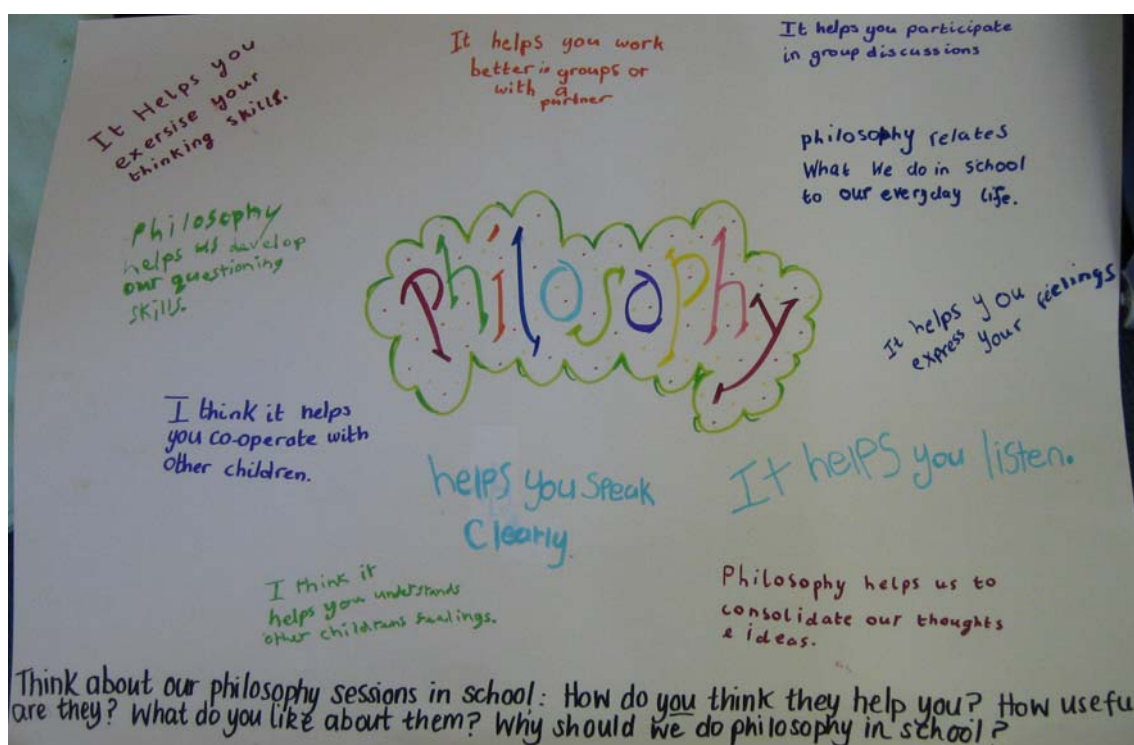


**Annual Enquiry 2005  
Case study**

# Oldham Networked Learning Community

**Alison Stott & Ronnie Woods**



Poster showing ideas from Year 4 pupils at Beal Vale Primary School on the positive benefits of philosophy

## Philosophy for Children

*"Philosophy for Children<sup>1</sup> is a trademark of a curriculum for 6-16 year olds developed by Professor Lipman and his associates at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children in New Jersey. [It employs] 'communities of enquiry' in which teachers and children collaborate with each other to develop both questioning and reasoning skills. Philosophy for Children puts enquiry at the heart of the educational process and as a network learning community we are committed to its development."*

Year 2 review, activity log

This enquiry focuses on the Philosophy for Children (P4C) strand of network activity in Oldham Networked Learning Community, using data collected via interviews with small groups of pupils and their teachers, discussion with all of the network headteachers and a short written survey capturing the views of 54 members of school staff at 4 of the network schools. We explore the impact of P4C in the classroom, and examine the decisions made by the leadership of the network, and the professional development opportunities created within the network that have enabled this impact to occur.

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

Philosophy lead learner

<sup>1</sup> In this country, Philosophy for Children is supported by the Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education (SAPERE).

## What is it and how is it integrated into learning and teaching?

A typical philosophy session is described as starting with a stimulus, often a short story being read to the class by the teacher. Other types of stimulus include drama sketches and works of art or sculpture. Pupils brainstorm a range of questions that the stimulus has raised for them. Several different voting mechanisms are used, by which pupils choose one question for further discussion in both small groups and as a whole class. At a later date, another question from the list may be chosen for further discussion.

