

**Annual Enquiry 2005
Case study**

Janus Networked Learning Community

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Celebration conference

In July 2005, Janus Networked Learning Community (Janus NLC) held a conference to celebrate the completion of three successful years as a networked learning community. In a conscious demonstration of the network as community, none of the displays of work in the hall were identified by school. All were branded in NCSL colours as network artefacts. The network's children opened the conference with drumming and a choir of 80 children, 8 from each school and no adults on stage. These are just two simple but powerful emblems of the depth of the network's commitment to collaborative working for the benefit of its children and the conference impressed everyone we spoke to: "The standard of work that we saw the week before last [at the celebration conference] ... I was gobsmacked", observed the chair of governors of English Martyrs Roman Catholic (RC) Primary School.

Impact on children: How has the network used ICT to develop pupils' literacy?

We visited 3 of the network's 10 schools, English Martyrs RC Primary School, St Joan of Arc RC School and Churchtown Primary School, in July 2005. The first two schools operate in challenging circumstances in deprived areas of Sefton, Merseyside and Churchtown; in more affluent Southport is one of the largest primary schools in the country, with almost 800 pupils. All of the schools received outstanding Ofsted inspection reports prior to the creation of the network. English Martyrs RC Primary School was the first primary school in the area to be awarded Beacon status and has a tradition of action research and supporting other schools. Churchtown Primary School was the first eco-school in the area and is, like English Martyrs RC Primary School, part of the local authority's emotional intelligence pilot. St Joan of Arc RC School is in an area which has been identified as one of the worst in Europe in terms of deprivation and around 60 per cent of its pupils are entitled to free school meals. Despite this, its standards are well above the national average.

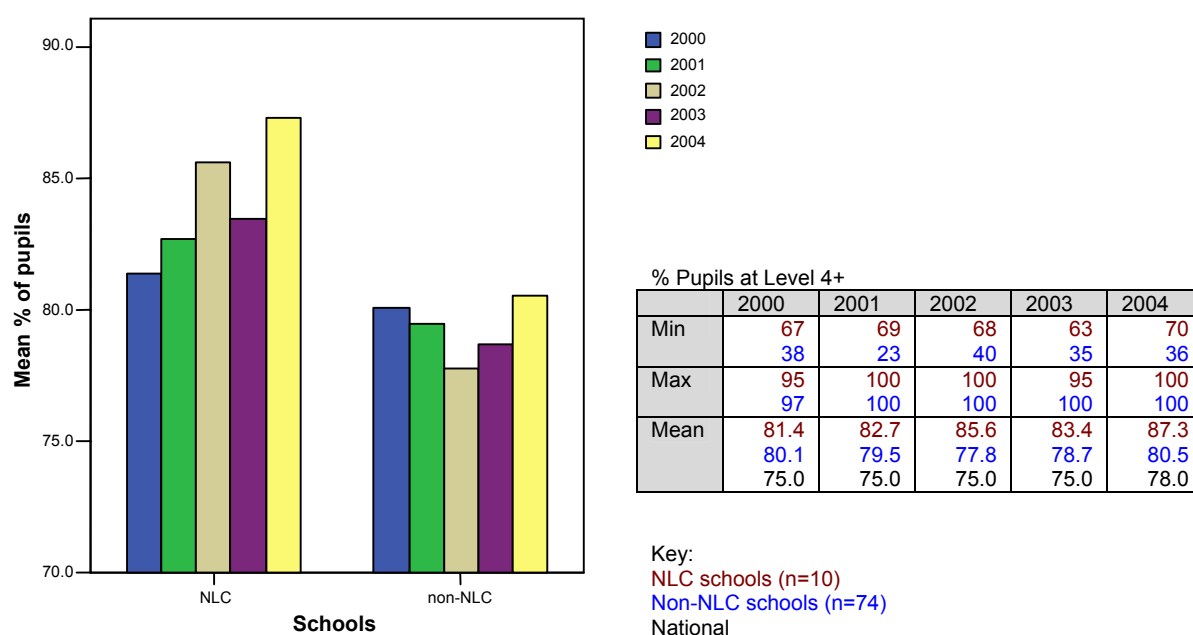
The network has focused on two curriculum areas: improving literacy at Key Stage (KS) 2 using ICT, especially writing for boys, and Foundation Stage to KS1 transition. Threaded through these are emotional intelligence and leadership development. Our initial intention for this case study was to investigate the network's impact on pupils by focusing on how the network has used ICT to improve literacy, but it soon became evident on visiting schools in the network that the use of ICT was so deeply embedded and integrated into the curriculum that it would be a wasted

