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Familiarisation and deepening understanding

Professional Learning Communities:
source materials for school leaders and
other leaders of professional learning

Broadening the learning community: key messages

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Sustainable improvement depends on more than staff working within their own schools, focusing exclusively on enhancing their own pupils' learning, colleagues' learning and educational standards. Good practice and innovation need to be shared around the system, and networks provide a vehicle for doing this. In addition, engaging with parents and the local and wider community is essential to ensuring the health and well-being of all children and young people. Our research found that professional learning communities are outward looking and engage positively in networks and community partnerships.

This activity presents four short think pieces that are excerpts from papers addressing the issue of looking beyond traditional school boundaries to collaborate and learn with educators in other schools and community partners. We are using the term 'broader learning community' to refer to all the types of community referred to in the four thinkpieces.

Process for reading and engaging in dialogue about the think pieces

We suggest a co-operative group jigsaw approach because we feel it is a valuable strategy to promote and support community learning. Using this approach, readers familiarise themselves with different articles or excerpts before sharing key points from their readings and then reflecting together on questions. The power comes from blending individual expertise and group dialogue within a community context.

You will need to photocopy the co-operative group jigsaw instructions, readings and notes pages for each person

Co-operative group jigsaw instructions

Form *home groups* of three or four people per group. Everyone should read these instructions.

1 Each person is assigned one excerpt to read (Reading A, B, C or D) for which they are responsible to become an 'expert'.

2 Colleagues read their think piece individually, bearing in mind the *expert group questions* and the *home group questions*. You might find it helpful to highlight or underline key points that relate to the questions. (Allow 5-10 minutes.)

3 Form *expert groups* of three or four people with the same reading. It may be helpful to label the *expert groups* A, B, C and D to match the readings (it doesn't matter if you have more than one expert group for each reading).

4 Discuss the reading using the following *expert group questions* which are repeated on page 10 with space for notes. (Allow 10 minutes.)

• What have you learnt about learning communities from this piece? Why are they seen to be important and necessary? What do the writers say are key features of the learning communities they describe?

• How does this relate to what you know about professional learning communities within schools?

• What are the key messages you want to share with your home group?

5 Rejoin *home groups*. Each member shares the key messages from their think piece. Colleagues ask questions to clarify understanding. (Allow 15 minutes.)

6 Reflect together on the following *home group questions* which are repeated on page 11 with space for notes. (Allow 15 minutes.)

Drawing on these readings and your own experience:

• What might be the benefits of developing broader learning communities?

• How can you plan for and broaden your current learning communities?

• What is likely to facilitate the development of effective broader learning communities? How can you make the most of facilitating factors?

• What appear to be the greatest challenges to developing broader learning communities? How might you resolve these within your context?

• How will you monitor, evaluate and note the impact?

• What are the next steps you need to take?

Summarise your key learning in a whole-group dialogue. (Allow 15 minutes.)

Reading A

From: John West-Burnham & George Otero, 2005, Leading together to build social capital. In *What are we learning about…? Community leadership in networks*, Cranfield and Nottingham, NCSL

… the time has come to explore alternative avenues of enquiry as we strive to understand the influences on student achievement and develop new strategies for maximising achievement of all. One starting point in undertaking this task is to focus on the social environment of the learner and the effects that deprived communities have on educational outcomes. While social disadvantage is not an excuse for poor achievement, it is an explanation…

In considering this explanation however, it is important to be clear that such definitions of deprivation necessarily need to embrace more than an understanding of the effects of economic poverty. As we are reminded by Field (2003)[1]: *'Social poverty is as negative and destructive as economic poverty'*. In the education sector, attempts to tackle the issue of social poverty within the schooling system have historically been characterised by school improvement efforts. When schools concentrate internally on improving their own school or organisational system, this creates bonding, introspection and institutional integrity. However, it also leads to detachment and compromises engagement and networking – the very basis of social capital.

"On this basis alone, there is a strong case to be made for shifting the emphasis of our improvement efforts – and by implication our leadership practices in education – beyond an institutional or organisational focus, to one which acknowledges the relationship between the building of social capital in a networked context and its influence upon educational performance[2]."

"By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things that they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty… We can conclude with some confidence that there is a close relationship between people's social networks and their educational performance[2]."