All of the schools within the network have adopted P4C to some extent. Most teaching staff in each school have received training in P4C from SAPERE to either Level 1 or Level 2, and as a result the majority of pupils are engaged in some form of P4C activities in the classroom.

Philosophy is largely taught as a discrete, regular, timetabled lesson. All of the teachers recognise the benefits of having distinct philosophy sessions, and initially enabling pupils to establish a different set of rules, where all opinions were valued, and which positively affects the classroom dynamic.

## Impact on children: attainment

*"You get other people's ideas and fix them all together like a piece of Lego ... When we are sharing our ideas, we can stick it together to make a big, big plan."*

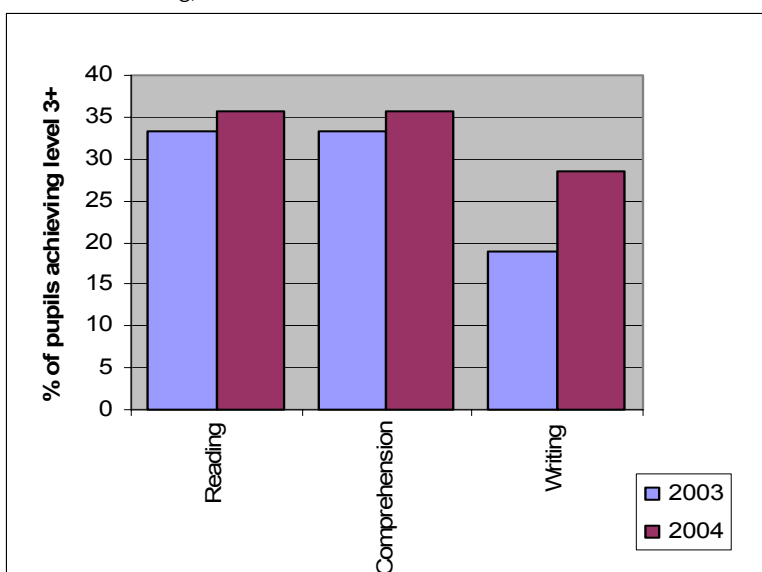
Year 2 pupil

Looking at trends in the Key Stage 2 attainment data for the six schools in the network reveals a very complex picture from which it is difficult to isolate the impact that membership of the networked learning community (NLC) has had on pupils. Comparing the combined results of the schools in the network with those of all other primary schools in the local authority reveals the following.

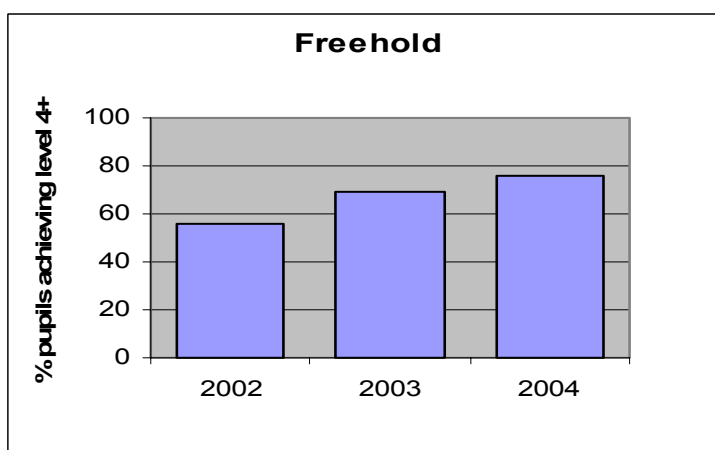
- Between 2002 and 2004, the average point score at Key Stage 2 of the schools in the network rose by 0.3 compared with 0.1 across other Oldham primary schools.
- Although the average value-added score between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 in the network schools decreased by 0.1 between 2003 and 2004, the corresponding decrease across other schools in Oldham was three times this magnitude at 0.3.

At both Beal Vale Primary School and Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School, trends in pupils' attainment in English, where improvements in questioning, thinking and reasoning skills arising through P4C might be expected to have positive knock-on effects, also reveal gains (Figures 1 and 2).

