

**Annual Enquiry 2005
Case study**

Primary Schools' Learning Network (PSLN) NLC

Non Worrall & Victoria Crowe



Winning entry for the network logo pupil competition

Impact on children: attainment

The core statement on learning by the Primary Schools' Learning Network (PSLN) underlines that the network:

"...puts pupil learning at the heart of its work. The PSLN will be a network that seeks to excite pupils about learning, to increase their independence as learners and to help them understand themselves better as learners."

Three years into its funding as a networked learning community (NLC), how far does evidence from children and adults in the network's schools validate this claim?

Literacy has been a particular focus within PSLN. In Bradwell Village Middle School and Portfields Combined School, selected in consultation with the research associate and network facilitator as sites for in-depth study, the school inquiry groups (SIGs) have focused on improving standards of literacy through self-evaluation and paired work. Figure 1 shows improving attainment data in reading and writing at Key Stage 2 for Bradwell Village Middle School.

Figure 1: Bradwell Village Middle School: percentage of pupils achieving Level 4+ in English at Key Stage 2, 2003-2005

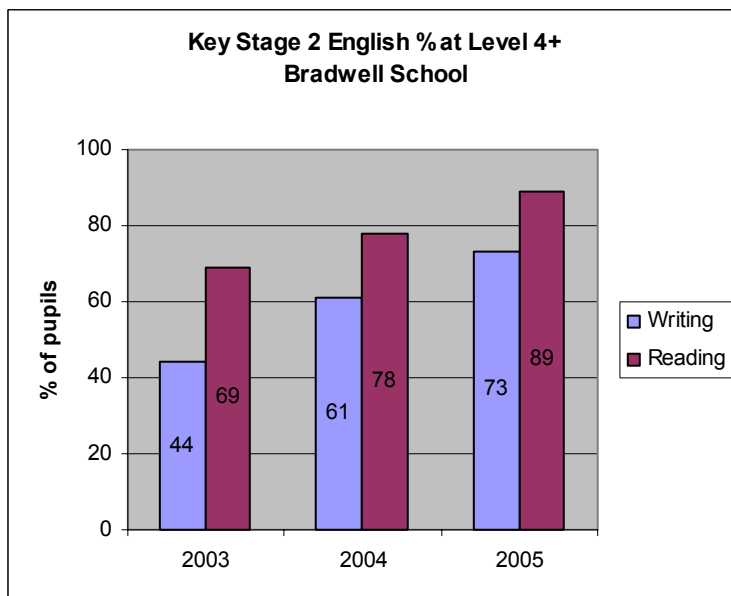
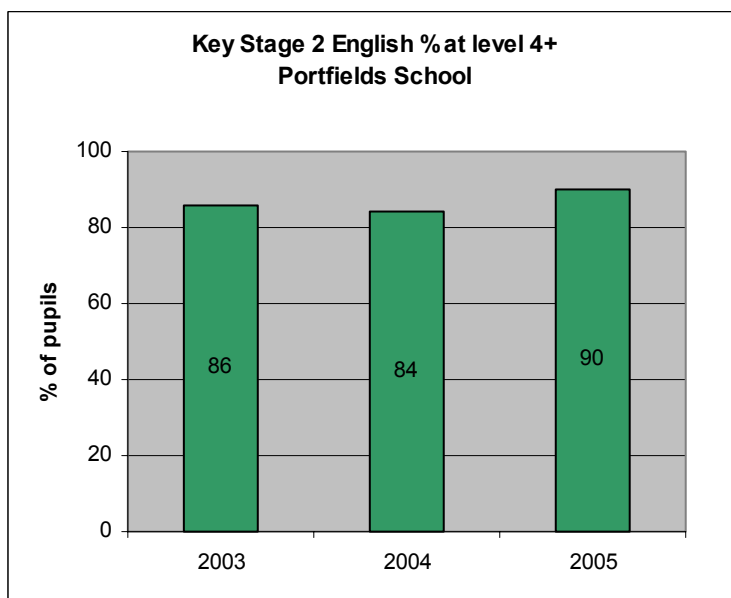


Figure 2 also shows an improving picture in English at Key Stage 2 for Portfields Combined School.