opportunity to limit ourselves in this way. Increasingly, we have focused on what its successful schools are getting out of being part of a network and whether it is a way of maintaining the momentum and enthusiasm that has made them successful. The headteacher of Churchtown Primary School saw ICT as “the tip of the iceberg”, a hint we took in broadening our interest in ICT by regarding it as emblematic of a whole-school and whole-network approach to education. Accordingly, we have used ICT and literacy as starting points to investigate what the network characterises as its approach to ‘provoking learning’, a phrase singled out as one of the network’s achievements at the celebration conference.

Impact on children: attainment

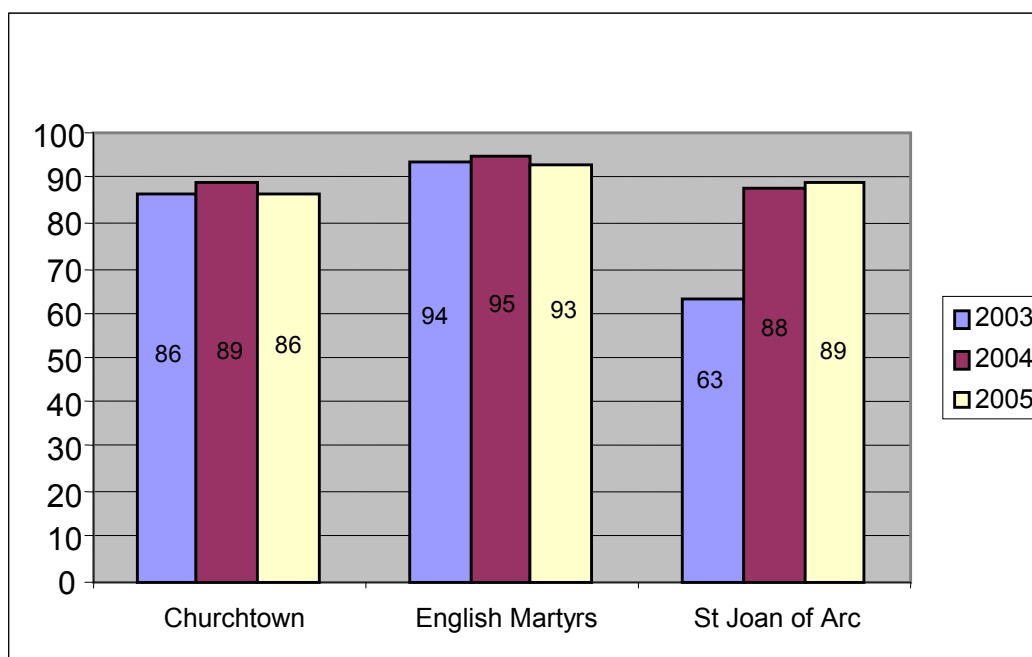
In looking at attainment in literacy at KS2, we began by looking at standards across the network as a whole. Between 2000 and 2004, the schools in Janus NLC have shown a larger increase in pupils gaining Level 4 and above in English KS2 than non-networked schools in Sefton, a differential that has increased slightly since the network was established (Figure 1).

Figure 1: NLC and non-NLC schools: percentage of pupils achieving Level 4+ in English at Key Stage 2, 2000–2004