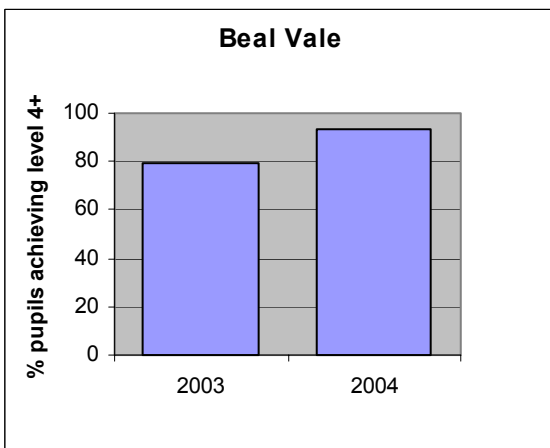
**Figure 1:** Beal Vale Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Level 3+ at Key Stage 1 in reading, comprehension and writing, 2003-04



**Figure 2:** Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School: percentage of pupils achieving Level 4+ in English at Key Stage 2, 2002-2004



**Figure 3:** Beal Vale Primary School: percentage of pupils achieving Level 4+ in English at Key Stage 2, 2003-2004



However, the attainment statistics represent a very limited snapshot in time. A wide range of factors in addition to membership of the NLC may also have contributed to the changes. One of the co-leaders expressed the opinion that the network was “still only just scratching the surface” in terms of impacting directly on pupils. This was partly attributed to the process of refocusing that the network had undergone since its foundation, and the time that had been taken for the network to develop a mutually agreeable focus.

## Impact on children: what do pupils think?

Pupils themselves have responded positively to philosophy, and those interviewed were able to identify and articulate some of the benefits they experienced as a result.

*“I think the good thing about [philosophy] is hearing other people’s thoughts, and hearing what they say, in case they have the same answer as you, and then you won’t feel uncomfortable.”*

Year 4 pupil

*“[Philosophy] makes you realise that you should come to school because philosophy lessons are fun, and if you don’t go to them you feel you are missing out on some fun.”*

Year 2 pupil

One pupil specifically mentioned the opportunity to work with pupils from another school in a philosophy session.

*“I liked it when Mather Street came for philosophy ... It was more fun, we made a lot of friends.”*

Year 2 pupil

A number of pupils interviewed appeared to be using strategies from philosophy sessions during the interview. Pupils often began their answers with “like [name of another child] ... said”, or “I agree with ...”, or they built upon or reiterated other pupils’ ideas when it was clear that they were unsure what to say in response to a question.

## Impact on children: what do teachers and school staff think?

Almost without exception, teachers interviewed and school staff surveyed expressed positive opinions about the benefits of introducing P4C in their classes. The most commonly reported areas of improvement for pupils related to questioning, speaking and listening, reasoning, social skills and personal confidence.

*“Pupils’ speaking and listening ability has improved, as has some children’s confidence in speaking out. Their ability to form philosophical questions and to identify good questions for discussion has improved. Pupils’ confidence in sharing their own opinions is continuing to improve.”*

Year 3 teacher

*“[Pupils] have developed their questioning skills. They are developing the ability to listen to the views of others and respect them. They are now able to listen with sustained concentration.”*

Year 1 teacher and nursery nurse

*“Increased confidence of certain (not all) children. The ability to ask good, open questions has improved. The ability to build on what others have said has also improved. The opportunity to discuss issues that are interesting to them but would not necessarily be*

*covered through personal, social and health education (PSHE). Developed the skills of debating and listening.”*

Teacher

Two of the headteachers in the network explained the specific benefits of P4C within their schools, where a high proportion of the pupils spoke English as their second language.

*“It really makes a difference to their speaking, and being able to speak like that it’s obviously changed their listening and reasoning.”*

Headteacher

*“There’s so much involvement of the children. Lessons are no longer teacher led. Children are no longer passive learners. It’s made such a difference to those children, especially their confidence in speaking.”*

Headteacher

Where P4C was particularly well established, teachers also gave examples of pupils using the skills that they had developed during philosophy in other areas of the curriculum.

