



articles



Enhancing Children's Learning

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'Child A, a muslim girl was struggling with aspects of socialising and learning in the Year 6 Class. She had not been allowed by her father to take part in the class residential trip – the only child not to do so. In addition several parts of the curriculum were not available to her on grounds of her religious beliefs. The teacher seemed to carry some sadness and frustration that this child was unable to take full part in class activities.

Through consideration of a 'conscience group' however, it is possible to see that the child's primary loyalties are to her family and culture – and that though she is sad she cannot take part in some things, she understands why and completely accepts the situation. An honouring of her cultural attachment, and support for her in upholding them, enables the teacher to play a more open and facilitating part in the child's learning.

At the end of term performance, the child sang an unaccompanied song beautifully. Her father, who hardly ever visits school because of the time pressures of his work, had slipped into the hall a little late to hear her. She saw him and turned to her teacher to ask if she could sing an extra song just for her father. Again, unaccompanied, she sang a Turkish song exquisitely to her father. The whole hall of parents were moved and touched by her powerful performance, which was in a way a public declaration of her culture, language and loyalty.'

This story captures the power of systemic thinking and the constellating methodology when applied within primary school classrooms to affect a child's capacity to learn, a teacher's ability to teach and the way in which parents can offer support. The teacher who described these events has been part of an eighteen month DfES sponsored research and innovation project in Wiltshire primary schools that is currently drawing to a close.

Her story wasn't an isolated instance. Each of the twenty two heads, teachers and teaching assistants involved in the action research project have similar stories to tell and a keen desire to develop the approaches further. This article briefly outlines the work of the project and some of the emerging features of applying systemic approaches in classrooms, which we believe can transform a child's engagement with learning.

Our initial insight

As a group of educationalists in the **nowhere** foundation, we hold a view that there has been much resource put into raising standards by government and Local Authorities over the last eight years and, whilst meeting with a good deal of success, considerable difficulties still remain. Key Stage 2 results are improving but are still below expectations, particularly amongst the 20% of underachievers – 'the difficult to reach'.

Similarly the efforts to improve behaviour have resulted in initiatives such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning and other behaviour management strategies. The cost to the government is estimated at over £700M over a seven year period. And yet, the incidents of violence, disruption, disaffection and absenteeism continue to make the task of teaching more and more challenging.

Part of the problem is many of these responses to improving learning and behaviour are underpinned by behavioural/cognitive psychological models, which place a strong emphasis on the individual – on the mechanics of learning or on how children respond to particular stimuli or curricula. We believe that alone they are not enough.

Our insight is to draw on work with families and organisations using systems-centred methods and techniques developed over the last 30 years, primarily in Germany by practitioners including Franke 2003, Franke-Gricksch 2004; Hellinger, Weber and Beaumont 1998; Senge 1990; de Shazer 1985; Ulsamer 2003. The radical nature of their ideas have been slow to take root in the UK education system but as conventional approaches weren't delivering, we responded to the feeling of desperation amongst some teachers in Wiltshire.

We wanted to explore a perspective that enables individuals – heads, teachers and children – to look at the 'bigger picture'. By seeing themselves and their issues in the context of the systems they belong to, each person has more space to understand the influences and forces that are helping to shape behaviours and their capacity to engage with learning – and, importantly, be able to take effective actions to improve the situation.



'The project has freed me up to do more teaching and less trouble shooting.'

Nicola – a classroom teacher

The fundamental shift with this approach is to accept and include the pupil's family and community systems as a natural and essentially dynamic part of the education process. Our emphasis now is to give far greater priority to the primacy of inclusion and belonging at the beginning of the school/learning process. We believe this perspective can offer a major contribution to implementing the recent government policy statement 'Every Child Matters.'

How we worked

The project was a chance for the teachers to explore and learn about new approaches, and importantly, at the same time deal with some issues that had seemed impervious to their best efforts.

The basic techniques of working systemically using constellations are quite simple but require people to make a radical shift in perception from conventional views of human behaviour. In order to transfer aspects of this practice into educational settings we had to find ways to 'de-construct' the wider process so that it could be usefully applied in classrooms.

The pilot placed great emphasis on innovating. It enabled us all to take the seeds of ideas, develop sufficient skills and understanding and to try them out in the classroom. There has been much sharing across the group, enabling teachers to design and fit the tools to suit their purposes – a truly authentic co-creative way of working. Inevitably, because of the relatively small scale of the project and the qualitative nature of the research, the results can only be indicative but they have exceeded our expectations.

One obstacle during the pilot has been the work pressures and lack of time for teaching staff during the summer terms. These affected their ability to work rigorously with the research method and tools, and meet deadlines for data gathering.

Any difficulties with the research method were more than outweighed by

the many instances of teachers dealing with some pressing issues and getting good results. Teachers commented on an easing of their work, a significant increase in their understanding of children and some of their fundamental needs as well as gaining empathy for their situations. There is also evidence from parents commenting on the positive impact of the new type of support the school was able to offer to help resolve home/school difficulties. There are also reports even at this early stage that the interventions were translating into improvements in children's learning – and importantly teacher's teaching.