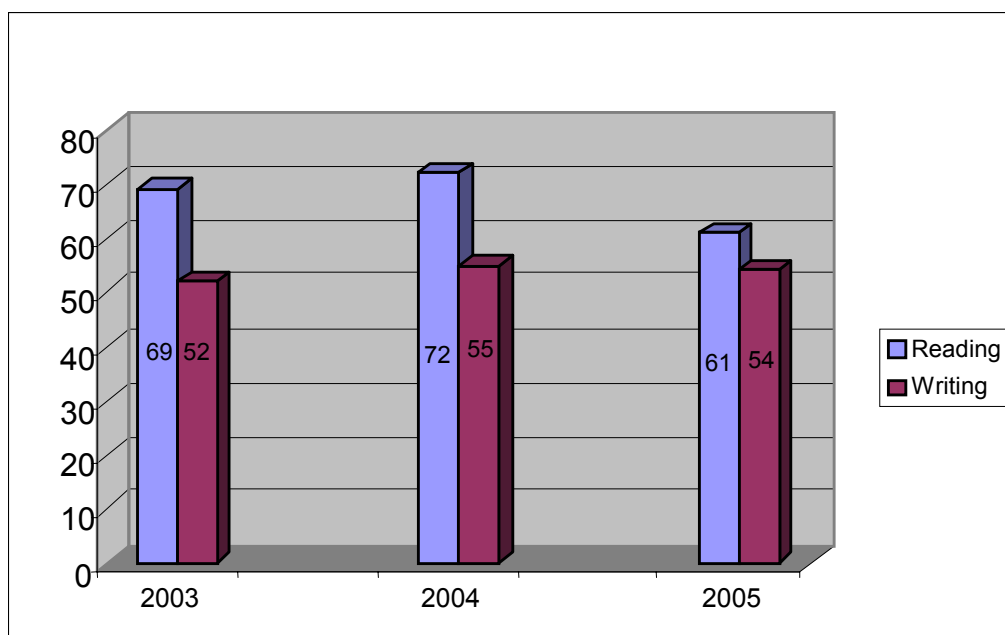
In terms of raw KS2 English results at Level 4 or above, Churchtown Primary School and English Martyrs RC Primary School have maintained their already very good results as they have introduced significant levels of innovation into the curriculum. St Joan of Arc RC School has achieved dramatically improved results since the network was established (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Churchtown Primary School, English Martyrs RC Primary School and St Joan of Arc RC School: percentage of pupils achieving Level 4+ in English at Key Stage 2, 2003–2005



Taking an even narrower focus, English Martyrs RC Primary School has also achieved high percentages of pupils gaining Level 5 and above in English since the network was established, as well as the highest value-added score in Sefton in 2004. This placed it in the top 5 per cent of schools in the country in terms of value-added between KS1 and KS2.

Figure 3: English Martyrs RC Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Level 5+ in English (reading and writing) at Key Stage 2, 2003–2005



The three schools' headteachers were clear that their involvement in the network has enabled them to learn from each other's expertise and that the network's focus on ICT and emotional intelligence has had a positive impact on its schools' attainment in literacy.