*“I can definitely see a massive difference in science. They are actually able to think things through ... They are able to say: “I think this. What do you think?”, and listen to each other, and develop an idea, which I think is a skill that philosophy has brought on.”*

Years 4 and 5 teacher

*“Encouraging children to share opinions and agree or disagree with others – this has started to come into other sessions and subjects. I have used group talk more since starting philosophy.”*

Year 3 teacher

The most recent Ofsted inspection of Beal Vale Primary School in May 2005 supports the positive views of P4C reported in the survey and during interviews. It identifies the contribution P4C had made to improved pupil attainment, stating: ‘Involvement in Network Learning has had a very positive impact’<sup>2</sup> and going on to explain that ‘speaking skills have been a focus for development through the philosophy programme and this is having a positive effect upon standards’.<sup>3</sup> In Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School, where Philosophy for Children was initially introduced before the formation of the NLC, the Ofsted report of January 2004 noted that ‘two sessions of philosophical enquiry were seen ... Good planning in both sessions ensured that all pupils were involved in thinking deeply about serious issues and in asking and answering questions that led them to greatly increased understanding’.<sup>4</sup>

Another indicator of teachers’ and headteachers’ perceptions of the benefit and value of P4C for pupils is the evidence of their continued commitment to teaching it regularly as a separate, timetabled subject, despite the pressures imposed by an already demanding national curriculum. This commitment to philosophy was also evident in displays around the schools (Figures 4 and 5).

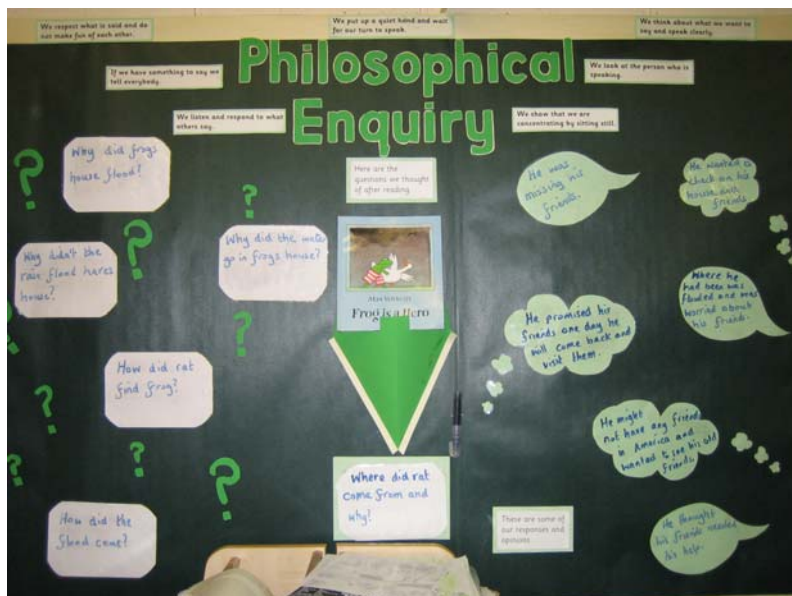
<sup>2</sup> Ofsted Inspection Report, Beal Vale School, 2005 p 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ofsted Inspection Report, Beal Vale School, 2005 p 6.

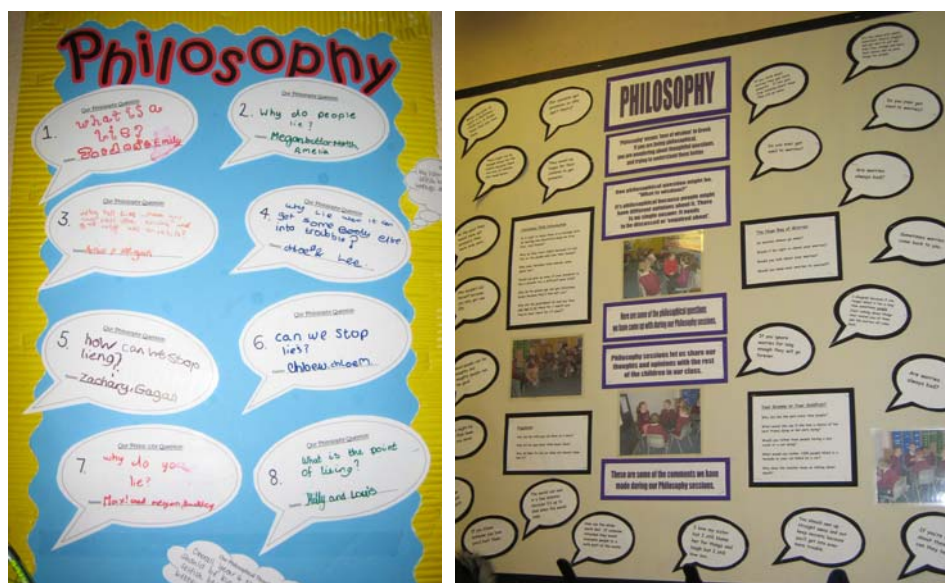
<sup>4</sup> Ofsted Inspection Report, Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School, 2004 p 33.