Figure 2: Portfields Combined School: percentage of pupils achieving Level 4+ in English at Key Stage 2, 2003-2005



Impact on children: achievement and engagement

This statistical information presents evidence of improvement in attainment. The pattern of improving results in the two schools demonstrates the success of their approaches to learning and teaching. The reasons for it would seem to lie, from the pupils' perspectives, in the changes that have occurred in their classrooms, and specifically in the ways that their teachers now train them to evaluate their own achievements and to work in pairs. At the outset of a focus group discussion, Year 7 pupils were asked to represent their feelings about literacy lessons before and after the introduction of self-evaluation techniques. Their responses indicated improved self-confidence and the value of collaborative work, in particular the sharing of ideas (Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Perception of self-evaluation by Year 7 pupil, Bradwell Village Middle School

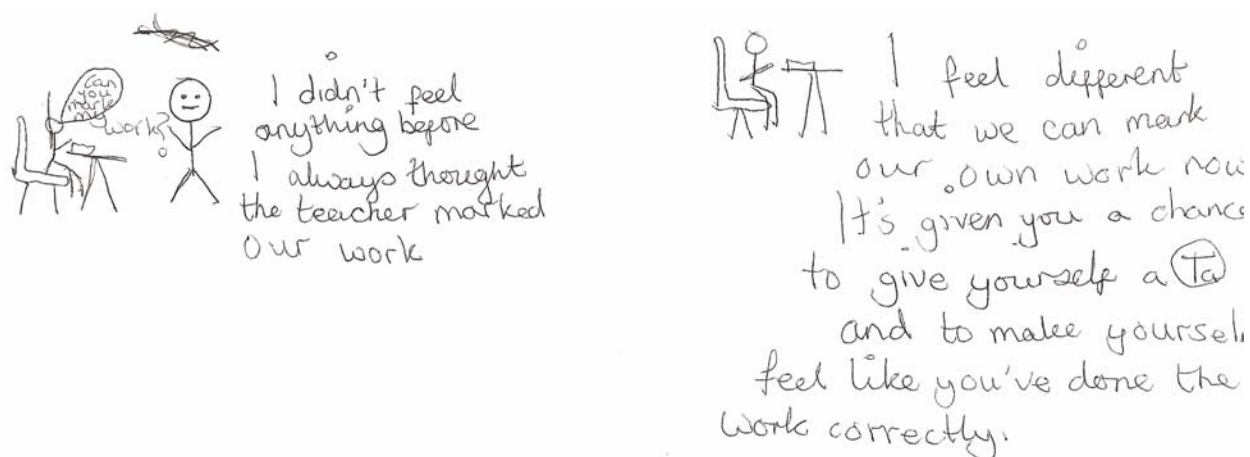
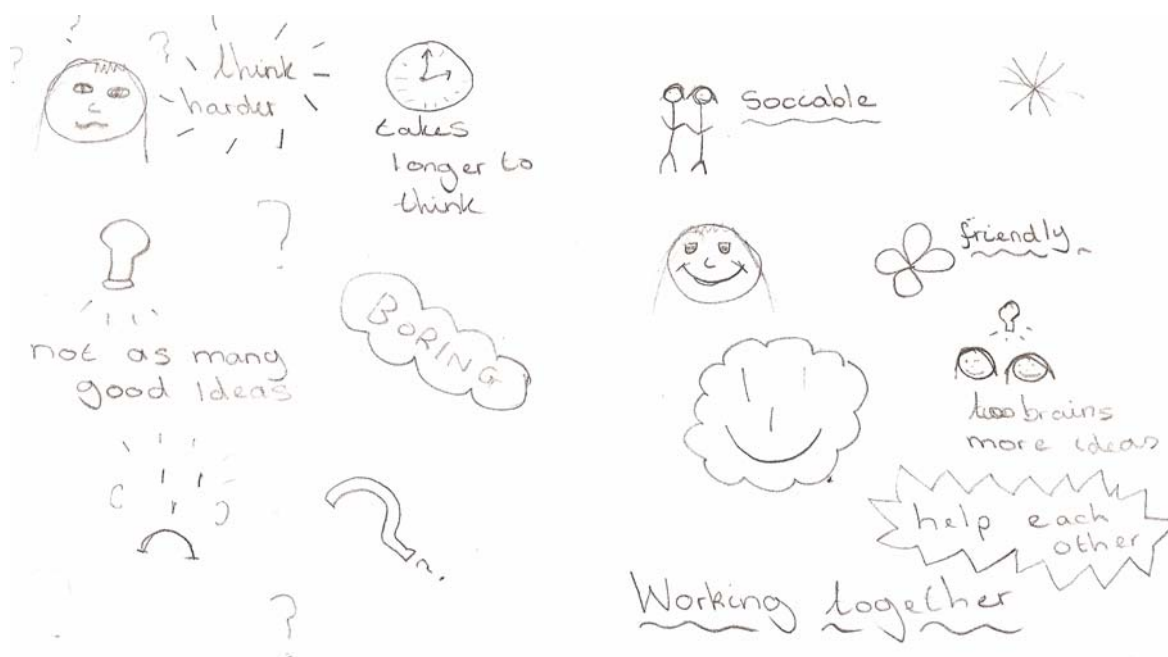