… As Mulgan (2001)[3] points out, learning will increasingly take place beyond educational institutions as policies for knowledge reach far wider than formal education, and issues such as diet, housing and the effects of poverty are identified as directly affecting cognitive development and educational performance. In this way of thinking, if academic standards are to be raised in a sustainable way, then school leaders will be required to see their role in terms of a broader social function which centres on their contribution to the creation of social capital, as opposed to a narrow emphasis on improving classroom practice (p3).

The theory of social capital can be summed up in two words – 'relationships matter' (Field, 2003). The importance of this relational dimension is reflected in the core components of most of the models of social capital which have emerged from current thinking and practice.

The building blocks of social capital in most models include:
• trust
• engagement and connection
• collaborative action
• shared identity
• shared values and aspirations

So, how do we actively create social capital within school communities? By focusing on and improving relationships, schools can begin making a contribution to developing the entire community's capacity to learn (p4).

… This involves building bridges to change attitudes, relationships and the deployment of resources. Two powerful strategies for doing

[1] Field, J, 2003 *Social Capital*, London, Routledge
[2] Field, J, 2003 See previous reference
[3] Mulgan, G, 2000, *The Prospect for Social Renewal*, Paris, OECD

this are building relational trust and promoting and practising dialogue (p5).

A ten-year study of Chicago school reforms concluded that schools with a high degree of 'relational trust' are more likely to make the kinds of changes that help raise student achievement. Without trust and bridging relationships to support the community goals, improvement in schools is difficult to sustain[4].

Since our relationships are defined by the quality and content of our communications, one powerful tool schools can use to engage and work with the community is through a culture of dialogue. At its best, dialogue transforms us as individuals, whilst increasing our shared understanding and emboldening our collective will.

Developing skill in dialogue takes time and practice. School leaders have an obligation to create spaces where dialogue can be learnt, valued and practised on an inclusive basis amongst all members of the network or school community.

Three types of conversation

1 **Instructional conversation** – most commonly seen in the classroom. This dialogue is about acquiring a skill, extra knowledge or guidance that is external to ourselves.

2 **Learning conversation** – closer to a conversation where our mutual growth is the end result. The relationship and the task get equal attention.

3 **Community conversation** – a vehicle for people to express and share the diverse views that they hold, to negotiate and reaffirm directions and vision and to develop social capital. This type of conversation depends on the art of dialogue the most.

Effective dialogue skills need to be taught at all levels of the community, from classroom discussions to council meetings. Using dialogue will increase our capacity to learn from each other through democratic discourse, despite major differences in experience and viewpoint and can lead to decisive civic action that promotes social justice and mutual respect (p6).

To download the full think piece and other relevant think pieces, go to:
www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc/wawla

Reading B

From: John Craig with Julia Huber & Hannah Lownsbrough, 2004, *Schools Out: Can teachers, social workers and health staff learn to live together?* Report commissioned by Hay Group Education from Demos about emerging practice in extended schools and its implications for public services and communities.

… Extended schooling has been part of the vocabulary of international education for perhaps three decades. In fact, the idea of schools as places for whole families and communities stretches back to the origins of formal education itself. More recently, however, this idea has re-emerged in response to demands for greater openness on the part of schools and school systems (p4).

To work successfully, extended schools have to become open institutions, alive and responsive to priorities, cultures and resources that lie beyond the school gate… As a result, extended schooling represents a challenge for every school; a challenge to create the openness, flexibility and dialogue needed to successfully play a broader role in community life (p5).

Extended schools raise questions about the roles that parents, pupils and different professionals all play, demanding that they work together to re-write the educational script (p7).

… helping people and professionals relate as human beings rather than representatives of institutions is as vital as it is challenging. Open institutions lie at the heart of fostering collaboration between professions, and between professionals and the people that they serve (p7).

For many professionals today, extended schools suggest the prospect of an educational empire. Changing this perception is not simply an issue of professional courtesy; it will be critical to extended schools' chances of success. As a result, schools need to be as open as possible to the practices and priorities of other professions, so that, rather than being lost in a destructive clash of cultures, the solutions they create can develop and travel (p8).

As an extended school creates trust and belief in its potential (to help families achieve their goals), it is able to turn greater interest in its activities into community involvement. As this involvement develops it can create a critical mass, such that the school starts to make valuable connections between different services and activities. In some cases, this enables parents to become more involved in their children's education, to become co-producers of the services they receive (p16).