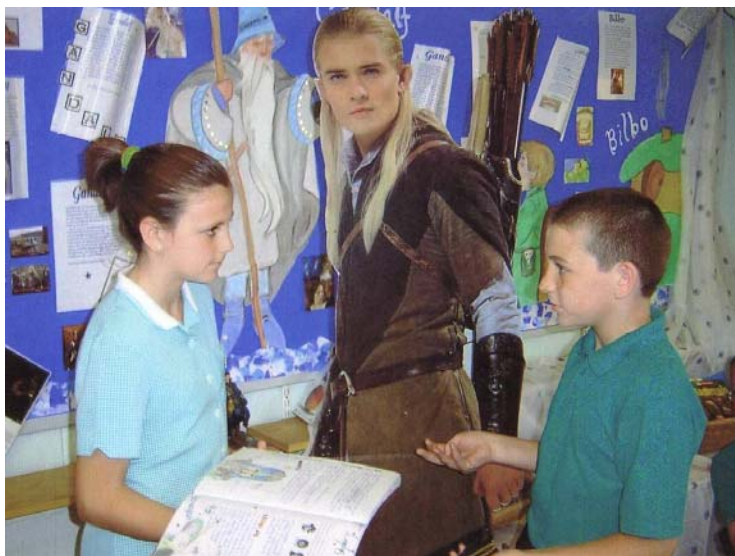
Impact on children: ICT and achievement

Members of the network were confident that the greatest contribution that the network had made to children's achievement was in terms of time. For example, teachers and other staff gained time to work on research projects and with their school's ICT co-ordinators, who also operate as a cross-network group, to increase their knowledge and enable them to embed ICT in the curriculum. In turn, this allowed them to make the cross-curricular links necessary to cover multiple subjects and learning focuses simultaneously. To find out more about what has made the school successful in literacy, we observed a Year 6 literacy class at English Martyrs RC Primary School in which one of the network's lead learners used film clips from *Lord of the Rings* to highlight the importance of looking for supporting evidence for a statement from hard-copy text, displayed on an interactive whiteboard. The teacher had undertaken research into using digital film and video as an innovative way of raising standards in KS2 writing, with the support of a Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS), in 2004. The technology was fully integrated into the lesson. Pupils were invited to walk around the classroom to share learning, and researched synonyms, such as 'audacious' and 'judicious' for 'brave', on the internet or with a thesaurus and selected answers on the whiteboard. The teacher told us that the use of film had helped to break down barriers experienced by so many children in literacy and make texts more accessible. The impact of both film and ICT is evident in the following pupil feedback: "This year the movies have helped me with my literacy by showing me what things to look for" and "When I touch the board myself, I remember what to do" were two comments from pupils.



Pupils giving feedback

The teacher had also found that boys had shown more interest in reading excerpts from the text as a result of work based around the film: "When I have seen it on film, it is easier to search for it in a book" said one pupil in feedback. Learning links were made explicitly with other work to elicit emotional responses from the children. Pupils were encouraged to learn collaboratively, which was also reflected in their feedback: 'When people share their ideas on the board, the work is easier' read a pupil feedback form.



A life-sized cut-out of the character Legolas from *Lord of the Rings* is used to provoke discussion and learning.

In a previous lesson, learning had been provoked by the introduction of a life-sized cut-out of one of the characters from *Lord of the Rings* into the classroom at the beginning of the lesson (see image). The children's subsequent discussion drew on the work that they had been doing in class, spontaneously using terminology they had learned in literacy lessons such as 'this demonstrates', 'I think this portrays' and 'my evidence shows' in animated conversation among themselves.

The systematic approach to pupil feedback in this class reflects Janus NLC's commitment to pupil voice as a means of securing pupils' buy-in to the ethos and practice of the network. Teachers spoke of pupil evaluation having led to curriculum plans being rewritten to be more creative and cross-curricular - and it doesn't stop there.

"Pupils have had an impact on changes that have been made to the curriculum ... how the curriculum's approached, but we want to move on a little bit in terms of how much they're included in assessment procedures and things like that ... If they're that aware now of themselves as learners and they can feed back and inform the teachers planning, then surely they can assess where they are in terms of standards, how well they've done and how they can progress further?"

Lead learner, English Martyrs RC Primary School

This is not an isolated example. We observed similarly innovative approaches at Churchtown Primary School, for example, in a Reception class in which children were reviewing and evaluating their previous week's work by watching a multimedia display and digital images of themselves on an interactive whiteboard. What linked the use of ICT in the three schools we visited was that it was integrated into the classroom, cross-curricular and informed by a commitment to improving pupil learning.

Impact on children: engagement

Literacy was also the focus of BPRS research conducted by another of the lead learners at English Martyrs RC Primary School. Four Year 5 boys who had underperformed in the Year 4 optional SATs, particularly in writing, were selected for a project focusing on writing for film using digital video. Interviews and questionnaires revealed that the boys lacked confidence when asked to write independently and found writing "difficult" and "boring at times". The project broadened the whole class's view of writing and literacy by focusing on cine-literacy (ie, the language of film and film-making) for the first term. According to the teacher, offering the

class an alternative approach, in which they analysed the construction of clips from well-known films and the way they attempted to influence the audience's emotional response, had an immediate impact on the boys' motivation. During the year, the focus group also worked on a number of film projects, which they evaluated at each stage alongside their own script writing. This gave the boys ownership of the project and had an immediate impact on their own writing. When asked about what he had learned, one boy responded that: "I think about what it would look like on the screen and that helps me get a picture in my head ... Then I can write about it better." By the end of Year 5, the boys in the group had all shown significant increases in their attainment during the optional SATs, all achieving at least Level 4 in writing.



Yr 5 pupils filming rehearsals for evaluation, part of a BPRS film project in which they wrote scripts based on a class text.