Figure 4: Perception of self-evaluation by Year 7 pupil, Portfields Combined School



These strong visual representations of the ways pupils' feelings had changed were reinforced in the discussions that followed.

The answer to what had happened to produce these dramatic changes in pupils' engagement and attainment would seem to rest with their increased understanding of their own achievements. As they share their ideas, check each other's work and comment on whether the lesson's learning objective has been met, pupils gradually build an awareness of precisely what it is they are trying to learn and how far they have got in achieving it. They would seem to appreciate the particular value of paired work in increasing their confidence in their ability to succeed: "I'm not really a very confident writer so when we're in partners they're like giving more ideas so I can get things done a lot quicker", said one Year 4 pupil at Portfields Combined School. Pupils also demonstrate a sophisticated understanding, as shown in the children's pictures above, of the impact the changed approach has had on them as learners.

"In Year 6 I don't think I worked that hard because I couldn't understand the questions so I couldn't do it. Now we can talk and discuss about it and find out what our partner thinks about it as well. Then we talk it through and try to work out the question together."

Year 7 pupil, Bradwell Village Middle School

The children show an impressive maturity in handling quite complex arrangements of partnering. The Year 4 pupils at Portfields Combined School adapt easily to two variants of paired work, having both response partners (chosen by the teacher and with whom they carry out particular designated tasks such as designing a board game) and day-to-day friendship partners (self-selected and "just for sharing work and talking about ideas"). In Year 2, friendship pairings enable children to discuss their ideas and check the accuracy of their writing, whereas by Year 7, the development of a literacy task takes a week with a consistent partner used as a constant sounding board in developing ideas, checking accuracy and then editing drafts of writing.

Impact on children: peer assessment

The influence of the work of Shirley Clarke on assessment in primary schools is evident in both schools as the children are taught to evaluate their own work and that of their peers through a system of clear explanation of the learning objective (with the younger pupils sometimes using the 'what are we learning today?' approach) in conjunction with self- and peer-assessment. The effects of being able to assess their own achievements has proved a strong motivational force, as indicated in the findings of the questionnaire to pupils distributed by the SIG co-ordinator of Bradwell Village Middle School in January 2005. Trying to unravel the specific impact on children of the newly introduced self-evaluation techniques, the questions revealed that the types of self-evaluation technique employed by teachers varied, but that the children's preference was for the instant, unwritten 'Give me five' technique. This is when the teacher asks how well the pupils have met the learning objective, and pupils raise the appropriate number of digits, from one to five. Figure 5 shows the favoured techniques by year group.

Figure 5: Bradwell Village Middle School: most commonly used self-evaluation techniques, Years 4-7

Year group	Self-evaluation technique
Year 4	Traffic lights and Give me five
Year 5	Give me five
Year 6	Give me five
Year 7	Write your own TA (target achieved) and Give me five

Working in pairs, as experienced by Bradwell Village Middle School pupils, consists of talking in pairs, producing work in pairs, marking each other's work, correcting each other's work and evaluating each other's work. There is a strongly recorded preference for working in friendship pairings, as opposed to teacher-selected pairings, with 84 per cent of pupils in Years 4 and 7 stating that they would prefer to be paired with a friend (research conducted by Bradwell Village Middle School's SIG co-ordinator in March 2005). This marked a 10 per cent increase in the responses to the same question three months earlier, indicating that experience is increasing the popularity of paired work among the pupils.

A Year 4 pupil's description of an approach to teaching poetry indicates how they are learning, by doing, about the significance of success criteria in achieving learning objectives.

