philosophical position or be ready to take on the same developments. An NLC is about a philosophy about our beliefs and values and where we are looking to go."

<div align="right">Headteacher</div>

"You can't collaborate just for collaboration's sake, people need it to be grounded and real. If you are working with a disparate group of schools they need a real vehicle to work on together, then you will get the supportive challenging style. One teacher said, 'I have done it this way for so many years and now I know there is a better way to do it and I can do it like this.' It's those sorts of real case studies that come out of this kind of work."

<div align="right">Network co-leader</div>

The benefits of focused collaboration for a strong network such as EXCEL are many. Established relationships foster trust and enable further sharing to take place.

"Within the network we paired up with schools. So in the story-making project I had staff paired up with Longwell Green staff, so they were then talking to each other about how they were doing it in their classroom. It's been really good when I have been able to phone up other schools and ask them what they are doing. For example, I have two staff moving up to Year 6 next year who haven't done it for a while. I have been able to arrange for them to go and talk to more experienced Year 6 teachers because I know them through the network."

<div align="right">Headteacher</div>

Cross-phase

Research from other networks suggests that maintaining cross-phase networked learning can be difficult. EXCEL successfully maintains a cross-phase dimension to its work, with primary and secondary partners working collaboratively to identify real areas of learning and methods of sharing good practice.

"Because we were working cross-phase it gave me a real understanding of some of the building blocks for learning which primary colleagues have a much better understanding of and which as a secondary specialist I don't really have. I wouldn't have got that from single phase."

<div align="right">Secondary headteacher</div>

Most of the visits to Malta, for both the planning and delivery of learning projects, have involved teachers from different phases. Even when projects have initially appeared to be phase-specific, EXCEL has ensured that teachers from all phases have been able to contribute to them and benefit from their learning outcomes.

EXCEL is part of the wider system

The members of EXCEL are aware that they are part of a highly complex system. Working across countries, as well as cross-phase and cross-authority, has required EXCEL to have the flexibility to fit into arenas with competing demands and priorities. Rather than see this purely as a challenge and a reason

to look inward, EXCEL sees itself very much as part of the wider system, as a means of schools coming together to improve the opportunities afforded to its young people. EXCEL's leaders model a high standard of system awareness and leadership.

> *"Beyond the network, I chair the Kingswood partnership (six secondary schools and one further education college) and the South Gloucester secondary headteachers' group. I go to colleagues and say: 'I have learned so much from working with colleagues cross-phase. If you think you understand learning then you don't, not until you get into working with colleagues who are working with youngsters who are five, six and seven.'"*
>
> Headteacher

Being able to see EXCEL in the context of a wider system enables network members to transfer learning to a wider audience.

> *"We've already planned future work; the NLC will live on undoubtedly. I'm already involved in Primary National Strategy Learning Networks. We are thinking about a kitemark for the Every Child Matters agenda."*
>
> Headteacher

Research and enquiry

EXCEL's commitment to school-based research and enquiry is impressive. Practice is evidently research-informed and there is a clear emphasis on disseminating learning across and beyond the network. A key element in the production of the story-making framework is the result of classroom-based research undertaken by a group of teachers, the core of which came from EXCEL schools. Research results have been distilled into a series of papers that have been made publicly available. The lead teacher for the UK-Malta arts project has also used the project as the focus for a research paper.

The commitment to teacher research has led to it becoming embedded in the fabric of EXCEL. The ILRC is the hub for most of the teacher research.

> *"We are just in the process of agreeing the next phase with our teacher researchers. What we are planning is international teacher research teams. Headteachers are beginning to identify the new teacher researchers. We have an introductory session planned here to talk through the ideas. We are sharing the plans with Malta and we will agree on three common themes from which to select."*
>
> Network co-leader

Research and enquiry were referred to by all of the staff interviewed as positive elements of the network.

> *"The network is something I've always wanted to be more a part of. Seeing other colleagues doing research, for example, I've thought: 'I really ought to be doing something like that.' It's actually made me do that, because I know that over the years I've found out an awful lot about problem-solving, so I need to actually share that with other people, and the networking gives us the opportunity to do that."*
>
> Key Stage 2 teacher

Realism about networked learning

EXCEL NLC is a mature collaboration. The network has engaged in sufficient strategic planning and project delivery to have a strong sense of what it has achieved and where it might go in the future. The network leaders are aware that networked learning takes time to become embedded and to register impact, but they appear optimistic that the network is both sustainable and capable of building upon its success in the future.

> *"International work is hugely important for us. We have a level and depth of learning now. We have done three years and I think we are just ready to start, if I'm really honest. We've got an understanding now of what international work could involve, down to the level of students."*

"Cross-phase work can be a challenge, particularly when the rhythm of the schools is disrupted, eg if there's an Ofsted inspection during the life of a network: how people are able to hold what it is that is important and how you can let people slip by and come back when they are ready. One of the Malta people used the example of the teamwork of geese as a means to exemplify the distributed nature of leadership of a network: when someone drops out, somebody else is there to pick it up."