**Figure 4:** Philosophy display at Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School



**Figure 5:** Philosophy displays at Beal Vale Primary School



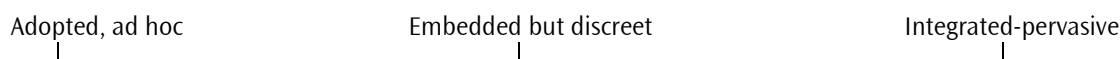
One headteacher reported that teachers' commitment to the subject was 'reinforced by pupil awareness, their responses, their obvious enjoyment, their engagement, and their questions about when the next philosophy lesson will be'.

## School processes: what contribution has the network made?

### Whole-school approach

In some schools – most definitely in Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School where P4C had been established the longest, although there was also evidence in other schools – the pedagogy of P4C had become pervasive across the school and across the curriculum, as shown in the continuum in Figure 6.

**Figure 6:** Continuum of experience in P4C across the network



Headteachers suggested that the different points on the continuum merely represent where each school is on its own journey, while still valuing the expertise held in the schools where P4C is more developed. In those schools where P4C has become most pervasive, teachers attach considerable importance to the whole-school approach, suggesting that implementation of P4C is easier and more successful, and that the children get a more coherent experience across their education, as a result of adopting this approach.

*“It is a whole-school approach ... I didn’t think it would be good for the children to have a year out with me, where they didn’t do any philosophy, and then go into Year 5 and start it up again.”*

Year 4 teacher

The headteachers also see the continuum as illustrative of the progress made by individual teachers as they develop their skills and understanding in the use of P4C processes.

What was clearly manifest in a multitude of comments was the level of staffroom debate about teaching and learning. The teachers interviewed and surveyed described how the P4C training has impacted on their classroom pedagogy.

*“I do philosophy as a discrete area, but do find it useful in other areas, skills etc, eg, asking questions, discussion.”*

Teacher

*“It has improved my questioning skills. I have a better understanding of children’s thinking and reasoning skills. As a consequence, I encourage children to explain thoughts and thinking across other subjects.”*

Years 5 and 6 teacher

*“This has really added value to work we do on speaking and listening and thinking skills ... I have used the questioning skills to support pupil peer co-coaching.”*

Year 5 teacher and deputy head

However, it was clear from the survey results that the impact of P4C on teaching assistants was not uniform across all the schools, and the provision of information and training to classroom support staff was already identified as an area for further network involvement.

All the headteachers spoke positively about how things are different in their schools.

*“It’s gone beyond philosophy lessons in our school. It is now being used in science and history lessons. It makes time for pupil reflection. They’ve become better listeners. They’ve*



*also come to understand that often there isn't only one answer, that there can be more than one opinion. That's been really good for the less confident: it's given them a voice, a voice to speak out and express their opinion."*

Headteacher

*"Staff think of the curriculum in a different way. [It's] a more active, enquiry-based curriculum where good questioning pervades the whole curriculum. We've had whole enquiry weeks where children across age groups have engaged in enquiry together. The whole school was involved."*

Headteacher

## Co-coaching

The adult co-coaching strand of network activity has given staff in all the schools the skills to observe, reflect upon and discuss each other's classroom practice and has encouraged the development of school environments where teaching and learning are regularly debated. Classroom support staff are also being drawn into these conversations and benefiting from the debate.