"We had to think about a poem we'd like and all the stanzas and the structure of it. Then we had to make up the rules of what the poem should be. And then somebody else had to write the poem from your rules. The person who gave the rules had to read it and mark it. They had to see that we'd obeyed all the rules and had the right amount of lines. We had to mark it and give it TA, which means target achieved, if they'd followed all the rules."

Year 4 pupil, Bradwell Village Middle School

This use of pupil marking has also been extended to the technique of 'close the gap' marking, where comments are written, usually by teachers, aimed at supporting the children in evaluating their own work (for example: 'Can you add two adjectives in this sentence to add interest?'). In one classroom, the pupils are so familiar with this technique that they have been encouraged to use it with their partners.

"I thought that's quite dodgy ground, they could put a comment that's not very useful. But they've actually come up with comments that I, in a lot of cases, would have put myself. So there's a fantastic piece of work with not enough full stops. They will put: 'Excellent piece of work, you've managed to [do] such and such, remember your full stops'. Which is exactly what I would write."

Year 4 teacher, Bradwell Village Middle School

As the pupils talked about their learning, it became apparent that their understanding of their teachers' intentions had deepened as they acquired more expertise in constructive criticism and ideas for improvement. There was an equally noticeable developing maturity in their attitudes towards learning as their understanding of the need to prioritise learning over personal friendship difficulties has deepened.

"In some ways we've learnt since Year 2 that bickering with each other ain't really gonna get you anywhere. We've got over that sort of childish arguing with each other if you don't agree on something. Basically we've just said that we're here and we're stuck here so we might as well just get on with it."

Year 7 pupil, Portfields Combined School

Perhaps the single most significant change in the way that children perceive appropriate classroom behaviour has come from the legitimising of their talk in the classroom. As a teacher

remarked: “Because they’re allowed to talk, it’s not wrong to talk.” One of the barriers to learning that had been perceived in both schools was that children’s disinclination to apply themselves to writing tasks could result in what are described as ‘diversionary strategies’ by the SIG co-ordinator of Portfields Combined School. By developing teaching and learning strategies that depend upon classroom talk between pairs of children, the adults involved (teachers and learning support assistants) have changed the climate of their classrooms, opening new avenues for collaboration, discussion and investigation as they give pupils a greater range of learning and evaluation skills.

School processes: what contribution has the network made?

Flexibility

The issue of children’s attitudes towards writing and the ways in which they approach writing were identified two years ago as common issues for three very different schools in the network. In the two schools studied in depth, there is a wide variety of classroom interpretations of the paired and self-evaluation approaches. For the SIG co-ordinators in each school, ensuring that each classroom teacher retained the control and responsibility for what happens in regard to planning and teaching in their own classroom, is a vital ingredient in their success story. Generating a sense of ownership of the initiative has proved critical to the success of the roll-out of the techniques in line with school policy. In the words of Portfields Combined School’s SIG co-ordinator, once the initial research showed that paired work had been successful in the eyes both of children and teachers, a decision was made that pairings would be established across the whole school. However, it was introduced in a way that gave some degree of flexibility and choice.

“We directed everyone to set up pairings but how they did so was their decision. We did say: “We have found that it works best if they’re friendship pairings” but we left that free for people to choose.”

SIG co-ordinator, Portfields Combined School

This freedom to choose has led to teachers developing their own particular approaches to self-evaluation and paired work, shaping the strategies to suit the particular needs of their groups of children. In some classrooms, as in Years 4 and 7 at Bradwell Village Middle School, the teacher handed the choice of who they worked with to the children. In other classrooms, the teachers decided the pairings on the basis of their perceptions of the children’s learning needs. The activities used in pair work at Portfields Combined School have included:

- talk for writing
- phonic activities
- role-play for writing
- planning for writing
- writing together on a whiteboard
- editing and secretarial skills
- responding to work verbally
- writing a piece of work together
- highlighting successful elements of each other’s work and writing improvement prompts
- written comments made by children on each other’s work
- children marking to checklists of success criteria, including the use of marking schemes
- assessing partner response in SATs papers

According to the evaluation of the school's 2003-04 enquiry, teachers at Portfields Combined School have focused more on planning the task and its delivery, being more creative in thinking about the activities from the perspective of paired work. They have found ways of making learning more enjoyable for pupils but have also highlighted "common problems that can be addressed in weekly planning". It would seem that an initiative that grew from enabling children to share in the process of learning has now led to teachers building a collaborative approach to problem-solving in teaching.