In helping families and children, most public services have to satisfy criteria – the child is at risk, in medical need or has a specific learning difficulty. These criteria can become embedded in professional cultures, so that services can seem to take a partial view of complex family problems. The breadth and range of services in extended schools allows them to think of the whole child and the whole family – against both positive and negative criteria. They can put together a flexible response based on the child's need, not their particular professional perspective (p17).

For many teachers, building meaningful relationships across professional boundaries is a huge challenge. Opening up educational practice and thinking to doctors or social workers, for example, can seem to undermine professional identity and, while teachers can see in extended schools an invasion of their territory, for many other professionals, extended schools can represent an education empire… By creating opportunities and incentives for professionals to make their practice public, and to reflect upon it together, whole communities may be able to build the openness on which extended schooling depends (p20).

The work of those within extended schools is beginning to show how the dilemma of professionalism can be resolved, and how professionals and whole organisations can work together more openly and flexibly. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on either dependence or independence, and the authority of key individuals, they are modelling recognition of interdependence and an increasingly distributed approach to authority… Leading professionals are finding the confidence to open up their values and practices to those of other professions (p23).

Where schools and parents work together, parents become more involved in school life, and schools engage with the social networks that surround them. To achieve this, schools first have to create processes through which schools and parents can interact. In doing so, community networks and the resources that they hold can become part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Having achieved this, schools can harness the full potential of community networks, working with parents and communities to change views about the roles of both schools and parents… (p27).

The education system to which… innovations (such as extended schools) seem to point is one in which the public value a school creates, by helping communities to work together, is as important as the private benefits it creates for its students working alone (p51).

The full report can be found on the websites of either the Hay Group or Demos:
www.haygroup.co.uk/education and
www.demos.co.uk

Reading C

At the time of writing… public services are approaching a crossroads… Targets are still an essential part of the toolkit, but setting linear improvement goals and then pushing harder and harder to achieve them can no longer be the dominant principle for reforming the whole school system…

Politically, public services are the focus of a wider struggle to prove that, amid growing diversity and inequality, public investment and intervention are part of what holds society together. The contention is that a strong public realm can equip us all to thrive in a rapidly changing society, and help make social fairness and cohesion a reality. The stakes could hardy be higher.

That is why the growing use of transformation as a goal is so important. Recent reform has shown that short-term improvements in key areas such as numeracy and literacy scores, hospital waiting time and street crime are possible. However, embedding higher expectations and performance permanently in the working of public service organisations means changing 'whole systems', often radically, and equipping them to adapt more effectively to ongoing change.

Transformation will only occur by shaping and stimulating *disciplined* processes of innovation within the school system, and building an infrastructure capable of transferring ideas, knowledge and new practices *laterally* across it.

Huge amounts of money, time and effort are spent trying to spread good practice between different schools. Most of that effort is wasted, because what we already know about how such transfer occurs (which is not enough) is not used in the design of dissemination strategies.

The organisational form which can give depth and scale to this process of transformation is the network. With the right kind of leadership and governance, the formation of networks combining collaborative and competitive endeavour could play a vital role in creating a system of world class schools.

The education narrative is already moving from an emphasis on 'informed prescription' towards 'informed professionalism' as the basis for improvement. But by what, or whom, should professionals be informed and challenged to adapt?

… Many teachers still feel that if they could just be left to get on with the job, they would be able to perform successfully. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Teachers, like any other professional group, are just as likely to resort to self-protection in the face of disruptive change as they are to embrace new and better practices. The challenge is to build professional identities and professional learning communities that are oriented towards adaptation and radical innovation.

In this way, knowledge-based networks are not the alternative to existing forms of public provision; they are an essential complement… transformation becomes an 'emergent property' of the whole education system as it learns to generate, incorporate and adapt to the best new ideas and practices that get thrown up around it (p3).

Why establish a learning network?

Networks of schools are capable of making this leap forward for four reasons.

1) Networks foster innovation

Good practice has never been something which can be defined and crystallised, but rather must be continually refined and updated. As David Hargreaves (2003)[5] has argued, teachers already innovate constantly – and have always done so – through making subtle changes to their practice based on a mixture of trial and error and their own experiences. But now the outcomes of innovation need to be spread further and faster through the system. The model of distributive leadership practised in networks of schools creates the conditions for the continual innovation and renewal in schools that might make this possible.

2) Networks are a test-bed for new ideas

No school can be expected to innovate in every area of school life. Apart from being virtually impossible in practice, the disruption caused by such an approach would cause more damage than good. Networks offer a platform for segmented innovation, allowing different schools to innovate in different areas of school life – but for all to benefit from their work. This kind of process distributes the risks and the workload between schools.