Network co-leader

Conclusion

EXCEL is a strong example of a successful networked learning community. The group of six UK and six Maltese schools is demonstrating significant learning benefits from ongoing collaboration at all levels. The focus on improving communication skills is leading to positive impact in the areas of pupil attainment, achievement and engagement. The story-making and UK-Malta arts projects are two excellent examples of collaborative learning and have demonstrated the key characteristics of EXCEL, which are leading to impact:

- internationalism
- real collaboration: building from experience to create a shared purpose and ethos
- keeping cross-phase high on the agenda
- EXCEL as part of the wider system
- using research and enquiry as drivers for change
- realism about strengths and challenges of networked learning

The impact of a network is difficult to quantify, but the research for this report showed clearly that EXCEL is adding value to the life of the individual schools, and having a positive effect on many of its pupils.

"What would we not have done without network? Three things: cross-phase, international element, and had an external group (ILRC) to provide a co-leader with a greater understanding of school-based enquiry and research. You could not get those three factors from working on your own. There's no way that that would have happened otherwise."

Headteacher

"The two projects would not have happened without the network, in particular because of the six Maltese schools having the support of the Ministry of Education. No school would have been able to do it on an individual basis. As far as the Ministry of Education in Malta was concerned, they were very keen to be sure that all the principles we were working with were well founded and well thought through, so the NCSL work that we were able to share with them was very important in making these links. That credibility was very significant."

Network co-leader

Networked Learning Communities

Acknowledgements

Methods and sources

This case study was constructed with reference to primary and secondary data and a series of interviews and conversations during May to July 2005.

Interviews

NLC co-leaders (two)
Frogwell Primary School (story-making project)
headteacher
deputy headteacher (research associate)
Reception teacher
Year 2 teacher
Year 5 teacher
SEN teacher
governor
Sir Bernard Lovell Secondary School
deputy headteacher
head of drama (research associate)
Year 5 students (two pupils from one school, three pupils from one school)
head of Key Stage 3
teacher (Malta exchange)
Focus groups
Year 8 pupils (two)
Year 9 pupils (five)
Year 10 pupils (three)
parents (five)

Documentation

Teacher evaluation questionnaires: arts project (two)
Pupil evaluation questionnaires (six)
Parent evaluation questionnaires (seven)
Teacher evaluation questionnaires: story-making (two)
NLG submission document
Annual review materials
Network meeting minutes and planning documents
ILRC journals (four)
NCSL EXCEL case study 2003
Story-making research documentation (eight reports)
Rogers, E, 2003, *Getting the words back – an investigation into the impact of the Story Making Project on less able and low achieving children*, Reading, CfBT Research & Development

Appendix 1: Project descriptions

Story-making project

The story-making project aims to address the learning challenge inherent in better understanding the link between speaking and writing in order to raise standards and improve the quality of children's writing. The project has been led by Mary Rose (EXCEL co-leader and ILRC director) and Pie Corbett (freelance literacy consultant and children's author). Building on a strong research base developed by Professor Traute Taeschner from University of Rome, the project has developed a three-stage methodology. The project is based on the idea that before one can write one needs to learn language, so writers internalise and reuse patterns of language learned from others. There are three stages in the process.

Imitation - listening, joining in and getting to know stories well. Beginning to internalise story structures and sentence patterns.
Innovation - taking a story you know well and using it as a basic structure by changing it. Borrowing and adapting story structures and sentence patterns.
Invention - making up your own stories, calling upon the store of known tales. Manipulating, adapting, altering and creating story structures and sentence patterns.

Stories to be learned are carefully selected so that through oral learning children internalise the language patterns and have a repertoire from which they can draw when speaking and writing.

A central element of the project's development has been the role of teachers as researchers in their school-based peer partnerships. Key research questions were investigated by participants, and all the teacher-researchers kept learning journals. Through seminars at the IRLC the network teachers were able to debate and share their learning from this innovation.

Throughout the life of the project, the EXCEL schools have begun to use the three-stage methodology as the means by which stories are told and learned, gradually integrating the structure across school. The story-making project included the international element in that teachers from Malta have observed its progress during their visits to the English schools and have also been working on the same stories with their children. On reciprocal visits the English teachers were able to share learning with the Maltese teachers.

The story-making project originated within the EXCEL network but has subsequently expanded. Since 2003 the Innovation Unit at the Department for Education and Skills has supported the project, and 14 primary schools have been involved. The project has resulted in the development of a full story-making curriculum framework for use by other schools.

UK-Malta arts project

The arts project involved groups of about 15 students of mixed ages from each of the 4 secondary schools in EXCEL, 2 in the UK and 2 in Malta. The project aimed to use ICT and multimedia techniques in collaborative ways and to culminate in a performance with the theme 'our culture'.

Pupils took digital images which were then posted onto a new educational extranet, an internet-based delivery system used for e-learning that can be accessible to all within the wider learning community. Pupils from the same country were able to take other images, title them, add text and then replace them on the extranet for others to use. The final images were then used to form the story-board that led to the production of the final dramatic pieces. The pieces incorporated music and drama as well as the digital images.

The arts project was introduced to the Maltese colleagues during a week of intensive planning in Malta in May 2004. The project methodology was piloted in detail by a group of Year 9 pupils in the UK during 2004. The full project for pupils ran from November 2004 to May 2005. The project culminated in the Maltese pupils and teachers visiting the UK for a week, during which the four performances were given. The UK pupils and teachers then visited Malta for a week and the performances were given there also.