By training the children in evaluation skills, teachers have found greater opportunities to both interact with greater numbers of children in the class and find the space to observe the learning taking place.

"You can watch more children in the lesson than you could when you had to go round and help individually because you could never get round to them all. It was always the ones with the problems that you got to see so it means you can watch a lot more children during a lesson and assess what's going on."

Year 2 teacher, Portfields Combined School

Work on learning objectives has helped to clarify what is required of the pupils, thereby making a difference to the teacher's experience in the classroom.

"I know that my [learning] objectives have been clear, and because they know what I expect from them, I find it easier to teach the national literacy strategy. Because each year will build on the other and the more they know what's expected of them ... you can build on [that]."

Year 4 teacher, Bradwell Village Middle School

Motivation

A deep awareness of value in terms of the personally motivating effects for individual members of staff as well as the retention benefits for their schools characterised the interviews of both headteachers. Whereas one insisted that "the excitement in my school is partly due to the membership of PSLN", the other particularly cherished the refreshing impact on a talented teacher who had begun to feel a degree of boredom with the mundane aspects of teaching but who now was reinvigorated in her commitment to her career. Membership of the SIGs is perceived as a particularly stimulating and successful way of putting the 'c' into continuous professional development (CPD).

There is, however, an acknowledgement that a minority of children have not found the changes easy or beneficial in terms of their learning. For some, their partners have proved a burden rather than a benefit, interrupting their flow of thought with intrusive questions. For others, disagreements have erupted that have made collaboration more problematic. Bradwell Village Middle School's evaluation for March 2005 reports that 18 per cent of pupils do not feel that working with a friend has helped their learning. However, there is an accompanying increase of 10 per cent in the number of children who would choose to continue working in pairs. As the feedback from classroom experiences and the outcomes of school-based action research projects have revealed the predominantly positive reactions of pupils and teachers to collaborative and self-evaluation strategies, these methods have steadily spread to other curriculum areas, such as numeracy, science, history and other foundation subjects.

Impact on the classroom

It is apparent that individual teachers may have different 'end-points' in mind as they evolve different ways of working in the classrooms. There is undoubted agreement in their desire to move away from teacher-centred to pupil-centred organisation, but the viewpoints about the

extent to which that should be taken were reflected in the diagrams members of SIGs created at their recent conference when asked to capture their ideal classroom with regard to assessment (Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6: Perception of pupil self-assessment by SIG co-ordinator

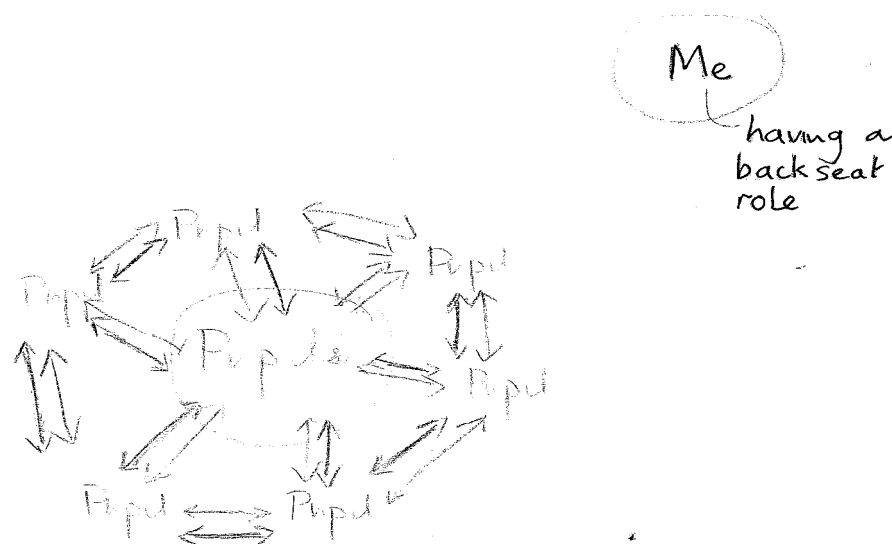
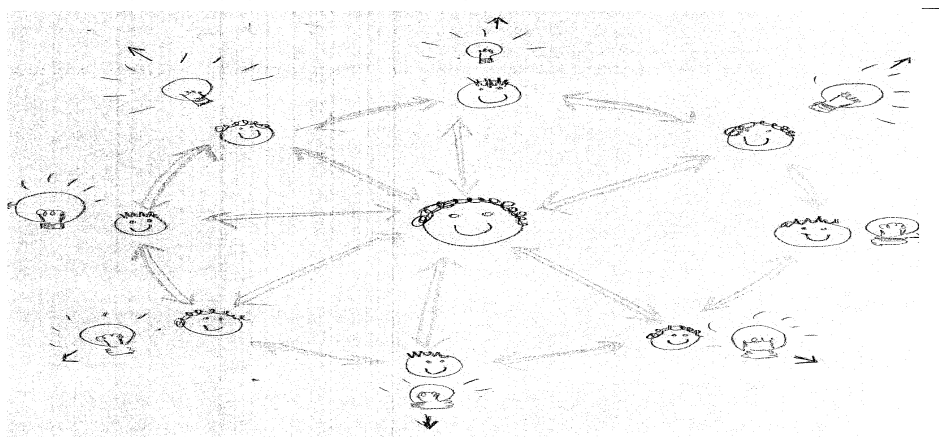


