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Working with Children, Working for Children: a review of Networked Learning Communities

NON WORRALL & CHRISTOPHER NODEN

ABSTRACT When schools and teachers come together voluntarily to collaborate in learning communities there can be powerful and positive benefits to pupils' experiences of learning and their wider lives. This article summarises some of the learning from the four-year Networked Learning Communities programme, managed by the National College for School Leadership. 132 networks of schools have been supported to innovate, share and exchange practice with a predominant focus on learning. The article draws on a conceptual framework of learning designed by Professor Charles Desforges against which evidence from the NLC programme is measured. Networked Learning Communities are shown generally to have engaged in higher stages of learning experiences spread widely across the curriculum. There are also indications that the programme has had a positive impact on attainment for some pupils, has encouraged pupil voice and participation, and that the learning community model is highly effective for the delivery of aspects of the Every Child Matters agenda.

The National College for School Leadership's (NCSL) four-year Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) programme was intended to explore new ways for schools to work together and build on the knowledge and expertise of individual teachers. It was deliberately non-prescriptive, with groups of schools coming together voluntarily and being given a basic frame and criteria on which to base their collaborative work. There was always an expectation that NLCs would be flexible, creative and non-hierarchical. A key aim was to make the best ideas and practice accessible to all. Programme-wide research shows some extremely powerful positive impacts on the learning experiences of pupils in networks.

Programme Principles: what's shared and what's different

The last decade has seen an explosion of interest and support for partnerships, collaborations and networks. 'Working together' has become a default way of working, both within and between organisations. For schools this period has witnessed a number of 'networking initiatives' including Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, federations, extended schools and many others. All of them have some common characteristics but there are key differences too – differences in focus, structure, expectation, governance, funding and responsibility as well as in context. The particularities of Networked Learning Communities have much to say about what happens to pupils when the collaborative impetus is built upon voluntarism and learning and when enquiry, devised and directed by teachers, becomes the norm. Teachers choosing to become jointly involved in innovation and experimentation are a powerful force for change in children's lives.

The 132 NLCs varied in size and make-up. The smallest consisted of six small rural primary schools, the largest included every school in a local authority. The aims and objectives of each NLC were equally diverse. The NLC programme provided a common organising framework and principles that specified broad organisational and structural parameters for each network (NCSL, 2004). All of this was ultimately intended to release the creative energies of committed professionals within the classroom and to enable them to share that creativity with colleagues in other schools. This paper will consider the impact that teachers working in networks have had directly on pupils and their learning.

A key element of the NLC framework which pertained directly to pupils was that each should select a 'pupil learning focus' (PLF) which was to provide the key objectives for their work. Some PLFs were refined over time but the central theme of each generally remained constant. The most popular generic themes were

- raising attainment
- pupil motivation
- thinking skills
- emotional intelligence
- pupil voice.

Work was based on six 'levels of learning'. The first and most important of these was that of the pupil (the others being teacher, leader, school, network and wider system). This made explicit the expectation that all network activity was to be planned with pupil outcomes in mind, either directly or indirectly.

The programme made much of its 'moral purpose' and its grounding metaphor of the 'network child'. Although much of the initial activity took place at adult and leadership levels there were constant reminders that the *raison d'être* for learning networks was to improve experiences and outcomes for real children and young people in real classrooms. This was never to be a selective

or limited ambition. Networks were strongly encouraged to attempt to make a difference to all of their children in all of their schools.

The approach was deliberate and structured and it led to some powerful results.

Towards a Learning Community: four stages of growth

In early 2006 our core research team undertook a detailed analysis of all of the pupil data available within the NLC programme. This included teachers' own statements of intention and self-evaluation as well as structured reviews and enquiries into their work.

Professor Charles Desforges devised a conceptual framework for our consideration of progress and outcomes (Worrall et al, 2006). He covered recent major trends in psychology, philosophy and practice and suggested that provision for learning has moved through four stages of development in the years since mass State education was established. The four stages Desforges identified are:

> Stage 1. Doing work - the 'traditional classroom model' in which the teacher imparts knowledge to largely passive pupils. High pupil test scores and maintenance of 'good order' are the two fundamental goals at this stage.
> Stage 2. Making sense – at this stage pupils begin to gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum. Classrooms are characterised by being learner centred, knowledge centred, assessment centred and community centred. But experience is still subject dominated, teacher dominated and focuses on individual progress.
> Stage 3. Community of learners – learning *per se* is now on the curriculum, pupils learn how to learn and have some say over how their learning is managed and arranged; there is some voice and choice and there is much more evidence of the hallmarks and processes of community as set out by Watkins (2005).
> Stage 4. Learning community - the learning community is described as the state of the art mode of working towards the objectives of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and the personalisation agenda and is consistent with the most advanced models of human cognition and reflects contemporary emphasis on democratic self-expression and self-determination. At this level there is a focus on knowledge generation and the creation of ideas beyond the curriculum; the wider community is used as a resource for learning; and crucially much of the learning experience itself is co-produced by pupils and teachers.