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

Headteacher

## Internal capacity-building

Alongside this, there is a sense of growing the schools', and network's, internal capacity in P4C. The majority of teaching staff have received Level 1 P4C training. Key staff in each of the schools have been identified as lead learners for philosophy and undertaken the more intensive four-day residential course to become trained to Level 2. Alongside co-coaching skills from the adult co-coaching strand of the network, using what they have learned in this way has built internal capacity. These individuals have become key levers for change across their schools and as their expertise has grown, so has their confidence to lead initiatives and shape their future direction.

*"It's coming from the classroom. Control is moving – it's coming from below."*

Headteacher

*"It's moving both ways, down-up and up-down. There's still a place for strong headteacher involvement, but it's definitely moving both ways."*

Headteacher

The Philosophy Action Plan 2005<sup>5</sup> identifies this internal capacity as vital in providing support to other school staff, including cascading P4C training to classroom support staff.

## Financial commitment

At a fundamental level, network support for P4C has been expressed in terms of a financial commitment to support all teaching staff to undertake the SAPERE Level 1 qualification. This has been a considerable financial commitment that has required additional support from the network's headteachers. One said: "[The network] has always been a priority for continuing professional development budgets. Network funds have never paid for all of the activity – we have always drawn on school funds".

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<sup>5</sup> Philosophy Action Plan, 2005 p 1.

## Network characteristics

### Context

Oldham Networked Learning Community began with 11 primary schools and 1 special school, with an initial focus on ‘learning and teaching through multiple intelligence’. It was designed to be a vehicle to ‘extend and develop the innovative work currently being conducted at [the special school] across all the schools’.<sup>6</sup>

From this early starting point, the network has reduced in size, and now incorporates just 6 of the original 12 schools. One of the network headteachers acknowledged that ‘the schools that remained were able to make a commitment – 12 was tough, it was always too many’. The six remaining primary schools serve diverse communities in Oldham. One school in the network has an almost wholly white pupil population, while in another the vast majority of pupils are of Asian origin. There was some history of collaboration between the schools prior to the formation of the network, through school improvement plans (SIPs) and cultural linking projects established by the local authority.<sup>7</sup>

There is a sense that for this network, achieving the right membership and finding the right focus have been challenges. The headteachers of the schools, who form the network’s steering group, talk of frequently re-evaluating where they are and reflecting on where they have got to.

*“I suppose it’s something we’ve always done: reviewed where we are, evaluated what we’ve been doing.”*

Headteacher

At the same time, compromise was key in establishing a focus that supported the needs of all the schools and united them.

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

Headteacher

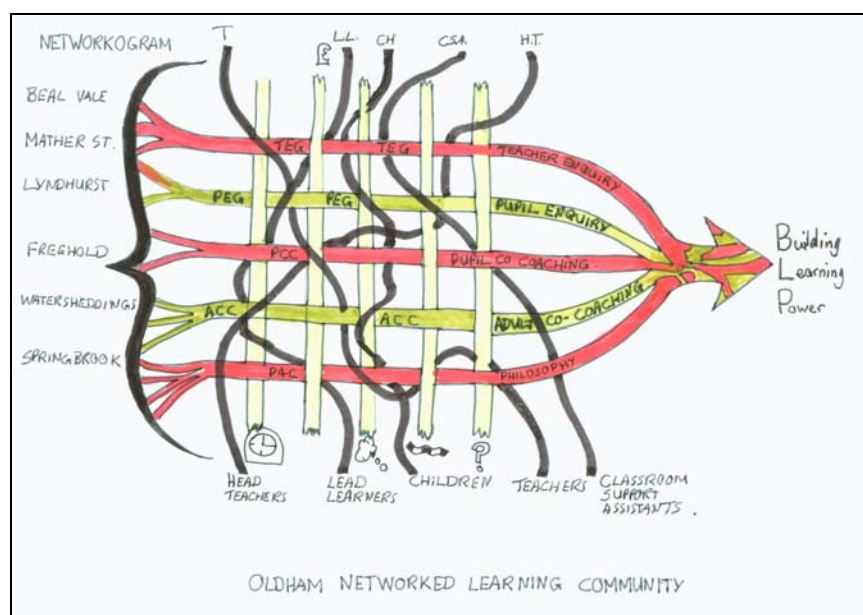
Following this extensive process of reflection and realignment, five key strands of inter-connected network activity have been established (Figure 7):

- teacher enquiry
- pupil enquiry
- pupil co-coaching
- adult co-coaching
- Philosophy for Children

<sup>6</sup> Submission document, March 2003 p 2.