Figure 7: Perception of pupil self-assessment by teacher



As the research project continues to affect the ways in which teachers promote learning and organise their classrooms, it remains the case that those changes have only been possible on a whole-school scale because of the particular approaches to the management and leadership of change and development within the two schools studied. At a whole-school level, both headteachers' whole-hearted commitment to, and support for, collaborative school-based enquiry, as demonstrated through the allocation of physical and human resources, are evidenced throughout the data collected. Their approaches to leadership may be contrasting, but their determination to "make a difference for the children" and to "give children the best start in an ever-changing technological society" has led them to search out evidence-based practice that can guarantee constantly improving standards of achievement and attainment.

Both schools have found external inspection a useful way of identifying a way forward, either by an Ofsted inspection, which provoked the focus on assessment processes or by an HMI visit, which endorsed the approach to the development of independence in learning. The headteachers, having identified SIG co-ordinators, have supported them fully as they have acted as the key agents of change in their schools. The headteachers have entrusted the SIG co-

ordinators to lead and organise groups of practitioner researchers and then investigate the outcomes of the work being done in classrooms. The headteachers have incorporated the research into their school improvement plans, ensuring that the outcomes will be embedded in the school's way of working as well as forming the inspiration for the next phase of development. There are clear, active examples of distributed leadership.

Network characteristics

Context

The Primary Schools' Learning Network (PSLN), inaugurated in 2001, was originally a school improvement network of 11 primary schools in Milton Keynes dedicated to developing teaching and learning to raise pupil attainment. The network was shaped and informed at this early stage by the University of Nottingham. In March 2002, the network applied to become a networked learning community and at this time four more schools joined the group. As part of the evaluation process of the Year 2 review, the network reduced to nine schools – eight of the original applicants plus an additional first school (for further details of network developments, see Appendix 1 for a critical incidents timeline).

The core purpose of PSLN has always centred on the pupil learning focus (PLF) of developing action-based enquiry to raise the standards of teaching and learning. Within that PLF, each school, working through a collaborative system of school inquiry groups (SIGs) (initially known as school improvement groups), decides its own particular area of investigation. There are clusters of SIGs across the network formed around a shared enquiry focus. For example, the two schools visited in this case study focused on the use of self-assessment in literacy.

Strategy group

PSLN's strategy group, consisting of two co-leaders, other headteachers, the internal network facilitator and representatives of the SIG co-ordinators, maintains commitment and involvement across the network and monitors developments. Funds are held by one of the middle schools and allocated according to a process of bidding approved by the strategy group. The strategy group is also responsible for establishing, monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the key aims of the network, which are to:

- build and sustain capacity in schools for growth and improvement and for PSLN schools to develop into learning schools
- seek innovative practices in teaching and learning that result in improved learning and raised standards
- develop leadership for learning, giving staff opportunities to lead and to develop their leadership potential
- work with other schools and networks to share and develop practice
- increase staff motivation through staff development that will improve the retention of staff

Through the inclusive nature of the membership of the group – headteachers, teachers and personnel from a higher education institution (HEI) and local education authority (LEA) – there are both direct links into the principal stakeholder groups across and beyond the network and the capacity to access informed perspectives on how best to allocate the funding available. The process of bidding for financial support and the centralised control of funds have meant that the strategy group can steer the developments through such decisions as buying in expertise and support from their HEI partner. In October 2004, a network facilitator was appointed in order to ensure that the work of the network was shared across schools and ultimately beyond. The network facilitator chairs the SIG co-ordinator meetings and, as well as completing all of the time-intensive requests relating to external accountability, acts as a liaison focus for all

network members.