In NLCs we found that the programme had produced significant activity (93 per cent of networks) in stages three and four.

Working with Children

There was a conscious shaping of networked activities that enabled schools to build cultures promoting more choice and active contribution to learning for pupils, generating a climate that was likely to promote self esteem, independence and life long learning. Teachers encouraged the development of pupil engagement in their own learning and pupil voice activity thrived. Here are two examples of the types of NLC activity we considered appropriate in Desforges' stages three and four:

> … The NLG funded 'the Learning game' in all schools for all staff, focussing on knowledge about how the brain works, learning styles, emotional intelligence and strategies for boosting confidence within the classroom … All Year 6 and all Year 11 pupils in all schools received a half day input from the learning game. Governors and parents workshops were also provided …The 36 pupil ambassadors met again [April 2004], they shared their research findings and then were taught about how the brain works. In cross school and cross phase groups the pupils discussed ideas on what makes a good pupil/teacher … they were given activities to try within their own schools … The pupil ambassadors agreed to speak about the network to other pupils. Some pupils spoke at whole school assemblies, others gave presentations to smaller groups. The pupils researched into the history of their schools and prepared presentations for the celebration event.
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> Pupil conference November 2004 …12 schools represented, pupils from Years 2-6 in the morning, Years 7-10 in the afternoon. Each group led by a Year 11 pupil using De Bono's thinking hats as a methodology. Four questions were asked of mixed groups … What does good learning look like to you? What does good teaching look like to you? What does good assessment look like to you? What does a good learning environment look like to you? Recorded in any form but mind maps were the favourite. Co-leaders collated the findings and fed back to all staff via the network website and a network INSET day.

We found clear evidence that pupils had 'gone meta' regarding the engagement and management of their learning. Interestingly the analysis also showed that NLCs impacted on all subject areas, with a fairly even spread across the curriculum. This may in part be due to the selection of broad-based pupil learning foci that were applicable across the whole spectrum of school life. This feature of NLC success differentiates it from subject-based and coercive initiatives.

Working for Pupils

Pupil voice, identified by Hargreaves (2003) as one of the key pathways to personalisation, was rapidly recognised as one of the most highly motivating and energising contributors to and shapers of NLC activity. This recognition led to the organisation of a high profile NLC conference, the content of which was substantially led and presented by pupils and students of all ages. We have no doubt that such recognition and the enthusiasm with which teachers accepted children's expertise concerning their own learning, is partly responsible for the high level of stage three and four activity in NLCs. The nature of NLCs seems to have provided a seed-bed for networked pupil voice activity.

As part of the drive to raise standards many networks had adopted off the shelf packages, like Assessment for Learning (AfL), to aid their development. One NLC had as its core aim to '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'. Teachers with the role of school improvement coordinators adapted and extended several of the AfL approaches stemming from familiarity with some of Shirley Clarke's (1998) work. Practice was shaped to suit their pupils' needs in their particular context. The kinds of results possible from this approach are indicated in this quote from an interview with one of the network's Year 4 pupils:

> We had to think about a poem we'd like and all the stanzas and 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.

Pupil voice is about much more than influencing the learning environment, but the quote below from Year 9 pupils serves as just one example of networks in which pupils reported a real and strong influence over their own learning:

> Our role in school is to try to influence how individual teaching techniques are applied for the better. We do this by looking at what makes the average person tick in a classroom … it sounds funny but it's true. How easy do you find it to stay switched on when the room temperature is also body temperature and there's about as much light in the classroom as there is in a ten-watt bulb? Our job is to provide two things for teachers – what we would realistically like to change around school – and to give an inside picture of how the majority of the school feel about the running of things … We're here to try to make school a better place in an unbiased and fair way, taking into account the wishes of teachers and students.

Pupil voice work often extended also to pupil enquiry groups. Groups of pupils working as researchers, often in partnership with teachers, identified an enquiry question related to their learning experience:

> I think the experience has allowed me to learn valuable skills in team work and oral presentation. It has helped me to appreciate how much can be achieved with good student-teacher relationships. Other people benefited from our research. It inspired other people to get involved with it. We were able to make a difference.

Inclusion and Evolution

In the past some network initiatives have been rightly criticised for benefiting only a narrow group of pupils from a limited number of schools, for example targeting selected groups of 'under-performing' or 'gifted and talented' pupils. While this limitation is a feature of some NLCs we found that 87 per cent of them reported at least one pupil activity occurring in all schools. Over half of all pupil level activity occurred across all schools in the network, and seventy per of it was at stages three and four.