Similarly, one previously unmotivated boy increased greatly in confidence and self-esteem when he was given responsibility for editing and emailing material to St Monica's School, another member of the network, in a collaborative story-writing project on Greek myths. The teacher research provided evidence that using digital video and ICT in this way motivated the targeted boys, by offering them choices and opportunities to take responsibility and operate outside the normal classroom environment. It also concluded that the children who had rarely taken an active role in text-based classes were more engaged when working with film than written narrative and more ready to contribute to the lesson. The resources developed with this Year 5 group are now available to the network as a whole through training and the network's website.

School processes: What contribution has the network made?

Collaborative ICT

The network's ICT co-ordinators' group has ensured that resources are shared with others on shared drives in schools and via training and CD. Where a school has developed expertise in a particular area, such as film and digital video in the case of English Martyrs RC Primary School, that expertise is not restricted to the school. Governors, parents and local authority advisers have all been impressed by the integration of ICT into the curriculum.

All of the schools we visited are doing interesting things with ICT and multimedia to provoke children's and adults' learning. What the network adds is a collaborative dimension that enables them to share ideas as resources and practices are being constructed. For example, the Chocolate Palace is a multimedia resource for literacy, created by children and overseen by a Year 3 teacher at Churchtown Primary School who wanted to make cross-curricular links between literacy, ICT, and design and technology. The class spent three weeks on this one

activity, writing their own fairy story, creating shoebox scenes like the one pictured below and recording them with digital cameras to create interactive e-books using PowerPoint. As a finishing touch, the children recorded themselves reading their part of the story. When the project was finished, it became a network artefact shared at first in Churchtown Primary School, then used in staff ICT training for the network as a whole, where it was shown as an example of how cross-curricular links can be made in literacy. One boy at Churchtown Primary School described to us how much he had enjoyed working on the project. Before that he did not feel capable of extended writing at all.



The Chocolate Palace is a multimedia resource for literacy, created by children and overseen by a Year 3 teacher at Churchtown Primary School.

As we have already seen, the network's encouragement for teachers to take on BPRS projects allowed schools to work together on some of the research. For example, two Year 5 teachers and classes, from Churchtown Primary School and English Martyrs RC Primary School, worked collaboratively on a BPRS project on the use of media with a BBC News 24 journalist. The project's aim was 'to put the literacy curriculum into a real-life context'. The children involved learned about the skills needed to write press releases, identify hidden agendas and conduct interviews. The teachers found that many children thought more about their writing if they knew it was going to be recorded for others to hear and 'all of the children in my class receiving learning support liked working on audio and found it less pressured than writing' (BPRS report, Dinsdale, L, 2004). The network's emphasis on the value of BPRS enquiry and cross-curricular approaches was an important influence on this work.

The network's ICT co-ordinators' group, which has allowed ICT co-ordinators to pool expertise and develop ideas together, has played an important role in supporting both the creation and the dissemination of resources like these. The ICT group produced a CD for the network's celebration conference as a showcase for the ICT and multimedia resources they have created, which has been shared with the local authority and schools beyond the network. Examples of e-books, digital video and sophisticated PowerPoint presentations are also available on the Janus NLC website. As a permanent, digital extension of the conference's displays, all of the materials on the CD are presented as network resources, rather than being associated with individual schools.

Provoking adult learning

As we have already seen, the notion of networked enquiry proved highly attractive to Janus NLC schools and led to 14 practitioners undertaking BPRSs in 2003–04 with the support of Liverpool Hope University. The objective in doing this was pragmatic: "to make the BPRS something that can be disseminated, can be shared [and] can be part of the Janus project" says a lead learner

at English Martyrs RC Primary School. Several projects involved the use of ICT and one of the teachers at St Monica's School won a *Times Educational Supplement* award in 2004 for innovative use of ICT in teaching and learning. Other research projects included exploring the benefits of digital video for literacy in Year 5; emotional literacy and implementing the PEWIT model of effective learning (incorporating Problem solving, Embeddedness, Working memory, Interaction and Time) in geography and art in Year 1. As a consequence, network members have visited other schools to share their findings and experiences, and teachers from outside the network have visited classes, both formally and informally. This indicates the degree of professional and intellectual confidence teachers have gained from the network's emphasis on collaborative enquiry.