<sup>7</sup> Annual Enquiry case study, 2003 p 1.

**Figure 7:** Oldham NLC networkogram from the Year 2 Annual Review



## Staged training

The high cost and intensity of the two-day SAPERE training course, and inevitable teacher turnover have meant that training all teaching staff has been a long-term plan with several stages. Providing this training has, to date, relied on external expertise. Because of the numbers of staff involved, the network has been able to bring the training provision to the staff, rather than having to send the staff to the training. The network has built a close relationship with Roger Sutcliffe and Karin Murris of SAPERE, who have provided training for the network on several occasions.

One headteacher recognised the benefit of training teachers from the school in several ongoing stages.

*“What’s been really powerful is that the training has come in waves. As each wave has come back into school they have brought new ideas, new thinking, new stimuli. As new ideas keep coming back, we are reinvigorated by that.”*

Headteacher

At the same time, one of the teachers interviewed highlighted the significance of the majority of staff being P4C trained. This has created a critical mass of staff who are positive about P4C and who will be able to maintain the momentum together.

*“It can’t go anywhere until people actually know what they are doing and are actually having a go in the classroom. So that was a big milestone – getting the majority of the staff trained.”*

Years 1 and 2 teacher

One of the teachers interviewed explained that after attending the Level 1 training, she remained sceptical about its relevance in her classroom, for her pupils. Another teacher put this scepticism into words, saying:

*“It was very hard to perceive children having a conversation like an adult about a book ... to imagine your class of Years 1 and 2 pupils with that high-order thinking, and that knowledge and insight. It was really hard to perceive them doing it.”*

Years 1 and 2 teacher

The teachers overcame this scepticism when Roger Sutcliffe visited the school and delivered demonstration lessons with the pupils, which all teachers were able to observe. Having seen the lessons done with their own pupils, they realised that it was both possible and beneficial for the children.

### Developing leadership

One of the things the headteachers talked about was a sense that over time, as the network had evolved, all the schools became involved in some way in its leadership. In the early days, the agenda had very much been driven by one school. When it was decided to adopt P4C across all the network schools, the expertise that had already been built in Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School, where P4C had already been implemented, was drawn upon to lead the way.

One of the headteachers suggested that a key moment for the network was when it first “went beyond the head’s office”. As the network has evolved and reconfigured in response to the challenges it has encountered, the membership has changed and roles have been created for classroom teachers to be lead learners in the network. In turn, this has created five groups of teachers to lead on each of the network’s initiatives.

### Building internal capacity

It has already been explained that the decision to provide SAPERE training to Level 2 for a small minority of philosophy lead learners was designed to build internal capacity across the network, and hence longer-term sustainability. These teachers have already been noted as an important resource within their schools in providing support and training in P4C to other staff, and this is a role that they are also able to perform across the network as a whole. Meeting regularly as a group across the network, and building on the good relationships they established during the training, the lead learners have taken a lead role in developing P4C across the network. They maintain close links with SAPERE in order to keep up to date with the latest developments and research.

Building and deploying internal capacity has been one of the central themes of the co-coaching strand of network activity, and this has been instrumental in encouraging the implementation of P4C and the dissemination of good practice across the schools and also across the network as a whole. This strand has similarly progressed from relying on external expertise to generating internal network capacity.

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

Headteacher

*“In our last review of our work we asked ourselves, ‘How do we distribute decision-making? What opportunities do we give lead learners to lead?’ And in that discussion there was a ‘big moment’, a realisation that we had in the past drawn upon external expertise but that within the network we had built internal capacity. The personal development of those people we had trained meant that they could lead future training.”*

Headteacher

*“We have actually linked within another school within the network and done peer observations on each other ... I observed them doing a philosophy session, and they came and observed us ... It wasn’t actually co-coaching, because we didn’t plan it together, but we used the co-coaching feedback and evaluation and adapted it.”*

Year 2 teacher and philosophy lead learner

In one example, collaboration involved two schools with very different ethnicity profiles transporting half a class each to the other school for a joint philosophy session.