Making meaning

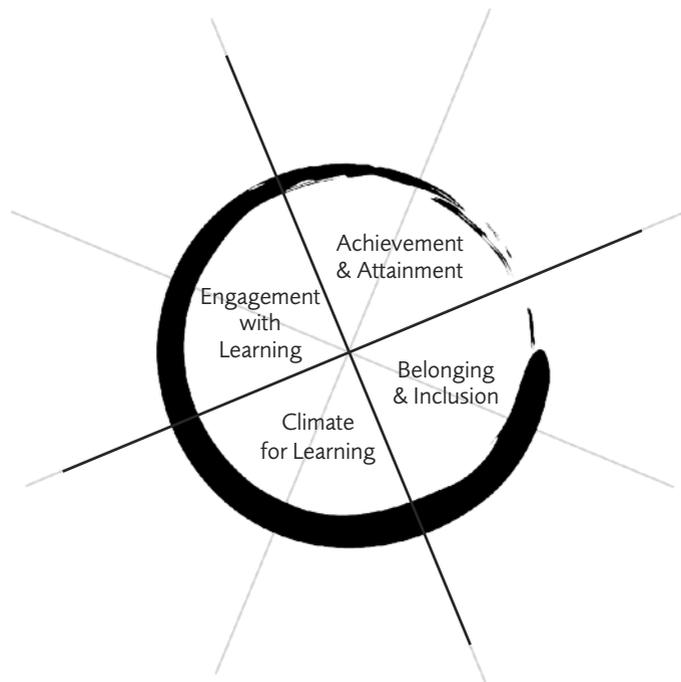
In general terms the major shifts that the teachers have made in their practice include an improved ability to develop a systemic intelligence, which goes beyond seeing the child as an individual, or considering the content of an issue. The depth of engagement allows them to:

- Face into some of the issues that they, as a staff-group, had a tendency to 'leave alone' because they weren't skilled enough to deal with them or had proved impervious to their best efforts
- Identify and deal with the roots of issues and not simply seek to control the symptoms
- Develop solutions that benefit all involved rather than deal with an issue in one place only to see it re-emerge elsewhere and at another time
- Create a culture of collective responsibility so that a child with difficulties and poor behaviours was supported by both their teacher and their peers
- Make minimal interventions to achieve the greatest effect
- Integrate the approach into their existing professional practices
- Attend to the whole container for learning rather than overly focus on the curriculum and achievement of the individual learner
- Allow children to enter more fully into and engage with the process of learning

We have developed a concept of a container for learning that shows a flow of learning, characterised by four phases:

- Children's safe entry into and connection with the school system, with a particular cognisance of the links with their family and community systems
- The mutual development and maintenance of a learning climate within the classroom and also at a level of the whole school
- The direct engagement the children have with the learning process through their minds and also their emotional, physical and social selves i.e. as a 'whole child'
- By attending to these first three phases teachers have begun to report on improved levels of social and academic achievement

A Flow of Learning



Key findings

By attending to the whole flow many of the problems with a child's behaviour for learning are prevented rather than managed. Below the key findings of the research are detailed using the four categories and specific measures identified.

Belonging & Inclusion

The school as a system overlaps with other systems that the child lives in and learns through – principally their family system. Acknowledgement of the family system helps the child considerably to find a settled place within the school/classroom system. A child's learning is enhanced by their being in the right place in the systems to which they belong.

'...there was a lot of conflict before we started working systematically with them and this seems to have been a lot less this last term.'

Val – a head teacher

With everyone in their right place, children:

- Have respectful relationships with teachers, teaching assistants and their peers
- Are more comfortable about coming to school resulting in better attendance

'I have found out things about the children that I didn't know. I have been more honest with them.'

Sallie – a classroom teacher

Teachers are then able to:

- Work more effectively with each child's motivational needs and issues
- Have improved relationships with parents resulting in stronger connections and collaborations with them about their child's learning and behaviour

Climate for Learning:

Schools and the classes and groups within them are dynamic human systems through which 'a flow of learning' is directly experienced on a day-to-day basis. A consequence of better working relationships seems to be an easier acceptance that learning is important.

'Children are more confident about expressing their feelings, so the learning has improved through a more relaxed atmosphere.'

Bella – a classroom teacher

When the systems are in balance:

- Individuals are 'safer' and there is often a reduction in instances of conflict
- Children are able to demonstrate mutual support and together with other class members tend to jointly own problems
- There are often high levels of enjoyment and satisfaction within the classroom and children are more easily able to voice their needs

Engagement with Learning:

Learners can engage with and gain more benefit from learning if they are well supported – by teachers, their friends and also by other special people in their lives. To achieve this level of engagement it is important that learning involves the 'whole child' – both mind and body – the cognitive and the somatic.

'Awareness and concentration; There has been a real improvement as the project has developed.'

Dan – a classroom teacher

Success criteria include:

- They are more easily settled and quiet
- Children are better able to concentrate on their work
- They tend to be more punctual in arriving at school
- They deliver homework tasks more readily

Achievement & Standards:

If there is a flow through the system then individual and collective performance is enhanced. Interestingly the benefits are felt by both children and teachers alike as members of the same system.

'I have no doubt the SATs results have improved through the improved learning environment. Their writing has been enriched as they can write more freely about a character's feelings. Spelling list levels have improved more than I expected.'

Bella – a classroom teacher

Indications are that:

- Results from learning – including SATS performance are improved
- There are increased levels of satisfaction amongst all stakeholders – including teachers, heads and parents

Concluding thoughts

We have brought a systemic lens to a number of complex but crucial school-based issues and are only just beginning to uncover the potential of this process. We can't make strong claims to know that our approaches are working on the basis of this small pilot but the evidence is pointing strongly to the benefits and positive advantages.

We believe we are creating something of major importance to education in the UK and are now at a stage where we would like to develop further research and development projects which extend the work into secondary schools and run training programmes across the whole primary sector. At the same time we are seeking to connect with others working in school situations elsewhere in the world. This work is fundamentally important and our sense is that the journey is only beginning.

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