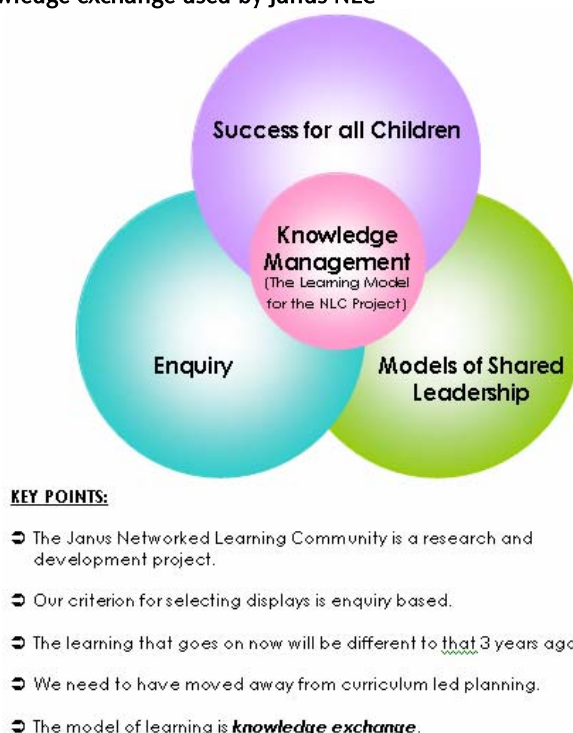
This desire to enhance the professional development, and by extension the leadership capacity, of staff in its schools is also reflected in the network's approach to adult learning. All of the staff members that we spoke to emphasised the degree of inclusive planning that preceded the foundation of Janus NLC: "We got the values right early on", reported the headteacher of St Joan of Arc RC School. Essentially, what the network did was to take what the schools did well and combine them to make something broader and more systematic.

"When something's been successful we've used the same model ... like the model in which we've involved the heads, we've done the visioning meeting, we've looked at identifying the strengths of the network, we've used that with emotional intelligence, we've used that with this [ICT], so there is a common pattern coming through here."

Headteacher, Churchtown Primary School

As Figure 4 indicates, learning was based on a model of knowledge exchange.

Figure 4: Model of knowledge exchange used by Janus NLC



The overwhelming proportion of NLC funding was targeted on adult learning, running whole-staff training events for up to 80 staff at a time, focusing on Key Stages 1 and 2. Outside the BRPS-related work with Liverpool Hope University, partnerships with higher education institutions (HEIs) did not prove successful so the network took the decision to be self-sufficient, running continuing professional development (CPD) in-house using models from the

Networked Learning Group and elsewhere to combine theoretical input with practitioner-led training in an attempt to, in the words of the headteacher of English Martyrs RC Primary School, “up the knowledge base of practitioners”. What made this model particularly powerful is that at the end of each session, practitioners were required to go away with a relevant task and return to the next session with evidence from its implementation in the classroom. The language of these early feedback sheets is revealing in questions such as: “What provoked your learning as a consequence of the last training day?” and “How can you respond creatively to Janus’s ideas for developing your learning and that of the children?” Adult learning was valued as a precursor for children’s learning and opportunities for collaborative enquiry were sought explicitly. Staff from the target year groups would share their learning with colleagues in their schools before feeding back to the network as a whole: “Not only did they have the theory but they saw what 10 schools had done with that theory”, says the headteacher of English Martyrs RC Primary School. This also meant that each training session effectively became part of a larger enquiry process, building on feedback loops from previous sessions and allowing CPD to follow the track of actual classroom need. The planning happened at all levels, including support staff. This was the first time that teaching assistants had been involved right from the outset of in-service training days, which they found very exciting, especially as it was founded on collaboration with their network colleagues:

“Network expertise was used to train staff. The most powerful thing is practitioners talking to practitioners. It’s so cross-curricular. ... Give them tools and the motivation and teachers are incredibly creative.”

Headteacher, Churchtown Primary School

Network characteristics

Context

Janus NLC consists of 10 primary schools in Sefton, Merseyside. Five of the schools are in highly deprived areas in the southern part of the authority and have a history of working together in a Catholic cluster and a Beacon network. They joined with schools from the north of the local education authority (LEA), some of which they had already worked with on an LEA emotional intelligence pilot, to form Janus NLC in September 2002.