Several of the teachers interviewed alluded to the additional confidence that they felt in implementing P4C, especially as a whole-school approach, knowing that other teachers and schools in the locality were doing the same. Knowing that others were making the same decisions and changes seemed to remove some of the potential risk that the teachers perceived in trying something new. An newly qualified teacher in one of the schools explained that:

*“Knowing that a lot of other schools were doing it, knowing that what we are doing isn’t much different to what the other schools are doing – it just gives you the extra confidence that what you are doing is a really good thing.”*

Year 4 teacher

Finally, the network has provided numerous opportunities for teachers across schools to meet to “compare ideas, share ideas and resources as well”. This year, the group of lead learners in philosophy have allocated £250 from the philosophy strand budget to each school to purchase stimulus resources. However, it is acknowledged that these resources will belong not to the school individually, but to the network, and mechanisms are being established for lists of resources in each school to be maintained to facilitate borrowing and sharing between the schools.

## Conclusion

The Oldham Networked Learning Community has come a long way, and developed a great deal since its original submission to the Networked Learning Group in March 2002. What is striking throughout this enquiry has been the continual evolution of the network, a sense of a significant journey travelled to get to its current position.

Given the time that has been taken in Oldham for the network to achieve the right balance and number of schools and adopt a mutually agreeable focus for network activity, it may still be too early to identify its benefits in terms of national test results.

However, there is a good deal of consensus among school staff and pupils about the positive benefits emerging as a result of the network's support for the implementation of Philosophy for Children. For pupils, these impacts are primarily in the areas of questioning, speaking and listening, reasoning, social skills and personal confidence. For teachers and schools, impacts centre on the development of internal expertise in P4C and increased professional dialogue (both in schools and across the network), and improving individual teachers' classroom pedagogy across the curriculum.

## Methods and sources

Initial interview with co-leader and associate. Not recorded, notes made.

Survey (Appendix 1) conducted during staff meetings at four out of the six schools (Mather Street Primary School, Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School, Beal Vale Primary School and Coppice Junior School).

Interviews with two teachers (Years 1 and 2 and Years 4 and 5) and groups of pupils from their classes (Years 2 and 5) at Mather Street Primary School. Recorded and summarised.

Interviews with one teacher and a group of pupils from their class at Beal Vale Primary School (Year 4) and Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School (Year 2). Recorded and summarised.

Discussion meeting with all network headteachers. Notes and summary.



## Documents

Original NLG Submission document
Annual Enquiry report 2003, NLG
Carter, K, 2004, <i>Striving for sustainability: re-designing leadership for learning in Networked Learning Communities</i> . Paper presented to the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Rotterdam
Nexus 3, Summer 2004
Levels of learning survey returns, NLG
Ofsted reports: Beal Vale Primary School, 2005 Mather Street Primary School, 2004 Freehold Community Junior, Infant and Nursery School, 2004 Lyndhurst Primary and Nursery School, 2003 Coppice Junior School, 2003 Watersheddings Primary School, 2003 Beal Vale Primary School, 2000
Year 1 review documents from network
Year 2 review evidence from network, including self-assessment supplementary evidence new activity record action plan networkogram networkogram chart
Year 2 review documents from NLG facilitator assessment facilitator judgement recommended judgement and best practice
Statistical data from Profile stats-profile, Oldham, NLG statistical value-added KS1 and KS2 data from the Fisher Family Trust
Interview summaries Beal Vale Pupils Beal Vale Teacher Freehold Pupils Freehold Teacher Mather Street Pupils Mather Street Teachers
Headteacher discussion summary Notes from Headteacher meeting

## Appendix 1: P4C questionnaire

### Philosophy for Children

Your school \_\_\_\_\_

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Your main roles/responsibilities in school \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

1. What training, guidance or support have you received in relation to Philosophy for Children?

2. What difference do you feel this has made to you and what you do in the classroom?

3. What difference do you feel Philosophy for Children has made to pupils' learning and development in your class?

4. How would you like to see the use of Philosophy for Children develop in the future?

5. How do you think your school's involvement in the Oldham Networked Learning Community has supported the implementation of Philosophy for Children?

Thank you.