The strategy group convenes with the same frequency as the SIG co-ordinators, with the meetings directly following the SIG co-ordinators' meetings. There is a dependent mutuality between the two groups. The strategy group ratifies the SIG co-ordinators' plans and decisions and provides funding for the work of the SIG co-ordinators and their SIGs across the network. The strategy group is also the interface between external agencies and the SIGs, informing the latter of external developments and opportunities as well as cross-network liaison and working.

HEI support

The University of Nottingham has played a central role in the inquiry work of PSLN. This relationship stemmed from the LEA primary adviser, who was the originator of the school improvement network in 2001. The university has since proved to be a key influence in the development of the network: it has performed the role of critical friend, broker, consultant, facilitator, trainer in research methods, conference organiser and co-author of academic papers. The professional and personal links through the HEI have been important in the development of the network. In the first instance, the LEA primary adviser was studying for an EdD on a course tutored by the university's professor of education. The headteacher of Bradwell Village Middle School spoke about the professor's influence during her MA in assessment. The headteacher of Portfields Combined School explained that having drawn on the professor's work in several ways during the course of her successful career, when the opportunity arose to join PSLN, she thought: "Well I know I'll believe in what [he] does."

Enquiry

A key input from the university has been the high-quality training in research methods and the support for teachers unfamiliar with conducting research in analysing and writing up their findings: "I think the role we play that's most helpful is the critical friend role, where a school or group of schools might be conducting an enquiry", observed the professor of education from the University of Nottingham. The principal method of building leadership capacity in PSLN has been through the SIGs, which have been the main focus of the network's classroom-based enquiries. The attendance of SIG co-ordinators at half-termly meetings is critical in ensuring effective communication across all of the partner schools but they also act as agents for change within each school as they lead and co-ordinate the work of each SIG team of researching teachers. The precise nature of the SIG varies from school to school, another indicator of the network's determination to generate a shared focus with enough flexibility to be adapted to the needs of each member school. Membership of the SIGs is voluntary and can change on an annual basis. The fluid nature of SIG membership can be a challenge to co-ordinate, yet it has been seen to bring benefits.

"This year we've had two new members on the team – they've had quite an impact on the movement and development of the SIG."

SIG co-ordinator, Portfields Combined School

In one cluster, three SIG co-ordinators have met regularly to discuss work and have conducted a series of learning walks around each other's schools. This support, provided by the SIG co-ordinators, has an interesting parallel with the support felt by the children in their partnership work.

"The value of talking [the enquiries] through with someone is quite useful because on your own you don't always ask the right questions. I know I've got better at asking the right questions."

SIG co-ordinator, Portfields Combined School

The work of the SIGs was boosted when, in June 2003, further funding was acquired by successful bids for six Best Practice Research Scholarships (BPRS). In addition to the funding, these scholarships provided the network with a formal research focus and formal deadlines as set out in the BPRS programme. This additional funding also meant that individuals were provided with the capacity and independence to conduct the work. These scholarships focused on self-assessment and writing, reading, mobility and behaviour, particularly at lunchtime. The results of the self-assessment work have been presented at academic conferences (BERA 2004 and ICSEI 2005) and have been published in the journals of *Professional Development Today* and *Teacher Development*.

The research focus of the network was further extended when the teachers within the network conducted their own research.

"We promised to do it for quite a long time and there were always lots of reasons why we didn't. We called ourselves model learners and therefore we had to do a bit of modelling. And that research now is taking in people who are not in the network, trying to extend that."

Headteacher, Southwood Middle School

This area of headteacher commitment was raised separately as a vital ingredient in relation to the issue of the network's sustainability and the future of the work to be conducted.

"As long as the heads of the schools are committed to it and as long as they've got someone to be responsible for leading it. People are the key – you have to have headteachers who are prepared to give time for their staff to be involved."

SIG co-ordinator, Portfields Combined School

The commitment of headteachers to enquiry, the work of the network and the network's sustainability mirrors that of other staff.