Learning

Our intention in returning once more to the centrality of learning in Janus NLC’s activity is to suggest that the network built a deep and systematic approach to learning, designed to operate at all levels from pupil and adult to school and network, into its planning from the start. This is most clearly represented in the concept of ‘provoking learning’ with its suggestions of confrontation, encouragement and stimulation to progress. One of the network’s headteachers indicated that the development of the network has completely changed her approach to recruiting new staff.

“I wouldn’t look for curriculum areas any more ... I would be delving deep to see what any candidates thought about learning and how it happens because that’s been the crucial thing that’s bubbled up with us for the past three years. We’ve had some fabulous discussions about how learners learn – that means us as well.”

Headteacher, English Martyrs RC Primary School

The discourse we encountered around learning was varied and fascinating. Members of the network spoke of the need for “shorter, in-depth, quality learning” of having “indulged ourselves in learning” and “chased the learning” in opposition to focusing on formal results. It was also suggested that pupil voice be extended to incorporate home pupil voice and home learning, to bring in elements and interests which are currently closed to the network.

Essentially, Janus NLC is concerned with an eclectic, creative and self-critical approach to learning: “It’s not about buying equipment but about staff and pupils knowing how to use it to learn”, says the headteacher of Churchtown Primary School. One of the headteachers sees the biggest impact of the network as having given teachers time and permission to embed new things. This has obviously also increased confidence. One teacher felt that working with network colleagues had given him the confidence to apply, successfully, to become an advanced skills teacher. Another of the network’s lead learners articulated the network’s impact on her professional identity.

“[The network] has changed my perception of education. I have realised I am still a learner. It has changed me as a person – I am now more confident. The relationship between me and my job is good and I have tremendous professional confidence. I can justify what and why we do what we do. It is not that it is comfortable, it is a learning journey. Being in a network makes sure that you are never in a rut.”

Lead learner, English Martyrs RC Primary School

Creativity

The notion of transformation, which was highlighted in the previous quotation, came up again and again in the schools we visited, despite their previous success: “I think the learning’s different ... I think the creativity has definitely mushroomed in the last two years”, says the headteacher of English Martyrs RC Primary School. Along with communication, children’s voice and communication, creativity was identified at the outset of Janus NLC as a key component of its strategy for affecting the quality of teaching and learning. Asked to comment on the ethos of the network, our focus group described it in terms such as creative, enthusiastic, inspiring, energetic and inclusive. More than one member of the network saw the network as embodying the “permission to take risks”. Another saw it as having allowed them to “ignore certain things” and the three headteachers we spoke to all emphasised separately that the network originally appealed to them as a way of supporting and protecting each other. Unlike some of the clusters in which they had previously been involved, Janus NLC has overcome competitiveness and nurtured innovation.

“The network has created new capacity to cover the work and therefore we can now be more creative. There are more opportunities to think outside the box and use our skills in other areas of the curriculum. Children want more variety.”

Headteacher, Churchtown Primary School

It is telling that creativity is always related to children’s learning. In the words of one of the school’s chair of governors, the network has “never lost sight of the child”. Similarly, the network’s focus on emotional intelligence has had an impact on staff, with support staff reporting feeling more valued and being used more effectively than before. We found evidence that the headteachers’ notion of schools supporting each other had penetrated quite deeply.



To take an example from ICT, senior staff at Churchtown Primary School were clear that while their heavy investment in technology over the past few years, which had included abandoning the LEA's ICT network and adopting an alternative system, was not directly related to their membership of Janus NLC, the network's support and emphasis on ICT had helped to justify that decision. They felt that the risk had paid off, greatly increasing the reliability of their technical network and thus improving teaching and learning. Furthermore, what they have learned has been fed back into the network.