This spread of activity was by no means inevitable. A group of schools can come together as a network and plan joint activity, but that activity can remain grounded at Desforges' stage one, characterised by a traditional production mode of learning. Our analysis showed that activity at stage four requires careful planning if it is to involve and engage pupils in more sophisticated forms of understanding and management of their own learning. Making this happen across several schools requires careful preparation, commitment and a significant investment of time and energy. Teachers and leaders in NLCs appear to have been inspired sufficiently to invest the time and energy required to reach this higher level of learning experience for their pupils.

A comparison of pupil level activity at the end of the second year with that at the start of the programme suggested that 80 per cent of NLCs had shown a definite shift towards the higher level of learning experience over time. For example, at submission stage one network stated that:

> Informal partnerships exist between three (of the six) schools where there are instances of collaborative learning. As a group of schools we would like to extend our partnership to become a network with the common focus of AfL.' (network A submission extract, 2002)

By the end of year two this same network reported that:

> A series of pupil reciprocal visits has happened … the focus of one visit was assessment. Pupils brought along their marked work from English, mathematics and science. Each school provided a display or presentation on one of the core subjects to act as a stimulus. Primary pupils had a booklet to help them focus their observations. In year groups they discussed how they were assessed, how they knew

> when the work was good, did they know how to get to the 'next stage' and how they feed back their experiences of assessment to their teachers. Older pupils ran these discussion groups acting as facilitators and then delivered to both phases of pupils and their visiting teachers. (network A year two review extract, 2004)

What About Attainment? How can Learning Networks Support Every Child Matters?

There are potential tensions between liberating the talents of young and adult learners while satisfying conventional accountabilities, in particular that of pupil test scores. Indeed in the short-term, during the period when time and energy are put into trialling and embedding new modes of working, some negative impact on test scores might be expected. Our analysis however does not bear this out. As indicated above our research overwhelmingly affirms the positive advantages of the self-direction, self-expression and voluntarism that are characteristics of NLCs. Further, statistical analyses conducted on programme-wide attainment data up to 2005 show some early positive indications for NLC schools in certain subjects and at some key stages while in other areas the picture is mixed (Mujtaba & Sammons, 2006). This is unsurprising given the relative youth of the NLC programme and the wide range of pupil foci and activity.

The grounds for real optimism are provided by some of the individual NLC case studies which have looked in more detail at impact on smaller cohorts of pupils. Targeted and focussed pupil activity at Desforges' stage four showed some spectacular examples of advances in achievement for some children (Church et al, 2006). This was despite the fact that improving test scores was never one of the programme's core objectives.

Significantly many NLCs also showed themselves to be extremely effective in meeting the classroom demands of the ECM agenda. Several networks developed multi-agency working, collaborating with other service providers to meet the more demanding challenges faced by some pupils. Our full-length research paper provides some specific and detailed examples of how NLCs made this a reality (Worrall et al, 2006) and how they are now leading the way for other schools that are just getting to grips with what *Every Child Matters* entails.

Conclusions and Commentary

Based on our analysis of pupils' learning experiences in Networked Learning Communities we think that NLCs provide conditions that are highly supportive of outstanding teaching, much of which has previously been concealed and contained behind classroom doors. The views of pupils themselves were almost universally positive – they find that expanding their sense of community and

their understanding of learning is extremely beneficial. They enjoy new relationships with teachers based on partnership.

The main lesson we have learned is that great things are possible amongst the focussed and committed. Our study shows what can be done. It does not show how to do it in the general run nor does it show how general, substantive or sustainable are the pupil gains. It is a testimony to the willingness of the very many classroom teachers who have not only been willing to throw open their classroom doors to new ideas and new network colleagues but also embraced new and challenging dialogue with pupils.

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NON WORRALL is a consultant researcher who worked with Networked Learning Group from 2003-6. During a long career as a secondary English teacher and deputy head, she worked closely with colleagues from the University of Cambridge to develop approaches to classroom enquiry and pupil voice, culminating in participation in the Learning Without Limits project (Hart et al, 2004) which investigated the ways in which teachers challenged the idea of fixed-ability labelling.

CHRISTOPHER NODEN is a researcher for the National College for School Leadership's Networked Learning Communities programme. He has extensive experience of research and writing in the fields of education and the public sector generally. Previously Christopher spent several years working in residential care for young people and then working with schools for the Education Business Partnership in Portsmouth and South East Hampshire. *Correspondence*: Christopher Noden, National College for School Leadership,

Networked Learning Group, Derwent House, Cranfield University, University Way, Cranfield MK43 0AZ (christopher.noden@ncsl.org.uk).