3) Networks provide challenge and discipline to teachers' learning

As Charles Desforges (2004)[6] has argued, much of the knowledge about how to refine and update practice is held by teachers themselves. He argues:

"We need the informed help of professionals beyond our parish… because they share our goal, understand our context, but are not blinkered by our assumptions about our immediate settings."

Through transferring knowledge laterally, networks are capable of offering teachers speedy access to innovation taking place in the classroom next door, or in the school in the next town. As a result, teachers are no longer left to tinker with their practice based exclusively on their own experience, but are able to take decisions based on a wealth of professional knowledge drawn from a wider context.

4) Networks help integrate services

It takes more than one teacher to educate a child. The expertise and knowledge required to meet the needs of every child are distributed among a wide range of people including parents, peers, and teachers. Networks offer the opportunity for teachers to draw on the knowledge of other teachers, parents and professionals including those from the health and social services (p4).

The full document is available to download at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc/wawla**

[4] Bryk, A S & Schneider, B, 2002, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, New York, Russell Sage
[5] Hargreaves, D, 2003, *Education Epidemic: transforming secondary schools through innovation networks*, London, Demos
[6] Desforges, C, 2004, Collaboration for transformation – why bother?, *Nexus*, 3, Summer, 6-7

Reading D

From: Lorna Earl & Steven Katz, 2005, *What makes a network a learning network?* Some key messages for network leaders from Phase 2 of the external evaluation of NCSL's Networked Learning Communities programme, Nottingham, NCSL, Innovation Unit DfES and Aporia Consulting Ltd.

This summary document is designed to distil some key messages emerging from (Phases 1 and 2) of the evaluation (of the Networked Learning Communities programme) for leaders of learning networks and those who support them. These are interim findings of an extensive three-year study. However… there is a significant audience for the outcomes of the evaluation now, and… there is a need to get these insights and ideas out into the system whilst they are at their most useful (p1).
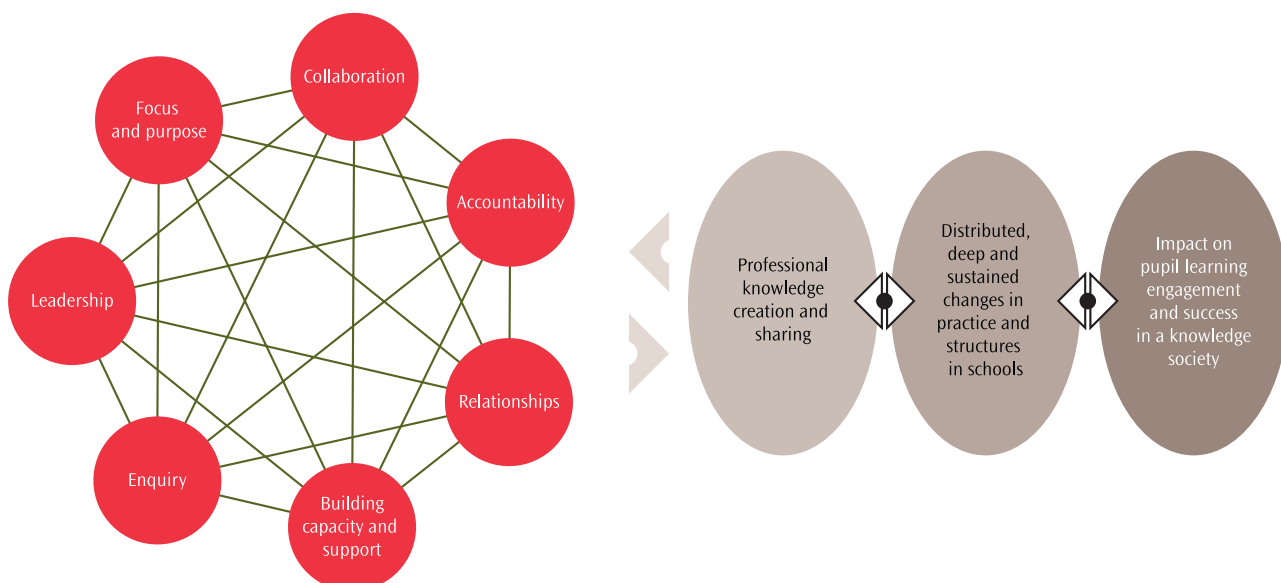
Key features

Phases 1 and 2 of the evaluation identified seven 'key features' of learning networks that appear to be significant (p1) see figure 1.