The network has used the diversity of its schools to foster this creative approach, building on the varying interests and knowledge of its schools, rather than bringing in outside expertise. Its systematic approach to training is evidence of this, as is its general approach to developing the use of ICT: "What we said was 'What have we got already in each of the 10 schools that can be used now, straightaway from day one of the project, that we can share and start creating resources with?'" said the ICT co-ordinator and a lead learner of English Martyrs RC Primary School. The emphasis on creativity and learning seems to have meant that the network is not content to stand still but constantly provokes its schools to learn in innovative and creative ways. This does not mean that all of the schools in the network have moved at the same speed. For the first 18 months or so, 2 of the schools struggled with their engagement with the network's approach to the curriculum but then seemed to realise the benefits of participation, caught up and are keen to continue to be involved. This again underlines the supportive function of the network and the importance of community.

Conclusion

Building community

We began by suggesting that the fact that the schools we visited value the focus, collaboration and mutual support that the network offers tells us something about the power and utility of networking to successful schools operating in a range of challenging circumstances. The Janus NLC schools came together because they saw more benefit in working together as a learning community than in attempting to maintain their momentum alone. Local authority support has since increased, particularly since some of its representatives attended the celebration conference, and they are now using senior members of the network in all kinds of consultative roles. This invites questions about the level and the timing of local authority support for networks, especially as they are finding their identity. It is an indication of the network's confidence that one of its newly qualified teachers has given a network presentation to the local authority.

The importance to the network of collaboration and equity is also evident in the schools'

commitment to distributed leadership. We saw evidence of network leadership in lead learners, ICT co-ordinators and teaching assistants. The headteacher of St Joan of Arc RC School, which has a flat structure without a deputy, felt that this had increased the level of trust in the network, thereby making it more effective: “I can feel confident that people who have been lead learners in the network will do a good job ... they will disseminate what goes on much more than in the hierarchical structures of the past”. This has been supported by the creation of a more inclusive community in which teaching assistants and support staff in general have been able to collaborate much more. For example, bursars have been much more involved in knowledge-sharing across the network, which has enhanced their expertise and informed their professional decision-making.

This leads us to suggest, in conclusion, that building community is one of the characteristics of the network; a commitment which was perhaps most strikingly captured in its emphasis on network identity at the celebration conference. The headteacher of St Joan of Arc RC School suggested that it is particularly important for schools and areas facing challenging circumstances to look outwards and the school has very consciously built international links with schools in Belgium, Hungary and China as a way of encouraging its local community to do this. Membership of the network adds a further layer of support to this sense of community and, of course, these international links are now also network links. Community is also being extended in the Janus NLC’s work with parents in helping them to support their children’s learning at home and with non-network schools. The network’s work on emotional intelligence and pupil voice is also important in this context. Churchtown Primary School’s headteacher commented that: “One of the reasons we went into emotional intelligence – we felt it would impact on staff and pupils and make learning more positive. We feel the motivation has increased”. The network’s interest in emotional intelligence is part of a conscious attempt to improve the learning and increase the self-esteem and resilience of children living, in some cases, in very difficult circumstances. There is also evidence that the network’s emphasis on provoking learning in the form of its commitment to large-scale CPD and collaborative enquiry has contributed to its own resilience and capacity to sustain its activity. This suggests that networked collaboration is about mutual support as much as working together.

“I’m amazed how some of the new heads still think they’ve got to come up with all the answers and they work very much in isolation. They’re the ones that worry me because I just don’t think you can do it anymore.”

Headteacher, Churchtown Primary School

Acknowledgements

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Methods and sources

Interviews

Headteacher network co-leader, English Martyrs RC Primary School and
Lead learners, English Martyrs RC Primary School (3)
Headteacher, St Joan of Arc RC School
Headteacher, Churchtown Primary School
2 deputy headteachers, Churchtown Primary School
Lead learner, Churchtown Primary School
Year 5 teacher, Churchtown Primary School
ICT co-ordinator, Churchtown Primary School

Class observations

Year 6 class, English Martyrs RC Primary School
Reception classes, Churchtown Primary School (2)
Years 1 and 2 classes, Churchtown Primary School

Focus group at English Martyrs RC Primary School

Chair of governors
Parent governor
Special educational needs co-ordinator
Teaching assistant
Teacher not directly involved in literacy work
Headteacher and lead learners (3)

Documents and other sources

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St Joan of Arc 17-10-00
Network Development Plan 2003
NLG Network profile
Spring Enquiry 2004
NLC Year 2 Review activity record 2004
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