"People are the key because to a certain extent the network and the school-based enquiries are all extra additions to the day-to-day work of teaching. So people need to be self-motivated. My SIG meets after school and they are actually quite enthusiastic. One of my SIG members is going on maternity leave and she is planning to come to the meetings when she is on leave, she is that motivated."

SIG co-ordinator, Bradwell Village Middle School

Network conferences

A critical dissemination strategy of PSLN are the conferences that are held twice a year. Those held in January are residential from Friday afternoon to Saturday, are open to all staff in the network and focus on exploring key issues of interest to all teachers within the chosen theme for the year. The summer conferences have been attended by members of SIGs and are a chance to share research findings. These summer meetings also provide opportunities to consult with the University of Nottingham and to plan ahead for the coming year. The university has played a key part in arranging and organising these conferences, particularly with regard to providing contacts with nationally recognised keynote speakers. However, one of the queries about the sustainability of the network relates to the costs of the inputs from the university. These costs, necessarily charged at the market price, constitute a significant proportion of the network's funding. For one headteacher this was not an issue since she perceived that "most of the money we've had as virtual money – there is real money to be found in the system". For members of the strategy group however, no matter what their background, this is an issue that will need to be addressed. There would seem to be a conclusion that either additional funding will have to be tapped, or the network will need to develop from within its school-based personnel the capacity to offer the objective viewpoint,

training expertise and knowledge of how to access key people in the wider system that have so far been provided by the HEI staff.

A strong indication of the rapidly developing maturity of the network is the recent commissioning of university staff to conduct an audit of pupil voice activity within all the schools in the network. Building out from their shared yet different experiences of strategies to extend pupil independence in learning or consultation within schools, pupil voice has now become the focus for PSLN. Just as the children are acquiring a clear sense of the value of their own input into learning, so the school-based personnel are now beginning to lead in developing their focus, rather than depending on the advice of external experts.

Conclusion

The way in which the network is meeting its declared aims is evidenced abundantly in the interviews with adults and children in both schools, and is supported by an extensive amount of formal documentation and research findings. It is developing dispersed leadership throughout the network and in individual schools by providing opportunities for staff and pupils to develop personal, interpersonal and organisational capacity. In recording her appreciation of the ways in which her school, staff and children have benefited from membership of the network, the headteacher of Bradwell Village Middle School spoke of how her staff were “really buzzing after talking with people from other schools and the quality of the presentations”. She was at pains to point out that, for her, one of the principal reasons for joining a network was because “unless you get out of the closed box, you can’t learn”. This indicates a basic commitment and aspiration to exemplify the role of lead learner in ensuring that internal structural arrangements support the principles and values of the PSLN network and the NLC programme.

Acknowledgements

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Methods and sources

Interviews

Bradwell Village Middle School headteacher
 Bradwell Village Middle School Year 7 teacher (SIG co-ordinator)
 Bradwell Village Middle School Year 4 teacher
 Portfields Combined School headteacher
 Portfields Combined School deputy headteacher (SIG co-ordinator and network facilitator)
 Portfields Combined School Year 2 teacher
 Portfields Combined School learning support assistant
 Southwood Middle School headteacher (network co-leader)
 University of Nottingham professor of education

Focus groups

6 Bradwell Village Middle School Year 7 pupils
 5 Bradwell Village Middle School Year 4 pupils
 4 Portfields Combined School Year 2 pupils
 4 Portfields Combined School Year 4 pupils
 4 Portfields Combined School Year 7 pupils

Documents

NLG Submission document
 Activity record submitted as evidence for NCSL Year 2 review
 PSLN Network-o-gram, June 2005
 NCSL Spring enquiry 2004 narrative
 'Changing teaching and learning relationships in the classroom: A cross-school collaborative action research project'. Paper presented at BERA, September 2004
 Self-review document submitted as evidence for NCSL Year 1 review
 Traffic lights document submitted as evidence for NCSL Year 1 review
 School improvement plans from Bradwell Village Middle School and Portfields Combined School
 Examples of pupil work from Bradwell Village Middle School and Portfields Combined School
 Summary of Bradwell SATs results
 'An investigation into the use of response partners to develop pupil self-evaluation skills and collaboration in the classroom', Portfields Combined School SIG
 Self-evaluation questionnaire report, Bradwell Village Middle School SIG
 Paired evaluation questionnaire, Bradwell Village Middle School SIG
 Pupil voice audit, University of Nottingham, 2005

Appendix 1: Critical incidents timeline