What are the key features and why are they key?

… Each of the key features has a role to play and… the ways in which they combine and interact are innumerable and cannot be predicted in any particular context… A change in any one invites changes in the rest. For example, the nature of collaborative enquiry will depend also on the quality of relationships; capacity building and support will depend on the kinds of leadership that exist; the role of accountability will depend on the focus and purpose, and so on.

At this interim stage, we (the evaluation team) think we are learning that together these seven key features are essential ingredients in generating the interim outcomes of (i) creating and sharing professional knowledge and (ii) changing practice. In turn, these two are essential in generating the final, desired outcome – which is impact on pupil learning, engagement and success (p2).

figure 1: Key features of learning networks

Key feature 1: Purpose and focus

Establishing an explicit statement of purpose about classroom practice, school improvement and/or student learning moves a professional network towards clear and purposeful actions. The process of identifying a focus can involve challenging, reconceptualising and making changes to existing practice and structures; legitimating the change process; making the status quo more difficult to protect; and offering opportunities for joint attention to issues that are relevant for all of the schools in the network (p3).

Key feature 2: Relationships

Networks are a function of the ongoing and dynamic interactions between members of the group. These learning relationships contribute to the establishment, development and maintenance of the professional culture. Strong group cohesion is based on and engenders trust, mutual accountability and an agreed upon sharing of power, which in turn strengthens relationships and commitment to shared goals and social norms (p4).

Key feature 3: Collaboration

Collaboration within networks is intended to engage practitioners in opening up beliefs and practices in order to provide them with opportunities to participate actively in the development of their own practice and that of the profession. This interaction allows for sharing within schools and across systems; it spreads innovations beyond discrete sites; it creates a dynamic process of interpretation and evaluation of practice between colleagues and it fosters identification with the larger group, extending commitment beyond the single classroom or school (p5).

Key feature 4: Enquiry

Enquiry is a fundamental tenet of networks that focus on learning. When networks 'need to know', the members are prepared routinely to investigate their work. Enquiry is the process for systematically and intentionally exploring and considering information from research,

from experts and from each other, in support of decision-making and problem-solving. Collaborative enquiry involves thinking about, reflecting on, and challenging individual and collective experiences, in order to come to a deepened understanding of shared beliefs and practices (p6).

Key feature 5: Leadership

Leadership in networked learning communities is both far-sighted and pragmatic and is different throughout the life-cycle of the network. Leaders in networks develop the vision and focus, provide support (intellectual and instrumental), monitor development, disseminate information and provide buffers from challenges posed by the larger environment. Networked learning communities encourage a broad-base of leadership in schools and across the network, with many people – with and without formal positions of authority – providing a range of leadership functions (p7).

Key feature 6: Accountability

Accountability within networks includes both providing transparent and informative 'statements of account' to others, and active self-monitoring to support and challenge the work of the group, in the process of striving for improvement. Accountability in a learning network also implies a sense of responsibility for the quality of work and of value for pupils across all the schools (p8).

Key feature 7: Building capacity and support

Significant change in schools is a function of 'high pressure and high support'. Networking initiatives require planned strategies for building capacity for change and improvement within schools and between schools. When networks are focused on learning, they intentionally seek out and/or create supporting activities, people and opportunities to push them beyond the status quo within their school and network development needs (p9).

The full document is available to download at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc** and click on 'Network Research'.

Expert group questions

What have you learnt about learning communities from this piece? Why are they seen to be important and necessary? What do the writers say are key features of the learning communities they describe?

How does this relate to what you know about professional learning communities within schools?

What are the key messages you want to share with your *home* group?

Home group questions

What might be the benefits in developing broader learning communities?

How can you plan for and broaden your current learning communities?

What is likely to facilitate the development of effective broader learning communities?
How can you make the most of facilitating factors?

What appear to be the greatest challenges to developing broader learning communities? How might you resolve these within your context? (You may want to use a force field analysis to help you with this[7].)

How will you monitor, evaluate and note the impact?

What are the next steps you need to take? (You may also find it valuable to look at the activity on *Extending your community through networks and partnerships* in booklet 10, **Developing your professional learning community**.)

[7] Lewin, K, 1947, Frontiers in group dynamics, *Human Relations*, 1 (1): 5-41

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